

2 Operation Rio Blanco

“He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
Sick for escape,— loathing the strangled horror
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.”

— From “Counter-Attack” by Siegfried Sassoon

I had been on another dozen patrols when word came down that we were going on another operation. This one was far, far away from our area. We’d be taking choppers to the battlefield. This incident I believe to have happened as part of Operation Rio Blanco, which went on from November 20th to 27th, 1967, right through Thanksgiving. The 7th Marines were 17 kilometers due West of Quang Ngai city on the Son Tra Khoc river. On November 25, 1966 the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines put three companies on line by helicopter airlift and engaged the VietCong.⁵ Delta company was along for the fight.

According to renowned Vietnam author Bill McDonald, who served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967 as a crew chief/ door-gunner on UH-1D helicopters with the 128th Assault Helicopter Company, over 12,000 helicopters saw action in Vietnam. Of that number, a total of 2,246 helicopters were shot down between the years of 1962 and 1973, and an additional 2,075 were considered operational losses. Being in a helicopter was always dangerous and sometimes a deadly proposition.

Jones and I were attached to a squad. Our company boarded sixteen CH-46 choppers and we flew off. Each helicopter nominally contained a crew of four and up to 22 ground assault troops. We must have flown for at least an hour, so we were at least another fifty miles into the countryside. I peeked up a few times during the flight to look at the rest of the men. Everyone stared at the floor, their faces expressionless. Eventually,

⁵ Information based on the account of Ron (“Doc”) Ferrel, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (<http://www.marzone.com/corpsman/RF-11.htm>).



Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines load into Crew/Chief Joe Silveira's (HMM-165) CH-46 aircraft for movement to a new LZ on Operation Rio Blanco (Nov. 1966). Source: Nat'l Archives

we got to the site of the battle. In series of threes, the choppers landed, men scrambled for cover, and set up fighting positions

When our turn came to land, the tailgate lowered. To the left of our probable landing site I saw another chopper that had been shot up pretty bad. Its engine was spewing flames and smoke. The pilot tried to lift off, but his chopper sunk into the mud and sputtered to a stop. The chopper pilot and crew quickly abandoned ship and ran for cover with our men.

As we descended, I heard a couple of bullets pierce the skin of our chopper. We hovered three or four feet above a rice paddy. All the men jumped out the back and ran for cover, except me. I was last man in line to go. I had started down the tailgate, but my pilot panicked. I deduced he probably thought he was going to be shot down, too.

He suddenly lifted up about thirty feet before I reached the end of the tailgate. A chopper crewman hollered to the pilot that I was still onboard. The chopper quit climbing and hovered for a few seconds. Here was another "slo-mo" episode I endured.

I can't leave Jones down there without his A-Gunner! I'll have to jump!

I had my pack on, with a few days' supply of C-rations, and a rocket pack with three eight-pound rockets attached. I must've been carrying at least forty pounds of gear. I was scared to death! The distance to the ground from where I had to jump was still over thirty feet. I was a fairly good swimming pool diver off a three-meter board, but nothing in my prior life had prepared me for a jump such as that.

I drew in a lungful of air, and then dived off the tailgate. My testes drew back into my lower abdomen. Foot by foot I watched the ground get closer. The further I fell the faster I went, the more horrific the experience became. I belly-flopped into the rice paddy. It was wet and very muddy. Fortunately, the mud cushioned my fall or I might have easily broken a leg or worse. I developed an intense fear of heights as a result of that jump.

Bullets were flying everywhere. I caught up with, and then followed Jones' every move as we made our way to the main part of the company. As we passed by, I couldn't help but notice some of our dead and dying.

It was grimmer than anything I'd ever seen in the movies, or on TV. There was blood weeping from my comrades' wounds, moaning and crying from I knew not where, and my adrenalin flooded my veins and arteries.

This operation was bigger than I had imagined. Instead of just my company there, there were actually three companies fighting that action. Marines were everywhere, and so were the VC. The smell of gun smoke was stifling. The sound of guns firing was deafening.

When I came under fire and rounds seemed to come at me from every direction, I either had what I call "tunnel vision" or I had "horizon vision".

