

Ranger Team - Hard Rider 74 Cambodian Mission May 1970

By Lou Bruchey

On May 1, 1970, the 1st Air Cavalry Division, supported by other U.S. ground forces and units from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) invaded Cambodia by launching multi-pronged attacks along the border in Corp III. Spearheading the assault were the five or six man, long range reconnaissance patrol teams (LRRP) from H Co, 75th Rangers, 1st Air Cavalry Division. The LRRPs were the “eyes and ears” of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, and their mission was to provide vital intelligence on the identification, location, and movement of enemy troops.

In the second week of May 1970, army ranger team Hard Rider 74 flew from its home base at Phuoc Vinh to 3rd Brigade headquarters at Quon Loi. From there, the team choppered across the border into Cambodia to the 1st Cavalry Division’s most northern and remote outpost, the newly established fire support base (FSB) David. The members of our team were: Sgt. Bill Abbott, team leader; Sgt. Johnny Rodriguez, assistant team leader; Spec. 4 Darrell Smith, radio man; Spec. 4 Lou Bruchey, medic; Spec. 4 Carl Laker; and Spec. 4 Dennis Smith, rear scout. At a commander’s briefing, we learned we were to be inserted into an area of operation (AO) deep into Cambodia and close to three branches of the Ho Chi Minh trail. With multiple trails, a nearby river and bridge, the AO was considered a major staging area for the communist forces.

Within an hour, we lifted off from FSB. David and began our long flight west to our AO. The team sat silently on the floor of the Huey, leaning back against our packs with our legs dangling out the door. Beneath us the land rose and fell, typical of the rolling hills of the central Cambodian highlands. The topography mostly consisted of high thorn, scrub jungle laced with open areas of fire generated grasslands dotted with small trees. Since entering Cambodia, I noticed the marked change in the landscape. All my previous missions in Vietnam had been deep into the bomb scarred triple canopied jungle where there were no roads, buildings, or cultivated fields. Since entering Cambodia, we now passed over dirt roads, small rice paddies, and occasional clusters of huts. My gut reaction to our new AO was “this is going to be different.”

As with all missions, the rangers operated in a “free fire zone.” No “friendlies” were supposed to be in our area of operation, so anyone we found in the AO was considered an enemy. Man or woman, young or old. To our mind, they were there for a reason, and that reason was to fight and kill American GIs.

When we finally approached our landing zone (LZ), the chopper dropped steeply onto the slope of a large grassy area. Within seconds of touchdown, Team 74 jumped from the chopper skids and moved across the open area toward the jungle which capped the high ground of a ridge. About ten yards from the edge of the jungle, we stepped over a well used trail that ran paralleled to the tree line. Sgt. Abbott led us into the jungle where we

paused, each man crouched with his M-16 in a ready position, each man scanning his area of responsibility, each man watching and listening. Whether moving, halting, investigating a trail or bunker, or setting up an overnight position, every ranger had an area of responsibility to monitor so that the team always had eyes and ears covering their position 360 degrees. In the distance, the staccato whomp of our chopper faded away until our world became silent maze of vines, bamboo, and leafy scrub brush.

After a few minutes, Abbott removed his pack and quietly placed in on the ground. In turn, he directed each man to a position. In a typical overnight halt, the rangers set up in a circle with packs in the center and each man facing out. The LRRPs sat on the ground with legs extended like the spokes of a wheel with their packs in the center, serving as a back rest. I was on the far right as we faced the trail. We could clearly see the open area and the trail, but the jungle vegetation provided just enough concealment that we would be difficult to see from the trail. After establishing comms with FSB. David, we gave them our location as best we knew it.

“Did you see the boot marks?” whispered Abbott. Everyone nodded. “Be alert. We’re staying here.” It was late afternoon and there was much to do before night.

In turn, each man very quietly cleared an area just long and wide enough for sleeping. His pack would be his pillow, his web gear laid along his right side. Spec. Smith removed the radio from his pack and placed it in the center of our position. When everyone was settled in, Abbott whispered for the claymores. Each man carried two claymore anti-personnel mines and several strands of detonation cord with blasting caps attached to each end. Abbott and Rodriguez gathered the claymores; then, cautiously, Abbott, Rodriguez, Dennis Smith, and I moved out into the open area. Smith covered one end of the trail, and I covered the other end as Abbott and Rodriguez placed the claymores along the path. After the claymores were armed and placed, Abbott unrolled a spool of electrical wire used to detonate the mines back to our overnight position; then wordlessly, we all moved back into the jungle. The ambush was set.

