

Extracted from
A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL
Flying With the Men of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company
Over I Corps and the DMZ, 1968-1969
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Chapter 13
OPERATION RICH

There is no such thing as a small battle or tiny war at cockpit, squad and platoon levels.

Col. Jack L. Mullen, Road Runner 6

SEARCHING FOR THE MEN WHO FOUGHT AT KINH MON on 25 October 1968, the author sent a query and rough draft of Bill Hooper's memories of that day to the website of the 5th Infantry Division. The reply saw his and another Catkiller's recollections of that day develop into something far more than either ever imagined.

Yes, sir, I remember YOU VERY WELL!! I have waited all of these years to say THANK YOU. I have always thought that I would not be alive today if it hadn't been for your very timely "air strike" on that NVA 12.7 machine gun. I was a sergeant with Recon 1-61. A 12.7 was chewing us UP—I had crawled to within fifty meters from it and stood to fire my LAW at him. He spotted me and adjusted to me. I fired the LAW and it said "CLACK"—misfire—sir, that 12.7 had me cold—then you swooped in and GOT him, just in time for me!! I also remember the M16 firing out the side window and the hand grenade "bombs." It has taken me a long time to finally get to say this, THANK YOU, Sir.

Jim Roffers
Recon Platoon, 1-61

Twenty-year-old Jim Roffers from Marshfield, Missouri, had returned from Vietnam and reported to the 5th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colorado. When he learned that the division's 1st Brigade was deploying to Vietnam, he volunteered for a second tour and was assigned to the Reconnaissance Platoon of Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry Regiment (Mechanized). His platoon leader was 24-year-old newly-commissioned 2nd Lt. David Merrell.

Jim Roffers—On 22 July 1968, we loaded up in C-141 Starlifters and flew from Colorado Springs to Anchorage, Alaska and from there directly to Cam Ranh Bay. We were ferried to Quang Tri in C-130s, then by trucks out to Wunder Beach. We were there for several weeks and Recon started out as armored cavalry, keeping the road

between Quang Tri and Dong Ha open at night for the Marines. We had some skirmishes and the companies some good firefights, but it was mostly fairly small scale, nothing like what we would experience during Op Rich.

As the official After-Action Report [AAR] would later record:

“Operation RICH was conceived as a Reconnaissance in Force to search out and destroy enemy forces and materiel in a designated area between Con Thien and the Ben Hai River . . . Enemy strength and exact locations and dispositions within the area of operations were not known prior to starting the operation. Order of Battle data indicated that the area was believed to be the area of operations for the NVA 27th and the 138th Independent Regiments (AKA 132nd Independent Regiment).”

What the AAR failed to note was that 1-61 was handicapped even before the plan was conceived. Charlie Company had lost one-third of its men killed or wounded the previous month, while Alpha and Bravo companies were down by 10-20% due to soldiers hospitalized for tropical diseases and routine medical problems. This left the battalion almost 100 men understrength, which staff at battalion and brigade level decided was an acceptable reduction in force; artillery and close air support could easily compensate for the shortfall. No provision was made for a shortage of portable field radios, which were vital in keeping elements aware of each other's positions and tactical situations when in contact with the enemy.

As mechanized infantry, they were trained to ride into battle in M113 armored personnel carriers, each mounting a .50 caliber heavy machine gun. Additional firepower came from up to four M60 machine guns among the eight to ten soldiers sitting inside a protective aluminum-alloy hull. To make them self-sufficient in the field, ample stocks of ammunition, water and field rations were stored wherever space could be found.

All of these advantages were set aside when it was decided that surprise was the key to the success of Op Rich. By eliminating the sounds of engines, 1-61 would not alert the NVA to its presence until it was too late to react. The proven tactics of mechanized warfare, for which the M113 was specifically designed, were discarded by leaving the armored vehicles behind. The troops, most of them citizen soldiers doing their obligatory two years' military service, would go into battle as lightly-armed dismounted infantry, each carrying his own ammo, food and water. Should contact with the enemy exhaust those personal loads, then helicopters were ready to deliver whatever was needed and evacuate the wounded.

Although the search and destroy operation was in the Catkillers' tactical area of responsibility, they had not been included in the OPORD.* Instead, the “Barkys” of the USAF 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron, which had previously worked closely with 1-61, had the job. Their twin-engine Cessna O- 2 Skymasters, flown by experienced pilots and carrying up to 20 smoke and high explosive rockets, were well-suited for the task. No one anticipated weather conditions that might make it impossible for them to fulfill that role on the day they were most needed.

* operational order

All available intelligence indicated that Op Rich would encounter scattered NVA elements lacking effective command and control; what those assessments did not anticipate was a cohesive battalion of least 350 North Vietnamese soldiers waiting in camouflaged bunkers with overlapping fields of fire. Every military academy in the world teaches that to dominate the battlespace an attacking force must be at least three times larger than defenders in prepared positions. By that dictum 1-61 had less than one-third the men needed for what was coming. The odds were stacked against them before they took the first step into the DMZ at midnight on 22 October, 1968.

Jim Roffers —Recon Platoon was with HQ Company at Con Thien. As we were breaking up that last evening before moving into the DMZ, our platoon leader, Lieutenant Merrell, was extremely worried about our lack of radio gear and on-and-off-again commo. I think we had just three PRC-25 backpack radios and two PRC-6 walkie-talkies. Most of the time we were passing “the word” back and forth, up and down the line verbally. Before we left Con Thien, we had scrounged all over the battalion, trying to beg or borrow radios . . . no go. I even had to steal one from our so-called allies, the ARVNs, down in Cam Lo.

Joe Krawcykowski, 22 years old, from Dunellen, New Jersey: —I was the RTO for Captain Haddigan, who was Alpha Company’s CO. We were at the A-3 fire support base about five kilometers east of the rest of the battalion waiting at Con Thien. One of the things that I remember in the few days prior to going into the Z was an Air America* chopper that landed and shut down. Official looking people climbed out and went into the command bunker. It seemed an awfully long time for someone to park a chopper where we got mortared everyday. I was with the command group and the skinny coming down was that something big was in the works. On 22 October, we were told to be ready at 2400 to move out on foot alone; we’d meet up with the other companies in the DMZ.

Then mail call came. I received a men’s magazine. The inside lead story was “Marines Battle Near DMZ.” It was about Operation Buffalo and the Marines getting their asses kicked in 1967 right outside our base camp! Bad vibes, ugly omen. After chow, most people hit their racks to get some rest. The bunker for the command group was heavy with something in the air; when you thought that you were the only one awake, you would hear someone whispering. The air had something in it. Oppressive.

Bill Youngren, 21, from Arlington in Washington State: — I was a newly-promoted staff sergeant and a squad leader in Recon platoon. After Dave Merrell went through the OPORD with me and the other squad leaders we briefed our teams on the need for stealth and operational security. I checked my ten men for any gear-related issues that might cause noise, and to ensure combat loads were appropriate. Our basic load was ten 20-round magazines,

* Air America was owned and operated by the CIA. Painted white to distinguish their aircraft from those of the military, Air America provided intelligence primarily to covert operations and occasionally to conventional line units.

one bandolier of additional ammo, two days of rations and two canteens. If the canteens had to be filled from streams and craters we had chlorine tabs to purify the water.

Joe Krawcykowski —We started out from A-3 at about 2345 hours. Dark as hell. Walking through the water up to my neck behind the captain and the group, I became separated by a little bit and no longer had visual contact. I thought, “Great, dark, can’t see, can’t yell and I don’t want to be out here alone. This shit is insane. How can I find them?” Then I realized that they had left a phosphorescent wake through the water, so I just followed that. What a hump through the water to make up time. Then I thought, “Wait, if I can see the trail, so can the gooks!” Nothing to do but hump on. Caught up with the group and humped until daylight.

After Action Report (AAR): “Terrain within the area of operation was characterized by low rolling hills, paddy land and intersected by two large, rain swollen streams running generally South to North. With the exception of the paddy land, the majority of the operational area was covered with heavy secondary vegetation.”

Alan Ogawa, 18 years old, from Honolulu, Hawaii, was with 3rd Platoon, C Company: —We left Con Thien under the cover of darkness. Platoon Sgt. Robert Yonesaki was in charge and I was his RTO. The field radio I carried weighed about 25 pounds and had a three-foot antenna. Because communications were important for maneuvering, NVA snipers always looked for those antennas. We were separated from the rest of the company and moved parallel with them as flankers. The terrain slowed us and the rest of the company got ahead of us.

23 October, 1968

Day 1

THE MEN OF THE 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry Regiment moved north under radio silence. The NVA could usually expect American forces to prep an objective with artillery fires before an attack. Operation Rich however, tried a deception with Army and Marine batteries sending shells to the west and northwest of the intended area of operations. At the same time, elements of the 9th Marines and 2nd RVN Regiment were launching an independent armored and mechanized infantry attack into the DMZ ten miles to the east.

Bill Youngren —We were probably overly optimistic in thinking surprise would work. The NVA were very good at operational security and I am convinced that their LP/OPs* picked up our movements in the early morning of the 23rd. We found base camps that had been evacuated just hours before our arrival. They left an easily followed trail that eventually led us into their prepared defensive positions at Kinh Mon.

* listening/observation posts

Pale light was filtering through monsoon clouds when the advancing battalion started to receive mortar fire. Bravo Company overran the mortar position and an hour later Recon Platoon stumbled on the first enemy bunker. Then more appeared, some containing hastily abandoned munitions and food stores. More mortar shells exploded among the three companies.

Alan Ogawa — When it started to get light we were on top of a hill resting when we noticed a line of troops to the east. We thought they were friendlies, until they got closer and we could see through binoculars that they were NVAs carrying supplies. I called it in and as we were watching as the jets came over dropping napalm and I saw some of the enemy troops running around on fire. We had lost over 30 guys in a contact the previous month, so I was glad that we were getting some revenge. Then we were told to continue on and join the rest of the company.

