

THE BATTLE OF "ONE-NINER"

(AS SEEN FROM THE EYES OF THE S-3 NEARLY FORTY YEARS LATER)

BY

BEN G. CROSBY

It was just another hot-sweaty day near the Cambodian border far west of Pleiku where we, the 2nd Battalion of the 35th Infantry, known as the Cacti Blue were chasing those elusive North Vietnamese Army units. The same ones who fought here from the time the First Cavalry became famous in the Battle of Ia Drang Valley (We Were Soldiers Once...and Young by LTG Hal Moore) and did so long after we were returned to the US. The Cacti Blue had only a few days earlier locked horns with them and come away with heroic soldiers and many casualties. It was during this battle when 2nd LT Stephan Karopczyc earned his Medal of Honor posthumously. And this next engagement was no doubt a continuation of that earlier battle of Plei Djereng but at a slightly different location.

According to the plans the Battalion Commander, LTC Clint Granger, and I had worked out, Companies "A" and "C" would leave their night locations and search toward Cambodia for evidence of the enemy. Granger, a West Point graduate from the Class of 1951 was an experienced Korean War combat veteran. He would need to bring all his infantry finesse, if there is such a thing, to this battle. After all, this was an enemy heaven -- the major infiltration route into the Central Highlands. We knew they were there...but where.

Sometime after 1500 hours (3:00 pm) Company "C" discovered a well used trail and a couple of enemy soldiers on it without their weapons running away from where Company "C" had only recently searched. Company "C" fired on the enemy who ducked in the thick-as-hell jungle and disappeared. Little did we know, but "C" Company had just alerted an entire enemy battalion of several hundred heavily armed North Vietnamese Regular Army soldiers who were in well defended positions awaiting our arrival. The company commander, Captain Ron Rykowski, also an experienced Korean War veteran, was again serving his country in the face of different enemy. He came from the Polish community of Chicago. Rykowski's company had been called upon to help company "A" during the Battle of Plei Djereng when the fighting grew intense only a few days earlier. Now, he maneuvered his rifle platoons to block that same enemy. Unfortunately, the enemy strength was unknown to Rykowski at this time...but he would soon find out.

In the meantime, MSG David Butters, the Battalion Operations Sergeant and I along with several radio telephone operators (RTOs) listened to the radios in the Battalion Tactical Operations Center known to all as the TOC. In this bunkered home away from home sandbagged on all sides hung the color-coded maps that displayed the not-so-secret hieroglyphics used by the Operations Sergeant and RTOs to post the known locations of the several maneuver elements of this combat Infantry battalion. And the enemy locations if known or surmised by the Battalion Intelligence Officer were marked in red. Whenever a radio blurted out the situation and map location (what the military calls coordinates) of one of the rifle companies, Butters, or one of the others, would post on that multicolored poster the location of that company noting the situation in military time and colored grease pencils. This grease pencil wall art became a jumbled mosaic that only an experienced TOC hand could read. It was our brains--no--it was our memory. Sweat dripped from all as the temperatures soared from the heat generated by military radios when transmitting. It was mixed with other forms of perspiration caused by the closeness of men stuffed into a small cubicle of an enclosure suffering from the never-ending fear of death. Air conditioning -- what are you thinking -- this was only a few miles from the Cambodian border deep in the Vietnamese jungle. Electric lights

inside flickered whenever the generator coughed but no one dared turn them off otherwise flashlights would be the only illumination. Coleman lanterns were prohibited – released too much heat and used too much oxygen in this dirt-enclosed nerve center.

Butters, an experienced operations sergeant, had honed the RTO's skills for more than a few weeks. He knew that a single mistaken location could mean the death of our soldiers from friendly artillery fire or airstrikes. It was Butters who cajoled and coached each member of the TOC team until they were at the top of their game. Without this close coordination of air and artillery, which took place in the TOC, confusion could rain in the form of hot cutting shrapnel on our rifle companies who were having enough difficulty dealing with the enemy. The red and green and black and blue pencils marched over the map painted---plotted---the locations of the rifle companies as they reported in. Then we, either Butters or I or the RTO holding the handset for the Brigade Command radio, sent those reports to the TOC of the next headquarters as fast as we learned the situation.

