

Five-Zero-Yankee

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by Major Ben G. Crosby



MAJOR BEN G. CROSBY, Infantry, the son of the late Colonel Ben G. Crosby, Armor, was graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1958. Following two years with the 82d Airborne Division he served with the 1st Cavalry Division in Korea where he was commandant of the division NCO Academy. From 1962 to 1964 he was a company commander and staff officer with the 2d Airborne Battle Group, 503d Combat Team (now the 173d Airborne Brigade) in Okinawa. After graduation from the Infantry Officers Advanced Course in 1965, he remained at Fort Benning as an instructor in the Mobility Department. During his recent tour in Vietnam he was S3 of the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry. Here he earned the Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star (V) and 20 Air Medals. He is now assigned to the Doctrine Directorate, Headquarters, U. S. Army Developments Command.

11 o'clock. 20 Aug. 1967. The radio in the operations center blurted. "Cougar six-five, this is Thunderball five-zero-yankee. SITREP no change. We're still moving north about 1000 meters in from the beach."

"This is six-five, Roger, out."

Team Hocker, call sign "Thunderball," commanded by Captain Bill Hocker, a tanker, had evolved out of a mutual admiration of Lieutenant Homer Krout's reconnaissance platoon and Hocker's Company C, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor. The recon platoon, known as "Krout's Killers," was an elite bunch that would tackle any size fight with no holds barred. They had developed a liking for the tanks since the new CO had joined them in the field. "Old Bill" Hocker and Homer Krout made quite a pair. Homer loved the devastation the tanks left behind and Bill loved the way Homer's men would charge into the very jaws of death right beside the iron monsters. They, together with Thunderball five-zero-yankee, SSG Dieter Burger, the fighting operations sergeant, made Team Hocker go. And a going concern it was.

"Cougar six-five, this is five-zero-yankee. We've got a resupply bird coming in a few minutes and we'll be holding up until we get this resupply finished."

"Cougar six-five. OK, but move out on that mission ASAP! Over?"

"Five-zero-yankee. Roger, out."

Team Hocker's mission was unique for a predominantly tank outfit. They were to move to the hamlet of An Tho and conduct a detailed search of the area. This type mission is one in which a unit is assigned a small area, such as An Tho hamlet to search for spider holes and enemy. The techniques used were developed by the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry, better

known as the "Cacti Blue," who exercised operational control over Thunderball. LTC Norman L. Tiller, or "Cougar six," CO of the Cacti Blue believed that these small searches would eventually defeat the Viet Cong by denying them their hiding places. The operations had, in the past, been extremely successful. It was this "hole hunting" technique that wedded Recon to Tank Company.

They made the perfect combination. The old adage – likes repel – opposites attract – described Hocker's team. Recon platoon and the tank company were direct opposites - but so were Krout and Hocker. Perhaps that's what made the team great. Hocker – quiet, reserved, a thinker, mature, deliberate and Krout – with more leadership than many seniors could muster. They were a pair, and the catalyst. five-zero-yankee... Burger was all that noncommissioned officers should be...young, brave, smart, handsome, practical and loyal. They made Thunderball run.

"Five-zero-yankee, this is Cougar six-five. Dolphin (The 174th Assault Helicopter Company) reports that your resupply bird picked up some ground fire north of your location."

"This is Thunderball six. What coordinates?"

"This is six-five. Vicinity bravo-sierra-eight-zero-zero-four-six-zero, about five minutes ago."

"Six-five, this is five-zero-yankee. Roger. We'll check it out."

Hocker sent a section of three tanks north toward the area of the ground to air fire. No sooner had they arrived than the lead tank spotted two enemy soldiers running along a trench and opened fire, killing one. Almost on signal all three tanks were raked by automatic weapons' fire. A fight was on! The M48s swung into action. The screech and rattle was deafening as Thunderball answered the call to battle. Amidst the dust and diesel, the "dinks" were there. The Second Company, 97th V. C. Battalion was ready to fight.

"Six-five, this is five-zero-yankee, CONTACT! Receiving heavy automatic weapons' fire from the north and northwest. How about some Aloha birds?"

"Six-five. Rog. Got location?"

"Five-zero-yankee. STANDBY."

