

# Wet n' Wild!

by

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Slashing Talon 6<sup>1</sup> and his First Sergeant had grabbed their gear and were running toward the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) at Phouc Vinh when the call came for WO Bard Davenport and I to 'saddle up' and make our way to get briefed. I sent Bard ahead to get the ship running, along with Waller and Harper while I ran to the TOC.

I entered the TOC, step for step with WO Hebert Valencia (Cavalier 26), leader of the two bird Cobra Fire Team. There we joined the LRP Commander already engaged in a hasty brief with our Operations Officer. The mission was simple: Slashing Talon 32, a six man LRP Team, had encountered an enemy point man and in an effort to capture the guy the NVA had taken a round or two. The LRP's were moving south toward the river and were in a running gun battle with the pursuing enemy. Our task was to find an LZ, evacuate the wounded NVA, and extract the LRP patrol.

My crew couldn't have been better picked by anyone for the work we had to do that day. WO Davenport was a big guy from Maine and talked in that mono tonal thoughtful manner that all of those folks who came from around those parts seemed to. Bard would do all the flying from the right seat and I'd be the Aircraft Commander (AC) handling the radios. SP5 John B. Waller kept the cleanest lift ship in Charlie Troop. 'Little John' was not great in stature but the huge care he took with his work inspired your confidence in the quality of the maintenance. SP4 Allan G. Harper would be manning the M-60 on the right side. Allan was another guy, like Waller, from California where everyone got labeled,

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<sup>1</sup> Commander, Co. E, 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, LRPS)

like it or not, as a 'surfer' but you could be sure that you were never going to poke the tail rotor into a tree on his side unless you heard about it first; loudly and often.

We were quickly airborne to the west and began a climbing left turn southbound headed for a river terrain feature known as the 'testicles' for the rivers eerie resemblance to a well developed male scrotum. The Cobras had raced ahead to support the LRP Team and to sort out the tactical situation. Less than 20 minutes later we were on station and square in the middle of a monumental FUBAR<sup>2</sup>.

The LRP 'snatch' ambush had gone badly wrong. The guy they bagged was walking point for a much larger NVA force strung out along the trail in column. The LRP Team had carried their wounded prisoner as fast as they could down the trail while fighting a rear guard action to keep the gathering NVA at bay.

The LRP Team found themselves pinned against the rapidly flowing river at their backs with no LZ and the bad guys deploying in an attempt to flank them. They quickly realized that there was no way they could get the NVA down the river bank, into the current, and on to the helicopter while laying down covering fire. Slashing Talon 6 made a snap call and asked us to go down and get as close to the river bank as we could.

Not exactly sure of what was going to happen next, Bard brought us to a low hover over the river keeping enough distance from the bank that we didn't get our main rotor tangled in the overhanging vegetation. Both Cobras had set up an orbit to our right and were laying down some seventeen-pounders<sup>3</sup> less than 100 meters north of the LRP perimeter.

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<sup>2</sup> Slang: "Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition"

<sup>3</sup> Seventeen pound high explosive, 2.75 inch, folding fin aerial rockets

The LRP CO had un-strapped and, along with his 1<sup>st</sup> shirt and SP5 Waller, had jumped into the current to reinforce and assist with the extraction. Waller hadn't exactly asked me for my permission; he just left. They took a short swim and joined the LRP Teams perimeter and quickly got on the radio to coordinate the extraction.



**1. SP5 Harper's exit. Slashing Talon 6 & 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. swimming to reinforce Slashing Talon 32**

The plan was to come back in when the LRP CO, 1<sup>st</sup> shirt, SP5 Harper along with one of the LRPs had moved the wounded NVA into the water suspended on a poncho. They would then swim out to the helicopter, put him on board and climb up themselves. The remaining LRPs would fold in their perimeter and we'd 'get the hell out of Dodge' while the Cobras suppressed. Great plan?

We came back in and took up our low hover as the swimmers struggled in the rivers swift current with the wounded NVA. When they got to the helicopter, they quickly realized that they couldn't lift the wounded guy in the poncho since the water was over their heads. Bard held us as steady as a rock while Waller went out on the right skid, hanging from the M-60 pylon knee

deep in river water, as Bard carefully lowered the pitch while we took 'Mr. 'H' model' for a swim. Waller was up on intercom calling out tail rotor clearance above the river until the water level was inside the cargo compartment. The swimmers, with some help from Waller, were able to float the NVA inside still on the poncho and we could pick up the hover a bit as we waited for the rest of the LRP Team to board. The remaining five-team members came on board while Bard eased us out of the river. The Cobra Fire Team rained high explosives and nails<sup>4</sup> along our right side as Bard struggled to get us flying. Cavalier 26 cheerfully called to let us know 'we were sporting a rooster tail' of dripping water that lasted for at least five minutes after we cleared the riverbed headed for Long Binh and the pad at Charlie Med.



**2. LRP covering the extraction of Slashing Talon 32 (Sgt. Seymore's Team)**

Our wounded NVA looked terrible as we flew toward Long Binh and medical care. I called ahead to ensure that they were ready for our arrival and knew the condition of our patient. The medics off loaded our

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<sup>4</sup> Nails: slang for 2.75" Folding Fin Aerial Rocket flechette rocket round

NVA and the LRP's decided to disembark as well and decompress a bit while we went to refuel for our short flight back to Phouc Vinh.

On returning to the pad, we were saddened to learn and concerned that the NVA had yet to be treated. Our entire LRP crew was gathered in one corner of the landing area quietly talking to one another and our wounded guy was still in the casualty holding area. Bard stepped out to figure out how long we'd be and to go see if he could roust some attention for the critically wounded NVA.

What none of us realized was that a medical assessment team had earlier triaged the badly wounded NVA and determined he wasn't going to make it. While we stood watching, our NVA gasped once and died provoking an emotional and tense response from Bard and SP5 Harper directed toward the medical folks who just couldn't grasp or begin to understand the depth of our emotional connection to the dead enemy soldier.

We got everybody loaded up and made the short flight back to Phouc Vinh in silence secure that we had done our best and gratified that we'd pulled it off and were still all in one piece. Slashing Talon 32 was coming home.

### EPILOGUE

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1969 aircraft UH-1H, 66-16714 was lost to hostile fire at XT 636587 in Binh Long province Republic of Viet Nam. Killed that day were WO 1 Bard Elton Davenport, WO 1 William Don

Potter, SP4 Allan G. Harper, and SP5 John Bussy Waller.<sup>5</sup>



3. UH-1H 66-16714

The letter I had mailed to Bard, following my DEROS<sup>6</sup>, containing a packet of Orange Kool Aid, intended to spoof those left behind who had to still drink the crap until their own Freedom Bird was '*gear in the well*', was returned on 13 May, 1969. It was accompanied by a letter from LTC Thomas C. Adams, Commander, U.S. Army Mail Terminal, San Francisco stating that "*The enclosed mail, addressed to WO Bard Davenport, W3 159 711, bears your return address. I regret that it was not possible to have delivered this mail to him.*"

I've kept the letter, in its original envelope unopened for all of these years, to remind me of Bard and of the valor and bravery that had become just routine behavior for some of the wonderful guys I had the honor to know and serve with.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Defense Intelligence Agency Helicopter Loss Database. Also OPERA (Operations Report.)

<sup>6</sup> DEROS: Date to Return from Overseas