



Specialist Four
 E CO (LRRP), 52ND INFANTRY, 1ST CAV DIV, USARV
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27 December 1967 - 1st Cav Mission in the Suoi Ca Valley

I was 5 years old in May 1967 when my second cousin, William “Billy” Critchfield stopped by our house on a rainy New Jersey spring night to say goodbye to my family. He was heading out to Vietnam. He was wearing his dress uniform and shook my hand as he left. It would be the last time. It is one of my earlier memories, and it is as vivid as if it were yesterday.

1967 was a watershed year for the War in Vietnam. The number of US troops increased from 435,000 at the end of 1966, to 500,000 in 1967. Although public opinion regarding the war had been waning, Middle America and the media were tiring but still generally supportive of the war effort. By late 1967, after a series of border battles initiated by the PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam) including Loc Ninh, Song Be, and Dak To, the war had reached a turning point and officers at MACV began to proclaim ‘light at the end of the tunnel’. US attrition objectives were being achieved: Vietcong and NVA units were apparently losing more forces in South Vietnam than could be replaced through recruitment or infiltration. Policy-makers in Hanoi also came to the conclusion that the war was stalemated and that battlefield trends were not in their favor. By December 1967, major operations throughout Vietnam had ceased and the war became a series of small unit clashes. Although it was generally not understood at the time, VC and NVA units were preparing for two major initiatives and moving men and materiel throughout the Central Highlands: The Siege at Khe Sanh would begin on the 21st of January 1968, and the Tet Offensive on Jan 30.

Billy Critchfield arrived in Vietnam on May 10, 1967 and was assigned to the 1st Cav. During the three-day in-processing, “cherries” typically received a briefing by the 1st Cav LRRPs. The “First Team” LRRPs had been established by Capt. Jim James in November 1966 and had been instrumental in providing long range reconnaissance throughout the 1st Cav’s wide-spread area of operations (AO) in the Central Highlands. After volunteering and completing the course, Bill was ultimately assigned to a First Team LRRP unit at LZ Uplift on Hwy 1 near the town of Bong Son with ~40-50 other LRRPs. Bill was well-liked and respected by team members.

LRRPs were a breed apart in nearly every way. They operated independently of the “regular” Army, with their own command structure reporting to G-2 Intelligence. They wore “tiger” fatigues similar to the South Vietnamese Rangers and Special Ops Studies and Observations Group (SOG). Steel pot helmets were exchanged for floppy bush hats. Their missions involved 5-6 man teams that were inserted into remote areas by helicopter at first light or nautical twilight. First light insertions were timed to execute the operation at “false dawn”, the brief transitional period of early morning as the darkness of night became a translucent grey just before the sunrise. Nautical twilight was the transitional evening period after sunset but just before the black darkness of night settled over the highlands. All LRRPs were volunteers – their missions were considered too dangerous for involuntary assignments. All LRRP volunteers had to pass a grueling 2-3 week training program where they learned a variety of skills including compass and map skills, radio, medical, tactics, and weapons training.



Missions would typically last 5-7 days often in areas of dense triple-canopy jungle, often outside the range of supporting artillery, or rapid reinforcement. Insertions were inherently dangerous and precise operations where a three hueys (known as a “slicks”), typically escorted by two gunships, would approach the improvised landing zone (LZ) from a low-angle. The team would be on the first slick followed by the other two, running one after the other. The lead slick would pull close to the ground at a pre-selected LZ, often a small open saddle on a ridgeline. While the gunships lazily circled to provide support for incoming fire, the LRRP team would stand on the chopper’s skids as the slick pulled pitch into a momentarily stall and hovered 5-7 feet off the ground. The team, carrying ~100 lb packs each would jump to the ground. The other two ships would pass overhead and continue on and the team’s slick would fall into place as the third one in the line. The slicks and gunships would continue on, increasing elevation but remaining on-station to provide support in the event of ambush until the insertion team moved off of the LZ to a pre-established rally point 50-150 meters from the LZ.

The team would quickly “lay dog”, assembling in a wagon-wheel pattern, feet in the middle, squatting or lying prone with each LRRP dropping his pack in front of him both as protection and as a shooting platform. With 360 degree field of fire covered, the team would quietly wait, ensuring their insertion was undetected. Although the VC and NVA operating in the 1st Cav’s AO were initially caught unaware as the LRRP program spun up in ’66 and early ’67, they quickly adapted their tactics. Special NVA Hunter-Killer tracking teams were soon operating throughout the highlands and sizeable bounties were offered to VC and locals alike for the killing or capture of LRRP teams. Although an insertion may have seemed successful, the teams had to worry first about VC or NVA units establishing an ambush, or discovering and overrunning them immediately after insertion. If that did not occur, the teams were concerned about being tracked and ambushed at anytime. The LRRP team members typically carried minimal firepower. M-16’s were traded-in for the shorter Car-15 carbines or an occasional Swedish K “grease gun” or other “exotic” weapons. LRRPs carried a double standard ammunition load of 18-20 20-round magazines. Without supporting artillery or immediate reinforcements, a 5-man team could be rapidly overwhelmed. The LRRP team’s best hope lay in remaining stealthy and ultimately undiscovered.