"Eight-one-two-four-five-five, over."

"Six-five. I gotcha. On the way."

"Five-zero-yankee. Thanks, out."

Hocker, realizing that heavy automatic weapons fire meant at least an enemy platoon and probably more, deployed the remainder of his team north to join the three tanks fighting.

Meanwhile slowly boring holes through the sky with his "birddog" was the brigade forward air controller, Major Smith, USAF, better known as "Helix two-two." Monitoring all radio nets with eagle

eyes straining earthward, he seldom missed the action...whenever possible directing his high-flying far-reaching silver-blue jets screaming at a target to leave the ground smoking and pockmarked with instant swimming pools. Smitty loved a fight!

"Hello, down there, this is Helix two-two. What's all the rumpus?"

"Helix, this is five-zero-yankee. We've been getting sonic automatic weapons fire from the north and northwest of where those three tanks are. How about taking a look?"

"Yankee, Helix here. How about having your lead tank pop smoke?"

"Rog. Helix, Smoke on the way."

"Five-zero-yankee. Helix here, I got your smoke. Identify Red?"

"Helix, this is five-zero-yankee. That's affirm. North and northwest of that smoke is where the fire is coming from."

"Rog, Yankee. I'm going down for a look."



Another enemy bunker fills up as a dozer tank goes to work in the vicinity of An Thach

While Major Smith was making his house to house aerial recon, the brigade aviation section was already pulling pitch with their H23 observation helicopters. Armed with two door gunners, the Alohas could sting as well as see and were feared by the enemy as much as the more heavily armed HUEY gunships, the Sharks.

Thunderball rolled north, joined its three companion tanks and turned to the northwest in a full blown attack against the enemy position now under eyeball contact by Helix two-two. Smitty reported that he saw 10-20 enemy, all armed, moving about positions in the village of An Thach. Hocker deployed on line. The enemy fire increased. A tank on the right was hit. No flame! Two men wounded. Burger called "Medevac." Hocker moved on!

"Cougar six-five, this is five-zero-yankee, over."

"This is six-five, GO!"

"This is five-zero-yankee. Got two whiskey-india-alpha. Not bad. Need Dustoff at coordinates eight-zero-five-four-six-zero. Over."

"This is six-five. Roger that. Come up on Dustoff's push. Do you need guns? Over."

"This is five-zero-yankee. Standby."

"Six-five, this is yankee. Affirm on those gunships. Six wants them on the Thunderball freq, over."

"This is six-five. Roger. Aloha is airborne and will be coming up on your push. Sharks will be out in about five minutes. Over."

"Five-zero-yankee. Thanks, out."

The hot noonday sun parched the throats of the recon troopers and scorched the decks of their iron pals as they attacked the hamlet, The clank of the tracks was matched by the zing of the bullets as the enemy machine guns chattered away harmlessly at Hocker's tanks. Reassuringly came the whop, whop, whop of the heavily ladden Shark gunships as they took up orbits around the battle area. The sides were shaping up The enemy had the west half of An Thach. Thunderball had the east. Suddenly Helix spotted several enemy moving along a trench on the south side of the hamlet. Hocker turned Aloha loose while the Sharks stood by.

"Helix two-two, this is Aloha zero-one, would you mark that trench where you saw the dinks?"

"Roger, Aloha. Turning in for a mark now. Mark, away."

"Helix, this is zero-one. I got your whiskey papa just west of that red-roofed hooch?"

"This is Helix. That's affirm."

"Aloha, zero-seven, this is zero-one. I'm going to make a run down the trench heading west. Cover me on the right."

"Zero-seven, Roger."

"Shark Lead, this is Aloha zero-one. I've got a bunch in this trench below me. Can you give me a hand?"

"Zero-one, Shark Lead. Roger, I see 'em. Move out of the way. We'll be rolling in from east to west."

"This is zero-one. I'm clear. Give 'em hell!"

