

THE CRICKET MISSION

Submitted by Julian Rincon, Co. F/52nd Inf. (LRP)/Co. I/75th Inf. (Ranger)

I awoke in the morning feeling pretty good. Our team, Wildcat 7, of which I was the Team Leader (TL), had been out for three days and been extracted just before dusk the previous evening. The team was tired but we had seen a lot of signs of enemy activity in our Area of Operation (AO). The last day of our patrol we had heard enemy movement near us all day long and had been extra alert and very tense for the time remaining prior to our scheduled extraction. Finally, just before nightfall, we had succeeded in exiting the area of heavy movement and been extracted by helicopter and flown back to our base camp Lai Khe.

Our company area in Lai Khe was comprised primarily of rows of 10-men canvas tents, with wooden floors. The tents were extremely hot during the simmering Vietnamese summer and remained hot even during the Vietnamese “winter” (if that season could be actually said to exist in the tropics). Nonetheless, we would generally roll up the sides of the tents to let some of the hot breeze pass through our tents, providing what little relief was available. At least we could strip down to shorts and T-shirts and kick back. That sure beat enduring that same heat while also “humping the boonies” with full rucksack, weapon, and ammunition—our face and all other exposed skin covered with greasy camouflage paste. After each mission, a team had the luxury of a one-day stand down” to clean their weapons and equipment, reload their rucksacks and ammunition magazines, read mail, write letters, and take care of any other immediate tasks. As part of that stand-down day, came a respite from the Physical Training (PT), which was otherwise a standard daily regimen of every LRRP or Ranger unit in Vietnam.

About noon that day I was told to report to the Operations tent. I arrived at the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) with my Assistant Team Leader (ATL), Daniel Wiggins. Wiggins and I were briefed on a new three-day LRP mission to be conducted in the area of Song Be (located approximately 70 kilometers north of Lai Khe, at the southern edge of Vietnam’s Highlands region). We were informed that the 1st Division G-2 (Intelligence section) had intelligence reports of a large enemy force operating in the area. Our job was to confirm the Division’s information. That was not an unusual report for Song Be, nor would enemy contact in that area be a surprise. Song Be was an isolated ARVN outpost and district capital, the enemy was constantly in the surrounding terrain and contacts with them by our teams or “line” infantry units of the 1st Division were frequent. Enemy observers could also keep Song Be under constant surveillance from the jungle on the sides of its most prominent terrain feature, the adjacent mountain known as Nui Ba Ra (“Black Widow Mountain). Teams seldom had a dull moment when patrolling near Song Be.

Our team Wildcat 7 normally operated with five members, but on this mission I requested and received permission for an extra member. I was worried about expected heavy enemy activity and a six-man LRP team, though still a small element, gave us a much appreciated 20 percent increase in firepower should we indeed make enemy

contact. Getting an additional highly trained team member was therefore both an operational boon, as well as a morale booster for the team. So for this particular mission Wildcat 7 would consist of, and its order-of-march be: Freddie Blankenship, point man; Julian Rincon, TL and walking "slack"; Danny Carter, radioman; Daniel Wiggins, ATL and M-79 grenadier; Dave Flores, extra team member; and, Bill Crawley, rear security. I gathered the team and once I went over the patrol order and got down to the equipment phase I told everyone to carry extra ammunition for two reasons: 1) the intelligence reports of heavy enemy activity in our mission AO and, 2) this particular AO was in the Song Be corridor, a jungle corridor running north of Lai Khe all the way to Cambodia, ending just inside of the Cambodian border and not far from branches of the Ho Chi Min Trail. The corridor, drained by the Song Be River, was largely covered by triple canopy jungle, greatly facilitating its use by the enemy as a primary infiltration route into War Zones C and D, and eventually into Saigon's environs. Such jungle cover limited the ability of US forces to cover it with aerial surveillance, even during the daytime, let alone after nightfall. The numerous enemy trails criss-crossing each other in the Song Be AO would attest to the fact that it remained the Vietcong's and NVA's (North Vietnamese Army) own backyard and we were about to enter it without their permission to play a deadly game.

Wiggins and I made a helicopter reconnaissance overflight of our designated mission AO and identified for the UH-1D helicopter pilot the open area we wanted to be inserted into and that we wanted to be inserted in the eastern corner of that clearing. The pilot in turn told us he would insert us into the designated Landing Zone (LZ) on the second "touchdown" of the flight. The strategy used to insert LRP teams was simple but effective. The pilot would fly at just about tree top level, suddenly drop into an opening in the jungle, almost touch the ground, lift off go to a second opening, again almost touch the ground, then go on to a third or fourth opening and do the same thing. Our job was to get off the chopper in less than 5 seconds on that second touchdown, head into the tree line, secrete ourselves just inside it and "lay dog" (silently lying in a wagon-wheel formation, feet to center, each team member facing outward and covering his area of responsibility). Meanwhile, the chopper would continue its pattern of multiple touchdowns until it had cleared the AO. The hope was that any enemy soldiers observing the touchdowns would not know with certainty at which touchdown the team, if any, had exited the aircraft.

