



## THE RECON MISSION,

A Recon mission of the NVA truck park near the Laos/Vietnam DMZ.

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with [Tony \(O<sup>^</sup>ng con Cop\) Spletstoser.](#)

Operation date; sometime 1972.

Cu' van: We were based at Hue, inside the Imperial City citadel and the airstrip. Our Special Forces compound is there.

The mission; Vietnamese Army Special Forces G-2 had told my unit of a large Communist camp next to the Laotian border and they wanted to know everything about it. The commanders tell us they believe there are maybe two or three hundred heavy transfer trucks there.

We know that there may have been other teams there before this, because someone found out for us exactly how the communists in there were dressed. Sometimes for a recon like this, our commanders will send in three, four or more teams in over a month to checking everything out very carefully, but the communists must never know about even one.

It's so secret that even we don't know about our own other teams and what they do. We are told only what our leaders want us to know.

Tony Cop: How many men were in your team for this job and how were you equipped and armed?

Cu' van Sat Cong: We are a six man team. We each carry only food and water for nine days. For this job, we wear the same uniform as the communist soldier; even our back-pack is like theirs. Each man carry AK47, with two full mags (30 rnds ea.) taped in reverse in the rifle, two spares in

our chest pack (Harris' rig vest) and two more in our back pack. We have 12 small "cherry" type hand grenades (From Belgium) packed in double tape like strip slung around our shoulder like bandoleer and one Willie Pete grenade each. (White-Phosphorus.) We carry packets of Korean style freeze dried cooked rice (LRRP ration), dry meat or fish. Most important, water, we each have nine canteens. It is very heavy but water is so important to us. We need at least one for each day. We all have a small emergency handie-talkie, it is the same as the survival radio that American pilot's have. "The Brick," (PRC-90) it has a locator beacon 'beeper' too. One man in the team is the RTO and he carries a PRC-25, (Prick25) back-pack radio.

Tony Cop: How did you travel to the target and what was the method used to insert your team?

Cu' van Sat Cong: One evening at twilight, they fly us by helicopter at low level to maybe 1.5 km from the target. We jump by parachute from 200 feet above the trees. All six jump, 1-2-3, we need to stay close together. We drop into the trees almost at once. When you parachute jumping into a dense forest of triple-canopy trees, you have to have special training. It's not like jumping to a open field or rice paddy. Everything different and easy to get killed. The trees come up fast, it's keep your feet and legs together and arms straight up over your head, as you begin to penetrate the branches. After we stop falling. we hold onto the tree and unhook the parachute. We know that we are going to get hung up, we also have get the chute out of the tree. What we do is, use the next job for two things. First we cut all the shroud lines lose, pull the silk down, and tie shroud lines together to lower ourself down. Next we hide and cover up everything. (We can not leave anything behind for the communists to know that we had been there.)

The helicopter has to fly at it's normal speed, they can't stand still over drop zone and let you down with a cable, it will draw too much attention.

Tony Cop: Tell me about how you began your approach to cover the distance to the communist base.

Cu' van Sat Cong: That night we moved out toward the enemy base. We know it is a large base, about 4 km square. It was about 4-5 km from the Laos border. We have move through 1.5 km of jungle to our search area, which is to be inside of "2 squares" on the map of this camp. When we get there we must stay exactly inside those 2 squares. Other leaders may running other SF teams in that base at the same time. It's not a good idea for us to run into each other.

All of us have to move very quietly and slowly, just like over here when we hunt the deer. You call it "Still Hunting" where you move a few steps, stop, listen for a couple of seconds, look around very carefully. We are in heavy forest, deep woods, but at ground level it is almost open with only light undergrowth here and there, (The shade keeps things from growing under the triple-canopy.)

We move out using the trees for cover. I am walking in the head, "the point position." Each man of the team behind has his special job. Each man is separated at about 30 meters, just far enough ahead to be in sight of the following man. When we stop for our check, the second man turns and looks to the right, the third man looks to the left, and so on until the last man. I check the man behind me from time to time also. We communicate with hand signals, the same system as the Americans. We are very careful not to disturb anything along our trail, even how the fallen leaves lay naturally on the ground.

The last man's job is to always check the rear, making sure that no one is following us, clean up our trail, so that it look like no one has been by there.

Every time that we stop we change which way we look. Every man depends on the other; we can not miss anything. We have to watch for enemy patrols, when they come and so on. We don't care how long it take; the main thing is that we don't get caught. It takes us two days to reach the base.