On the next radio call into the TOC, we heard the enemy automatic weapons fire as it crackled past the Charlie Company radio operator's ear. Then the first report of a wounded soldier shrieked out over that speaker on the Battalion Command Net. The TOC immediately called for a medical evacuation (Dustoff) helicopter to fly out to pick up the wounded. The standard operating procedures required that the landing zone (LZ) be clear and safe before we sent the Dustoff chopper the LZ coordinates and the necessary details of the pick-up. But by now every radio transmission from Charlie Company was filled with a background noise caused by the whiz of enemy bullets flying past the RTO's handset and an occasional whump of an enemy 82 millimeter mortar round exploding nearby.

Butters said, "Oh, shit, we're into it again!"

And I agreed. There we were, sitting in our steaming sandbagged house with the TOC's color coded maps, trying to figure out what the hell was going on and yelling commands out over the battalion command radio net. Get Company "A" moving in the direction of the fire fight to reinforce "C" company before the mass of enemy can get there. Captain Louie Barcena, veteran of the miscalculated Cuba invasion under President Kennedy, Commander of Company "A" replies in his heavy Cuban accent, "Jesus, we're on the way," adding an expression or two in Spanish that none of us could translate and probably wouldn't want to anyway.

But they are too far away in this Godforsaken jungle thick with up and down ravines that would make a mountain climber cry. No matter, Alpha headed toward the sound of the guns where Charlie is now in a vicious fight for its life as Charlie had done to help Alpha in the Battle of Plei Djereng. And we in the TOC called for all available helicopter gunships to support the beleaguered rifle company while artillery pieces – only yards from our TOC -- blasted away. The shock waves from their muzzle blasts shook the maps on the sandbagged wall and kicked dust up from every corner. Inside this oven-like office, the heat and dust swirled around our noses making it difficult to breathe. Sweat trickled to every private place. Dust and the heat permeated every pore. Jungle fatigues stuck to our skin. Radios belched. RTOs plotted. Butters calmly double-checked and I reported. It was just another day at fighting for freedom in this far off country.

And then matters got worse. Captain Rykowski was hit in his stomach and legs by enemy automatic fire. Severely wounded, he was bleeding badly. The Artillery forward observer, LT Emory, the eyes of the big guns firing from nearby the TOC, and one platoon leader, LT Sudborough are mortally wounded. Charlie Company was losing leaders fast. Control was slipping away as fast American blood seeped into the jungle floor. Casualties were everywhere. The enemy was charging at a severely weakened rifle company. But Charlie's withering return fire was killing an even greater number of North Vietnamese Army Regulars as they raced headlong toward Charlie's automatic

weapons which were already smoking from the constant fire coming out of their barrels. Guided by bleeding officers and wounded noncommissioned officers and shot-up radio operators, Charlie fought on.

Butters and I, in the TOC, heard the pleas coming from Charlie's RTO's hoping against hope that help would arrive. Artillery thundered down on the elements of attackers. But it had little effect on the human wave assault which is now only yards from the edge of Charlie's defensive perimeter. Butters and I feared that they cannot hold out and would be overrun – a devastating defeat and many American casualties.

At last, the helicopter gunships arrived overhead. After quickly coordinating directions -- Charlie Company used colored smoke grenades to identify their front line locations -- the gunships engaged the charging North Vietnamese with their four machine guns on each firing pass. Bullets hit only yards from Charlie's blood soaked perimeter. Pass after pass, the UH-1B's rolled in firing burst after burst into the enemy human wave ranks. Every helicopter fired five hundred rounds per minute from each of their four mounted M-60 machine guns. All hell broke loose. The enemy human wave assault was broken. Charlie was saved from certain death. The North Vietnamese retreated and dragged their wounded and dead toward Cambodia but left the battlefield littered with corpses.

Rykowski was getting weaker. We heard his radio transmissions trail off as he nears death from loss of blood. Butters and I, in the TOC, can understand this clearly. Butters said that if we don't get a medevac in there soon, Rykowski and many of his men will not last much longer.

And now it is getting dark...not a nice situation.

LTC Granger and I agreed that I will take Captain Jim Lanning from Texas, the Assistant S-3 into the battle zone whose drawl was well known to all RTOs and put him in command of C Company while on that same helicopter evacuate Rykowski to the battalion aid station where he can be stabilized. Once a wounded soldier gets medical attention, he has a much better chance of long term survival but Rykowski had none bleeding to death in the jungle.

Butters demands to go but I order him to stay with the TOC as we need him there more than we need him tromping through the jungle. LTC Granger agreed that he will stay in the firebase as it is not wise to have both senior officers of the battalion out trekking through the jungle in search of what remains of Charlie Company.