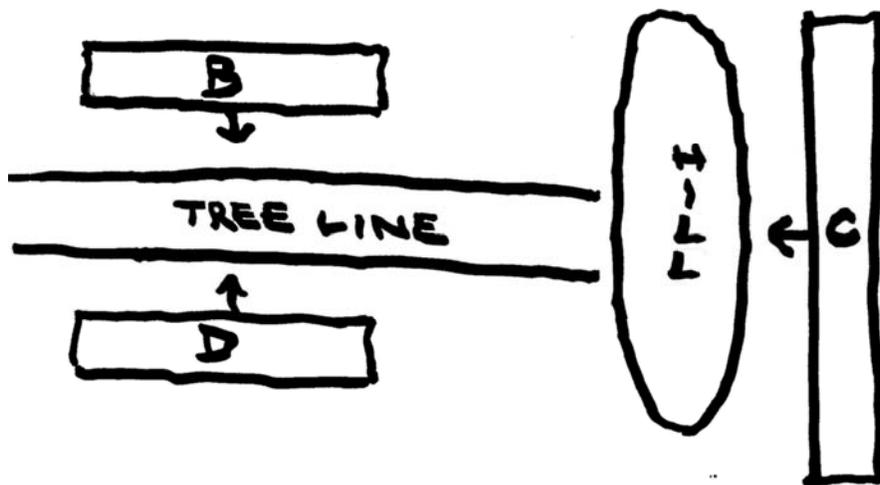
I had "tunnel vision" when I felt I knew where the enemy was firing. I focused on the terrain immediately around the source of the attack. I squinted my eyes, looking for the telltale smoke from a just-fired rifle. It seemed like I looked through binoculars. The times I had "horizon vision," I forced my eyes as wide open as I could, and took in as much of the whole area as I could. That seemed like I was looking at an IMAX movie screen.

Incoming rounds flew from every direction. I caught a glimpse of somebody out of the corner of my eye, to the right of me. He was about twenty meters away. I turned to look directly at him and immediately recognized him. He was the Priest from Regimental HQ I'd met while I traveled to Delta for the first time.

He knelt over a gravely wounded man who lay on the ground in front of him. The Priest took off his helmet with his right hand and laid it beside him. His left hand clutched a rosary and some vestment.

He put his hands together in front of him, and prayed over the chest of the dying man. As he was giving what small comfort of last rites he could, he caught one directly in his temple and fell over to the left. He lay there, motionless. A Corpsman ran over to him, in a crouched position. He shook the priest by his shoulder a couple of times, then "Doc" shook his head "No", as he stared at the ground. "Doc" then fled back into the lines from where he had come. I believed the Priest went straight to Heaven!

This was no good time to let myself become distracted. I filed the memory of that scene in the recesses of my mind. We began working our way into position, readying for our three-company assault. There was a "Master Plan" to the battle at hand that sounded good but was seriously flawed.



I've drawn you a crude picture of a piece of landscape where the "brilliant" battle I participated in was planned and executed. The oblong circle near the far edge represents a fairly high hill. The two lines that come from the hill, across the middle are supposed to indicate a tree line. Behind the hill, on the edge of the paper, I drew a rectangle with a C, for Charlie Company.

That's where they were dropped in, by helicopter. Above the tree line is another rectangle; Bravo Company was positioned there. The rectangle below the tree line is where Delta Company, my unit, set up. The plan was to have Charlie company advance up the hill and drive the VC down into this tree line, where we would ambush them.

We formed up into a column and began working our way along a tree line. Word came down the line that Charlie company was chasing about a hundred VC off of the hill, into the tree line about fifty meters in front of our position. Jones and I set up behind a dike and aimed the launcher at the trees. When he said he was ready, I yelled "Back blast!", which meant that a rocket was about to be fired.

The men who came up behind us took cover. Jones fired. The back blast spewed gas and shards of wiring out of the breach. I once caught a tiny bit of blue wire in my right eyelid. It stayed embedded there for years.

The order "Get On Line!" came down to us. That, to me, was another one of the worst commands I had to obey. "Get on Line." Imagine a line of fifty or more men standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the sideline of a football field. They face the other sideline. The enemy is on the other sideline.

"Forward!" The command to attack was announced. I took a quick, deep breath and held it.

Please, God, don't let me die!

As ordered, we held our rifles hip-high, and fired repeatedly as we marched directly at the enemy.

Charlie company accomplished exactly what they had intended to do. The VC ran off the hill and into the tree line to escape. When we advanced against the enemy, so would Bravo. In other words, the VC would be caught in between Bravo and Delta, and our two companies would be

shooting at the VC, but we were also shooting at each other. The problem was obvious! Either Bravo or Delta should have advanced toward the tree line, but not both of them at the same time!

I walked and fired straight ahead, at the same pace as the others. I was spared, but in my peripheral vision I could see men drop, wounded or dead, to the ground. The gunfire drowned out their screams, if in fact they did scream. The gunfire noise from 10 men simultaneously firing M14s, repeatedly and constantly, deafened me.