The next afternoon, Wildcat 7 was inserted, per plan, onto the east corner of the opening and immediately headed into the adjacent tree line. Just as rehearsed and performed so many times before, as the helicopter approached the LZ the entire team stepped onto the skids and when the helicopter came within approximately five feet of the ground, the pilot performed a quick stall and the team all jumped as the "go" signal was given by me. The helicopter never came close to touching the ground and was quickly again moving forward on to the next false insertion. Soon, with the departure of the clattering helicopter blades, the jungle once again resumed its normal sounds.

We went about 30 meters into the woodline, set up a defensive position and I told Carter, our radioman, to give the helicopter pilot the word that it had been a "cold" (no contact)

insertion and that Wildcat 7 was going to “lay dog” for awhile and then proceed with its mission. Unable to initially contact the departing helicopter from the jungle, the team moved briefly back to the LZ to get their radio message out, then returned to their jungle hiding place. As our vision adjusted to the relatively faint light on the jungle floor, we almost immediately saw signs of recent enemy activity. The team moved out and quickly came upon an extensive collection of freshly dug enemy fighting positions. Among the positions were “berms” (earthen barriers) subdividing the enemy base-camp into multiple platoon- and company-size areas. Discovering this recently constructed encampment put the already wary team on an even higher level of alertness as they moved silently through it and deeper into the jungle. We also came upon a medical complex (several bunkers) and could not understand why no one was around. There were lots of medical supplies, but nobody was guarding them. Shortly, we came upon a clearing and stopped behind some bushes and attempted to make radio contact. There was a loud cracking noise that sounded like a stick breaking. Suddenly three gooks with AK-47s appeared, walking directly at us. We waited, in the ready position, and they walked parallel to us on the opposite side of the bushes. We opened fire and instantly killed the three enemy soldiers.

Once clear of the basecamp, Rincon marked its location on his map and called its map grid coordinates into their Forward Operations Base (FOB) radio team, for relay back to company HQ in Lai Khe. He then changed the direction of travel, heading due north and signaling Blankenship, the point man, to find a “Remain Overnight Position” (RON). It was starting to get dark, and this being the early part of the month only a small amount of moonlight could be expected and would hardly penetrate to the jungle floor. In addition, this part of Vietnam was in its monsoon season. This would surely bring pouring rain in the evening then again in the early morning (if not throughout the night). If there was any respite from the rain, then the wind would start drying our soaking wet tiger fatigues and chill us to the bone--strange country. As directed, Blankenship found a secure, unobstrusive overnight position. To get into it, we had to slowly, carefully crawl a good ways through thick brush and “wait-a-minute” (thorn-covered) vines to get to it. Once in position we set our claymores (directional, command-detonated mines) around us. If we got into contact that night, the last claymore detonated would be the one pointing north and thus cover our escape in that direction. As the night progressed, so did the enemy activity. A few hours after it had gotten dark we could hear them moving all over the place. The Vietcong or NVA were using flashlights and lanterns as they moved about all over the area looking for us and shouting to each other, coming close to our position a few times. They clearly knew we were somewhere nearby, but were unknowingly bypassing our redoubt. By the sounds, activity and lights out looking for us we knew this was a large force of Vietcong. No one spoke, our radioman able only to “break squelch” (briefly hold down the speak button) on his radio in order to maintain communications with our FOB radio team. Even radio contact with the FOB was intermittent, as the terrain and weather had caused severe deterioration in the team’s ability to maintain radio contact. Carter faithfully broke squelch each hour throughout the night, but the team could not tell if even that minimal communication was getting through to their FOB. I had to admire my team: they were cool and collected, ready to deliver deadly force if we were discovered. Most of them were graduates of the MACV “Recondo School”, and

most of us had been together as a team for almost five months. Training, combat experience, and well-earned confidence in themselves and each other were irreplaceable attributes of a good LRP team, and this was a good one.