At about a few minutes before seven in the evening we; CPT Lanning, two radio operators, a couple of other soldiers and myself, jumped from the Command and Control (C&C) helicopter into a jungle clearing somewhere south of Charlie Company hoping to be able to link up with the remnants of Charlie or Alpha which had now joined forces in Charlie's defensive perimeter. The C&C was unable to land as the trees were too tall. Plus the area selected as a landing zone (LZ) was covered with downed trees from artillery strikes or earlier B-52 bombing runs. My guess is that we had to leap ten feet but at the time it seemed like twenty. Nonetheless, we rallied our small group of soldiers and headed in what we believed to be in the direction of Charlie and Alpha. There, hopefully, was a relatively secure location. Enemy activity was absent...at least it was now. I was not sure how far we would have to travel to get to those friendly soldiers but my guess from the map was that it would be about five hundred meters. Five hundred meters in this jungle can be a lifetime. This is not like ambling down the Boardwalk.

After boring through about two hundred meters of thick jungle in the near darkness, the six of us came upon a well-worn trail leading in the direction that we wanted to go. As the senior officer, I was leading our small patrol. When I was going through Ranger training at Fort Benning, Georgia, as a 2nd

Lieutenant, I learned to never get on a trail -- much less one in enemy territory where we now were -- it's a sure ticket to an ambush and this is one ticket you don't want. We immediately left that trail only to enter a large enemy bunker complex, unoccupied thank goodness, only a few meters from that same trail.

Soon after we arrived in this bunker area formerly occupied by the enemy, we heard sounds of movement coming down that used trail. I thought it might be soldiers of Alpha or Charlie seeking to link up with us to lead us to their night lager position.

So I yelled, "Hey, who's there?"

And the answer I got was the last thing I wanted to hear. It was Vietnamese. There was a lot of yelling none of it to my liking. We all hit the ground -- Captain Jim Lanning was only a couple feet from me. I quickly and quietly asked everyone to put their weapons on full automatic for if they come at us we would take as many as we could. Even though the jungle air had cooled somewhat, sweat oozed from my every pore. It was not from exertion. We were in trouble. A handful of lightly armed American soldiers faced a withdrawing battalion of heavily armed North Vietnamese Regulars. They had been bloodied but they weren't dead yet.

I asked Jim if he had any hand grenades. He said, "No."

I said in a whisper, "Hold your fire." There was utter silence from us as we lay there in this enemy bunker complex breathing only when required. I cupped the radio mike closely to my mouth and quietly transmitted to the TOC that we made contact with the enemy. But I had no idea where we were with respect to Charlie Company. All the while, enemy soldiers were now noisily crashing through the dark jungle the trail at a trot -- how many, I don't know -- but one helluva lot more than there were Americans hiding in this abandoned North Vietnamese Army bunker complex. My guess is that nearly a hundred enemy passed by six hiding and silently praying Americans of which I was but one.

After the enemy passed and it got quiet, we resumed moving but as slowly and as quietly as it is possible in this now dark jungle. Suddenly, behind us, we heard the whop, whop, whop of approaching rotor blades. Some more of our soldiers were arriving at the jungle clearing we had jumped into earlier. We returned to the vicinity of that so-called LZ only to find that LTC Granger and his radio operators had dropped in the same place we had just left a half an hour or so before. So we joined up and headed back toward the enemy bunker complex. Radio contact was made with Charlie Company and we, now reinforced, moved out to link up with them.

At that time, I thought what the hell is Granger doing here -- we had agreed before I came out that both Battalion Field Grade Officers should not be here in the jungle together. But he was the commander...so be it. We moved on to the night lager location after meeting some members of Alpha company who came to provide us protection -- a little late -- and assured us that the route to the night lager location was mostly secure.

They guided us to that location. It took us about an hour or so of picking our way through the Vietnamese jungle to get to there. In the meantime, the first medical evacuation helicopter, Dustoff, attempted to evacuate some wounded when it was shot down by an enemy rocket propelled grenade killing two of the crew and blinding both pilots. The enemy grenadiers were killed by Company "A" personnel after they had revealed their hidden position by firing on the Dustoff evacuation helicopter. The Dustoff had, unfortunately, turned on his landing lights making him an easy target for the enemy. The area was again secured so we could begin the evacuation.

