



Incident: LRRP Team Extracted by Cobra Gunship, Republic of Vietnam as told by team members and Lt. Larry Taylor

Date: 18 June, 1968

Units Involved: F Company, 52nd Infantry (LRP), 1st Infantry Division
D Troop (Air), 1st Squadron/4th Cavalry, 1st Infantry Division

Individuals Involved: Long Range Patrol Members, Wild Cat 2, TL PFC Robert P. Elsner, Assist Team Leader SGT Billy Cohn, SP4 Gerald Paddy, and SGT Dave Hill, Cobra Pilots 1LT Larry Taylor, WO Bill Ratliff, Cobra Pilots Roger Trickler, Capt. Dirk LeMay

On 14 June, 1968, Team Wildcat Two of Company F, 52nd Infantry (LRP), 1st Infantry Division, was sent to an ARVN Regional Forces-Popular Forces ("Ruf-Puf") compound located 18 kilometers northeast of Saigon, from where it was to conduct patrols for the next 7-days period.



Supporting the team from the compound would be a Forward Operations Base (FOB) communications relay team, also from Co. F. Two days later, the team, led by PFC Robert P. Elsner (New York City, NY), was given a warning order to conduct a two-day reconnaissance mission near the village of Ap Go Cong, a long suspected VC sanctuary, two kilometers northeast of the ARVN compound. Elsner, though a PFC, was an excellent, experienced and much-decorated team leader, and that was rightfully the criteria (not rank) upon which Co. F team leaders were selected. Ap Go Cong, with only 1500 inhabitants, was not a large village, but over the years had earned a reputation for being staunchly sympathetic to the enemy (this assessment was later proven to be a significant understatement). Without benefit of the usual helicopter overflight, the team was ordered to walk off the compound at dusk on 18 June and patrol toward the village, reaching it by 1900 hours. Once there, they were to remain hidden until dark, then move into a gully that reportedly ran across the mouth of the horseshoe-shaped village. If they were able to reach that point unobserved, they were to pause, then move slightly east of it and set up an observation post (OP). Their primary mission was to monitor the village and a large rice paddy area to the east of it, which ran all the way to the river. They were to watch for a VC company that was reportedly using the village routinely for resupply and recreation. If they spotted the enemy column, the team was to avoid direct contact and instead,

engage them with artillery. Contact was expected, as the team had briefly engaged a VC force of unknown size two nights previously, closer to the river.

This was not Elsner's usual Team 2, generally comprised of five men. He still had his regular Assistant Team Leader, SGT Billy Cohn (Old Mystic, CN), carrying his M-79 grenade launcher.

Cohn and Elsner had been working together continuously for many months. Walking

"slack" (number two position, right behind the "point man") and carrying the team's radio, was a relatively new team member, Spec. 4 Gerald Paddy (Maryville, TN).

The patrol's "rear-security" was SGT David Hill (Visalia, CA), a scout-dog handler who had been attached to Team 2 since March 1968. A bad experience on the first night patrol using the dog team had convinced Elsner and the previous Team 2

Leader, Sgt. Ronnie Luce (Kansas City, MO), that the German Shepherd was far too noisy to accompany a long range patrol, and the decision had thus been made

back in March to leave the scout dog behind in base-camp. However, this did not apply to the dog's handler. Hill had proven over the following months to be a more-than-capable team member without the dog, and stayed on as a regular team member. Hill, instead of carrying his usual weapon, the M-79, was carrying an M-2 carbine (borrowed from the ARVNs), as Elsner wanted to have at least one weapon which would not immediately, by sound alone, identify the patrol as American should some nearby target need to be taken out.