Air Force Barkeys were orbiting 1,500 feet above them, calling in artillery on enemy positions and marking targets for airstrikes. From behind a camouflaged 12.7mm antiaircraft weapon north of the Ben Hai River, the enemy gunner tracked Barky 16 in his ring sight and pulled the trigger. A three-second burst sent at least 40 finger-size bullets hurtling toward the aircraft.

Alan Ogawa —I looked up and saw a plane flying low, marking the area with white smoke rockets. Then it seemed like the plane just glided down and disappeared into the trees. We didn't have far to go to the crash site, but the thick undergrowth slowed us down. When we got there, the fuselage was in a small clearing on top of a hill. The wings and top of the cockpit had been ripped off when the plane went through the trees. The pilot was still strapped in his seat, dead, and there were sandal footprints all around the wreckage. Looked like the NVA had been there just before we arrived. We had to cut his harness to get him out and onto a medevac chopper that took him back.

Air Force pilot Maj. Marion Reed had become the first casualty of Operation Rich.

24 October, 1968

Day 2

At dawn, the men moved out of their night defensive positions near the Ben Hai River. Under a steady light rain they found and destroyed abandoned enemy bunkers. Bravo Company's Kit Carson scout* translated a sign in one identifying it as a battalion headquarters; they were inside an enemy forward command post. Under observation by

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* Kit Carson scouts were former Viet Cong recruited to assist counterintelligence officers and translate from Vietnamese to English.

the NVA, they came under long-range harassing fire from the far side of the Ben Hai River. Barky 18 called in airstrikes and 5-inch naval gunfire from the heavy cruiser USS *Boston* on station a few miles from the coast.

AAR: “At 241334,* B/1-61 came under heavy enemy fire from the northern bank of the Ben Hai River. Air Strikes and Naval Gun Fire were initiated. A detailed search of the south bank of the Ben Hai River revealed extensive enemy fortifications and supplies.”

By the end of the day an estimated forty NVA soldiers had been killed, but it was small consolation for the friends of PFCs Larry Martin and Lonnie Parker of Charlie Company, who had died from mortar fire. It was nightfall when 1-61 stopped near the abandoned village of Kinh Mon. As they pulled ponchos over their heads and settled into their muddy holes for the night, it seemed the elusive enemy had no intention of closing with them. They were wrong: the disciplined NVA battalion was waiting for the Americans to enter the killing zone.

25 October, 1968

Day 3

Soon after midnight intelligence sources reported enemy movement near Trung Luong, a village two miles northeast of the American unit. Though not yet identified, it was a NVA company of 80-100 men marching to reinforce the battalion that lay in the path of 1-61. When the information reached the Tactical Operations Center at Con Thien, the duty officer checked his watch and made an entry in the log at 1:35 a.m.:

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #20: 250135 From Bde G-2, enemy activity increased ... believed moving south.”

Those who managed to sleep awoke to more rain and the twin-engine growl of Barky 1-8 overhead. The battleship New Jersey, steaming ten miles offshore in the South China Sea, advised the Air Force FAC that she was in position and ready to fire on the suspected enemy force near Trung Luong. In the 26 years since she had been launched, her big guns were about to be used for the first time in direct support of U.S. ground forces.

DONG HA DUTY OFFICER’S LOG: 0740: “Bde to Bn CO battleship New Jersey firing TOT within next hour. Notify people on ground.”

* To track the chronology of the battle, reporting times have been underlined. A number of the entries are preceded by the date, i.e. 24 or 25 [October].

Joe Krawcykowski —When the FAC told us to get our people down, I told him that we were in the bottom of B-52 craters and digging already and how much further could we go? He replied something along the line of, “You’ll see.” A spotting round landed in the rice paddies and then those 16-inch shells started coming in. They sounded like freight trains and I remember the ground shaking and pieces of debris coming down like rain. The reaction from the troops was, “What the hell was that?” The FAC was on the radio and told me, “That’s the USS New Jersey, my son.” It made me feel good that we were getting help from a ship named after my home state.

A HUNDRED METERS west of Ski and Alpha Company, Recon Platoon was leading Capt. Jack Langston’s Bravo Company. Moving cautiously along a narrow trail that snaked through the elephant grass, they stumbled onto a camouflaged bunker complex. Thin smoke from a small cooking fire rose from a hearth. Hand signals from Lieutenant Merrell sent men to the left and right.

Jim Roffers —We spread out to search it. Even close-up the bunkers were very hard to see because of the thick vegetation around and over them. They were covered with logs and a foot or so of dirt, with ground-level firing slits about a foot high and two or three feet wide. Each had a sloping entry at the rear and they were spaced about 10 to 15 yards apart around the small perimeter. There was a small Vietnamese pig running loose in the brush. Inside one hooch within the perimeter we found freshly pressed NVA uniform shirts and a lot of papers. A metal washbasin filled with water had a catfish swimming around and around in it.

Wayne McKendree —Lieutenant Merrell told me we needed to get the documents back to intelligence, so I grabbed them and threw ‘em into my poncho bag.

DONG HA DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #21: “0810 1-61 to TOC.* Found complete bunker complex. Hooch, furniture, Documents. VN interpreter says it was Colonel’s quarters through Documents found.”

Colonel. Colonels in the Peoples Army of Vietnam had more than twenty years of combat experience against the French and Americans. They commanded regiments. Two days earlier, the Marine-ARVN task force had killed more than 100 North Vietnamese soldiers ten miles east of where 1-61 now was. Added to the sign identifying an NVA battalion headquarters, plus fresh intelligence on a large enemy force in the area, the documents can have left no doubt that the Americans had entered the enemy’s back yard. Alarm bells should have been ringing throughout northern I Corps.

* Tactical Operations Center

AAR: “At 230824, October 1968. After reaching the stream, A/1-61 and C/1-61 were unable to find suitable fording sites and were forced to conduct an expedient stream crossing with the aid of a single strand of rope. The difficulty encountered was a direct result of the heavy rainfall experienced for a number of days prior to initiating the operation.”

Bill Youngren —Pre-op planning hadn’t taken into account the weather. The rain did help mask our movement but it also isolated us. Little thought had gone into the potential problems caused by the terrain, such as having to unexpectedly rope across a swollen stream in darkness.

The thick overcast was still high enough to use tactical air support but the clouds were getting lower and darker and rain showers became a downpour. The worsening conditions slowed the battalion’s three companies and gaps in their lines widened as they snaked between low hills and thick elephant grass.

Jim Roffers —All of the streams that we crossed were running pretty high because of the heavy rain that was coming down. Tom Coopey swam a rope across one and nearly drowned. When we got across, we could only get one cigarette lit, so we all shared it to burn the leeches off.

ALPHA COMPANY, STILL SEPARATED from Bravo and Charlie, spotted a small group of NVA soldiers 200m east of them. Captain Haddigan sent a squad to make contact as the company came under heavy mortar fire. Ski was on the radio to Barky 18.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #32: “0847 A Co to FAC 18, mortar behind Hill 124”

Joe Krawcykowski —We were about a klick from a railway embankment, advancing east through rice paddies, in the rain, when we started taking mortar fire. The squad was pulled back in and we all started running through knee-deep water for the embankment. I was about tenth back in the column when we started and second when we made it to the west side of it. Mortars were landing on that side, so we ran back over the tracks to the east side. As soon as we got to the other side of the embankment the NVA opened up with machine guns—lots of them—from a wooded area about 200 yards to our east.

We ran south along the embankment until reaching a river. Radio in one hand, rifle in the other, I don’t remember swimming across the twelve-foot-deep river, but I got to the other side in record time. Captain Haddigan dropped his SOI codebook and started diving for it. The rounds were coming in very heavily, sounded like bees whizzing by. I shouted, “Leave the fuckin’ thing!” but he finally got it and we continued south. The terrain the

embankment followed rose just enough to make our run through the mud more difficult. The rain kept coming down, harder and harder.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICERS LOG: “0925 A Co on railroad track. Taking automatic weapons and mortars from N and E.”

Jim Roffers —We were partway across some little abandoned paddies, leading Bravo when Lieutenant Merrell told us to fall back. We were the reserves, he said, “to be used only in dire need.” Bravo moved past us toward the enemy mortars. Suddenly there was just a storm of firing on the left. Some was M16 and a lot was AK-47 and SKS. It had to be Alpha Company being engaged and returning fire. Then there was a very fast buildup of firing to our front.

Joe Krawcykowski —My call sign was Baby Tides 6 Romeo. One of the Air Force Barkys contacted me and asked where an airstrike was needed. I told him to the east of the railroad track. There was still a lot of the company trying to get down the line under heavy fire when the jets dropped their loads and the 1st Platoon reported friendly casualties.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #41: “0926 A Co to FAC 18, airstrike on 1st platoon element stop it.”

Two men with superficial wounds were treated by medics and returned to the fight. More mortars and machine guns opened up from across the Ben Hai River and Barky ran more flights of air to hit them. As yet unknown to anyone in 1-61, fresh intelligence was coming into the 3rd Marine Division Headquarters about large NVA reinforcements moving down from North Vietnam. If they could cross the river, the American battalion would be heavily out-numbered and in grave danger.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #58: “1007 CG 3RMAR* need to know if any fording sites or crossing points on the Ben Hai for foot troops. ASAP message.”

Even without enemy reinforcements to face, the men of 1-61, tired, wet and scattered, had already entered what was fast becoming a battle for survival.

Joe Krawcykowski —We’d gained some distance from the river and were still going uphill. I was a step or two behind Captain Haddigan, with Spec 4 Jim Soriano and Sgt. Jim Wright running more or less abreast of each other a

* 10:07 a.m. [from] Commanding General 3rd Marine Division

few feet in front of him. There was an explosion when a mortar round landed in front of them and I hit the ground. I jumped up, saw no one moving, hit the ground again and low-crawled over to check everyone out. I rolled Soriano over and saw that he was KIA. I next checked on Sergeant Wright, who was very badly wounded. I heard a moan and went back to check the captain, who was bleeding from several wounds. I pulled him back to a bomb crater. Sergeant Wright was unconscious and I pulled him into the crater and then Soriano's body. There was a lot of small-arms fire in the area, but I saw no one else. Captain Haddigan gave me instructions on what he wanted done, then I got on the radio to the battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel Wheeler.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #61: "1019 A Co to Bn CO my CO hit bad. Bad situation fire from three sides."