The team sat quietly throughout the afternoon. No one moved from his spot on the ground, and no one spoke. Each man scanned the area in front of him. Each man was lost in his own thoughts. I was alert with anticipation of coming action. I had seen the tracks of the North Vietnam Army (NVA) on the trail. There were plenty of them, and they looked fresh. I was eager for an ambush, but I was also wary. I thought about a previous mission in Cambodia that had made me realize that anything was possible in the field. In that instance, we had searched a heavy jungle throughout the day without finding a trace of the enemy before stopping for an overnight halt. While we rested in the stillness of triple canopy jungle, a large truck started up and began idling just yards from our position. Instantly, we all reacted with bewilderment and surprise. A truck in the middle of a jungle with no roads? Was that possible? What kind of truck? Troop transport? If so, how many men? Supply truck? Were we close to a camp? Was it even a truck? Maybe it was armor. We called a pink team, consisting of a Cobra gunship & a Light Observation Helicopter (LOH), to our location for backup and to find the truck and the personnel. When they arrived, the LOH buzzed the treetops, but never spotted the

vehicle. The Cobra made repeated strafing runs close to our position in the direction of the truck noise, but the results were unknown as we were extracted after the Cobra had expended its ordinance.

Suddenly, I felt the flush of adrenalin as movement caught my eye. About fifty yards away to my right, I watched in amazement as a column of NVA soldiers streamed out of a draw onto the trail and moved toward our position. Quietly, I whispered to the team, "Here they come," and tried to get as low as I could. Silently, the other rangers flatten onto the ground.

My heart was pounding as the long line of NVA approached our position. The NVA were heavily armed with AK-47 rifles, heavy machine guns, ammo belts, and B-40 rocket propelled grenade launchers. Some wore the familiar NVA green uniform with pith hat, while others wore black pajama-like pants and shirts. Each man carried a large pack. Some of the soldiers looked very scruffy, even wild, with long hair and dirty uniforms. These were not new recruits. They were veteran troops who had been in the field a long time. Despite their heavy load, the men walked quickly. Several times we heard men speak angrily as if urging the others to move quicker, or maybe it was just someone bitching like all soldiers do about harsh conditions, a forced march, or even the army. Their voices were sharp and abrupt. For an instant, I thought these guys are just like us. They don't want to be here any more than we do. They were living in the field under miserable conditions for months at a time, being hunted night and day, by air and by land, suffering under the heat and the rain, destined to fight an endless war against a superior force until they were either maimed or killed. But these were hardened soldiers dedicated to their cause, and they were tough.

Many thoughts flashed through my mind as I watched the enemy in a seemingly endless column pass by. I tried to comprehend the unreality of my situation. Minutes earlier I was quietly sitting in a jungle. Within seconds, I was suddenly within a few yards of hundreds of enemy soldiers. True, we were camouflaged head to toe and concealed in the jungle, but barely. We were not in a thick, triple canopy jungle. It was more like a shrub brush, vines, and a thinly treed forest. My major concern was that we had some concealment, but no cover. There were no large trees, rocks, bunkers, or even fox holes to protect us. Our entire position was no more than a few yards wide. A long burst from one enemy AK-47 could take us all out. Our only hope was to remain completely silent and invisible. No cover and very little concealment. This was not good.

We were so very, very close to the enemy. I concentrated on remaining absolutely still and controlling what little breath I had. I did not move as I felt ants and other insects crawl over my body. I could not comprehend that I could be dead within seconds. I wondered about my team mates. There were six of us. If anyone moved, coughed, spoke, or made any kind of sound, we would surely be killed. We were all highly trained, but we were all human, too. I prayed no one would panic. I hoped no one would start shooting. And I hoped Abbott didn't detonate the claymores because even our anti-personnel mines couldn't kill them all. The claymores! What about the claymores!

The claymores had been set up along the trail. If even one NVA saw them, we were doomed. I had provided security on one end of the trail when the mines were set. But because I had been watching the trail, I didn't know exactly how or where they were placed. Were the mines camouflaged properly and hidden from view? Were the electrically cord and the connecting detonation cords hidden? In the open area there wasn't much ground cover and the grass was thin and low. When I first got into H Company, I remembered sitting in the barracks in the evenings listening to stories from veteran LRRPs about NVA soldiers who had actually seen improperly hidden claymores before they were detonated. I heard stories of claymore that were set too low and when detonated didn't kill the NVA but just blew their legs off. I heard stories of claymore that didn't go off. I wondered about our claymores, and I was very worried they would be spotted.