Tony Cop: When you moved into the enemy compound, what did you find first?

Sat Cong: We found the fuel dump first. There were about 15 or 20 large fuel tanks or bladders, each about 20 by 20 feet, for gasoline. There were also many 55 gal fuel drums stored there.

Tony Cop: You did know that under International Law, you could be executed as spies if you were captured?

Sat Cong: Yes, we know that, but if they catch us, we would only live as long as they thought that they could make us tell something. We got a pill sewn into the corner of our shirt collar to take care of that. We can just bite down on it through the shirt and we done. There is no way that we can do the job unless we are dressed like them, we are right in there with them.

Tony Cop: What was your next step?

Sat Cong: When we get there it is about two o'clock in the afternoon. It is early, but it has been a ruff walk and we are all tired. So now we take a break and just stop there and check each other out. We find a place about 200 meters away from the gas tanks.

Before we start our mission inside the camp, we need to be fresh and rested. If we are too tired, we can make a careless mistake. We must have plenty of energy and fresh in our mind to take care of ourself. If we do this right, it will be an easy mission. We set a watch, eat something, try to sleep. We sit back to back, to watch for each other, we sleep that way. We never talk or take off our packs. Everyone has a roll of string in their pocket. We tie the string to each other and also run some around our position, so that we signal each other by pulling on the string, and if any stranger come to us, we know before he find us.

We make no sound of any kind. We got a little piece of paper that we write on about what we going to do next. Any communication have to be

silent. We wait for everything to settle down over night; we sit there from about 1230 until about 6 O'clock in the morning.

Tony Cop: How did you go about scouting out this huge camp without being discovered?

Sat Cong: For the next four days we do our job to find out everything we can about this supply dump and base. At first we stick close together, each watching in a different direction, we are slowly moving from spot to spot. We have to see how every-thing is laid out. You know, before we really go in there we must first learn how the communist do in there, and how they work, so that we know how to act just like them.

The communist leave the big trees, but they have cut down all the small trees and bushes under the triple canopy. This is in-order for it to be clear to move and store supplies easily. So we can see all around us. but the branches of the tall trees are so interwoven that nothing can be seen from the air, There are trails that they walk from the tank to tank, back and forth between the truck park and the other supply stores.

We see the men working there and sometimes they see us, but they all got a job to do and are busy doing their work. Since we look just like them, they don't pay us any attention. That way we move all around the camp. When they see us, we might wave or smile and then just go on. We never act like we try to hide, only just like we belong there.

Tony O^Ng CO.p: You mean that you really expected to get away with that?

Cu' van Sat Cong: Of course. We make them think that we are just another one of their patrols or guard groups. You see, we are so far away from any Saigon government forces that the communist soldiers there never think that any of their enemy could be nearby.

Tony Cop: How are you able to record all that you see by just writing notes?

Sat Cong: We had been given a 35 mm camera and four or five extra rolls of film. Exposed film is locked in a special tough plastic carrying case. In the daylight we take a lots of pictures and write down notes about what we see.

Tony Cop: Are you completely on your own?

Sat Cong: Oh no, every move that we make, what we find, every little thing we check out, we report to our leader in the sky. He is flying in a L-19 (Bird-Dog) airplane, just far enough away not to be seen or heard. Our leader is a Special Forces captain. Since he has advanced through the ranks from the same as us, he usually understands exactly what we say. Our leaders become officers because they are smart and brave and not because of family connections. Our captain had passed some real tests for his promotions. He has a VNAF pilot trained to work with Special Forces. When we make contact with our leader by radio, we hold the radio mike down inside our shirt so no

sound can be heard outside. We listen by ear-piece. We report to him what we see and where we are at that time. Then he tell us what he wants pictures of. We must act exactly like the communist soldier do. Tony

Cop: What did you find in there?

Sat Cong: That base has about a thousand men. We see what of supplies they store there and mark in our notes exactly were they. There are also sleeping quarters and the places that they cook and eat.

One suprise we see, they have the biggest VC flag that I ever saw, not even the Presidential Palace in Saigon got a South Vietnam flag that big. It was on a pole in the most open place that we see in there, although it still can not be seen from above.

Tony Cop: What kind of activity was going on?

Sat Cong: The men there do maintenance on trucks, move supplies, load trucks going south, unload trucks from the north, just like one of our transportation bases, only nothing can be seen from the air.

We do this for four and a half to five days. Everytime we move and what we see, report all of this to our group leader.