Walking point, PFC Elsner led his four-man patrol out of the compound nearly an hour before dark. The weather was high/overcast. It was not supposed to rain during the mission, but Elsner knew that any cloud cover could have some adverse effect on the capabilities of the "starlight" scope he was carrying. The starlight, a relatively new and very effective night-vision scope, was carried by the team whenever one was available to them, and it would prove to be a key factor to the team's survival on this particular night. The team initially moved to the west to deceive any prying eyes, then swung to the north until they hit a tree line. The terrain bordering the rice paddies was covered by low brush and single canopy trees, and offered only minimal cover to the team. From his map, Elsner knew that the tree line they were moving within ran almost to edge of Ap Go Cong village. They followed it until it intersected with another tree line that extended out from the south wing of the village. Taking advantage of what cover the thin brush and trees offered, the team moved to within approximately two hundred meters of the village. They quickly set up in a circular perimeter, all facing outward, and remained hidden there until full darkness.

As the sun was nearly set, Elsner began to scope out the approaches to the village. He could see that at the end of each leg of the horseshoe-shaped village, a tree line extended another two hundred meters or so, ending at the leading edges of the vast rice paddy. He quickly spotted a trail in front of them that snaked from the end of the southernmost tree line and ran out across the rice paddies toward the distant river. Elsner decided that this was most likely the trail the enemy regularly used to enter and depart the village. The team leader also spotted a waist-deep gully that separated the area inside the village horseshoe layout from the rest of the huge rice paddy. As soon as Elsner felt that it was dark enough to move in closer, he led the team into the southern tree line and stopped 60 meters from the nearest point of the village. Even without the starlight scope, the LRRP's could see the shadowy forms of the village's inhabitants moving back and forth between their hootch's. They could also hear the sounds of Vietnamese music, and soon realized the villager's were carrying on some sort of celebration. The music seemed to be coming from points throughout the village. Faint lights shown from the hootch's and a few outdoor fires burned in various parts of the village.

The team remained in that position for nearly fifteen minutes, quietly observing-Elsner using the starlight scope. He could clearly see the activity in the village, but saw no movement outside of it. To get a better view, Elsner led the team out of the trees and northward, initially paralleling the gully, then turning in toward the center segment of the village. When they got within 30 meters of the nearest hootch's, Elsner again motioned for the team to halt. From this new vantage point, the LRRP's could hear dogs barking in the village, but with the slight breeze apparently in the team's favor, the domestic canines did not seem to notice them. It was now nearly 2000 hours and the team was on schedule per the original plan.

While able now to closely observe the village itself, Elsner decided that a large mound to their rear denied them a clear view of all of the trail that ran across the rice paddy and into the village. That probable approach route by any VC was too critical a sector not to be under complete observation by the team. While the team remained in place, Elsner backtracked slightly toward the tree line to find a better observation position, and quickly found one-now able to see about 300 meters into the rice paddy through his scope. Now all critical portions of the village, the rice paddy, and the trail were as visible to the team as the scope's limited range would permit. Elsner advised the team that they would remain in that location until 2100 hours, then move twice more in succession further out into the large rice paddy until they were within approximately 50 meters of the primary trail he had spotted, which is where G-2 wanted them to be not later than midnight. As it turned out, they would never make it to that final objective.

At 2100 hours Elsner gave the signal for the team to get ready to move. Silently, with Elsner leading, they formed into a file, five meters between them, and began heading toward the next point he had selected. They had gone only about 10-15 meters when the hair on Elsner's neck suddenly began to tingle. He had not seen or heard anything, but his "sixth sense" was telling him that something was amiss. He immediately raised a clenched fist to stop the team. He raised the starlight scope toward the gully and out beyond it to the large rice paddy. They were no longer alone! Despite the team's seemingly successful infiltration, enemy soldiers had apparently detected the team and had themselves moved to set a trap for the LRRP's. The VC, down among the bushes on top of the gully, had not been visible on his previous scans of the area. However, Elsner could now make out an enemy soldier behind a tripod-mounted .30 cal. machine gun set up directly in their current path, on the near side of the gully. As Elsner scanned slowly right to left, he counted another fifteen VC strung out along the gully on either side of the machine gun, laying in the brush and seemingly relaxing. Continuing to pan around the team's position, Elsner quickly spotted another machine gun and crew at the point where the southern tree line ended at the large rice paddy, and yet another group of VC toward the edge of the northern tree line. Why they had not been visible previously was not known, but they clearly had the team effectively trapped. The team's precise position was apparently not yet known, but their possible routes had been accurately predicted. Now, with the village at their backs, and only the two foot high paddy berms to protect them, the team was effectively boxed in, with no safe place to run.