It became obvious when I arrived at the lager site that the evacuation was going to be difficult, if not impossible, as the trees were about one hundred feet high and the hole cut by the battalion engineering team was only big enough for one HU-1D (Huey) to get into and out of. The pilots informed us that due to the height of the trees, they could only lift out two wounded at a time. And that would take better than average flying skill. The Hueys had to lift straight up and could not deviate in any direction or they would crash into the trees and come down on those of us under them. Hitting a tree with one's tail rotor didn't make for the best takeoff. The only way to get this done was for me to stand directly under the helicopters as they hovered down guiding them with my flashlight and radio. It was bold and simple...but somewhat dangerous. I used the bright flashes of the emergency strobe light to lead the pilots to the general area in the dark but turned off the strobe as they hovered down toward the ground as flashes from the strobe hampered the pilots' night vision. There were no night vision goggles in Vietnam at that time. I screamed to the pilots over my radio as the thunder from the rotor downwash was deafening and signaled to them with my handheld flashlight to tell them to go forwards or backwards or sideways a few feet while they hovered down. Only a few short feet spared the spinning tail rotor from the tall jungle trees. A single tail rotor strike could terminate the evacuation...not to mention me. I planned to jump sideways off the tree stump where I was standing were a chopper to come crashing down. But, truthfully, I would not have made it. The air blast from main rotor wash burned my eyes but I dared not shut them while the helicopters hovered only a few feet above my head. A single mistake would mean the seriously wounded would most likely not get medical attention until the next day -- probably too damn late.

A successful landing (a most liberal use of the term) allowed the pilots to put only one of their helicopter skids on a fallen tree while we loaded the wounded. Full power was required to keep the UH-1D steady as soldiers shoved litters carrying two of Charley's bleeding, moaning soldiers aboard to be lifted out to their only chance for life saving aid. My ears still ring when I think of those rotor blades swishing just above my head as I communicated with pilots via flashlight hand signals. Sometimes one is just lucky and the Cacti Blue needed all its luck that long night in the Vietnamese jungle. Charlie had already paid a fair share of dues to the luck-god -- enough for the entire battalion - so it was only fair that we received a night of good luck in exchange. The first flight brought in the Battalion Surgeon, a Doctor, and his chief medical assistant to administer emergency first aid to the wounded. He began the difficult task of sorting the horribly wounded from the slightly wounded and the dead. Those able to survive the night would have to wait until first light in the morning before getting to the aid station or the hospital. The others we would evacuate now.

It took the better part of three hours to lift out thirty or more severely wounded. But it worked. And I have been told that none of our wounded that we evacuated that night died from their wounds --- not at all bad. It is clear that had we not undertaken this radical and somewhat dangerous medical evacuation, more Americans would have died even though we had the Battalion Surgeon administering emergency aid in this tiny blood-soaked landing zone.





These photos were taken of the chopper that crashed into the LZ we were using to evacuate the wounded. You can see the condition. Photos were taken by SP5 Walter Lankston, 54th Signal Bn on Mar 24, 1967 at least that is written on the back of the photos.

About 2 or 3 am, LTC Granger and I were lifted out of this LZ back to the firebase where we could enjoy the cacophony of sound from the eight-inch howitzers and the 175 millimeter rifles either of which would lift one six inches off your bunk or air mattress whenever they blasted away. After the harrowing medical evacuation, I slept soundly hardly noticing our heavy artillery friends.

The next morning, when I awoke, my ankle was swollen to double its normal size. I couldn't lace up my jungle boot. As we were flying later that morning in the Command & Control helicopter, LTC Granger asked what had happened to my ankle. I told him I was not sure but most likely it was injured when I jumped out the night before but I hadn't noticed it until then. Adrenalin, or something, has a way of protecting us soldiers in times of battle. Later it turned out that I had a "stress fracture." Stress used here has more than one meaning. That is war.

When we landed, the next morning, in that same LZ, where we had evacuated the wounded, I came across Captain Jim Lanning with two grenades dangling from his belt.

I asked Jim, "Did you have those last night?"

He said, "Sure did."

I asked him why he hadn't given them to me when I asked for grenades.

Lanning said, "Because you would have thrown 'em!"

And he was right. And it is just as well he was.

This battle was named by MSG David Butters as "ONE-NINER" in honor of one of the RTO's from Charlie Company who was killed in action at this fight while standing by his Company Commander, Captain Rykowski. His call sign was "One Niner Sierra."

BGC