

THE MILK RUN 11-November-1967
By Dave Sebright and Al Gaither

Dave: It was a beautiful day to be a newly appointed Aircraft Commander in the 176th Aviation Company. My assigned helicopter was UH-1D 65-10052 and my new call sign was Minuteman 17. I had been in country since the first of September and I had accumulated about 240 combat flying hours. I had been shot at, had my helicopter shot up, and had a few aircraft emergencies under my belt. I felt like I had the world by its gonads. Two months earlier I had joined up with the unit at Duc Pho and started flying support for the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division during Operation Cook in the mountains NW of Quang Ngai. On 11 September we airlifted the Screaming Eagles to the mountains NW of Tam Ky and just South of the Que Son Valley. At this time the 176th also relocated to Ky Ha on the North end of Chu Lai. Life had gotten better with real beds instead of cots, sea huts instead of tents, real food instead of whatever they were feeding us at Duc Pho, and enough Officer Clubs to keep us entertained. Life was good.

Al: I arrived in Cam Ranh Bay, Viet Nam reception center on 24 SEP 67, with flight school friend and fellow WO-1, Edward A. Fitzsimmons. The next day we were both assigned to Task Force Oregon, I Corps. The following day, 26 SEP, we boarded a UH-1D for a flight to Ky Ha, located at the North end of Chu Lai. We bunked at the 14th AVN BN Hq until the 29th, then we both were assigned to the 176 Assault Helicopter Co. Call signs for the unit were: Minuteman for slicks, Musket for the guns. I was further assigned to the 1st Platoon slicks. As an "FNG", when I drew my flight gear, the only chest protectors left on the shelf were size "Short - Small! Seemed about the size of a deck of cards! I made it my business for the next few months, to go to the supply room every time I knew of someone DROSing or being evacuated, to see if a bigger one was being turned in. I ended up with a X Long - X Large. Its weight put my legs to sleep, but when the "fit hit the shan" it felt good!

For the next month I flew missions as a Pilot, learning the trade. Most of the assignments were as a C and C, (command and control) where we landed at a field headquarters and picked up the Commander and or staff to fly over their AO, (area of operation), or the second type of mission which was "Utility". Utility ships had a variety of tasks, including delivery of troop replacements, food, water, medical supplies, blood, ammunition, mail, medevac, and anything else a combat unit might need. These aircraft were also on call for CA, (combat assault) operations, where two or more ships, usually accompanied by UH-1C gunships were used to infiltrate or exfiltrate troops into combat areas. On 11 NOV 67 I was assigned a mission to fly with AC (aircraft commander) WO-1 Dave Sebright on a utility mission for the 1st Brigade, 101st ABN Division.

Dave: The relationship between our air crews and the 1st Brigade combat units was very good. The Screaming Eagles were well trained and led, hard charging, and battle tested. There was not much that we would not do for these units, even if it meant

stretching the safety envelope occasionally. We had seen a lot of battle with the 1st Brigade and they knew how to use their aviation assets.

On the 10th of November I was given our mission for the next morning. We were to fly resupply missions for the Brigade S4 to their subordinate units. We would pick up our loads at Chu Lai and Tam Ky and fly them to the various fire bases. This was a milk run mission flying from secure locations to other secure locations. There was not much chance of getting shot up and there should be plenty of flying to keep us busy. W01 Al "Gator" Gaither was my assigned pilot for the mission. Al had been assigned to the 176th since the 29th of September and was known to be a good pilot. We were both assigned to the 1st Flight Platoon (Slicks). Up to this day we had never flown together because until 8 November we were both pilots and had to fly with Aircraft Commanders. We were assigned my aircraft 052. Unfortunately neither one of us can remember the crew chief or gunner we were assigned that day.