Bravo Company had completed the river crossing behind recon and was ordered to envelop the enemy force from the south and capture or destroy the mortars. Still west of the railway embankment, they overran a company-size bunker complex and came under intense automatic weapons fire from all sides.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #65: "1023 Bn CO to B Co Move fast enemy are closing in on A Co."

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #66: "1024 Bn CO to A Co, anyway you can pull out? No, separated from one of my elements."

Joe Krawcykowski —The 1st Platoon was reorganizing after the airstrike, higher ups wanted to know the status and the firing was getting heavier and closer. I juggled things as best I could, relaying orders from Captain Haddigan and giving a few of my own over the radio. When the battalion commander called again for an update, I told him to stand by until I called him. I had enough to do and didn't need him at that time. I yelled for "Top," First Sergeant Ledford, who had been behind us when we were working our way out of the paddies and running south on the track line.

We now had just one radio because the mortar that killed Soriano and Wright had ruined the other one. That was the company push. I had the battalion push and converted over to company. We were spread out after running across the rice paddies to the railroad embankment and I directed the platoon leaders to their right rear and left rear from the firing I heard. Captain Haddigan was in and out of it, so when they finally made it back to my location, I passed on what he had told me to tell them.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #68: "1033 Bn CO to Bde CO need medevac with gunships within 30 minutes. Tides situation bad, pinned down with auto weapons and mortars. B Co trying to relieve pressure. A Co has 6 WIA."

Jim Roffers —Word came down the line that Captain Langston, Bravo Company's CO, had ordered Recon to attack the ridge top in support of A Company. My hair nearly stood on end. If they were pinned down, why were we going forward? Only four of us in the platoon had ever fought an infantry battle; the rest of the guys had been trained solely as recon men and had never been into anything like this. We were traveling light—I had used up my bandolier of ammo and was down to ten mags and some only had seven remaining. Our job, the one we had been trained for, was to slip up, find the enemy and then turn them over to the rifle companies. Well, at that moment, we became the infantry and didn't have the ammo or trained people to do this.

Tom Coopey was a twenty-year-old from Brooklyn, New York: —Recon reversed course back through B Company to bring relief to A Company. We made our way past the reinforced NVA bunkers, which had been searched and were about to be blown by the combat engineers, when we came under intense enemy fire. I had to hit the dirt several times, as I could hear the rounds snapping very close to me. I managed to keep sight of Willie Williams, who ran like a deer. He dove into a bomb crater and I was seconds behind him. We found Lieutenant Merrell, his radio operator Tommy Ray and Wayne McKendree there. Barney Hyatt was on the ground, shot in the shoulder and in shock. At this point Dave Merrell had his back to the enemy and directed my squad to an empty enemy trench line to his left and another squad to his right.

As soon as my squad got to the trench line, we could hear automatic fire all around us, mostly AK-47 but also a crew-manned 12.7mm heavy machine gun. We couldn't see them because of their spider holes and the six- to seven-foot-high elephant grass. We began firing to our front, where the sounds of automatic fire were coming from. I had about fifteen magazines of M16 ammo and went through half of that in about five minutes. Some of the guys were standing up in the trench to see, with only elephant grass hiding their bodies, when, out of nowhere, Captain Langston appeared and began berating us for firing on our own troops, presumably A Company. He was outside the trench line, oblivious to the risk he was taking and I would almost swear he was alone and without a weapon.

SOMEWHERE JUST TO THE NORTH of them, Roffers' squad was advancing: —So here we are, going up a brush-covered little slope, in the rain, into battle. The rain made the grass slippery and had turned everything else to mud. The visibility was pretty bad, but the darkness helped to pick out the muzzle flashes. Heavy fire snapped all around us. We were running forward at a low crouch, crawling on hands and knees and bellies sometimes. I'm thinking, "Man! This is going to be bad!" I honestly didn't think I was going to come out of it alive. When we reached the top of the slope, there was firing all around us—360 degrees. All three companies were engaged and recon as well.

Charlie Company was on the right flank trying to hook around the enemy but was encountering heavy resistance. Alpha Company was being shot to shreds down by the abandoned railroad tracks to our east.

Wayne McKendree —The rain had stopped, but everything was wet and muddy. Lieutenant Merrell, Tommy Ray and I were out ahead of B Company in a thick hedgerow when Captain Langston showed up and he and Lieutenant Merrell moved away from us. I couldn't hear everything they were saying, but from the tone of their voices and their arm movements I could tell that they were arguing. When the lieutenant got back to us, he was really angry, which was unusual for him.

Bill Youngren —I was nearby when Langston ordered Dave to pass through. Dave had concerns and it elevated to a heated discussion and then a direct order from Langston. We went through B Company in two columns and ran headlong into prepared positions and a 12.5 heavy machine gun. Dave, Tommy Ray and Wayne McKendree were in a bomb crater adjacent to the one my team took refuge in. The rest of the platoon was scattered in more bomb craters and each was a perimeter defense of sorts. We lost the ability to maneuver entirely at that point and communications were hopelessly inadequate.

With platoon leader Dave Merrell between the two recon squads and most of the battalion now fixed by enemy fire, the rain slackened and ceiling lifted. The break in the weather would last just long enough to run one crucial air strike.

Wayne McKendree: —Lieutenant Merrell motioned for me and Tommy Ray to come on and the three of us started moving forward through the elephant grass. We were under fire from an enemy machine gun nest and I can remember the rounds whizzing by my ear. We kept on crawling until we got to a bomb crater. Ray was the first in, then the lieutenant. When I rolled into it, I ended up between them, elbow to elbow. The enemy machine gun was only about 40m away and when Ray rose up to look, I saw him get hit in the head. Just as I turned to my other side, to tell Lieutenant Merrell what had happened, I saw a round exiting his head. Ray was dead, but the lieutenant was still breathing. I needed to get a medevac for him.

I pulled the radio off Ray and tried to raise Sergeant Marzan but I was on the wrong frequency and there was no answer. Then I heard someone on the radio say he was a lieutenant colonel and that he could help. I looked up and saw this gray aircraft, with an engine in front and one in the back and it was practically standing on one wing so the pilot could get a look. It was a Barky and he told me to throw a smoke to mark my position. The only smoke I had was white and that was used to mark enemy positions, but he told me to go ahead and throw it. Then he said, "I can see the machine gun."

I must have told him what had happened to Lieutenant Merrell, because he told me to get the lieutenant down into the crater. Then he brought in a jet that dropped a napalm. I can remember the heat and smoke. Then the jet came back again, firing his 20mm guns right over the top of us. An empty shell casing from the jet hit me on the helmet.

Barky said the machine gun nest was destroyed and that I could move. I got the lieutenant on my back and crawled out of the bomb crater to find help. I was also dragging the radio. I must have crawled about 100m when some other guys from recon found me. But Dave Merrell was dead. He must have died on my back as I was carrying him.

Bill Youngren — We were under withering small arms and machinegun fire. I had the guys provide covering fire and sent Cal Cathcart over the lip to Dave's position to see if he and Ray were indeed dead. He went over and returned quickly with the bad news. At that point Paul Taylor, one of the guys in my position, went over backwards to the bottom of the crater and was bleeding from the face. I was sure he had been shot. Turned out that a bullet had hit the receiver of his M16 and sprayed his face with shrapnel. It looked bad but was superficial and he rejoined the fight.

THE BRIEF RESPITE FROM THE WEATHER ended. Ceilings dropped to 100 feet or less and the rain returned. Marine Phantoms and Skyhawks circling above a thick and solid undercast broke off and returned to Da Nang or Chu Lai. Then the Barky O-2s, already at the extreme edge of their envelope for tight, slow and low maneuvers, were forced to withdraw. One-six-one had lost its only air cover and its men were almost out of ammunition.

Jim Roffers — We were told that was it; we couldn't get any more air support because of the rain. I can only guess at the thoughts going through the heads of those who were running things. We didn't have things set up for this type or size of battle, no ammo ready to go, no resupply set up, nothing prearranged, or at least it didn't appear that way to me. The top brass must have been scrambling around, wondering how it was going to look back home if an entire American battalion got annihilated up there.

THE CITIZEN SOLDIERS of the 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry were on their own and pinned down by the seasoned 1st Battalion of the NVA 132nd Independent Regiment, which had been reinforced by a company from the regiment's 2nd battalion. On the other side of the Ben Hai River more units of the People's Army of Vietnam were marching south to engage the already outnumbered Americans.

Since the discovery of the NVA battalion command post more than 24 hours earlier, Op Rich had been thrown into disarray by the weather, difficult terrain and unexpected enemy strength. Adding to the potential for catastrophe was evidence of a NVA regimental commander in the area and multiple reports of more reinforcements

approaching. But a shortage of staff at Con Thien meant it had not yet been assembled into a coherent picture. Then it started to dawn that the planned “reconnaissance in force” had escalated into a head-to-head clash in the worst of conditions. The outcome now depended on a few hundred isolated Americans, all low on ammunition, holding out against an enemy determined to kill them.

Chapter 14

MY PEOPLE NEED HELP

ELEVEN MILES SOUTHEAST OF KINH MON and unaware of the battle, Bill Hooper and new guy Rod Stewart were in the Dong Ha line shack, their early-morning, two-ship mission into North Vietnam scrubbed because of the weather. Stewart, 22 years old, from Westchester, California, had never flown with the other pilot who sat moodily at the end of the picnic table, watching the rain.

Rod Stewart —I knew little about Hooper other than he was very enthusiastic about taking the fight to the enemy and had a bit of a John Wayne reputation within the company.

THE LINE SHACK’S field telephone clattered. Hooper leaned over and lifted the handset.