As the rain suddenly began, the enemy search for us started to slow down-- even they were settling in to ride out the downpour. Normally, in dry conditions, we would sleep on the ground with all of our equipment on and our weapons lying on top of our bodies. In this kind of weather, just as our enemy, we would sit cross-legged and cover ourselves with the same kind of thin plastic sheet as they, thereby able to keep as dry and warm as possible, but without a noisy and cumbersome American-issue poncho covering us. We were never totally successful in that effort [to keep dry and warm] but did the best we could in order to avoid stiffening up in the wet and cold environment. The rain continued throughout the night, with but a brief respite just before daybreak. During the course of the night, Crawley even had a snake slither over him, finally proceeding on its way as if he had not even been there. All Crawley could do was sit quietly, statue-like, afraid to either disturb the snake or give away the team's position. I would be the last to take the radio watch before daylight, though actually none of us had been able to sleep that night: better groggy than dead. Daylight approached quickly and soon the damp terrain was also foggy. I had each claymore brought into our position one at a time, keeping the noise down. Just prior to moving out of our overnight position I checked my topo map, shot a compass azimuth (direction), orientated Blankenship, and the team headed due north. A few minutes later we came across a trail that intersected our patrol route. After silently observing up and down the trail for a moment, we moved to the jungle on the far side of it. No sooner did we cross it than we heard voices. Quietly proceeding toward them, we soon came into a small clearing and saw two Vietcong digging a bunker. We walked right past them, apparently so stealthily that they never looked up. They just kept on digging and we kept on walking. Neither group said a word nor acknowledged the presence of the other. As we kept walking we began to see more and more Vietcong digging bunkers not far from us. Apparently still unseen, we slowly, carefully continued onward. We had no choice, as the enemy seemed to be in every direction and our current course seemed as good as another did. Finally, just before we got to a large trail, we encountered three Vietcong next to a bunker. As they simultaneously spotted us, we could see them going for their AK-47s. We fired first, shooting them on the run and killing all three as we headed down the trail. While we would normally have avoided staying on any trail, this one appeared to run in a northerly direction, and speed of exit was now our premier objective—any hopes of sneaking to safety now gone with the just concluded shooting of the enemy soldiers at the bunker. As we ran up the trail, we could hear clickers, sort of like those kid's toys called "crickets". Then it dawned on me we that we were not receiving any enemy return fire. The enemy were apparently more interested in surrounding us and running us to ground, using the cricket noises to maintain contact with each other during the pursuit. Perhaps the enemy plan for us now was capture. While our teams had at times gone on "prisoner snatch" (to get enemy prisoners rather than just bodies) missions, we had no interest in being on the receiving end of an enemy prisoner snatch operation. After continuing to run for another several hundred meters, I signaled Blankenship to stop and get off the trail just for a few seconds so I could get orientated and call in artillery, and so Danny Carter could radio

Operations as to our situation. We were still hearing clickers all around us. While the rest of the team took to a knee, I was standing looking at my map a few feet from the trail, just inside the jungle. Suddenly Blankenship snaps his finger to get my attention. He signals me that there are three VC on the trail coming directly toward us. We are all frozen in position. We could hear the Vietcong talking and they are carrying their AK-47s slung on top of their shoulders holding their weapons by the barrel, instead of leveled in a ready and alert posture. For whatever reason, call it a sixth sense, the point man, at whom I am looking, brings his eyes up and around and stares right at me. I can see his eyes open wide, knowing this cannot be happening to him. He starts to remove his AK-47 from his shoulder, trying to bring it to a firing position, while he is simultaneously yelling to his comrades what he sees. At the same time, I am raising my CAR-15 to my waist and we all open fire at once. Our shots are on the mark, theirs flying over our heads as they are bowled over backward by our volley. In an "Immediate Action" (IA) maneuver, we quickly and automatically reverse our order of march. Crawley, originally assigned as rear security, now becomes the point man and Blankenship is now rear security. I point in the direction I want to go and tell Crawley there is a potential pick-up zone (PZ) about two clicks (2000) meters away. Now we are off on a dead run. It will be a foot race to the PZ, our lives on the line. We continued to hear the "crickets" but as we neared the open area we also start receiving automatic fire from our rear. So much for them trying to take us alive! Notwithstanding our heavy rucksacks, we slowly gain separation from the pursuing enemy. Thank God for all that PT. Though we cursed it back in Lai Khe, it paid off in dividends as we relentlessly moved to the PZ.

A seeming lifetime later, we break out of the jungle and onto the edge of the designated clearing. We quickly take cover and start to deliver return fire. I yell over at Carter to "get on the horn" (team radio) and call the TOC and let them know we are at the PZ and ready for extraction as soon as possible. Our extraction helicopter, accompanied by helicopter gunships, should already be enroute and I want to ensure them we are ready and more than willing to get out of there. Just then a "bird-dog" (Cessna 0-1 airplane) spotter plane is circling above us. He has heard our call for artillery and knows we are in a bad situation.