On the morning of 11 November we performed our pre-flight inspection on 052, had a short briefing for the crew, then proceeded to fly to Tam Ky to the forward Brigade resupply pad. We started flying our resupply missions and had flown approximately three hours before we landed on LZ Center. There were Hueys parked all over the LZ, I later learned that there was a change of command going on for B Company 2-327 Inf. and that there were two Generals on the firebase. There were gunships shut down on the LZ which was very unusual. It seemed that the only open flat space left on the LZ was the "No Slack" resupply pad that we had landed on. After we had landed one of the guys working the pad told us that they (2 Bn, 327th Inf) had a tactical emergency going on and asked us to shut down. The Bn S3 (Operations Officer) came to the pad and gave us a short operational briefing and asked us if we could make an emergency ammunition resupply to Charlie Company. The S3 told us that C Company was surrounded by NVA and they were running low on ammunition. The Battalion had requested gunships but none were available at that time (where did the General's gunship escort go?). It was apparent that C Company would need ammunition resupply shortly. The Milk Run was going sour.

We loaded up our slick with about 1,000 pounds of 5.56, 7.62, and 40mm. We stacked the ammunition cases along each side of the cargo compartment so that they could be pushed out rapidly. We asked for two volunteers to ride along with us to push the ammunition out. This would allow our crew chief and gunner to stay on their M-60s. We quickly had the two volunteers to ride along. Unfortunately we do not know their names, only that they were on the resupply pad. We are now waiting for a lull in the fire fight to deliver the ammunition. The waiting time gives us a chance to evaluate the situation. I knew that a high overhead approach was not going to be a good solution since we had no gunships. The best solution seemed to be to fly in low level and try to surprise the enemy on the way in. Coming out of the Company location was not going to be good no matter how we went in since they were surrounded. We had C Company pop smoke while we were still shut down on the resupply pad. We identified the smoke coming from an island of trees on the valley floor. It was several miles away. Al and I stood on the pad trying to pick out a route and identifying landmarks so that we could navigate in low

level. This is not going to be easy as there are many small islands of trees on the valley floor. Soon someone came running down from the BTOC and told us that Charlie Company was out of 7.62 and 40mm and they had redistributed their 5.56. They were down to eleven rounds per man. It was time. I believe we had been on the pad about a half hour but it could have been longer or shorter.

AI fired up the L-11 turbine and brought it up to operating RPM while I got the radios on and tuned. I called C Company and told them our basic plan of coming in low level from the North and to be trying to hear and see us in case we needed a direction change. I took the controls and we lifted off LZ Center diving down the North mountain side to the valley floor. We can no longer see C Company's position and will not see it for a couple of more minutes. We cross over a small ridge flying about 5' AGL (above ground level) and at 100 knots. The trick now is to go to the right island of trees. We head West to a visible check point and turn South directly towards the LZ, I hope. AI and I are talking trying to identify the correct island of trees. We are about a mile out traveling over two miles a minutes when the RTO hears us and finally sees us. We are headed directly in to the LZ. It is time to flare and decelerate. I stand 052 on its tail and drop down into a high hover in the tree tops. We are taking fire but the tree tops are helping. I feel AI lightly on the controls. As we are coming to a high hover the RTO tells us to kick the ammo out there.

AI: I could see several NVA scurry back and forth in the underbrush directly to our front not more than 75 to 100 feet away. I could hear rounds hitting the ship and then I saw one of the NVA sit down at the base of the palm tree to our right front. At that moment I thought "He is very close and he is not going to miss!" He began to fire his AK and I felt a burn on my leg and a spray of particles of plexiglass and aluminum hit my chin and lips. I was yelling into the intercom for the gunner on my side to get this guy, not realizing that one of his rounds had clipped my commo cord in half and no one could hear me. It looked to me that he fired several single rounds, and then went "guns-a-go-go" on full auto. Over the noise of the firing and engine, I could hear the ammo pushers and the crew in the back yelling "GO, GO!" Every warning light in the instrument panel that was still functioning was lit up, and because Dave wasn't answering me on intercom I was sure he was hit. It was time to move out! As I tried to expedite our departure, I felt resistance on the controls and felt the collective come up and the cyclic move forward I realized that Dave was OK, or at least was able to fly the ship. It wasn't until we landed at the firebase that I realized why I could not direct the gunners fire and that no one could hear me.