The whoosh of the rockets momentarily drew everyone's notice as the Sharks poured it on the enemy position. Hocker, realizing that the enemy had more than just a platoon in An Thach. moved one of his platoons further to the north and Krout's men moved with the tanks to protect them from tank killer teams. The fight raged on. Hocker and Homer pressed their men further into An Thach. The resistance became fanatical, One Viet Cong charged the lead tank firing his BAR, only to be blasted into limbo by the 90 millimeter. Colonel Tiller, overhead in the command and control helicopter decided to throw B Company. moving slowly toward the scene of contact, into the fray. "Bravo" doubled their pace heading south. At the same time, Cougar six directed the A Company commander to get his unit ready for a helicopter pick up. They would be air assaulted near An Thach.

"Thunderball six, this is Cougar six. I'm going to put Alpha in if I can get the lift ships. Where do you want him?"

"Cougar six, this is Thunderball six. It would be best if you put him in that open field just south of An Thach."

"This is Cougar six. Roger, out."



Victors at An Thach examine captured enemy weapons. (Left to Right) CPT Hocker, LTC Tiller, LT Krout and the author

The battalion S3 air had already alerted the lift ships and reported that A Company could be lifted in two complete lifts. Since the gunships were already on station over the contact area, no further request for Sharks would be necessary.

"Five-zero-yankee, this is Cougar six. What's your situation now?"

"This is five-zero-yankee. We're right in the center of them now. We've been killing them left and right. I don't know how many. They're everywhere. Wait, out!"

Hocker and Krout attacked due west into the center of An Thach achieving the classic armor penetration which split the enemy into two forces, one on the north side of the penetration

and the other on the south. Aggressively exploiting their success, they pursued the enemy until he subdivided into even smaller units attempting to flee from the fire-belching ironclads and their sweaty soldier protectors. This head-long drive pitted tank against man. Time after time a tank literally ran a desperate dink into a hole where a determined dogface grenaded him into oblivion. Realizing the western escape route was sealed by the low flying helicopters, the enemy tried suicidal tactics. Following the lead of their dead BAR man, several charged directly at the command track. Burger zapped 'em and reported.

"Cougar six, this is yankee. Two of 'em just jumped on my track. They're KIA. We're still moving west. I can see the rice paddy ahead. I think they've broken up now."

"Five-zero-yankee. this is Cougar six. Good. Keep rolling. The paddy on the west is covered by Aloha and the Sharks. They won't slip out there."

"This is Thunderball six. Roger that. When we reach the paddy, request permission to reverse course and cover the hamlet again. We didn't get several dinks that darted into holes. Over?"

"This is Cougar six. Permission granted. We'll put Alpha down to the southeast and have them block that corner. Bravo is working south along the paddies and can cover the northern escape route. We've got all exits blocked."

The scheme of maneuver directed by the battalion commander in effect boxed in any enemy that may have been bypassed in Thunderball's first attack. When Captain Hocker reached the western edge of An Thach and turned his tanks around to retrace their tracks, he had killed 26 enemy and captured nine weapons including a 60mm mortar. At the same time Company A completed the air assault on a landing zone south of An Thach and immediately began a systematic search of the village. The move back over smoldering An Thach was slow and deliberate. No "hell-bent for leather" march this time. The tanks were motionless, fifty ton pillboxes that secured each house while Krout's killers took it apart piece by piece. The din of battle was dead. Only the occasional burst of fire and the thump of a grenade bursting underground was heard.

"Thunderball six, this is Cougar six. Do you have an LZ where I can land and talk?"

"This is Thunderball six, Rog. We'll secure one next to our personnel carrier. Standby for smoke."

"This is Cougar six. Roger. I have your violet smoke. On the way in."

That day, tiny innocuous-looking An Thach yielded 53 enemy dead and 18 weapons. Colonel Tiller's official report of the action states:

"Captain Hocker repeatedly concentrated his forces in overwhelming strength at the enemy's location as reported by the aerial observers. This outstanding employment of tanks and infantry together, the firepower and maneuver of the tanks with the close-in fighting of the infantry, resulted in the virtual annihilation of the 2d Company, 97th Battalion, 2d VC Regiment."

This article is dedicated to Captain William Eddy Hocker (Thunderball Six) who was a great combat leader as well as a polished author (See "Clear As A Cloudy Day," .ARMOR, July-August 1967) and to Staff Sergeant Dieter Hans Burger (Thunder-ball Five-Zero- Yankee) who was a fine combat soldier. Two weeks after the battle of An Thach herein described, both were killed in action while serving their country.