When I entered the tree line I saw at least a dozen VC lying on the ground, pretty shot up. I watched, in disgust, as Private Dewey, a rifleman I had been on a few patrols with put his foot on the chest of a dead VC.

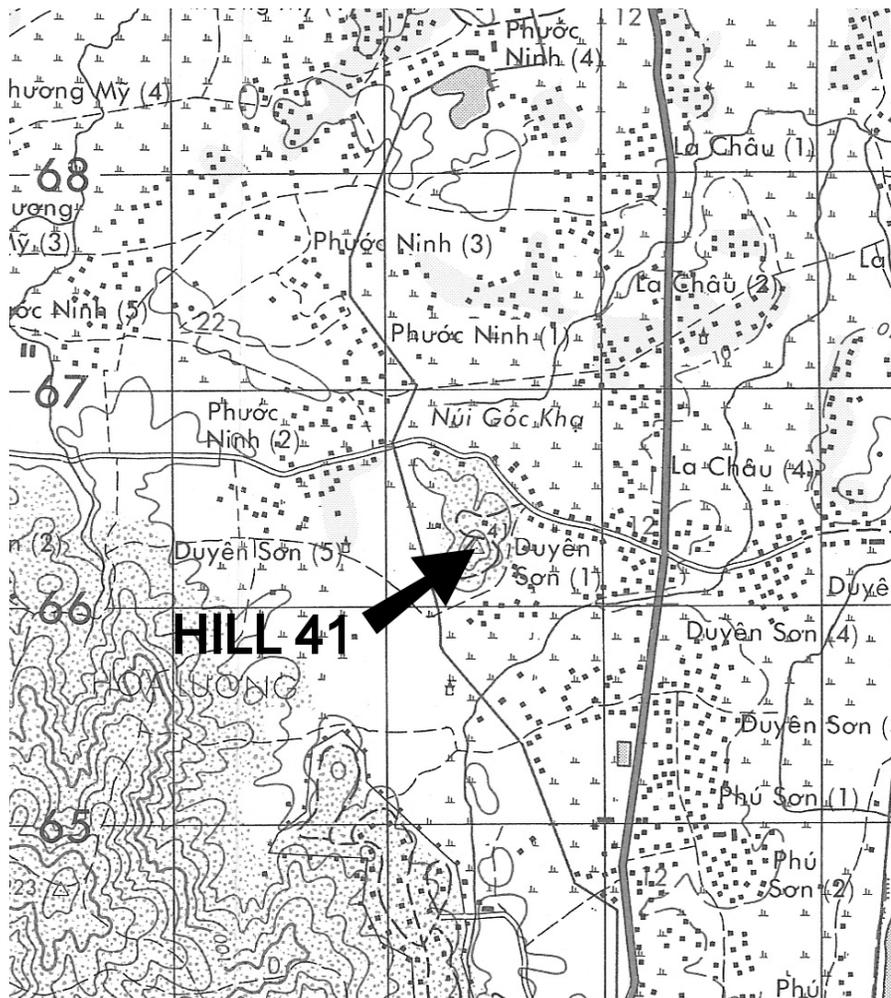
Dewey was shorter than most of us. He acted like he had a chip on his shoulder. He held his rifle in his right hand and his helmet was cocked to one side. He held his left hand up in a fist and stomped on the dead VC's chest. Blood squirted out through the bullet holes like a miniature garden fountain. I couldn't force myself to look away; some hideous part of me wanted to watch this macabre act.

“YEEHAW,” he screeched.

I was sickened and nauseated by the scene, and ashamed to have been one of the “Lookie Loo's.”

Back home, after the battle, Delta learned that we shot up Bravo pretty bad. After that our company was nicknamed “Deadly Delta.”