Bill Hooper —It was a very worried operations officer from the other side of the airfield. He told me that one of their battalions was fighting for its life in the DMZ and asked if we could lend any kind of support. I took another look out the door. The far side of the runway was barely visible 400 feet away. I was wondering what use a Bird Dog could possibly be under these conditions, when he said very slowly and distinctly, “My people need help.” I could hardly believe what he was asking. Just taking off in this weather was insane. Getting fast-movers was impossible; no way they could get under a ceiling this low. Artillery would be too dangerous for friendlies; impossible to adjust if I couldn’t see where the rounds fell. Common sense said stay on the ground. Common sense lost the argument. “Roger that, sir. If you’ll send me an observer, we’ll head out there and whatever we can do, we will do.” He gave me the battalion’s grid reference and call sign— “Tides”—and hung up.

Rod Stewart —When the phone calls started coming in that morning, the one side of the conversations I heard was alarming, but Hooper became absolutely frothing to get to the fight. Switching our FM radio to a frequency used by the battalion in contact proved my feeling was valid: U.S. Army units in the DMZ pinned down . . . medevacs requested . . . airstrikes and artillery requested. Hooper hung up the phone, shouted instructions to the crew chief and was out the door.

Bill Hooper —I was zipping up my flak vest, when the duty crew chief stepped in front of me. “There’s no way you can help those guys,” he said. “You’re gonna get your ass shot off.”

“Do we have any HEs?” I asked, trying to hide my growing nervousness. Still shaking his head in disapproval, he left to load willie petes. At the door I saw a ceramic “chicken plate” someone had removed from his body armor. I grabbed it, ran to the airplane and started to place it under the back seat, then changed my mind and wedged it

beneath mine. I waited under the wing as the rain drummed against it and ran in sheets off the trailing edge. The observer I'd been sent, an overweight and very unhappy lieutenant from the 108th arrived and reluctantly crawled in. I taxied into position. "Dong Ha Tower, this is Catkiller 1-2 holding short, ready for take off. Over."

With ceiling and visibility far below what the Army decreed were minimum conditions, the controller was not expecting any traffic this morning.

"Catkiller 1-2, this is Dong Ha Tower, you're ready for *what*?"

The controller's disbelief brought a faint smile to Hooper's face. The smile faded as he pushed the throttle forward. The Bird Dog started rolling, the tail came up and the tiny Cessna disappeared into the rain.

Rod Stewart —I was the new guy, so I was to stay and monitor the radio and answer the phone. If this was as big as it sounded, we would be expecting orders from higher up. Our platoon commander, Captain Finch, was already on his way up from Phu Bai and Hooper could call if he needed any help. I sat and listened to the radio. I could often only hear one side of a conversation and had no idea which units the various call signs represented. Locations and coordinates were not supposed to be given in the clear, but with map in hand and calls for strikes on such-and-such a target, I could piece together a confusing bit of the fight.

The phone rang again and it was an officer at some command center. Instead of giving me instructions or orders, he wanted me to tell him what was going on up in the Z. My confusion deepened. Why had we not been told of this operation before now? I radioed Hooper. He was not on our company frequency, but Captain Finch, trying to find Dong Ha in the rain, answered and I relayed all the information I could think of to him.

Charlie Finch —I was at Phu Bai and the weather was worse than anything I had seen since arriving in July. Fred Willis and I were on the scheduling board for the mid-morning mission at Dong Ha but he didn't like flying in marginal conditions, so I decided to head out on my own. I knew Bill was up there and I didn't need one of his not-happy looks if I wasn't there when I was supposed to be. I went down Highway 1 to Quang Tri and then followed the Thach Han River northeast to its mouth which was almost due east of Dong Ha. I turned inland and called the line shack to find out what the weather was there. That's when Stewart told me about the fight going on in the DMZ.

HIS WINDSCREEN OPAQUE FROM the lashing rain, Hooper was skimming the underside of the clouds 80 to 100 feet above Highway 1. He knew that between him and 1-61 were low hills rising just into the overcast; spotting them in time to go over or around was too risky. He'd stay over the old French road up to the Ben Hai and then follow it west. But just past the Trace, the ceiling lifted to almost 150 feet, allowing him to cut the corner by turning directly

toward Kinh Mon. He flew over one hill with barely twenty feet to spare and then another before the terrain flattened out.

Bill Hooper —When I was within a couple of miles of the battalion's position the weather started forcing me lower again and I made my first call. The response was immediate. Given the heavy firing I could hear in the background, I was amazed at how calm the radio operator sounded.

"Roger, Catkiller 1-2, this is Baby Tides 6 Romeo. How do you read? Over."

"Tides 6 Romeo, this is Catkiller 1-2, I read you lima charlie. How me?"

"Roger, Catkiller, lima charlie. Do you have us in sight?"

"Negative, Tides 6. I am an O-1 Bird Dog 100 feet above the terrain. Do you have me in sight?"

"Negative, Catkiller, we don't see you, but we can hear you. We think you're to our southeast. Turn northwest. You should pick us up."

DOWN IN THE BOMB CRATER, radio handset to his ear, Ski was squinting into the rain. "Several of us were saying, 'Where the hell is that little plane and how the hell can that guy fly in this soup?' We could hear the sound of an engine but he was invisible."

Bill Hooper —My vision was obscured in every direction by the weather. I brought the nose a little farther to the west, throttled back and dropped some flaps, allowing the plane to sink. Coming out of heavier patch of rain I was startled by all the muzzle flashes and tracers in the low scrub and elephant grass. Thin smoke from what must have been an earlier napalm strike was rising just to the east. Tides 6 Romeo told me he was in a bomb crater about a quarter of a mile directly in front of me.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #73: "1056 A Co to Mar Fac* Loc in bomb hole."

Through my open window I caught sight of a much bigger muzzle flash. Just below me was a heavy machine gun in a trench filled with water, troops wearing helmets, green uniforms and back packs. At first I thought it was an American position. I passed over them and directly ahead saw a triangular pattern of three bomb craters, each filled with water and more troops. I told Tides 6 Romeo I thought I had his position, but to give me a hand signal and tell me what it was. As I crossed over the crater, I saw someone on his back, waving and kicking his arms and legs. He rolled back to his stomach and said he'd given me a spread eagle sign. Another crater to the south was taking fire from the heavy machine gun I had just overflowed and I relayed its position to the radio operator.

* Having never worked with the Catkillers and thinking Hooper was a Marine FAC, the troops used the generic "Mar Fac" when talking to him. This would complicate communications when Finch arrived.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #73: "1101 Mar Fac to A Co spotted machine gun and 10 men in bunker 400m from airstrike; think it is unfriendly position check your position."

On reaching the western side of the battle, he reversed course and saw another automatic weapon and what appeared to be a mortar pit.

CON THIEN SPOT REPORT # 77 [handwritten]: "A. **Catkiller 12**; B. 251110; Enemy machinegun position & possible mortar position; Surrounding and taking under fire."

FLYING WITHIN PISTOL SHOT of the enemy, Hooper learned that 1-61's companies and even some platoons were separated by the NVA, which restricted return fire for fear of hitting their own people. And given the size of the enemy force, until they could consolidate, the scattered groups of young American were threatened with being destroyed in detail. He made a wide orbit to familiarize himself with the area. Bordered on three sides by tree lines and covered with old bomb craters, the battlefield was crossed by numerous small streams that led to a tributary flowing north to the Ben Hai, less than 150m away. He located a second divided company in more bomb craters under fire from all sides. The rain, thick elephant grass and darkened, rain-soaked uniforms made it difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. He asked for flares to pinpoint their positions.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #76: "1118 Bn CO to B Co fire flare. Bn CO to A Co shoot flare to help locate him."

Bill Hooper —When I found the third company they had their backs to a railway embankment and were under heavy mortar and automatic weapons fire from the eastern side of the battlefield. I advised Tides 6 that the lightest enemy concentration appeared to be between him and the company just to the west. I reported a third machine gun and a mortar and he said they had people moving forward to take it out.

Jim Roffers —My squad received orders to pull back to the west. After a minute or two of crawling on hands and knees, the word came to about-face and move easterly. Then a few minutes later, we were told to move directly south to hit an enemy 12.7 that was keeping everyone pinned down. My point man, Joe Shallcross, took the initiative and moved toward this heavy machine gun. I remember thinking, "Oh my God, Joe . . ." I dropped my pack and rifle in the mud and got out the LAW rocket that I'd been carrying and we all crawled forward to a large bomb crater.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #81: 1121 [from] Mar Fac machine gun position [map coordinates] 168757
men in foxholes other defenses facing friendlies.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG # 83: 1123 [from] Mar Fac [to] B Co over position B Co to Mar Fac my
troops are in bomb crater, pass over mark.

A DESPERATE RADIO OPERATOR ASKED Hooper if he could put an air strike on the 12.7 that had them pinned down. It was wishful thinking. Fast-movers couldn't get through the low clouds without flying into the ground. No helicopter gunships were available. Their only air support was an aging propeller-driven Cessna with four smoke rockets. It banked toward one of the most dangerous weapons in the enemy's arsenal and started closing to what, for the Russian heavy machine gun, was virtually point-blank range

Bill Hooper —I eased my turn, reduced power and waited until the gun appeared in front of me. It was difficult to see clearly because of the rain against my windscreen, but the large muzzle flashes were very bright in the dark conditions. Big tracers were going flat across the ground toward a crater somewhere to my right. I was about 100 feet above the battle when I leveled the wings and went into a slow glide, fully aware that if they shifted their fire to me I'd never have time to evade.

Jim Roffers —The machine gun was just to the left and south of our crater. I moved to the edge, stood up with the LAW on my shoulder and squeezed the trigger. Over all the shouting and gunfire, there was a loud clack! A misfire. The 12.7 gunner swung the weapon and several heavy rounds struck the mud all around me. I ducked down, recocked the LAW, stood and aimed again. There was another clack. It wasn't going to fire. Bullets were flying all around me.

Bill Youngren —The NVA had allowed us to get within 15 meters before opening fire from directly ahead. They tried to flank us but were unsuccessful. The 12.7 was to my left front and I saw big tracers going towards a position maybe 20 to 30 meters to my left, which was where Jim Roffers was.