Tony Cop: Do you mean that your leader must stay on staion up there all day long? What has he been doing with all that information?

Sat Cong: Yes, except when he have to pull off to go back to refuel, but then another airplane takes his place while he gone. After five days, our leader communicate the results to the commander at our headquarters. We normally are set up to stay out for nine days. We tell our leader that we think that we found out everything, all the information, we have a couple of days left, but we need that to get away to safe PZ.

Our leader in the air said, "We need to get that place down." That means that they want us to destroy that place. We say OK, but how? We just go in there as a recon team and we don't carry any explosive equipment. The captain say that they going to supply us by air drop. This means we have to move back away from the camp to someplace that the enemy can not see the drop.

Tony Cop: Why don't they just call in a air strike?

Sat Cong: We have the same idea, and talk this among our selves. We don't understand, "They exactly know where everything is; why don't they send out some of our F-5s or American F-4s with bombs and napalm?" That's a big question on our minds.

Tony Cop: It sounds like your `Leader' is going to make your `smooth' job a `ruff' one.

Sat Cong: Yes. The leader told us to figure our how much explosive we need and they supply us. We got two days to get it set up. He tell us since it will take more time, that they will drop us some more food and water also.

Our leader say that they talk it over at headquarters and along with the explosives they are going to send us some more personnel to help us. Boy, we

don't like this at all; too many people make too much noise.

Tony Cop; I guess that every army has it's Strap-Hangers and REMFs. Good men just seem to think differently after they get a staff job.

Sat Cong: Most of the time what they think is right. I never understand why they think like this now. Anyone of us know now that it will go all wrong for us; the plan not right. We still got a little meat and rice, but you know after nine days it's going to be ruff and with only two days left we don't have time to go out to a drop point, pick up equipment and then work our way back inside to do the job. Also, too much risk. We are tired, wore out, it's too easy to make a mistake when a man is like that. We told our leader that it look like everyone want to get out. When he finally understand that, he say, "Ok, we pull you out and burn it down the next time."

He tell us that we must leave the enemy truck-park in a different direction than we go in. There is something more that he want us to check on the way out. He gave us the direction to take and the coordinates for our PZ. We must be there exactly on time when they come to pick us up. We have to be in and out before the enemy can respond.

Tony Cop: What did you do then?

Sat Cong: When our communication is over, the day is in deep twilight, the sun is in a thin line and you know that in the woods it will be completely dark in a few more seconds. I look at the map and I see that the PZ is about three squares away (3km). I think, " How we gonna move there in two days?"

When you move through that kind of country, you don't know what you find on your way. If we have a road it only depend on how fast you walk, but this is jungle with NVA soldiers all around; we cannot estimate how much trouble that we will find.

That night we talk with each other (with pencil and paper). We know we do not have much time, so we decide to move as much as we can. We know that if we are not at the PZ on time that we gonna be stuck a couple more days. We have to move in the direction that our leader gave us. Our leaders never tell us what another team has seen. The secrecy is so that they can compare reports against one another as a check for accuracy. So, we thought that we were leaving the supply base behind and going into the jungle. We move maybe 2/3rds of a square distance on our track (600 m). It is now about 1130 and totally dark and we do not know when we are in relation to anything in the camp. So we stop and take a break. After rigging our strings and setting a watch, we set back to back the same as before. We try to sleep and get some rest.

The next day about 0530, the man on watch heard some noise, maybe a 100 feet away. He pull on the string to wake us all up, then we all listen. There are men moving around, talking right where we at. We are in a thicket hidden at the foot of a big tree. A little later we find out that the Communist camp Head Quarters is right there.

Our leaders know about this place but don't tell us. They want it checked on our way out too. In the dark, we got too close. Nobody see us yet. We look at each other and we know, "Don't be afraid of it, if we die we die, but the main thing is to get out of there."

The job is done now and we must look after ourselves. We began to move, we move as normally as we can, maybe a 100 feet from where the noise is, then one of our team make the sign that he go ahead to check out where we are. We agree. We say you come back as soon as you can.

So he move away, ahead and we move back 100 yards toward where start from last night. About 30 minutes later we heard gunfire. We fear the worse, because you know in that camp there is no reason for gunfire unless they shoot at one of us. That means that probably something our man do didn't look right and they know that he their enemy.