Dave: The two volunteers push all of the ammunition out in a few seconds. Our M-60s are laying down fire. The crew chief gives me the all clear and I take 052 to maximum power as I start a left turn directly towards LZ Center. We clear the trees while making our left turn and the NVA roll onto their backs and hose us down with small arms fire. The crew in the back have their M-60s laying down fire and both of the guys from the resupply pad are firing their M-16. They are hosing us down good with AKs. Bullets, shrapnel, and plexiglass are flying all over the cockpit and cargo compartment.

Suddenly I feel Al coming on the controls. I try to talk with him on the intercom to get him off them. He is not answering. I yell at him to get off the controls and he yells back that he thought I was hit since I did not answer him. His helmet communication cord has been shot in half right next to his neck. We are about two minutes out of the LZ and by now climbing out at 80 knots and all of the power 052 can muster. We have engine and transmission gages going wacko, warning lights coming on, and smoke coming from an electrical fire in the nose compartment. The smoke is minor and soon is gone. Some rounds had hit the wiring harnesses. I am communicating with the crew chief and gunner to see if they or the volunteers are injured. It appears no one has any major wounds. As we are on short final approach to LZ Center I smell the distinct smell of hydraulic oil burning on the engine. All is well though as we have power and controls. We land and shut down.

Soldiers from the 2d Bn, 2-327th Inf are all over the pad. Everyone is trying to talk at once. Someone from the BTOC is on the pad and I ask them to call the rear so that we can get a ride back to home base. 052 is peppered with bullet holes. Al has his helmet cord shot in half and his baseball cap that he had stored in a cubby hole behind his head had a bullet hole through it. One of the volunteers had his steel pot shot off from his head. He had his unread mail tucked in the helmet liner and was pissed that he had lost it. Shortly a slick comes in and gives us a ride back to Ky Ha. 052 will need a ride home by a CH-47 Chinook. Back at Ky Ha I head into operations to file a report and Al catches up with his Dad who had arrived in Viet Nam the same day. Later I watch the Chinook bring in 052. At about 10 feet above the ramp 052 starts spinning and the hook pilot punches it off. It will be Jan of 68 before I get 052 out of maintenance. That night I catch up with Al and his Dad. Al is wearing his hat with the bullet hole in it.

Shortly after 11-Nov-67 Al went to the Muskets (Gunship Platoon). I don't believe that we ever flew slicks together again. If we did it would have probably only been for a check ride. Maybe once was enough!! 052 ended up having 28 bullet holes in her and numerous other holes from shrapnel. During the time that 052 was in maintenance for repairs I flew 054 until Bob Hartley and I flew 054 into a rice paddy, but that is another story for another time.

Dave Sebright, Minuteman 17
Al Gaither, Musket 10

Company C, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry (Airborne)

November 11, 1967

The Mission

On November 6, 1967, Company C, 2-327th Infantry, along with the remainder of the Battalion made a helicopter assault into the Hiep Duc Valley, west of Tam Ky, RVN. The Battalion's mission was to block exfiltration routes from the east heading west out of the valley.

The Situation

The next five days passed without major contact with the enemy although there were numerous signs, sightings, and reports of his presence in or passage through the area of operations. Late in the morning of November 11, Charlie Company deployed three of its four platoons in patrols using a cloverleaf pattern around the CP location. First, third, and fourth platoons dropped their rucksacks at the CP and second platoon remained with the CP as a reaction force and to secure the rucksacks. Company field strength was around 80 to 85 with nine troops in the CP and 18 to 20 in each platoon. Each platoon had two small rifle squads and two M60 machine gun teams. Third platoon and fourth platoon both quickly began seeing enemy signs such as a discarded uniform, black pajamas, bulk rice, and a VC id card.