Bill Hooper —I sighted down the grease-pencil crosshairs on the windscreen and at a range of not more than 250 meters, fired my first rocket. I broke to the left and looked over my shoulder and saw it explode just to the left and short of the gun emplacement, but close enough to spray white phosphorous over it.

Bill Youngren —I heard and saw the O-1 come in from behind me. The ceiling was really low so the FAC came in close. I saw the smoke from the rocket launch and the explosion. The heavy machine gun was silenced and that was that for it.

Jim Roffers —I was half-turning to dive into the crater when I heard the raspy sound of a rocket go over me and an explosion. I peeked over the crater lip and saw the willie peter smoke and then saw a FAC flying really low to my left. Where had he come from? There was no fire coming from the machine gun. I ran bent-over back up the trail to retrieve my rifle and pack and ran into Sergeant Marzan, who gave the word to pull back.

Recon was ordered a few hundred meters to the east. By the time we got there we were scattered in small groups all over the hilltop. There were six or seven in my group and we ran into someone who ordered us to move a little north to help guard a large crater filled with our wounded. A lieutenant from Bravo Company kept going out to drag dead and wounded back into the crater. I witnessed three trips out and back. He was heading out again and asked if anyone had any hand grenades. I gave him my last two grenades and he ducked up and over the rim and was gone.

NOT LONG AFTER HOOPER HAD taken off, Charlie Finch touched down at Dong Ha.

Charlie Finch —As soon as I landed and refueled I was met in the line shack by Capt. Russ Cedoz. Russ had already been fully briefed on the situation in the DMZ and reckoned the Army was in a serious shit sandwich. Aggressive and motivated in the best Marine style, he had brought extra clips of M16 ammo and some grenades. Russ was ready for war as usual but much more wired than I had ever seen him. I usually carried five or six clips of ammo in the leg pockets of my flight suit and could not really pack any more, so I stocked up on smoke grenades and filled the door shelf with them.

Rod Stewart had over-nighted at Dong Ha and had been monitoring the FM radio since Bill's departure. What he had heard indicated that the Army had stepped into a giant hornet's nest. When he asked about coming up with me, I weighed the weather and his lack of experience with troops in contact and told him to stand by for the time being.

When Russ and I lifted off, the rain was so heavy against my windscreen that I had to fly in a crab to see out the open right window. We could hear Hooper talking to the troops on the FM radio. It was clear that he was extremely busy and that very little separated him from the battle just below. He briefed me as much as he could. The picture Bill painted was that the Army was not doing well. All three companies—as well as individual platoons—were separated, with enemy positions between them. That and the weather were making it impossible for us to give them the cover and support that we normally provided for troops in contact—support they needed desperately.

We came up on the eastern side of the battle, where there was a railroad bed that rose about ten feet above the paddies. There were NVA on top and on both sides. From the railroad tracks toward Con Thien, it looked like a huge shooting gallery. Muzzle flashes everywhere you looked. Russ and I were amazed at how close the NVA forces were to the American positions. We had seen this tactic of closing to within 20m of small Marine units to prevent air strikes, but not a force of this size. At first glance Russ said they would have to retreat.

I came across and we started firing our M16s and Russ was tossing out his grenades. Holding an M16 out the window against the air stream and firing on automatic while trying to fly below 100 feet is not cool, but at that point it was the only help we could give them. Why the NVA did not shoot me down at such close range I will never know.

Jim Roffers —We'd been told that we couldn't get any support from the air because of the rain, yet now there was a second FAC overhead. It made three or four low passes—maybe 25 to 50 feet—over and in front of us, someone dropping grenades and firing an M16 out the window. The FAC was also taking fire and I saw green tracers going past him. They were all that we had, but it meant that we weren't up there all alone. With the craters, the rain, us and the NVA firing at each other and the little plane silhouetted against the dark skies, it looked like something from the movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Charlie Finch —I had the M16 braced against my chicken plate and got off some good, long bursts. We were running through magazines and empty shell casings were everywhere in that small cockpit. Every once in a while Russ would shout over the intercom, "I think I got one!" The radio traffic was very intense, very difficult at times to understand. The ground troops were giving us directions to where the guns were, but with two identical Bird Dogs low overhead and on the same frequency, sometimes they thought they were talking to me when they were talking to Bill, or vice versa. Calling both of us "Mar Fac," they'd tell us to "turn right" or "turn left" or "you are over our position," which sometimes had us making all sorts of unnecessary maneuvers. It was a classic example of the fog of war. Bill stayed west of the railroad and I was east and south and although we must have occasionally overlapped, because the cloud was so low and the rain so heavy we never saw each other.

Jim Roffers —I saw two or three NVA running bent-over in single file toward our crater. Two of us opened up and they disappeared into some brush. The rest of the time I was shooting at muzzle flashes. The noise was unbelievable—the cracks of bullets, the firing from us and the enemy, mortar rounds exploding near and far, people screaming to be heard, radiomen yelling into handsets, the little airplanes overhead . . .

Joe Krawcykowski —One of the guys in the crater with me thought we didn't have much time to live and lit up a Chesterfield. I didn't smoke, but I pulled it out of his mouth and sucked down half of it.

INSIDE THE TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER AT Con Thien, Dave Pittam was monitoring 1-61's company and battalion frequencies. He heard the voice of a rifle platoon leader pleading with a Catkiller to find and eliminate NVA mortars that were firing on his men.

Charlie Finch —The first desperate call I recognized as definitely being for me was that the NVA mortars needed to be silenced quick. Russ and I could see NVA everywhere—at one point we saw 25 to 40 uniformed troops lying on the east side of the railroad bed—but we had to ignore them and find those mortars. I lowered my flaps and got down to about 60 knots and we immediately took a hit about two feet behind Russ. My slow pattern kept exposing us to more ground fire, but there was no other way to do the job. I knew that Hooper was taking heavy fire to my west. There was no safe place. Calls for medevacs increased, but the heavy rain and low ceiling were still preventing them from getting in.

Bill Hooper —With the three companies spread in a southwest to northeast arc and the company along the railroad tracks at the top, I orbited over the battlefield, advising on the disposition of the enemy troops. Tracers passed me and there was a tic as a round punched through the Bird Dog's skin. Slamming the throttle forward, I hauled back on the stick and escaped into the cloud layer, changed course, waited a few seconds, then descended into the open over the railroad embankment.

Joe Krawcykowski —I can't recall how long I was on the radio, but soon after the platoon leaders went back to their platoons, Top arrived, along with a Kit Carson scout named Thau. They helped out immensely when the NVA started to close in on our bomb crater. I directed Thau to cover the westerly side. An NVA soldier was about 150 feet away, coming toward us with a RPG. I yelled at Thau to shoot. Don't know if Thau hit him, but the guy with the RPG disappeared. The rain was still coming down heavily. Top Ledford helped to get more people to our location and then took over, relaying orders from Captain Haddigan and giving his own orders, until the designated platoon leader returned to take command.

SEPARATED BY THE SAME RIVER the rest of the battalion had already gotten over, Charlie Company was ordered across in support of Bravo Company.

Alan Ogawa —We had a rope stretching across the river and the ones that couldn't swim held on for dear life. I took the loads off the non-swimmers and helped them across and we kept on going, with Staff Sergeant Yonesaki as acting platoon leader. We came under fire in an old rice paddy. Rounds were coming very close to me. The NVA always tried to kill RTOs and the long antenna made me easy to spot. Myself and another guy made it across, but

the rest of the platoon got pinned down on the other side and the rest of the company ahead of us kept on going. Finally, after returning fire, the rest of the platoon were able to cross. We were going around a hill and, as soon as we reached the other side, Sergeant Yonesaki got hit bad in the stomach and hip. We went in an old B-52 crater and started to receive more fire.

AAR: “AT 251130 OCTOBER, C/1-61 completed the stream crossing at [map coordinates] YD 155762 and was immediately committed to the east of B/1-61 in order to relieve pressure coming from a reinforced bunker complex on the eastern flank and to prevent the escape of the enemy forces to the south.”

Tom Coopey —We’d been in the trench for what seemed a long time. We had no communications, were low on ammo and very, very thirsty. A medic told us just to brush the scum off the top of the water in the craters and hold our canteens below the surface to fill them. Then we should add the Halazone purification tablets and wait half an hour before drinking. But we were so thirsty we didn’t wait for the tabs to dissolve.

Then we heard friendlies approaching from our rear. One of them shouted that he heard movement to their front—us. Another voice said to throw grenades and we all started shouting, “No, no! Friendlies!” A couple of our staff sergeants decided that we had to make a move. Much debate followed as to which direction we should use as our escape route. Finally someone jumped up and we followed. Moments later a figure came out of the elephant grass. He was shirtless and appeared to have a chest wound. He identified himself as a lieutenant, said he was policing up stragglers and that the NVA were popping up at random out of spider holes. He had two grenades, pins pulled and advised us to follow him as fast as possible and that we should keep running if fired upon—his grenades would take care of the problem. He led us to an area pockmarked with 500-pound-bomb craters and we jumped into the closest one. One of the adjoining craters was lined with the dead and wounded.

Joe Krawcykowski —Top Ledford was less than an arm’s length away when I looked up and saw another NVA about 250 feet to our west fire a RPG at us. I yelled, “Duck!” and pulled him down. The RPG went right over our heads and hit the next hole down, wounding several guys. The one whose cigarette I had swiped right out of his mouth earlier ended up paralyzed.

AAR: #86: “1131 A Co to Bn CO receiving what looks like RPGs. Left into defensive position.”

Charlie Finch:—Only on UHF was there some clear communication. Russ was all over the FM in response to the guys on the ground telling us to change frequencies between company and battalion. Underneath us there was a lot of vegetation for everyone to hide in. Our guys would pop out and in the rain it was not always clear at first if they were friendlies. I felt so alone and helpless up there as I’d catch a glimpse of the wounded below and hear the panic

and anger on the frequency. One transmission was: “We’ve lost him!” but I didn’t know if one of their friends had died or an NVA in their sights had disappeared. The weather was getting worse—the rain was unbelievably heavy—and it seemed the battle was intensifying. It appeared to a simple Army pilot like me that the mission planners had never anticipated an engagement of this size and ferocity.