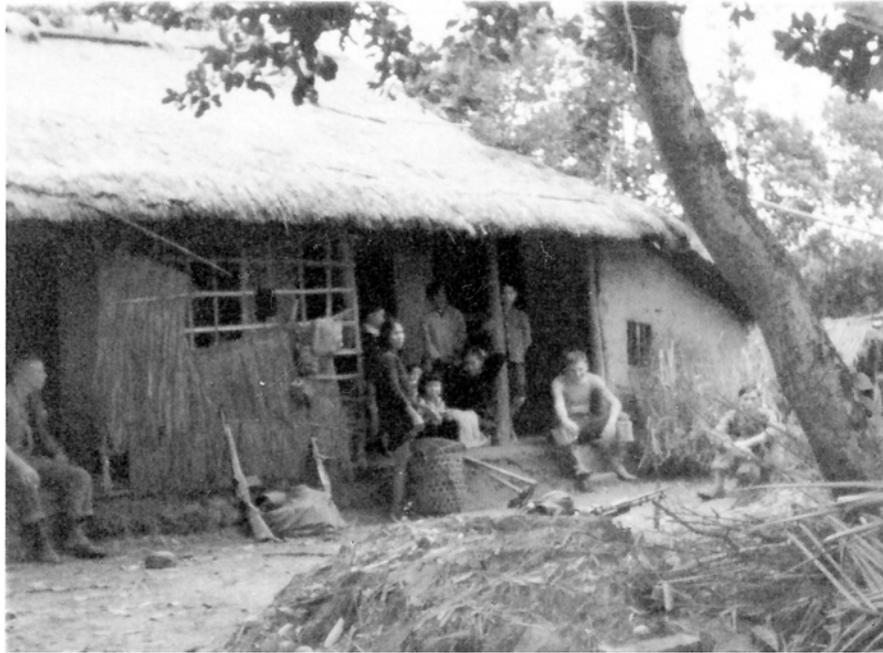
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Hill 41 TAOR. Map courtesy USGS (Map 6640-IV, coords AT 934664)

Patrols back on Hill 41 had become commonplace. We rarely were shot at and the booby traps the VC set for us were amateurish and fairly easy to spot. I thought that the VC waited for us to become lazy on patrol, then they would surprise us.

Once, when we took a break at a Ville, I left the other men, who were screwing around with the villagers in their huts, and stood watch under a shady tree. I sat on a rock, daydreaming about being back in America, when a VC took a potshot at me.



Taking a break in the Ville. Source: DWP

The dreaming stopped! I fell to one side and got ready to fire. The other men scrambled out of the huts and looked like the “Keystone Cops,” from a scene out of an old black-and-white film. They ran around in all directions. If it wasn’t real life, it could have been funny. I was mad at myself for letting my guard down. It was never safe to forget where you were and what you were doing.

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VC wrapped in duct tape, found deceased. Source: DWP

On another operation in the Phu Longs across the river, the front of the line came under fire. A VC, whose whole upper body was wrapped in duct tape, had been shot and killed. The tape was not there for protection. Rather, his idea was if he got shot he could continue his charge at us because the bullet(s) would pierce straight through his chest. He knew he was going to die and he wanted to take as many of us with him as he could, before he himself had been shot and killed.

The column came to a stop and we took a fifteen-minute break. I saw his body off the trail to my right. I sat on top of a large rock and looked around my area for anything dangerous.

Two men decided to pull the body onto the trail. They then proceeded to crush the man's skull with a large rock. They took turns with each other until they succeeded.

They both emitted the now-familiar squeal ("YEEHAW") as the man's brain matter oozed onto the ground.

"For heaven's sake, guys! Knock it off. You're grossing me out!"

I looked away in disgust. Now I had come to know that even the dead were disrespected.

I fight alongside murderers and mutilators. Will I become like them? I pray to God that day that He would spare me those sins.

I faced back down the column, to my rear. I spotted three VC trotting away. I could tell they were VC because they were young men, wore black pajama outfits, and were obviously hurrying away from any confrontation with our outfit.

I immediately jumped from the rock, took aim, and fired at them. I hit one of them and grazed another. The two still standing tried to drag their fallen friend along with them, but my shots at them made them forget their plan. They ran away, full speed and escaped. The Marines near where I shot the man confirmed that he was dead. They did so by turning their attention back to their C-ration lunch, and left the VC on the ground where they found him.

That was kill number two for me.

My soul felt scarred.

I believed that I was fighting in Viet Nam to free the South Vietnamese from the North Vietnamese. I had justified to myself that if I had to kill people in combat, then so be it. I had killed twice now. Each one I killed was during a combat setting, but my personal safety was not in jeopardy either time. So, truthfully, it wasn't a question of "kill or be killed".

I thought of myself as a very faithful Christian. "Thou shall not kill" meant a lot to me. Nonetheless, I had killed people.

From now on, I was determined to only fire at others when my life or my comrades' lives were threatened, I swore to The Almighty.

On or around early December 1966, Lance Corporal Hobarth was hit by a waist-high grenade booby trap. It filled his groin with shrapnel and he was Medivac'ed all the way to Okinawa for treatment.

Hobarth was another rocket gunner in our squad. All he ever ate, like me, was C-rations, and was probably twenty pounds below what he should have weighed. He rarely spoke, and when he did he usually had to be asked to repeat himself in order to be understood.

I was meritoriously promoted to Lance Corporal and took over Hobarth's launcher.