After intense observation for signs of attack or ambush, the team would load up and begin slowly moving through the jungle. They tended to avoid trails and would instead stick to covered areas where they could blend in with foliage. This often meant slow progress through “wait-a-minute” vines, thick bamboo forests, and triple-canopy undergrowth. The team would string out 8-10 feet apart with the most experienced team members taking turns “walking point” leading the team. The Team Leader (TL) would generally walk in the second position and an experienced LRRP would bring up the rear, known as “Slack” or “Drag”, ensuring that all evidence of the team’s presence including bent branches and footprints were eliminated. Teams would occasionally circle-back on their route (button-hook) to determine if they were being tracked or followed. LRRPs moved silently, slowly, and deliberately observing and reporting any presence of enemy activity, trails, tunnels, weapons or food caches, as well as terrain features and foliage type. If the team detected sizeable enemy forces, they would radio in the position for artillery, air support, or helicopter gunships to decimate the enemy force while remaining hidden. On occasion, particularly later in the war, missions also included NVA/VC ambushes or prisoner-snatches.

LRRP teams would seek and establish positions of natural strategic or tactical advantage where observations could be made stealthily but could also be defended if attacked, and from which Escape and Evasion (E&E) could be conducted if the position was overrun. In establishing an observation point or a night position, the team would agree on the E&E plan as well as establish a perimeter 10-20 meters out and set trip-flares and, as night approached, claymore anti-personnel mines. They would also call in the periodic sitreps (Situation Report) and call in advanced firing coordinates in the event they needed artillery support.



6 heading north near the mountains on the east side of the Suoi Ca Valley (South of AQ)

On Dec 26, 1967, SP-4 Bill Critchfield returned from a mission with another team lead by Bob Carr in a remote area in the Kim Son Valley in the Vinh Thanh Mountains known as the Crow's Foot. He volunteered to join another mission scheduled for the next day. This mission was to be lead by Sgt. "Montana" Joe Haverland. Bill was the Assistant Team Lead (ATL) joining Pat Blewett (RTO), Don Van Hook, and two South Vietnamese scouts Qui and Phi. The team lifted off from LZ Uplift the following morning for a first light insertion in the Suoi Ca Valley. The Suoi Ca Valley lies ~20 miles south of Bong Son in the Binh Dinh Province and is named for the Suoi Ca stream that meanders through the craggy valley. The valley itself is

approximately 20 kilometers long on a north/south axis that roughly parallels Highway 1, notoriously known since the French occupation as "La Rue Sans Joie" – The Street Without Joy, triangulated by Binh Khe to the west, Phu My to the northeast, and Phu Cat to the southwest. The insertion was successful and the team made their way to their first rendezvous point. After laying dog for 30 minutes or so, they began to reconnoiter the mountainside and deep ravines in the valley thick with triple canopy vegetation. The day wore on without excitement or significant discoveries.

At approximately 5:00pm, the team located and established a night position on the side of a hill with a



Flight heading south over the Suoi Ca with the river visible and runway at Phu Cat Air Base near the center

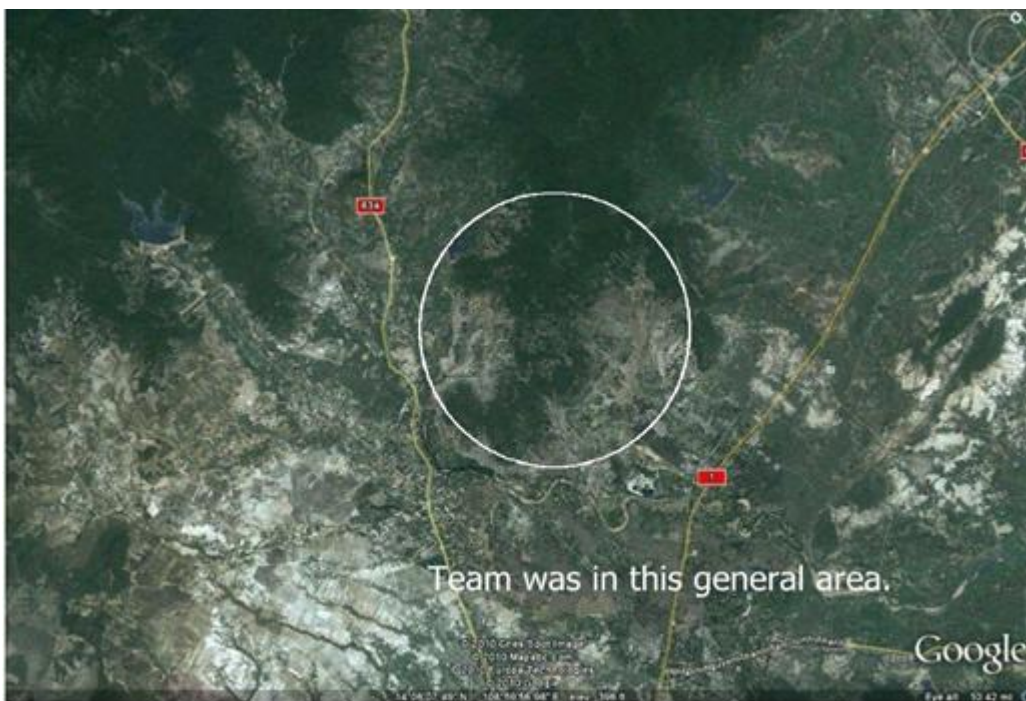
~20 degree incline in an area surrounded by thick jungle with trees that afforded Montana the ability to