FINCH WAS NOT ALONE in his assessment. The battalion commander was desperate for helicopter gunships and a “demonstration,” a diversionary attack by an armor company waiting at Con Thien. Its purpose was to divide the enemy’s attention and force them into reacting to the perceived threat. The armor’s deployment had been part of the contingency planning for Op Rich, yet only now, three hours into the battle, was the cavalry told to saddle up. Not as a diversion, but directly to the embattled US battalion.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #39: “1135 Bde CO to TOC: Est 1 NVA Bn is unit that A/1-61 is in contact with. Request 3rd MAR DIV launch gunships to contact area to support CO 1-61. B/1-77 will execute contingency support plan and move northeast of A-4 to assist and reinforce 1-61. ”

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG #89: “1141 Bn CO to Bde CO 1. Need Gunships. 2. Start something out other way. 3. Captured two mortars. 4. Weather closing in. Need demonstration. You know how long it takes. Others I have requested.”

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER’S LOG: # 90: “1148 Bde CO to Bn CO B1/77 plan from yesterday commencing now. Could get into trouble.”

Peter Van Haren, B Company, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor Brigade, was at Con Thien: —I had been appointed as the CO of the ready react force for Op Rich so I knew the plan and the logistics. But the first I heard of anything happening was over the tank radios when someone said to switch to battalion net. We heard that 1-61 had made contact north of us and that the enemy weren’t running as they usually did, but deploying and attacking. I could tell from the background sounds and the excitement and fear in the radiomen’s voices that they were in heavy contact. I went over to the HQ bunker, where my company commander, Capt. Art McGowan, was practically begging the colonel to let us get going now. But there was some kind of glitch in the operation plan, which HQ staff said meant we couldn’t go yet: they weren’t sure if the main route had been cleared or if the M88* was ready. Finally the old man said, “Screw it. Go. ” I was ordered to take point with my platoon and two more tanks from another platoon and get up there.

* The M-88 was a large-bodied tank retriever.

I ran back to the line yelling for my platoon sergeant, “Mac” McHenry. Thankfully, everyone was right around the area and we were up and running in 30 minutes. I led my platoon off the firebase and onto the trail, heading northeast. The weather was cloudy and rainy and the trail heading north was muddy but passable. I figured the other platoon and the two HQ company’s tanks would join the column as I cleared the base, which would give me a total of ten. But they had problems getting started, so we had to stop a few clicks down the road and wait.

AAR: “At 251145 October, B/1-77, with ten (10) tanks, was committed from Con Thien (A-4) attacking northeast, parallel to the existing road to the vicinity of Kinh Mon.”

FUEL GAUGES TOUCHING THE RED, Hooper and Finch were still over 1-61, looking for enemy concentrations and relaying the information to the rain-soaked troops in their bomb craters. They weren’t on the tankers’ frequency and had no idea that armor was on the way.

Charlie Finch —We finally spotted the mortar positions and Russ called in an artillery fire mission, but no one wanted to take charge of the target. Dong Ha and Camp Carrol were receiving incoming from north of the river and the 155mm and 8-inch batteries at various firebases were busy with counter-battery fire. We eventually got some 105s, but in order to adjust the fire I had to tighten my turns by lowering flaps, which obstructed Russ’s vision out the windows. We finally destroyed the mortars and I stopped the artillery so I could locate the automatic weapons firing on our guys. Right after that, the NVA over near the railroad bed came out of these holes and charged toward the friendlies. We could not believe our eyes. The number of enemy we saw going over the top toward our guys is burned deep in my memory.

HOOPER CAME OUT OF A LOW turn over the embankment to see 15 to 20 NVA soldiers running down a trail not more than 100m away.

Bill Hooper —Chopping power, I reversed the controls. I still wasn’t coming around fast enough and I shoved rudder and stick as far as they would go, forcing the nose farther down and to the right. Still descending, I pulled the trigger. My snap shot sent the rocket straight down the path, but about ten feet over their heads and I saw them hit the ground.

I was now very slow and less than 30 feet above the ground, so close I could see minute details of their muddy uniforms as they came to their feet. My eyes locked on one man not more than 25m away, firing on full automatic and I could hear and feel rounds hitting the airplane as I flew through his fire pattern. I should have stayed low and kept going, which would have exposed me for far less time, but on the verge of panic I firewalled the throttle and

went for the clouds in a desperate attempt to escape. Just before reaching them, there was very hard, loud thud beneath me and the cockpit instantly filled with white smoke.

Still under fire, we disappeared into the clouds. I rolled right, came back out, pulled up again, broke off to the left and emerged once more, scanning the gauges. Oil pressure and manifold pressure were still good and a quick check of the wings confirmed the fuel tanks hadn't been punctured. I twisted around, expecting my observer to be dead or seriously wounded. He hadn't been touched, but wore a helpless deer-in-the-headlights stare and was begging me to return to Dong Ha. The smoke was sucked out the windows and I turned back toward the battle.

Charlie Finch —Cedoz was on the radio, switching back and forth between company, battalion and brigade and I was up on the Guard frequency trying to get some gunships to help as I felt I could guide them into the area. Dong Ha DASC was also looking for us. We had fast movers on standby at Da Nang and Chu Lai, but the weather was far too bad to get them onto the target.

Tom Coopey —Some senior NCO rounded us up and said that we were to attack the enemy on his signal. We were out of the bomb crater and lying on flat ground with no cover. The sergeant blew his whistle and we started to rise but got no more than ten inches off the ground before the NVA opened up with everything they had. We got down again and there was no further mention of attacking.

Bill Hooper —The radio operator in the northernmost company reported they were in contact with the company south of them but needed help to link up. I circled to the west until I had their positions identified, then turned toward the gap occupied by NVA troops. I sent my third rocket into the gap, pulled the nose up slightly and triggered the last. White phosphorus burst under the rain and the NVA began scattering toward the east. Low on fuel, out of rockets and thinking the worst of it was over, I advised Charlie that I was returning to Dong Ha.

AAR: "While attacking to the flank and rear of B/1-61, C/1-61 destroyed elements of an enemy platoon attempting to flank B/1-61 and the Battalion Command Group. Upon completion of the cordon, close Air Strikes* and artillery were employed on the enemy forces to the north and east of the Battalion, resulting in the destruction of sizeable elements of the enemy force and driving small groups of NVA into the open where they were destroyed by the deployed Infantry forces."

WHEN HOOPER SHUT DOWN AT DONG HA, a shaken observer crawled out of the back seat and slouched away without a word.

* Referring to Hooper's smoke rockets and Finch and Cedoz's M16 and grenades as "close Air Strikes" may have been the only time that Cessna Bird Dogs were ever described as strike aircraft.

Bill Hooper —The crew chief and I watched him go, then turned to examine the Bird Dog. Of the hits she'd taken, many were around the cockpit area, others though the fuselage and tail. The smoke that I'd seen was the result of a bullet striking the chicken plate under my seat, pulverizing the ceramic layer and filling the cockpit with a cloud of fine ceramic dust.

The crew chief stepped back and scolded him for being so careless with "his" airplane. "I told you that you were going to get your ass shot off, sir."

Rod Stewart —Hooper landed and I remember the holes in his plane—not just the holes, which were memorable—but him laughing and joking about it with the crew chiefs. I was ready to take my turn, but he said to wait until Captain Finch called for me. He refueled and took off for Phu Bai.

MINUTES AFTER HOOPER LIFTED off, Stewart got his chance. A call came into the Dong Ha line shack for someone to provide reconnaissance and air cover for the armored rescue column.

Rod Stewart —I was to fly out and find a column of tanks leaving Con Thien and lead them to the fight. An observer drove up and we took off and flew out under the low overcast. I dialed in the frequency for the battalion's tactical operations center at Con Thien and learned that the tanks were moving slowly, enemy strength was greater than anticipated and our infantry were pinned down by heavy fire. I followed an old road running northeast out of Con Thien, with battalion operations acting as the relay between me and the armor. When the radio operator in the TOC reported that the tanks could hear me but not see me through the rain, I asked him to tell the armor to pop a smoke grenade.

Peter Van Haren —We didn't know just where to go until a FAC flying overhead came onto our company net and began directing us. His call sign was Catkiller something and he was outstanding in keeping us aware of the current situation, how far we had to go and where the enemy were between us and our infantry. We were in high brush and trees now and couldn't see any farther than the next bend in the trail. We had no choice but to go forward in column, because there was no room to spread out.

Charlie Finch —At times the clouds came right down to a few feet above the ground and to keep from becoming completely disoriented, I had to cross the Ben Hai into North Vietnam, before reversing and coming back. There were times I was flying blind on instruments – turn and bank, air speed and altimeter. The radio was going crazy. An NVA machine gun had pinned down some of the infantry. By sheer luck I hit a thinner patch of rain just as I

passed right over two machine gun positions, flew out about thirty seconds, found my way back, armed two rockets and punched them off no higher than 100 feet and at about ninety knots. Couldn't see the result, but someone on the radio shouted, "Perfect! Keep it up!"

We still could not get the medevacs because of ground fire and I had to calm down Russ more than once, especially when it was a Marine medevac that tried to get in and got blown off with automatic weapons. Russ figured that if we were in the same area and getting shot at the same way, they should be able to get in.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #111: "1242 A Co turned back medevac, too hot."

Joe Krawcykowski —Most of the 1st Platoon wounded were brought back down to us, but we could not get a medevac in. Too much fire. We were down to about twenty rounds per man. Because we figured that the wounded would be getting out soon, we took all their ammo. Those with chest or stomach wounds had their water taken, too.