The Battle

At approximately 1245 hours, the third platoon point man had a meeting engagement with three enemy soldiers. One NVA was killed, one was wounded and captured, and one fled. Third platoon pursued and encountered the main enemy perimeter. They attacked and penetrated the perimeter to what was evidently a command post in a hut. The platoon leader initially estimated there were 15 to 20 NVA soldiers. Subsequently, we determined there were many more--at least a company. Once third platoon had overrun the CP, the enemy reestablished the perimeter thereby surrounding the platoon. Shortly after penetrating the enemy perimeter, the platoon leader was seriously wounded by an NVA grenade. It was obvious that his wounds would impair his ability to direct and adjust artillery, gunships, and TAC air. Consequently, the CP with a point man borrowed from second platoon, began maneuvering to join up with third platoon to assume control of supporting fires.

As the CP neared third platoon's location, the point man opened fire on three NVA who were positioned to ambush the unit. The point man shot one and the other two fled. Having penetrated the perimeter, the CP maneuvered left to join third platoon. As the CP neared the 2 third platoon location, they came under RPD fire from the left killing the artillery recon sergeant. The CP maneuvered past the RPD and linked up with the third platoon around 1400H.

Meanwhile, the first and fourth platoons were also on the move to link up with the CP and third platoon. First platoon arrived about 45 minutes later breaking through the western side of the NVA perimeter and linking up with our expanding C company perimeter. Fourth platoon linked up with the second platoon at the old CP location, policed up their individual rucksacks, and headed to the contact location with the second platoon minus three men who stayed behind to guard the remaining rucksacks. Fourth and second platoons crashed through the weakening NVA perimeter from the North and joined the rest of the company. Meanwhile, the battalion recon platoon (Hawks) linked up with the three troops from the second platoon to secure the remaining C company rucksacks.

By this time we had gunships and TAC air, each working in their turn, and we getting heavy fire from our DS 105 mm battery and a GS 155mm battery. We began running low on M16 and M60 ammunition and requested a resupply. We attempted to secure an LZ for the resupply chopper, but even after losing one man killed, we were only able to secure a small area for the landing leaving the approach unsecured. The resupply chopper was able to get in and kick out a few cases of ammunition, but was shot up coming in and going out. Those few cases of ammunition were vital as third platoon troopers were running low after fighting for about three hours. With those few cases of ammo plus redistribution of ammo from troops from the other platoons, we were able to get everyone up to a level where we could repel a substantial enemy attack. We also tried to get a medevac in, but the pilot aborted because the LZ approach was too hot.

The contact continued sporadically until after midnight. We were tied down with our wounded and KHAs that we couldn't evacuate and the enemy commander was trying to withdraw with his wounded. I have always been convinced that the enemy commander probably overestimated our strength. First of all, it was obvious that we completely surprised him. He had no idea we were there, consequently, he had not been able to observe us and determine our strength. Second, the way the battle unfolded, with his unit getting attacked initially by third platoon, then from a slightly different direction by the CP group, followed by an assault by the first platoon from a third direction, culminating with an attack from another direction by the second and fourth platoons, he most certainly thought we were a much larger force.

The Aftermath

Around 1800 H, A company made an airmobile assault to set up a blocking position approximately 1500 meters to our west. We continued to employ artillery, helicopter flare 3 ships, and C130 gunships until after midnight as we continued to receive sporadic probes and sniper fire. However, we received no further casualties from enemy fire.

As the morning of the 12th dawned, we were able to evacuate our wounded and dead. As we were preparing to move out, we had gunships hose down the area to our south in case there were any enemies remaining there. Unfortunately, one of the door gunners on the C model huey gunship became disoriented during a firing pass and hosed down the CP with his M60 wounding two more troopers. The gunship landed and medevaced the two troopers and C Company headed back to pick up their rucksacks.