He radios us to pop smoke so he can get our exact position. Accordingly, Wiggins crawls out into the open area and pops a green smoke grenade. The bird-dog pilot identifies "green" and we are in business. We cannot see what is on the right side of our position, so I send Crawley and Flores to check it out and make sure we don't get hit on our right flank. I tell them to hurry, as we should soon have incoming friendly artillery and I want the entire team in one, tight group. Our pursuers, however, are not waiting for our help to arrive. We are soon pinned down by heavy automatic fire. While we return fire as effectively and efficiently as possibly, we now are also starting to get low on ammunition. Finally, the requested artillery rounds begin to arrive. As the first round hits one hundred meters from our location, Crawley and Flores are at a dead run, then diving back into our position. Crawley is all excited. He has a red bruise on his forehead and Flores' ear is bleeding, as an AK-47 round has nicked a piece of it during their withdrawal. Bird-dog is starting to get excited, as he sees a large enemy force moving towards us and wants to drop artillery 50 meters to our front and fire for effect. Relying on his judgement, I radio the artillery Fire Direction Center (FDC) to "drop 50

and fire for effect”. We need a wall of steel between the enemy and us if we are to survive until we can be extracted. We keep firing, hugging the earth as the artillery continues to arrive—it is “danger close”, but much appreciated. I told everyone to stay down as low as they can, as the artillery continues to impact just outside of our position. I quickly ask Crawley: “What happened”. He said that just as he and Flores moved into the jungle on the team’s right flank, he ran head-on into a Vietcong soldier. They butted heads and both fell to the ground stunned and in shock. Unable to stop, Flores collided into Crawley and rebounded, but stayed on his feet. As Flores recovered his balance, both Crawley and the Vietcong had picked up their weapons, turned around and headed in the opposite direction. But a second Vietcong, unseen behind the first one, recovered enough to quickly get a few poorly aimed rounds off, one of which nicked Flores’ ear. Crawley and Flores quickly retreated to the team’s position. With the rounds hitting so closely to our position, we started bouncing off the ground with each impact. We would feel the impact, then the splinters and small shreds of metal rain through the trees, followed immediately by the larger pieces, cutting everything in their path: this was really close. After the first few volleys, I asked Bird-Dog if it was safe to move further back into the open area. He said yes, as he took control of the artillery and continued to bring more rounds in between the team and the enemy. Finally, in the distance, we could hear the rotors of our extraction helicopter, beating the air as it headed into the clearing. Two Huey Cobra gun ships accompanied it, ready to chew up the jungle around us once our position was clearly identified to them. The UH-1D asked for a new smoke grenade, everything beyond it to be fair game for the Cobra gunships wrath. As soon as the extraction ship pilot identified our smoke, it came barreling in for the extraction. The extraction ship itself soon also began receiving automatic weapons fire, its door gunners firing over the team’s head in response. The enemy fire still being too heavy, the UH-1D flared up and circled away before returning to again try for the extraction. Knowing that the team’s time was quickly running out, I advised Bird-Dog to have the Cobras make their rocket and minigun runs from north to south along the tree line, while we awaited the returning UH-1D pick-up ship. With the enemy thus being engaged, and now focusing their weapons on the Cobras, the UH-1D was finally able to land long enough for the team to clamber aboard. As the pick-up helicopter “pulled pitch” and got out of the PZ, the team, and the ship’s door gunners continued to fire into the rapidly receding jungle as the UH-1D clawed for altitude and safety.

Wildcat 7 had clearly stirred up a hornet’s nest, and had barely made it out of there. The net result, aside from the team’s survival with no serious casualties, had been the location of an enemy base camp and confirmation of G-2’s hypotheses that strong enemy forces were indeed still operating near Song Be. That was not a “news flash”. From past missions, we had pretty well known what to expect going into Song Be. While the enemy base-camp would be targeted for air strikes, undoubtedly new base-camps would soon take its place and follow-on LRP missions and line infantry operations would again go into the AO to find them. For Team Wildcat 7, it had just been another “day in the life”. After a day’s stand-down in Lai Khe, we would soon be on another mission.

Hard to believe that we were on that mission nearly 37 years ago. It is still vivid in our memories.

Here's wishing everyone best wishes and happy holidays. May the new year be better than the last. I will leave you with this poem sent to me by Ramona Catherwood, wife of Greg, AKA "HOLLYWOOD" Catherwood. This poem was written for Greg by his neighbor, Keric.