Charlie Finch —I ran into some clouds that were right on the deck, so I just headed east. The weather was the same in that direction. I turned south and eventually broke out south of Quang Tri. Very scary. Our low and slow flying with all the drag of flaps meant our fuel consumption had been higher than normal so I headed for Dong Ha for gas, but they were taking incoming, so I turned back to Quang Tri. Rolling down the runway I saw Huey gunships with blades tied down and OV-10 Broncos with engine plugs in place and tarps strapped over the windscreens. The Broncos were too fast, had a higher stall speed and couldn't maneuver tight enough at 50–100 feet, so keeping them on the ground made sense. As far as the Hueys, I was sure the pilots wanted to get in the air but higher ups were refusing permission to fly because of the weather.

It was only after I shut down that I discovered that a round had cut the chain connected to the rudder cables for tail wheel steering. Russ and I were topping off the fuel tanks, when our crew chiefs suddenly showed up; they'd been listening to the radio and knew we had diverted to Quang Tri. Without asking permission from anyone, they'd loaded the jeep with tools, rockets, M16 ammo and anything else they thought we might need. Then just the two of them had raced 20 miles from Dong Ha. The road was not secure; if they were ambushed there was no chance of help. And now, ignoring the artillery exploding across the base, they reloaded my rocket tubes, rewired the tail wheel and inspected my plane for any other damage. As soon as they were satisfied there was nothing more to do, they gave us a thumbs up and we headed back to the battle. Their bravery and dedication helped to save American lives that day and they never received the recognition they deserved for putting the mission ahead of their own safety.

Peter Van Haren —We went in single file through a forest and I was in the second tank, standing in the turret. Being exposed from the waist up was a very vulnerable feeling but it was what I expected of all my individual tank

commanders. That's when my lead tank hit a big mine. From the size of the explosion it was probably one of our own unexploded bombs that the NVA had found and booby trapped. It blew the 50-ton M-48 a few feet up in the air, knocked off its right track and seriously injured one crewman. We were on an emergency rescue mission and couldn't stop and wait for a Dust Off so we put him in the rear tank which took him back to Con Thien.

I could hear my other tank commanders in the platoon and my crazy CO on the company net yelling stuff at me from HQ. Our headphones were built into our tanker helmets, called a CVC, but it didn't block out most sounds.

Our speed going through the forest was near our top—maybe 25-30 mph. We had not seen any enemy troops yet but Catkiller kept telling me they were just ahead across a clearing. When we came to the edge of it we stopped and I tried to spot them but I couldn't. There was another treeline about 1,000 yards in front of us and that's where they were. We all opened up on it with our .30 and .50 cal machine guns. I manned the .50 mounted on my hatch. There was also a coaxial-mounted .30 that the gunner fired and another .30 on the loader's hatch.

Starting across that open space was one of the hardest and scariest things I did in Vietnam. All we knew was that they were there over there. And I had no idea if our "mad minute" of machine gun fire had done any good. Though it was a relatively cool day, I could feel rivers of sweat coursing down my back and my hands were clammy on the butterfly triggers of my .50. I had won a Bronze Star the month before on September 2nd for attacking and wiping out a company of NVA and I wasn't as scared then as I was on the edge of that clearing. But nobody was going to move until I gave the order, so I started yelling ('cause that seemed to blow off some of the fear) and we charged—still in single file because of the good trail.

Halfway across a couple of RPG rounds came whizzing overhead without hitting any of us. We were also getting a lot of small arms and MG fire but it, too, was mostly wild. That's the thing about charging tanks—they scare the shit out of even the most battle-hardened soldiers.

When we got across into the second treeline we could finally hear the battle raging off to our left. We cleared those trees quickly and that's when we went line abreast in a gate-swinging maneuver to the left front. It had taken us over two hours, but then we were there, behind and to the side of the NVA and we rolled right over them, killing many and scattering the rest.

Tom Coopey —When we heard the sound of engines someone panicked and started shouting, "Russian tanks!" But that was squelched pretty quickly.

Bill Youngren — The tanks came in from the southeast and crossed from my right front heading generally north northwest. The tank commander went on a personal rampage and was running over NVA positions, firing his .50 Cal HMG and .30 cal coax and main gun. NVA were trying to escape and he killed many of them. The other tanks spread out and started helping Alpha and Charlie companies. I recall the overwhelming effect that just one tank had.

Peter Van Haren —There was no line of battle. The 1-61 units were surrounded in small pockets, each fighting like old Wild West settlers against the Indians. I called cease fire on the machine guns and we charged between the pockets throwing out hand grenades. When we got past our friendlies we opened up again on the reinforcements the NVA was trying to bring down. Then we broke up into single tank actions to help the grunts clear the battlefield. Some of the squads that had gotten separated used us as moving cover to rejoin their units. Eventually, the combined firepower of us, the infantry, artillery and air strikes forced the NVA to retreat. We tried chasing them, but they were really good at melting away.

AAR: “In the vicinity of coordinates YD 165745, B/1-77 encountered approximately an enemy platoon attempting to flank the Battalion and took this element under fire destroying two (2) squads and dispersing the remainder.”

Rod Stewart:—My engine sputtered and started to quit. In all the excitement I had allowed one tank to run dry. I switched to the other, the engine roared back to life and I told the armor and Con Thien that I had to leave immediately. It was a short flight back to Dong Ha, but weather made low-level navigation difficult. I could have flown east to pick up Highway 1 and followed it south, but I was terrified of running the remaining tank dry and going down anywhere near the DMZ.

Charlie Finch —On the way back up I heard Stewart talking about being low on fuel and needing to get back to Dong Ha. We made another call on Guard for gunships. Got a call from some Huey gunships south of Quang Tri. I gave them directions but they never made it up to us.

Just before we got back to the battle, a call came in from DASC. The armor had reached our guys and now we had to find the NVA guns firing on Dong Ha and Camp Carroll. We headed straight across the Ben Hai into North Vietnam. The weather was marginally better up there and we found two active artillery positions fairly quickly. Russ was trying to get a Marine or Army battery to take the fire mission when we were advised that Onrush, the USS New Jersey, was ready to give support. Russ called in the coordinates and we cleared the area.

Everyone who fired this beast had his safety margin. We stayed parallel to the gun target line, because it was the short and long rounds that scared everyone and at least 2,000m from impact to avoid shrapnel from those one-ton shells. “Shot,” then wait forever for “splash.” Even from two clicks away we could hear them coming in. Because of the weather, I couldn’t see the splash and told them to fire again. When I finally spotted a shell, it was way off target and I had to adjust until we got them on target and took out the positions.

Still north of the river, I turned east and we flew over Highway 1. Our jaws dropped at the sight of trucks and fresh NVA troops heading south. They were in a loose formation, walking in front, alongside and behind the

vehicles. For the enemy to be on the road in those numbers meant their commanders were sure the weather would keep us on the ground. Russ got on the radio to his Marine guns; I got on the New Jersey's net.

As we were getting the coordinates established for the mission, I came around and flew straight up the road, both of us firing our M16s out the window at almost point-blank range. I broke to the east, came around again and used one of my rockets. As we went by with our wheels almost touching the ground, Russ opened up again with his M16 and I can still see their faces. Given how slowly they reacted, they must have been inexperienced troops. They finally started shooting back, but it was all very wild and inaccurate.

With the excitement of seeing so many NVA out in the open, writing on my windscreen and kneepad with grease pencil, getting a naval gunfire mission cranked up, staying out of the enemy's gunsights, trying to keep us below the weather and stay oriented, things were happening pretty fast for us.

By now the New Jersey was ready. We broke away and those 16-inch shells started coming in. Once I had her firing for effect, it stopped the column dead in its tracks.

DECK LOG—REMARKS SHEET USS NEW JERSEY (BB-62) “25 October 1968 . . . 1433 Commenced fire Turret Three. 1526 ceased fire. Ammunition expended: 12 rounds 16”/50 Cal High Explosive Projectiles with 12 rounds Reduced Powder Charge Cartridges.”

BY THE TIME FINCH AND CEDOZ had returned to the battle, 1-61 and the tanks from 1-77 had been without air cover for an hour. But the rain was slacking off, the ceiling was lifting and Marine fighter-bombers were scrambling from Da Nang and Chu Lai. Catkiller 19 was waiting for them.

Charlie Finch —All the Marine pilots were familiar with the DMZ. We dry-rehearsed each flight using a west heading because of the weather, which meant they could not pull out feet wet like they were used to. As they orbited to the east, we could give them a pretty good idea of how they would do their run.

I ran a pair of Lovebug F-4s, a pair of Ringneck F-4s and a pair of Hellborne A-4s. We had it timed so when one of them started to roll in above the clouds, I was beginning my roll in to mark the target. Fortunately, there was very little wind, so my smoke seemed to hang there forever. When one of the fast-movers broke out of the overcast, all I had to say was where to hit relative to my smoke. They had confidence in us and themselves as long as they had enough time to see the target, release and not hit the ground in their dive—and they were a lot lower to the ground that day than normal.

We did napalm first and frag bombs second. Running over friendly positions is a real no-no, but this time we did not have any choice. Because of the half-moon disposition of our troops and the enemy and the weather, the boundaries we always used to run airstrikes had to be dramatically revised. Some napalm was close to the friendlies and I was told later that we had warmed some soldiers with it. Then they came in with their 20mm guns.

Tom Coopey —I remember napalm drops from an F-4 which were released to our rear and carried on over our heads. They hit a couple of hundred yards to our front, but close enough to dry my jungle fatigues.

Jim Roffers —I remember them coming in low and fast, spewing empty 20mm cases all over the place. A couple of us tried to shield the wounded from these empties. They hurt.

Alan Ogawa —My platoon had gotten separated far from the rest of C Company. When the spotter plane was flying low over our old B-52 hole, we were afraid it would take us for the NVA, so we flipped over on our backs and started to wave to make sure he knew we were friendlies. When the jets came we were happy to have them. We knew that they were taking out the NVA and had them on the run. The air strikes were closer than usual, but we didn't care or complain.