So we forget about what the danger is, we have to move back to see what is going on. We see the fire coming from a watching tower. They shooting in the direction away from us, so we believe it's to where our friend go. I wonder what has happened? We had been walking around and by these check-point watch towers for the last 5 1/2 days and no one had noticed us.

Well, it's too late to hide now, and what we have to do is shoot the bad guys in the tower in order to protect our friend. They don't see us yet. We kill the shooters in that tower and we run toward where our man go. We run almost to him, when we run into another check point (tower) and they fire at us and we have to lay down and work back away. Then we see our friend hauling-ass by that other tower check point, and they shoot him. Now they shoot at us too. Then another friend of mine run up there and he get shot. Four of us left now. I run up there, firing at the tower as I go. I move up to the second man that got hit and pull him back. It ain't doing no good; he already dead. The others lay down. The enemy hasn't located us yet. When I get back, I call our leader and tell him the situation; I tell him that we run into the enemy HQ and two of our team get killed. He said. "OK, we get you out. Make it to the pickup point as fast as you can. We wait for you." That means that he wants us to continue in the same direction past the HQ and watch towers, the same place our friends get killed. In his mind our job isn't done until we check it out.

Tony Cop: Your group leader's orders don't sound like they will make things much better. What do you do then?

Sat Cong: We talk it over and make a decision between ourselves to split up because if they catch us together there is a good chance they get us all. Just like if you are hunting and you kick up four rabbits and they run different ways. First you must make a decision about which one to shoot at and maybe by then they all get away. That's the way we think. So the other three head out separately in a slightly different track in the direction that our leader told us to go.

Tony Cop: Did you follow the rest of the team?

Sat Cong: I start to, then I think to myself, "We already lose two men in that direction and the enemy know we go that way; I don't think that it's good idea." So I move back to where we were the night before. I make it there and then I hear a lot of commotion from the direction my friends go. Lots of shouting, yelling commands, and shooting. I never see my friends again.

It's then that I know that I don't want to try to go that way. It's not that our leader wanted us killed; he just didn't understand how bad our situation was.

Tony Cop: Well, you broke the rules then. What did you report to your leader after that?

Sat Cong: I begin to work back toward the place where we were put in. I stop to check in with my leader. He say, "What happen down there? Where you at?" I say, "I can't tell you right now, I'll tell you later." I'm pretty sure now that my friends are gone and that maybe one of our radios fall into the enemy's hands. I don't want to reveal anything over the radio. I tell him I will call him again in 30 minutes. It's only about 10 o'clock in the day then.

I know that I am going to get into trouble because I don't follow orders, but I know that they are wrong and I must save my life and complete the mission the best way that I can.

I move back to our original drop point. I have to go slow because I still don't know what is out there and I have no one to watch my back anymore. The enemy may looking for me.

I don't call my leader in 30 minutes. I keep quiet and keep moving. About two hours later I call him. My leader answer, he say, "Where the hell you at? How are the "children?" No one else call in." (When he say, "children," he mean my other recon team members.) I say, "I don't know, they not with me." My leader ask, "What is your location?" I say, " Wait, I'll tell you later." I can't get him to understand that it's not safe to give information out the radio.

So I turn the radio off and continue to work my way toward the drop point. The less we talk the better. Finally I see the leader's plane turn around and he go home.

Tony Cop: How long did it take you to get back to the drop zone?

Sat Cong: I get almost back to the drop point about noon the next day. Then I hear the leader's plane returning. I take out my survival mirror and signal him with it. I identify myself and ask him if he understand. In the Special Forces, we had worked out answering signals that a airplane could give. By kicking the rudder pedals that meant "no", pushing the stick forward and back was "yes". A banking turn to the left was another thing, and so on.

Then I call him again on the radio and tell him that I am ready to be taken out. The leader say, "God damnit! Where in the hell have you been? We been missing you for a whole day now. Why aren't you at the PZ that I told you and where are the other `children'?" I tell him, "I'm here now, but I have to be quiet and I don't know where the children at. But I'm here and ready to be pulled out, no more water or food." My leader said, "I have to check it out with the commander back at the base." I said OK and then wait. I guess he talk back to our base.

Then he said. "I have to go back now, we return tomorrow at 10 o'clock to pull you out." I tell him, "OK, everything I'll tell you later." Then he leave.

So I make myself a `hide' place the best I can to stay another night and wait.

The next day 10 o'clock come and go and I wonder if maybe my leader is going to leave me here?