The radio was another real concern. Nothing like a squelch break or a crackle of a radio transmission to alert the enemy. What was happening with the comms? Nothing I hoped. Everyone was still. Everyone was quiet. Every eye was riveted on the long column of enemy soldiers moving directly in front of our position.

But did anyone back at FSB. David know what was happening? Was a pink team on the way? No, wait. If a pink team showed up, what would the NVA do? They wouldn't stand out in the open as a Cobra came diving down on them with mini-guns and rockets blazing. They'd run into the jungle, right where we were. So, don't send the gunships. In fact, I prayed *no* aircraft would fly over which would surely cause the NVA to seek cover. Ironically, we were in the midst of a large enemy force, but we couldn't call for help because it might drive the enemy into our position. We were on our own. Six guys somewhere in Cambodia with hundreds of enemy soldiers just yards away.

After the first column had passed, I knew we were in trouble, but I liked our chances. I tried to focus on my breathing, but within seconds, I was shocked to hear more Vietnamese voices and the soft clatter of troops on the march. Unbelievably, I looked to see another line of NVA emerge along the trail heading to our position. For several minutes, enemy soldiers shuffled passed us, not in one long, evenly spaced column, but in smaller, platoon sized groups. I felt like I was in a Hollywood movie, but this was real, and there would be no retakes or second chances.

Eventually, the long enemy columns passed our position. Smith put the radio handset to his ear and quietly alerted FSB. David with a situation report. For stealth purposes, all comms was accomplished with barely audible squelch breaks, except during insertions, extractions, and contact. One squelch break meant "yes," two squelch breaks meant "no." After the mission, during the after action report, we learned what had transpired on the radio between Smith and the firebase.

From the operation center at the firebase: "Hard Rider 74, do you have movement?"

"Squelch," replied Smith.

“Are you in contact?” asked the firebase.

“Squelch, squelch,” replied Smith.

“For every 3 gooks, give me one squelch break,” asked the firebase.

Smith repeatedly broke squelch without really counting the number. When he stopped, the relay operator hesitated as if he misunderstood, and then asked, “Understand 40 gooks?”

Smith replied with two squelches.

“Understand 120 gooks?” asked the firebase incredulously.

Smith replied with a squelch. “Yes”.

It was way more than 120 NVA soldiers, but Smith later said reporting the exact number of enemy was immaterial during those desperate moments. Besides, how do you say, “too many to count” in squelch breaks? He just wanted to alert the firebase of a very large enemy force which was nearly on top of us. Later, if the rangers survived the mission and made it back to the firebase, the team could give a more accurate description of the enemy troops, but now was not the time to hash out details.

Within minutes the rangers were told that a pink team was not immediately available, but artillery was, and they were standing by for a firing mission.

Darrell Smith, the radio man, recalled his experience that night.

“At dusk on our first night, we watched – as I remember- 200-300 bad guys walk swiftly uphill in a long broken line through a scrubby draw to pass within 10 meters or so of our position. The NVA were extremely close. Too close! We hugged the ground completely motionless. I remember lots of black pajamas, others in green with flop hats and some had pith helmets. They carried AK-47s, magazine fed machine guns, rocket propelled grenades, and a few had rakes and shovels. When we talked later, someone said one of them had a bugle strapped to his pack.

No one got an accurate count because the sheer number of them challenged our primitive Ranger arithmetic. We had to lie absolutely still and completely concealed with our faces and bodies as close to ground as possible. I didn’t even want to show the whites of my eyes. It took them many long minutes to walk by us in numerous drawn out groups. They were talking and coughing and occasionally yelling at each other. I was hoping none of them would stop and pee on us.

After all the groups had passed, we thought some of enemy had halted a couple hundred meters beyond us at the end of the finger of hilltop jungle. We called in artillery (Redleg), on them. Within minutes, 105s howitzers from David began lobbing high

explosive rounds into the path of the NVA. The shells exploded in the distance, then seem to get closer. Several rounds landed way too close. Were the coordinates correct? Now, we could hear shouting and movement from the NVA, and we quickly realized some of them were moving into the jungle and back toward us to avoid the incoming artillery. Between the exploding rounds, I finally called in a cease fire.”

Within minutes the guns stopped firing and an eerie calm settled over us. The team lay motionless, frozen to the ground, M-16s ready, claymore detonator in hand, silently absorbing what had just happened. We waited for more enemy movement, but the trail was empty and the jungle was silent. Still, we remained in our position, alert for any enemy voices or movement.

