

Chapter 20

WIRETAP RECOVERY WITH A HATCHET PLATOON

February 1969

January proved to be a bad month for CCC. On the 29th, every American on Recon Team New Mexico was KIA on a mission in Laos. They were S.Sgt. Charles D. Bullard, Sgt. Billy J. Simmons, and Sp5c. Larry A. Stephens.

On January 30, Sp4c. Jerrald J. Bulin was KIA on the nightly security recon patrol around the base camp at Kontum. There were NVA troops in the area at that time, and the 'Yard camp had been hit one night. Bulin had arrived at CCC only a couple of days before. That brought the total Americans lost in January to six, the highest loss count of any month of my tour. And this did not include the four crewmembers of the Huey from the 170th AHC lost on January 8 supporting CCC recon operations.



In February one of the recon teams located an enemy telephone line along a road network of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that skirted the Vietnamese border just inside northern Cambodia. They decided to plant a wiretap, a suitcase-sized device designed to record the messages sent over the tapped line and relay them to

a plane that would periodically fly overhead. After planting the wiretap, the team withdrew a few hundred meters to RON for the night.

During the night, the team had an emergency when the enemy seemed to be cutting a road right up to their position. A firefight ensued, and they were extracted the following morning. About a week later a Hatchet Platoon of approximately 35 men was to be inserted to recover the device because it had stopped transmitting. One of the Americans from the team that had planted the wiretap accompanied the platoon to assist in locating it. I was the medic assigned to accompany the platoon.

The mission was launched from the CCC compound at Kontum instead of the normal launch site at Dak To. This was because the flight to Dak To would have been longer than the distance to our target area. We were dropped off in Vietnam about a mile from the Cambodian border.

The insertion was accomplished without incident, and we proceeded west toward the Cambodian border. We traveled up and over two small, moderately steep hills and then hit an enemy trail with bunkers built on either side every 10 to 20 meters. At this time we also

could hear people talking in the jungle off the side of the trail to our north. They may have been cutting wood because we could hear periodic chopping. We crept up this trail and past those doing the talking, who I would estimate were about 30 meters away. The trail seemed to follow a ridgeline, and as we got to where the ground leveled off, we stopped when we heard sounds we couldn't identify. It was as if someone was shouting something followed by a multiple cracking noise. All I could picture was someone practicing karate chops on a shattered piece of bamboo.

The commander of the Hatchet Force, a first lieutenant, sent a small detail to see what was causing the sound. When they returned, they advised that there was a large number of NVA out in the open doing drills with their rifles. The shouts we were hearing were those of the drill sergeant calling out the orders, and the cracking noise was the soldiers slapping their weapons while executing the commands. It raised the hair on the back of my neck to know the enemy was so very close by. At this point, I noticed we had stopped just before a 3-foot-diameter tree trunk that had fallen across the trail, and the detail that was sent forward had to climb over it.

After calling for a Covey plane, the first lieutenant proposed going back down the trail the way we had come up. When the word was relayed to the rear of the column, an American came to the front and said that one of the Montagnards had overheard one of the NVA who was cutting wood say, "We will get them when they come down." After confirming this with the indigenous interpreter and the Montagnard, the first lieutenant then directed the column to angle off the ridgeline at approximately 45 degrees in a southeasterly direction. I was glad the lieutenant listened to reason and decided not to go back down the trail.

I was positioned near the middle of our single column and was about 40 meters below the ridgeline when a Bird Dog spotter plane flew across the trail above us. About a half dozen AK-47s immediately opened up on it. Our commander, hearing the shooting and believing we were under fire, tossed a purple smoke grenade.

The purple smoke drifted up the hill toward the NVA who had been doing the shooting. They

must have thought the pilot had thrown out the smoke grenade when they fired on the plane, as there were no rounds now being directed down at us. We continued downhill another 50 meters and crossed a small brook and started up another hill whose ridgeline intersected with that of the hill we had just come from about 100 meters to the west, where the NVA had been seen. About 75 meters up this hillside, we sought cover and made preparations to call in an artillery strike.

We were now almost exactly on the border of Vietnam and Cambodia. The plan was to walk the artillery up the ridgeline and trail we had traveled earlier into the concentration of the enemy. We received word from our radio operator that the Bird Dog pilot reported that in his multiple tours in Vietnam, he had never seen so many NVA out in the open.

