

What was your first Combat Mobile Team experience?

by Steve Glines

My first Combat Mobile experience was as the only Specialist in an ATC ("air traffic control") assignment. The rest of the squad were simple grunts lead by the massive Sergeant James T. Adams, Regular Army, *the ghost of the Central Highlands*. Sgt. Adams made it clear that he was "Regular Army" and that I and the rest of his motley crew of draftees were disposable crap. We were nothing and he was important and we'd better remember it if we wanted to stay alive. He was very of full of himself, the RA crap and all that, but he knew his stuff and was mostly genial. After a while we all learned that his tantrums were a very controllable act.

We were about 250 miles northeast of Saigon near the Cambodian border outside of the city of Pleiku. The area was dry and with slight rolling hills, not the wet jungle everyone thinks Vietnam is. The mission was simple. We were going to be dropped in the middle of a field then build a 10 meters wide by 100 meters long helipad and bring in about 100 Huey's full of grunts and their supplies and keep them supplied for as long as the operation lasted. They were going to sweep the area for a couple of weeks then pack up and go home. The area chosen for the helicopter landing pad was in the middle of a grassy field. I don't think it was cultivated since there weren't any nearby Vietnamese villages, at least I don't think so. It was pretty lonely territory. It was an area where the VC could easily maneuver in fairly large numbers, not like the squad on squad battles in the jungle further south.

We came in two Huey with a third carrying a small bulldozer. We landed and immediately fanned out just in case there was any opposition. There wasn't so Sgt. Adams ordered us to dig fox holes

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along what passed for a ridge. Since I was paired up with Sgt. Adams I got to dig our foxhole while Sgt. Adams ran around giving orders.

The first task, after getting the bulldozer going, was to lay out the field with a transit, wooden sticks and a measuring tape. I set up our radios both the ATC radio and Sgt. Adams tactical radio while Sgt. Adams and the rest of the squad leveled the field with the bulldozer. It was pretty easy going since the soil was loose and sandy and in four hours we had an acceptable helicopter pad large enough to accept four at a time although I never attempted to land more than two at a time. The field was finished except for the steel mats that were needed to keep debris to a minimum during flight operations.

When we had the field roughed out I called in the choppers with the Marsten mats. These were sheets of steel, 16 inches wide by ten feet long. A flight of four Huey brought the first load of mats in. That was the first time I had actually brought choppers in on my own and the pilots pretty much ignored my directions. I told them to come in two at a time, hover and gently land their loads as directed by guys on the ground but apparently that last time these guys tried that they received a lot of incoming fire so instead of coming in high and slow they came in low and fast, in formation and dropped their cargo when the lead chopper said to, then muscled their way out of sight.

One of the pallets hit the ground from a good fifty feet in the air, exploded and sent half a ton of steel sheets flying in the direction of Sgt. Adams. A sheet hit his leg just below the knee and broke it in three places. It took a few minutes of very loud cursing before we realized that Sgt. Adams was cursing from pain and not for the untidy delivery of the cargo.

I ran down from my foxhole/tower to see what happened and got chewed out by Sgt. Adams for A. not controlling the birds better, B. for leaving my foxhole without permission and C. for not bringing a medical pack with me, all in the same breath. He also informed me in his next breath that A. I better call a dust off, a medivac for him,

B. that he was still in charge and C. that as soon as he left I was in charge. Shit!

We carried him up to the top of the ridge, got a splint on him and shot him up with enough morphine to mellow him out.

While we waited for the medicac I got the squad back to work laying out the mats which interlocked to form a relatively hard surface. We got a 10 by 15 meter pad prepared by the time the medivac arrived to take Sgt. Adams away. That night we received our first incoming mortar rounds.

The VC were relatively lazy about targeting mortars. The first round overshot us by 150 meters and the second undershot by as much. That's all we got that night but it was enough to guarantee that no one got any sleep.