Finally when my leader come back again he say, "OK, we get you out in few more minutes. Where is your location?" I said, "Good morning Sir! How are you!. I tell him the he knows the spot from yesterday when I use the signal mirror." I still don't want to use the radio to give my location away. My leader then ask, "How tall are the trees where you at? I tell him that most are 100 meters tall, some 60 meters. The leader said, "We have to find a place that is a little more open in order to pull you out. I ask him since he can see from the air better, please find a good spot and direct me to it. He find one and tell which way to go and I work toward it. About that time I heard a screaming whoosh going over at tree top level and I know that they are almost here. It was VNAF F-5s' that we use for top cover. Next, it was the Slick over me at a high hover and dropped the cable for me. I hook up my carabiner from my vest "D" ring at my shoulder, to the cable ring, and away I go.

Tony Cop: I don't suppose that you minded being drug through a few tree tops that time? Were your commanders anxious to learn all about what you found inside the communist base and what went wrong at the end?

Sat Cong: You're right about that, they could have drug me through thorns and it would have been alright.

When get back to our base they meet me at the heli-pad. Someone is there to take the camera and the film; then they put me in a closed truck and take me to the SF camp. They let me take a shower and change to clean uniform, but that's all.

I don't get to eat or anything.

They take me to the conference room and begin to ask questions about the mission and what went wrong. I tell them, but some of the things they don't like to hear. They talk everything over with each other and then they write me up for two things. (One) is that I didn't stay with the others and (two), I didn't follow orders and go to the PZ that my leader ordered me to....

Then they put me in jail for four days.

The "Jail" in our camp is converted CONEX shipping container. It get real hot during the day. While I sit there, I think, "This isn't fair, I work hard and do the best that anyone can. They got the information that they wanted and the other men lose their life for it." I think about that some more; then I think, "It's a lot better being here in jail than being back out there dead." I rest easy then; I had survived.

My leaders and my officers in command are very strict; we must always follow orders exactly. Most of the time, our survival depends on that. I don't want anyone to ever think that our commanders would send us out to get killed on purpose. We are too valuable to the government to throw away. It takes over two years just to train us. My officers and all the officers in command came up through the Special Forces just like me. They all know exactly what we know, they are tough and must always be obeyed.

There is always something that we don't want to do, but we must do it anyway. If we think that we can do what we want to, nothing get done. Sometimes they make a mistake, but they can't help it.

They also teach us in Special Forces training that first you save your life, and then the `mission' is the main thing. This time I knew that they were wrong and I had no way to explain that to my leader, so I must disobey my orders to save my life and to finish the job. But I had still disobeyed them and they have to show some punishment. I know and they know, that for me, it was worth it and after all, the punishment is really not very much. <sup>1</sup> So we must do the best that we can.

Tony Cop: After this interview is over, Sat is sitting there thinking, remembering.

Sat Cong: "Tony, this is only one story. I been on operations most of the time from when I graduate in 1971 until April 1975, and maybe you think that it didn't bother me. Well, I'll tell you, I never got over being scared. I know that you been scared before and that you think that you know how to handle it, but I'd give you the easiest mission that I ever had and you'd piss your pants. I know that because the first ten missions that I made, I pissed in mine. After that I learned how to handle my fear, but I never quit being scared." If you ever run into a Special Forces type that says, "I ain't never been scared," stay away from him; he's a dead man on loan.

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<sup>1</sup>he American Special Forces commander may have handled a mission result such as this a little differently, but always remember, there are differences between our cultures. While many things may seem the same on the surface, there are always underlying differences that the `Westerner' will never understand.

Sat Cong: When I was about 12 years old, I grow up in a beautiful valley near Quin Nhon, in central Vietnam. Our family is mama, daddy and four children. I have a older sister and a younger brother and sister. When the communists come to our valley in the north, we have to leave and move south to below Nha Trang, but my daddy still up there getting our belongings together. My sister go back up there with him to get some more of her stuff and the communists catch her. They make her go with them for supply transport, like a pack animal. We never see her again. Later we hear from some old people that stayed behind<sup>2</sup>, that maybe airplanes bomb the VC on the trail and she die somewhere in the jungle. I always remember my sister and what the Communists do. I never tell anyone about this, not even my closest friend in the army, not even my wife after I marry, but I never forget my sister and when I am in the Special Forces I don't worry about getting even, I get ahead. I know that nothing will ever give me my sister back, but every time that I put another communist down, I think, "There is one more that will never bother someone's daughter or sister."

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<sup>2</sup> Informed rumors, some families had members on both sides.