Our primary goal on the mission was to find the enemy, and we had exceeded that goal far beyond our wildest imagination as we had watched the North Vietnam Army pour down the trail in front of us. Only a few yards and a thin veil of leafy vegetation separated us. In an instant, our mindset had gone from offense and possible attack mode to basic survival.

Finally, Abbott and Smith were able to quietly call in a verbal situation report to David. When the higher ups at the firebase grasped how dangerous and vulnerable our position was, they decided to extract us as soon as possible. A pink team and Huey lift ship were dispatched, and we were to prepare to move out onto the LZ. Because we had no idea when or if more NVA would be on the trail, our plan was to wait until the choppers were on station, blow the claymores to clear a path ahead of us, and then move across the trail, out into the open area for the quick extraction.

As darkness rapidly closed in, we finally heard the distant sound of the approaching helicopters. When the Huey arrived, we detonated the claymores and moved onto the exposed LZ. As the chopper descended, the rangers were startled to see a dozen or so lights moving through the nearby jungle. The NVA were all around us, but the pilot bravely touched down, and we quickly clamored onto the floor of the bird.

Every step of the way, from the time we left the jungle, jumped onto the chopper, then lifted off, I was waiting for a hail of AK-47 rounds or B40 grenades to come flying into us. After we scrambled aboard, the pilot nosed the chopper forward, straining to gain altitude to clear the intermittent trees that dotted the ground. Suddenly, we slowed, stopped, and then began to pivot just a few feet above the sloping hillside. What's going on? Was it a mechanically problem? Were we too heavy? Was it the night air? Was the pilot lost? Was the pilot insane? What's going on? We've just gone from one side of the clearing to the other. If the NVA opened up on us, it would be like target practice. Get this thing in the air! Then, the pilot reversed course and reapplied power. For a few tense seconds we skimmed the grass before slowly lifting into the night air. When we cleared the scrub trees and rose far above the jungle, I looked over to Rodriguez who just shook his head in wide-eyed amazement and relief. The team was quiet as we flew back to the firebase.

When we returned to FSB. David, Abbott and Rodriguez hurried in to debrief the commanding officers, who were concerned that the firebase would be attacked. Two to three hundred NVA on the move. That's nice to know. Are they heading our way? Let's be ready if the shit hits the fan.

In retrospect, we realized we were very lucky that the NVA were on the march that day and not in an encampment where we were inserted. If so, they certainly would have had LZ watchers, and we would have been shot off the LZ on insertion. Miraculously, we had arrived a few hours before them, and eventually, we had left after the main body had moved passed us. The exact number of enemy soldiers we saw was an estimate. Nobody really counted, but estimates from each team member ranged from 200-300. We were amazingly close to them, no more than 10 yards away. We saw a human face on the enemy. We listened as they talked. We saw their expressions as they labored under heavy loads and wartime dangers. It was both a fascinating and terrifying experience.

The following morning, extensive aerial reconnaissance failed to locate the NVA. Because of the pace of their march, the NVA could have been miles from where we had encountered them, and the winding trails could have taken them in any direction. The only trace left were a myriad of boot prints on the trail. However, at 0230 on June 14, 1970, FSB. David was attacked by an estimated reinforced company of NVA. In a fierce battle that lasted till nearly dawn, the enemy failed to overrun the base, but left twenty-eight dead in and around the perimeter. The Americans suffered thirty-three wounded by mortars, grenades, and small arms fire. It seems very likely that the enemy troops that walked past us that night were part of the assault on FSB. David.

Of the team members of Hard Rider 74: Abbott, Rodriguez, Darrell Smith, Bruchey, and Dennis Smith survived their tour in Nam and returned safely to the U.S. Tragically, a few weeks later, Spec 4. Carl Laker, and another ranger, SSG. Deverton Cochran, were killed in action when Team 52 was nearly wiped out on a mission in Cambodia close to the same AO where we had encountered the NVA. The bodies of Laker and Cockran were never recovered.

I've often thought about that mission. True, we were very lucky, but we were also pretty good. Each man on that team exemplified the finest qualities of an army ranger: skill, courage, and resourcefulness. Each man reacted quickly and performed as trained, even under extreme pressure. Each man trusted his life to his team mates as he lay silently in a nameless patch of jungle in Cambodia. No one made a mistake. No one panicked. Everyone survived to fight another day.

Rangers Lead The Way!