climb a tree and view the valley floor. The team set out trip flares but held off setting out claymores. The VC and NVA were known to sneak up on positions and turn the claymores around on the team. Claymores would be deployed as

night fell, often placing a pin-released hand grenade under the claymore as a booby-trap if it were disturbed. The team settled in and began preparing dinner. On most missions, the team ate freeze-dried LRP rations – because standard C-rations were too heavy to pack in. On this mission, the team had also brought in the meat portions from some C-rations. As they started to prepare the meat, Phi and Qui went out into the jungle and brought back a number of plants and chopped them up and made a delicious stew that was heated using a small piece of C4 explosive lit on fire in a small hole in the ground. C4 burned hot and fast and was fairly smokeless and was often used to heat rations in the field.

High over the Suoi Ca valley looking over the eastern side mountains, across the coastal plain





At around 5:30, as the team was just getting ready to eat dinner, Montana whispered down to the team, "Gook." A moment later, "Another one." Several moments later he said "Shit. They're all over the place." An NVA anti-aircraft battalion consisting of 1,500 – 2,000 North Vietnamese Regulars were moving down the valley floor, hugging the edge of the tree line nearest the team's position. As the RTO, Pat Blewett radioed in an artillery strike to decimate the large force. As the artillery shells landed, Pat called in the coordinates, walking the artillery up the hill toward the

team's position. Normally, a force attempting to evade artillery shells would move in a different direction than where the shells were landing but for some reason, the main NVA force evaded directly up the hill on top of the team.



Montana, still in the tree, called out "Let's get the hell out of here." The E&E plan called for the team to split up into two groups (Pat, Bill, and Phi) and (Montana, Van Hook, and Qui) and move in opposite directions around the hill and rendezvous in the valley on the other side. Bill and Phi were squatting on the ground in a defensive firing position to the left of Pat, packs on, ready to move. NVA soldiers simultaneously threw a satchel charge and sprayed the area with automatic weapon fire as it detonated. A satchel charge is composed of high explosives packed into a canvas bag along with priming assemblies and a pull igniter and is typically significantly more powerful than a hand grenade. The charge

landed several feet immediately in front of Bill and Phi. Pat had just pulled on his pack and was turning to say "Let's move" when he saw a bright orange flash. He pulled the emergency release on his pack and kicked his legs out, landing prone on the ground as the satchel charge exploded.



After the blast, Pat opened his eyes and looked to his left to discover Bill and Phi in a heap. The explosion blew a hole in Pat's calf and shredded his backpack, which had not come off - likely saving his life. The explosion also blew off Qui's heel and blew Montana completely out of the tree, injuring his back. Only Van Hook managed to escape serious injury. Pat and Van Hook immediately went to Bill and Phi who were unconscious and attempted to administer first-aid. LRRPs carried a med kit including cans of blood extenders (serum albumin). Unfortunately, the med kit had been in Pat's backpack and was destroyed. Van Hook found a damaged can of serum albumin but sliced his hand open while attempting to open it. Meanwhile, NVA

soldiers were still overrunning the position while evading artillery. As Van Hook helped Montana and Qui, into defensive firing positions, Pat radioed in the initial distress call with request for reinforcements and immediate evacuation.