Following the conclusion of the contact, information obtained from an A company POW confirmed the unit we were facing as the 40th battalion of the 1st VC regiment. According to the Brigade S2, the battalion had an estimated strength of 250. Immediate results of the contact were four friendly killed and five wounded plus two more wounded by the gunship. The NVA lost 14 killed by ground fire and one killed by air. One SKS, one RPD, and five AK47s were captured along with numerous rucksacks. Over the next three days, an additional 11 NVA bodies were discovered in graves and two wounded NVA were captured. Also, two additional SKS rifles and two additional AK47 assault rifles along with ammunition, magazines, rucksacks and grenades were captured. Other information included a FAC report of five NVA dragging a body down to the nearby river just south of the contact. Further, interrogation of a female civilian revealed that after the contact, three NVA with small arms had passed through heading east and that the village chief (who was VC) had fled across the river to the south. Finally, interrogation of a civilian in another nearby village said that a squad of NVA with small arms had stayed in the village the night of the 12th and left heading west.

Larger Implications of the Battle

The 1st VC regiment was a battle hardened outfit. The regimental commander and all three battalion commanders were veterans of Dien Ben Phu. Operation Starlite in August, 1965 was the first major offensive regimental size action conducted by a purely U.S. military unit during the Vietnam War. U.S. forces involved included the 2/4th, 3/3rd, 1/7th, and 3/7th Marines. The opponent was the 1st VC regiment which then consisted of the 60th and 80th VC battalions. The 1st VC regiment suffered 600 plus killed and had nine prisoners taken. They also lost 109 weapons. The Marines suffered 54 killed and 203 wounded. They lost 22 tanks and PCs and 13 helicopters. The 1st VC regiment was a tough outfit. Later, the 40th battalion which was a local force battalion was added to the 1st VC regiment. Operation Starlite is covered in detail in *The First Battle - Operation Starlite and the Beginning of the Blood Debt in Vietnam* by Otto Lehrack.

Sometime prior to 1967, the 1st VC regiment, including the 40th VC battalion, was added to the 2nd NVA Division. During the period April, 1967, through early August, 1967, the 2nd NVA division was heavily engaged with the U.S. Marines in the Que Son Valley in I Corps. This battle is chronicled in *Road of 10,000 Pains, The Destruction of the 2nd NVA Division by the U.S. Marines, 1967* also by Otto J. Lehrack. According to Mr. Lehrack, during the battle the U.S. Marines had over 600 men killed while the 2nd NVA division lost over 6,000. At any rate, the 2nd NVA division essentially disengaged, refitted, and came back down in August to disrupt the SVN national elections to be held on September 3 and to get control of the rice harvest. Following those actions, the 2nd NVA division was to head to Da Nang for the Tet Offensive. The Marines reengaged the 2nd NVA division disrupting their plans and inflicting more damage.

In August, the U.S. Army began replacing Marine units in the southern part of I Corps and the Marines began redirecting more of their effort to the Northern part of I Corps along the DMZ. Consequently, the Americal Division, including the 1st Brigade of the 101st, began assuming responsibility for the Que Son Valley and the 2nd NVA Division. The 2nd NVA Division had been badly beaten up by the Marines and 1st Brigade S2 put their strength at 4,500. Following the rice harvest, the 2nd NVA division would have been preparing for the Tet Offensive and their objective, the city of Da Nang. The 1st Brigade of the 101st killed 1105 enemy soldiers during engagements with the 2nd NVA Division plus capturing 186 individual weapons and 34 crew served weapons. That damage, combined with other inflicted by the sister brigades in the Americal Division, finished the 2nd NVA Division for the Tet Offensive. Once the Tet Offensive began, only one enemy rifle company was able to make it into the city. Thus Da Nang was saved from the death and destruction suffered by other major cities in South Vietnam and C Company and the 176th Assault Helicopter Company had a hand in it.

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C Company Commander