Charlie Finch —When the jets pulled off, we went down low again. I still have a vivid image of the NVA running in circles, many with their uniforms torn off from the explosions or burned off from the nape. I felt sad in a way, as they had put up such a great fight. Russ never forgave me for waving to them to go north and get out of the way of the next artillery barrage. He wanted to stick around and kill them all.

After refueling again at Quang Tri and getting back to the fight, it seemed forever before we could get the medevacs. I guided several in from the east because of the weather. The Marine pilots were unfamiliar with the area and took fire the whole way in, yet never wavered. The enemy was retreating but still kept firing at all of us in the air.

CON THIEN DUTY OFFICER'S LOG #122: "1633 send medevac with guns to A Co."

Joe Krawcykowski —It got eerily quiet. Really quiet. Then a Cobra gunship came up over the knoll behind us and unleashed a volley to the east. Staff Sgt. Jesus Fuentes jumped up and immediately aimed a pop flare at the chopper. When we asked why he'd done that, he said, "Because he scared the shit out of me." Everyone laughed like hell. Jesus was a helluva soldier and had been in the thick of things with A Company's 3rd Platoon before coming back to the command area. Their motto—"Jesus Saves"—was painted on the front of one of their tracks. The battalion chaplain thought it was very religious.

Jim Roffers —It was late in the day and my squad had ended up with some guys from C Company. We were moving southeast and had just passed the trench and bunker area. A Dust Off was coming in when there was a heavy burst of enemy fire and we all hit the ground. A Cobra was behind it and opened up with his miniguns. Then

the men on my left moved forward and dragged out four or five NVA bodies. With the arrival of the Huey Cobras, we knew that we would be okay. A tank was off to my right about 100 yards and the armor began crushing bunkers and caving in trenches. We kept watch, had a small fire fight and started loading the wounded onto the choppers.

Alan Ogawa —Sergeant Yonesaki was in bad shape with his stomach and hip wounds. When the first medevac arrived, I asked for help to carry him, but no one volunteered. Finally Frank Kaiser said, “Let’s go.” We borrowed two .45s and stuck them in our waist bands and carried Yonesaki in a poncho, sometimes in a low crouch and sometimes crawling. The rain was still coming down and the poncho was full with blood and water.

When we arrived at the chopper, it was already full of wounded and they told us they couldn’t take Yonesaki. I pulled out my .45 and told the pilot the most seriously wounded must go first. He ordered someone with a flesh wound on his arm to get out and we loaded Yonesaki. Frank thought I was crazy but I didn’t care. Yonesaki was already in shock and if we had to wait, he wasn’t going to make it. When we got back to the platoon, Sergeant Morgan was already in charge and we started returning fire at the NVA running through the tree line.

AAR: “At 251730, B/1-61 continued the attack north to effect link-up with A/1-61 at 251800 October. Small groups of NVA and abandoned weapons were destroyed during this attack.”

Tom Coopey —When we assembled, there were barely 40 of us. At first we thought we were the only survivors. Night was approaching and I thought to myself, “This is it. Charlie is going to overrun us at any moment.” But as we moved out, more units began joining us and I started to appreciate how dispersed the battalion had been during the battle.

AAR: “At 251852, the Battalion link-up was completed. After the initial contact with A/1-61, isolated groups of NVA were trapped inside the Battalion defensive perimeter. At 251853 October, one (1) NVA was captured trying to escape from the Battalion defensive Perimeter.”

Joe Krawcykowski —Suddenly, word circulated about gooks in the perimeter and I thought, “Oh, no! Not more of this bullshit!” Found out it was a wounded NVA medic who had been captured and lots of people went to look at this guy. That night, we were cold, wet and nervous, worn out and shot to shreds.

Peter Van Haren —That night it was cold and rainy, a damp, wet cold that chilled you right through. The infantry troops were shivering badly and began standing behind our back decks so they could get some warmth from the engine exhausts. After awhile, a couple of them keeled over, others started staggering around and we realized they were being poisoned by the carbon monoxide in the exhaust. I remember feeling terrible that I had to order them

away from the tanks. Some of them couldn't understand why and just looked so miserable. We took a couple of the worst ones into the hulls for awhile. There were many more who couldn't get warm, so we let them back near the engines but made them move away every five minutes or so. They were hungry too, and we threw them what we had, which wasn't much, as there had been no resupply.

Bill Youngren —After the fight I was physically and emotionally shot. We'd had no food for the last two days. When the tanks showed up they had cases of C-rations tied to their turrets. We did get them to part with some.

Alan Ogawa:—That night we were still soaking wet and cold, but they wouldn't let us stand behind the tanks to get warm. They mentioned the fight they'd had with the NVA on the way up from Con Thien. They threw us some cigarettes and cans of C-rations. So this guy Everett and I spent the night freezing in a muddy hole. We couldn't sleep knowing the NVA was still all around. His wife had just had a baby and he asked me to contact her if he didn't make it.

Jim Roffers —I had always wanted to get a close look at a Russian 12.7, so I wandered over and found some soldiers dragging bodies and weapons from bunkers. The 12.7 that had been trying to kill me lay in the wet grass and was already rusting after being burned by the white phosphorus. The barrel was bent just in front of the action, where part of the rocket casing must have hit it.

Peter Van Haren —It wasn't until then that I learned that a second tank had hit a mine just after we turned off the trail. It wasn't damaged as bad as the first one but two crewmen had concussions. They were dusted off with the 1-61 dead and wounded. We spent a nervous night there expecting a counter attack anytime but the NVA had cleared out and the next morning we made it back to Con Thien.

26 October 1968

Day 4

AAR: "at 26 0630 October, Task Force 1-61 received its first bulk resupply since initiating Operation Rich. Some lightly wounded personnel and the NVA POW, captured the previous evening, were evacuated on the USMC resupply helicopters. .."

Joe Krawcykowski —The next day couldn't come soon enough. We loaded up our dead and extra equipment and started out for what we thought would be a straight walk back to A-3, the closest base camp and Alpha Company's starting-off point for the operation. After some time walking, the word came that A Company was to walk down the track line through this little valley, with B and C Companies flanking. Word was that the last people through this

little valley had been the French. Column stopped. An under-strength company, it seemed a dumb idea. The brigade commander wanted to know what the hold up was. Words were exchanged on the radio and I seem to remember him landing and talking to Staff Sergeant Fuentes, then getting back into his chopper and we then veered off to the right for A-3.

Alan Ogawa —We were walking next to a tank back to Kinh Mon base camp, when the tank went over a mine. Gayatano, who was two behind me, and acting platoon leader Morgan were both hit badly in the legs with shrapnel. A piece of shrapnel the size of a baseball tore through the radio on my back and ripped my flak jacket and knocked me off my feet. I had bad whiplash and my ears were ringing. Dan Fenti and I both got concussions. We loaded Gayatano and Morgan on a medevac, and Fenti onto one of the tanks. I tossed the busted radio into the Huey and was going to go out with it. But then they gave me a new radio that had been delivered. As the RTO I felt responsible for keeping comms so I stayed with my platoon on the walk back.

Joe Krawcykowski —On the way out of the area, we went past a cold cook fire and some scattered plates. Then we went through a hedgerow and there were news cameras. Someone up the chain of command had choppered them in to report on how well we had done against the NVA. Really freaky thing —a place where the NVA has been eating when the fighting started and then civilians taking pictures. The thought was that they were nuts for being out there when they didn't have to be. We didn't want to be but had to be. The march back to A-3 was pretty uneventful. When we arrived just before dark, the mess hall was open and had food, coffee and fruit for us.

Jim Roffers —The usual method of having a memorial service is to take a man's rifle and bayonet, stick it into the ground and place his helmet on the butt, but they used only four, one for each company and one for recon. After the memorial service, I turned Joe Shallcross in for the Silver Star, which he was awarded. I tried several times to locate the FAC who had taken out the 12.7, just to say thanks, but he was always out flying missions, so I never got to do this until over thirty years later.

Joe Krawcykowski —Several days later, First Sergeant Ledford and a young Shake and Bake buck sergeant and others went over to Con Thien to receive Bronze Stars from General Davis, 3rd Marine Division commander. Top Ledford left me in charge of the HQ section and gave me a case of cold beer and said my Bronze Star would be coming at the end of the month. Never did see it.

Charlie Finch —Since taking off that morning, I'd landed twice at Quang Tri for fuel, rockets, M16 ammo and smoke grenades. When I finally shut down after our third mission of the day, I'd flown seven and a half hours,

collected bullet holes in the door, wing strut and fuselage and twice received hits to the Bird Dog's tail wheel. At least they were not holes in Captain Finch or Captain Cedoz.

When Russ and I got out of the airplane at the end of the day, we were both very dehydrated and utterly exhausted. The bullet holes were evidence that we'd been in a fight, but the weather—the worst I'd ever flown in—had been even more dangerous and frightening than the enemy fire. There were times we'd been down to 25 feet in blinding rain. At that altitude, a split-second lapse in concentration could have put us into the mud in a crumpled ball of metal.

I leaned against the Bird Dog's door. 'What have we just done, Russ?' But my Marine friend, as worn out as I was, gave me a dry smile and shrugged as if to say it was all in a day's work.

GIVEN THE INTENSITY of the close-quarter fighting, American losses were miraculously low, though each a tragedy for the families and friends of those who died. They were: Tom Casey, Billie Long, Larry Martin, David Merrell, Lonnie Parker, Thomas Ray Jr., Air Force pilot Marion Reed, James Soriano and James Wright. Another sixteen were wounded, some disabled for life.

When a search of the battlefield was completed, the bodies of 303 NVA soldiers were counted, each death a tragedy for a family in North Vietnam.

Lieutenant Joe Abernathy, whom Jim Roffers thinks was the officer he gave his grenades to and Tom Coopey believes was the wounded, shirtless lieutenant who led his group to the bomb craters, was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

All three Catkillers received the Silver Star.

Life does not count in years. Some suffer a lifetime in a day and so grow old between the rising and the setting of the sun.

—Augusta Jane Evans (with thanks to Tom Coopey)

Extracted from
A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL
Flying With the Men of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company
Over I Corps and the DMZ, 1968-1969
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