A 30-man Quick Reaction Force (QRF) unit known as "The Blues" and "Red" team gunships from the 1st Squad/9th Cav were scrambled out of LZ Two-Bits near Bong Son. The 1/9 headed south into the mountains and valleys of the coastal plain toward Suoi Ca to insert the Blues platoon, secure the area, and extract the 1st Cav LRRP team. In a 2006 email to me, Paul Hart, the lead lift pilot described the following:

"In the darkness of the mountains our guns ships designated a landing zone (LZ) as close as possible to the team and we proceeded to air assault our Blues into the area. As we circled above the valley floor we could see our unit(s) in "contact" and tracers streaked through the air. During this "holding" period we had some airborne discussion regarding the extraction and medivac of the team, as well as our own Blues. "

The 1st Cav team had managed to set up defensive firing positions and in the darkness was working by sound only. In a recent email regarding the events of that night, Pat Blewett stated:

"Suddenly something set off one of our trip flares and Van Hook spun around to sweep the area on full-auto but I stopped him and got on the radio, 'Blue, if you tripped that flare, tell me now.' We received an affirmative reply. I answered back 'You're going across the mountain above us. I'm sending a man up to you. Don't shoot.' Van Hook went up to the Blues and we got everyone ready to go. Everyone, except Van Hook and I, were put on ponchos and carried out. Van Hook was able to walk on his own and I walked up the hill with two M-16's for crutches and one on each shoulder. Van Hook and I dusted one gook hiding in some bushes on the way up."

Paul Hart continued:

"I accepted responsibility for the extraction and medivac when we got the call. The other three lift birds would add the additional troopers that made up the squad I would leave behind. With the area still "hot", [still shooting] we received a call from our Blues telling us that they had reached the LRRP team and needed immediate medivac. That was my call to go. I went into a makeshift LZ at the direction of our Blues and under cover of our guns. Obviously, at this point the adrenaline rush sets in and as a pilot you're concentrating on the job at hand. In this case it was landing in the dark, possibly under fire, getting the team on board, getting out of the LZ and to the nearest medical facility. In the few frantic and hurried minutes it took to land and load, I was able to glance around as the team was helped or placed aboard by our Blues. Some seemed to be conscious others not. My crew chief yelled "flights up" and we were gone. Fortunately, there was an aid station a short flight away. We were there and on the ground to waiting medical personnel within minutes. After everyone was unloaded we departed the area and returned to our base camp... As the Aircraft Commander (A/C) that evening, I was recommended for and received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Something that I continue to display and take pride in -- not because it came from an act of war, but more from an act of humanity - one soldier helping another - what more can be asked."

Upon arrival at the med station at LZ Uplift, it was determined that both Bill and Phi had died from their injuries, most likely immediately. Both had multiple bullet wounds in the chest and extensive damage to the lower body from the satchel charge explosion. In all likelihood, neither Bill nor Phi knew or felt anything before they died.



"Montana" Joe Haverland suffered back injuries and later returned to LZ Uplift for a few missions. He transferred to the 1/9 Blues until his return to the United States. Joe died in a car accident several years later when his car went off a cliff.

Pat Blewett spent several weeks in a hospital and returned to LZ Uplift to continue with the LRRPs. He received back injuries in a chopper crash during a mission in the A Shau

valley in 1968 and since he could no longer carry a backpack, he was reassigned to the 1st Cav's 13 Signal Battalion where he worked until his eventual departure from Vietnam in January 1970.



Pat grew up in Lodi, California, the sole surviving son of an Air America pilot who died in Vietnam in 1961. He joined the Army in 1967 at age 17. He is a retired long-haul truck driver and lives in Lone, California. Pat was essential in providing a first-hand account details regarding this fateful mission and did so without reservation.

(http://www.tomah.com/lrrp_ranger/NamPhotos1/NamPhotos1.htm)

In this photo, taken in 1968, Sgt. Bill (shirtless guy) Hand's LRRPs, including Don Van Hook

(hiding in the back of the tent) pose for a team photo at Camp Evans. Don Van Hook left Vietnam in November 1968. He died of cancer in North Carolina in the mid to late 90's.

For a description of his last mission, go here: <http://www.vietnamgear.com/article.aspx?art=44>



Paul Hart was a Lift Pilot with the 1/9. He grew up in New Jersey and returned to become a police officer until his retirement several years ago. He now resides in Arizona. Paul once told me "I did a similar extraction within weeks of the 27th. Single ship, no Blues, guns for cover, coastal mountains, hot, dangerous and as exciting, but with better results. Everyone out, safe and home for another night. Couldn't ask for more." Interestingly enough, Pat Blewett was on that team as well.

Paul has been "the man behind the scenes" since we first communicated in 2006. He has been an untiring ally reaching out to former First Team LRRPs, obtaining photos, and steering people like Bob Carr, Doc Gilchrist, Bill Carpenter, Earl McCann, Bill Hand, and Pat Blewett in my direction. It is ultimately from Paul, and through him, that this information came together. I am forever indebted for Paul's assistance.

Note:

This description of the Suoi Ca mission is a work-in-progress. I am always in search of information regarding missions in which Bill Critchfield participated, photos, stories, after-action reports, and other artifacts that help describe his service in Vietnam and his life. I can be reached at deanl@cyberstrom.com or 970.690.1429.

Dean Lindstrom

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