The next morning we received our remaining three installment of mats. This time I made it clear to the chopper pilots that I wanted it done right and they did what they were told. We got the rest of the strip built that day without incident. That night, however the number of mortar rounds increased to one or two an hour. None of them came very close to us or the airstrip but it kept us awake for a second night.

About 0400 the next morning the assault began starting with four Huey gunships that laid down suppressing fire along the wood line and beyond. I was able to give the gunships a bearing of the mortar position because the VC never changed their azimuth so it was pretty easy to just draw a line from where one mortar round hit to another on a map and project it into the woods. One of the gunships spotted the mortar and about a dozen VC's and blasted them all.

By 0700 the assault began in earnest. I brought in one or two Huey every ten minutes for a couple of hours. The choppers would land, offload the troops who would form up and march off. When half a battalion had been landed a bird Colonel arrived in a Loach (a small 4 seat helicopter) helicopter and parked himself right next to my "tower" and began barking orders over his radio which was obediently held by a Sergeant Major, both the Colonel and the Sergeant were in khaki uniforms. I know weird.

The next six Hueys were the command company for the brigade. The Colonel, I forget his name, insisted that everyone in his command platoon wear khaki uniforms instead of the combat fatigues the rest of us wore. I swear this guy thought he was fighting the Boar War or something.

Rule of thumb number one, don't stand out. Rule of thumb number two, don't stand out. With a good scope a sniper can see the stripes on your sleeves or whatever you've got on your shoulder.

Anyway the Colonel went trotting off with his sergeant and a squad of grunts while a Major, Tom Thumb or whatever his name was, and a couple of Captains and some senior NCO's and a wayward looking second Lieutenant set up shop right next to me. The Sergeants dug a triple wide foxhole and put a tent on top of it while the Major inspected the airfield. A Staff Sergeant later came over and told me that I was doing a great job. I never did talk to anyone else besides that Staff Sergeant. I dug a new foxhole/tower fifty meters away from the "Command Tent."

By nightfall our fortress had grown from just my squad to a full battalion, about 800 guys, and occupied an area about 800 meters by 800 meters with my airfield in the middle. There were several firefights going on all night off in the near distance but I had finally got to sleep when I heard someone yell "Incoming."

When mortars, shells or rockets fly overhead they make something between a whooshing and roaring sound. If you hear them then you're safe but the rule is you won't hear the one that kills you. A couple of seconds after I heard the warning I heard and felt the "whomp" of a mortar round exploding followed by the whirring of shrapnel as it passed over my head. It hit maybe 30 meters away near the "Command Tent." For the next hour round after round came in obviously targeting the tent which was the only thing visible from the tree line. In all I counted twenty five rounds before they stopped. The next morning all that was left of the tent was a splintered frame but the only casualty was some minor shrapnel wounds suffered by a medic who ran to the tent when he thought it took a direct hit.

That day we suffered our first real casualty. It had been quiet when one of the Sergeants still dressed in khakis stood up to stretch and smoke a cigarette. A VC sniper put a bullet right through his heart. He crumpled like the air had been let out of him. I didn't even bother to call a dust off (medivac). They threw him in a body bag and I suppose threw him on one of the empty choppers later in the day. After that the headquarters Company wore fatigues, even the Colonel.

Over the next two weeks the battalion had about ten killed and thirty or forty wounded. Mostly the medivacs picked the wounded and killed up in the field but occasionally they'd be brought back on stretchers from patrols.

We got shelled one other time but only briefly because there was a flight of napalm carrying Phantoms circling above us just waiting for someplace to dump their load and head home for a beer. They lit up a good square klick of forest and that was the last we heard from the VC.

The whole operation lasted a little over two weeks. I was the last to leave that crappy spot in the highlands. We left a mess. I got promoted to Spec 5 and got a two weeks leave in the Philippines. A month into my two weeks leave I went back to Vietnam and got a new Combat Mobile Team assignment instead of the Court Martial I expected. Damn, they were trying to kill me.

