



SFA C-60 February 2011 Newsletter

This is an excellent example of SF in the most brutal of situations.

In February & March 1966 I commanded SFODA 102 at the SF/CIDG Camp A Shau in I CTZ, RVN on the Laos border. In December 1965 the NVA 325B Division began infiltration into the A Shau Valley and Be Long Valley SE of it and onto the encompassing mountain ridge lines. The small A Shau CIDG garrison contested the NVA incursion (the "mouse" with the defiant finger to the "hawk"). Our combat with the enemy became increasingly intense and bloody; our position was totally isolated from civilian community and accessible only by air, and adverse flying weather limited access to it. Our garrison strength of CIDG was approximately 220, and after several weeks on patrols of costly skirmishes with the enemy and with snipers killing our men on the watch towers at night, morale among the CIDG was not high. Adverse flying weather drastically reduced attempted delivery of critical ammunition and other categories of supply. Even knowing that a significant enemy buildup was in progress, LTC Facey, the SFODC 1 Cdr in I CTZ had no CIDG Mike Force available to reinforce and assist us - they had almost all deserted during the course of the Buddhist v. Catholic turmoil of the period. Our isolated garrison was in severe danger of destruction by an NVA division.

As the enemy buildup around us increased and became obviously overwhelming in its potential to destroy us, I requested reinforcement of/support by at least two conventional (Marine - this was III MAF turf) infantry battalions with artillery support. III MAF decided that the priority was insufficient for such commitment and that it had more immediate and urgent requirements with which to contend - possibly correct considering they had only two already heavily committed divisions. USARV was more than ready to leave the problem of our support to III MAF. LTC Facey, having no available combat forces to provide us, appealed to COL McKean, Cdr 5th SFG(A) at Nha Trang who, fortuitously for our A Shau garrison, ordered SFODA 503(-) with a company of its Mike Force Nungs to reinforce us. They arriving two days before the battle for Camp A Shau began. Captain Tennis (Sam) Carter and 6 SF NCO's arrived at A Shau on 7 March 1966. With the arrival of Sam's detachment (-) and Nung company, we mustered 10 PFD of my detachment, 8 LLDB, and a total of 435 total in the camp, including some civilian employees, dependants of VN, and 10 civil prisoners sent there for "hard labor." Our 435 faced an NVA division with all its units and assets in place and under adverse weather conditions for air support for us. Not a comfortable situation!

Ot 0350 hours, 9 March, after digging a lengthy approach trench and a parallel outside our defensive wire (Vauban would have given them good marks), the 325B gave us one heck of a mortar bombardment, inflicting heavy casualties, while their sappers blew gaps in our defensive wire off our south wall and half (SE) of our E east wall parallel to our airstrip, and their machine gun teams completed the investment against the north wall. It was a tremendous shelling and we suffered mightily (two of our SF were KIA and several WIA in the opening of the battle).

On the 9th, weather conditions limited severely the ability and effectiveness of air support, and a number of our fixed wing and helicopters and their crews were lost or downed to enemy fires in their heroic efforts to support us. On the ground, most of that day was one of being on the receiving end of intense mortar fires and sniping by the enemy. Our casualties were heavy and mounting. Through the heroic efforts of an USAF CH-3 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter crew, (the chopper taking many small arms hits) we were able to evacuate over thirty of our most serious US and CIDG WIA.

What happened in the pre-dawn hours of the 10th made the events of the 9th seem mild. The 95B Inf Regt, under heavy supporting mortar fires, launched massive ground assaults against our south and SE walls. It was close and bloody fighting. Our CIDG 141 Company (approx 60 man strength) holding the apex area of our S and E walls crumbled, some, having been demoralized by the strains of the previous weeks and subverted by VCI within their ranks, rallied to the NVA, while others, either surrendered or fled back to more secure positions within the camp. The enemy secured a penetration, and while we diverted men from their pre designated battle stations to engage that penetration, the enemy also achieved significant penetration through our thereby weakened south wall. The battle subsequently became a slugging match within the camp. We gave at least as good as we took: the 95B was wrecked by our ground action and by air support when it could get in, and the 325B Division commander had to commit his 18B Regiment to the action. Throughout the day of 10 March it was a messy, close combat action: attacks, counterattacks, air strikes as weather permitted called in by us upon the camp, no quarters given by either side, and both sustaining heavy casualties.

As the late afternoon situation developed, we were almost out of small arms ammunition, most of us were wounded, we were all desperately thirsty, having drunk all of our canteen water and no other source now available, and our

physical exhaustion was extreme. In a sense of pseudo bravado, we few Americans who were in contact with one another, and low on ammunition, griped about MACV/USARV not having issued bayonets to Special Forces because they were in short supply - I think that our physical strength at that point was such that bayonets would probably have been useless, but we were determined to go down fighting.

Then, in late afternoon, the order came that was the salvation of those of us who survived. LTC Facey ordered me to attempt a breakout to the north to an LZ approximately 400-500 meters from the camp, into which USMC LtCol House had volunteered to commit his CH34 helicopter squadron to extract us. We organized and conducted an effective breakout, but the USMC helicopters in two waves encountered devastating AA and ground fire that downed two of the first wave and hit almost all others, whereupon the second wave broke off the descent and rose above the already low and dropping cloud cover. The CIDG who had reached the LZ realized that there were too few helicopter to extract them all, and some panicked and mobbed, overloading, the choppers, causing crew chiefs to shoot them off. I did not personally see any of this (that was reported in the American media) because I had stayed behind to control the rear guard/stay behind force to cover the breakout/withdrawal, and by the time I got to the LZ all of the helicopters were gone and left were only our still mobile SF soldiers, the crews of the two downed USMC helicopters, and probably the worst wounded of our CIDG. It was almost dark, fog was building and the cloud ceiling dropping, and enemy machine gun green tracers and mortar rounds were impacting the erstwhile LZ. We had to move out, and we did. Our evasion lasted two days, and most of the CIDG with us were recovered.

We started with 435. There were 188 survivors. Of the 17 American SF, 5 were KIA, 12 survivors WIA. There were 7 DSC's awarded. I recommended two NCO's, one each from A-102 and A-503 (posthumous) for Medals of Honor. Both were denied on specious (in my opinion) grounds that "valor was common place." Hard to imagine that with 7 DSC's for 17 Americans involved in a battle and with all three officers who received DSC's agreeing and recommending two NCO's for the MoH, neither received it. I concluded that there was more in politics than reality in award of the Medal of Honor. It isn't good to loose a battle, although with only 188 out of 435 surviving, one might think even us defeated gave a worthy account of ourselves, nor did we/ ask for extraction: we Americans had resolved to go down fighting and quite frankly, at the time, I protested the breakout order, asking instead that the helicopters bring in a relief/counterattack force. But, regardless of the politics of the time, whether my conclusion is valid or not, there is no denying that SFODA 102 and SFODA 503 (-) and their CIDG gave the NVA 325B Division one hard fight at A Shau on 9 and 10 March 1966.

Rather lengthy, but you might want to extract segments and at least mention the Battle of SF CIDG Camp A Shau on 9-10 March 1966 as a Special Forces event worthy of note in the next Chapter LX newsletter.

Warmest regards and ***De Oppresso Liber!***

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SFAC LX

In a message dated 2/28/2011 8:45:37 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, WFR226@aol.com writes:

Members,

Here is the hot link to the February 2011 issue of our Chapter newsletter:

<http://www.specialforces.org/sfalx/news/2011.02.pdf>

DOL, Wayne