The artillery took awhile to get under way, but eventually three-round salvos began progressing up the ridgeline and the enemy's position. All at once the NVA seemed to panic and started intermittently firing at the Bird Dog with 37mm antiaircraft guns, a .51-caliber machine gun, and countless numbers of AK-47s. Judging from the din resulting from the simultaneous discharge of the antiaircraft guns, it sounded as if there were three of them.

After the artillery had reached the top of the hill where the two ridgelines joined, it continued for about another hour, still in three-round salvos. All the while the enemy guns fired at the spotter plane, as if the NVA felt this was the source of their problems.

After the artillery had finished expending, we were told to still keep our heads down. We would be getting air support from some Navy jets that had taken off from an aircraft carrier and they would be dropping 500-pound bombs. We sought cover behind what trees and logs we could find as the air strikes began.

The show was awesome. We could tell whenever one of the jets was approaching as the three 37mm antiaircraft guns would open up, along with the .51-caliber machine gun and all the AKs up on the hilltop. The firing would stop abruptly and after a short pause there would come the noise of the exploding bomb. Six-inch pieces of smoking bomb casing fragments were dropping through the trees around

us. After the explosion, the next thing we heard was the roar of the jet passing and then the sounds of the flak from the 37mm rounds popping off high in the air. We stayed in our positions and listened to the air attack all afternoon until it got dark. We were advised that this would be our RON location for the night.

The night passed without incident and the next morning the air strikes continued, but now there was no return enemy fire. About midday we proceeded south to recover the wiretap. We went up and over two more ridgelines of hills about the same size as the one where we had encountered the NVA. At a third one we found evidence of a road having been cut and the member of the recon team that had planted the wiretap identified this as the area of their RON. He then located the place where the team had tapped the wire, but both the wire and wiretap device were gone.

We followed the unfinished road to its source and found it connected to a well-used and well-maintained dirt road that skirted the border just inside Cambodia. We continued walking north alongside this road about 20 meters off to its right and in the jungle. The Hatchet Platoon commander was then told to return to the area where the air strikes had taken place and do a bomb damage assessment.

After paralleling the road for about a half-mile, we found a side road that headed east toward Vietnam. You could tell it was new because there were still small stumps and vegetation on the roadbed. We followed it until it opened up onto the hilltop where the two ridgelines joined, the site that had been the target of our artillery and air strikes the previous day.

We discovered an enemy complex that was quite well laid out. There were even urinals and latrines built into the ground. We could tell that the three 37mm antiaircraft guns had been positioned in the form of a triangle, with 6-foot-deep trenches connecting them like three spokes in a wheel coming together in the center. There were cavelike bunkers dug into the walls of the trenches every 10 to 15 feet. The guns themselves had been set into large foxholes about 15 feet in diameter. Where one of the gun positions had been there now was a 500-pound bomb

crater that half-overlapped the original hole. We found the recoil spring from the gun in the pit. There were numerous empty 37mm casings around the gun pits, and I put one in my pack as a souvenir. Someone else found an unfired shell and took it with him.



Near the latrines, I found clumps of human hair. Either an NVA barbershop was once there or someone had been seriously wounded. There also were numerous bloodstains on the ground. We found no bodies in the area because the NVA took everything when they abandoned the position the previous night. It was my theory that after laying their wiretap, the recon team was surprised by the same NVA forces that we had called the artillery strikes on and the Navy jets had bombed. I guessed they were building the road to move the antiaircraft guns into place when the recon team made contact with them. They redeployed three ridgelines north, feeling the initial site was too hot after their firefight with the recon team. We had subsequently encountered them in their new position.

As we were leaving the area, we came across the huge tree that I had noticed the day before when we stopped to investigate the strange sounds. It was only about 20 meters from the enemy latrines. It looked to me like the enemy had cut it down to clear the field of fire for their gun position. We then traveled down the trail we had come up the day before and veered off when Covey directed us to an LZ. We were extracted without incident late in the second day, just before dusk.



In my estimation this was probably the most successful mission in which I participated, despite the fact we did not recover the wiretap device. We got extremely close to the NVA, called in artillery and air strikes on them for most of a day, knocking out one of their 37mm guns, and made them abandon their position—all without having a shot directly fired at us.