Elsner turned to the team, apprised them that they had "gooks all around them", and to form up in a "wheel" against the junction of two berms, their feet to the center, each to cover their assigned sectors of fire. They quickly put out five claymore mines in a circle around them: two facing the gully to their front, one each on the flanks and another facing the now quiet village. While his teammates pulled security, Elsner took a few moments to evaluate their situation. He was certain that the VC knew the team was out there somewhere, though not its exact location. But it was clear that there would be no escaping the trap without supporting fire-lots of it.

Soon, the LRRP's detected movement in the section of the gully to the team's left front. Elsner told the rest of team to stay in place, while he crawled out to toward the gully, grenade in hand. When he reached the gully, he heard more movement, and now, whispering. He slowly pulled the pin from a white phosphorous grenade and lobbed it toward the sound. In the resulting flash, he could see that he had caught two VC in the blast. He could also hear more of them running back up the gully. Jumping to his feet, he threw a fragmentation grenade as far as possible up the gully toward the end where it merged with the tree line, then quickly moved back to the team's tiny

perimeter. Amazingly, the VC did not respond with fire of their own, perhaps themselves surprised that the initiative had been momentarily seized by the as yet unseen LRRP's.

Gerald Paddy had already contacted the LRRP company's Tactical Operations Center (TOC), and as soon as Elsner dropped down in the center of the perimeter, he took the handset and gave his CO a brief sit-rep (situation report). Elsner advised him that the team was boxed in by the surrounding village and tree lines, with over 30 VC between them and the river. Without waiting for a reply, Elsner also asked for helicopter gunship support. The CO recommended that Elsner call in artillery while the gunships were being scrambled out of Phu Loi. Meanwhile Elsner had also advised the other team members that they were to use "grenades only, no shooting yet", as the VC apparently had not yet pin-pointed the team's exact position and Elsner wanted to keep it that way as long as possible. For the next few moments, each of the team moved slightly outward from his respective sector and over the paddy berm, flinging fragmentation grenades as far toward any movement/noise or the VC machine gun and rifle positions as they could, then quickly crawled back behind the small berm. Still the VC did not assault toward the LRRP's position, seemingly hesitant for some unknown reason.

Elsner proceeded to radio for artillery fire, based on the pre-plotted concentrations he had established with their artillery support prior to departing on the patrol. He called for a "marker" round at the first concentration, estimated to be approximately 500 meters out along the trail, toward the river. Giving the artillery battery's Fire Direction Center (FDC) the azimuth to it the concentration, he advised them that rounds would need to be "danger close" to the team's own position to be of any value. An appropriate time after the artillery radio operator advised: "Shot", no round was yet in evidence. Sensing something was wrong, Elsner then called for a drop of 300 meters and a second marker round. Nearly 30 seconds later, far in the distance, they spotted a flash-so far away that they barely heard its sound. Frustrated, and unsure why the rounds had been nowhere near where they should have been, Elsner reconfirmed the azimuth and the team's approximate position to the FDC. He was preparing to continue adjusting the rounds in toward the enemy position in increasingly larger drops, when suddenly a voice broke in: "Wildcat 2, this is Dark-Horse 32". Lt. Larry Taylor (Chattanooga, TN), piloting a Cobra helicopter gunship, was trying to establish contact with the team. That night Taylor was the Flight Leader of a two-ship flight of Cobras from D Troop (Air), 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, which had been immediately scrambled out of Phu Loi in response to the team's predicament. Flying with Taylor as his co-pilot/gunner was WO Bill Ratliff (Cody, WY). Flying as aircraft commander in the second Cobra was Capt. Roger Trickler, with Capt. Dirk LeMay (KIA Dec 1968) as his co-pilot/gunner. The sleek, two-man gunships were "loaded for bear" and nearing the LRRP's location. Taylor advised



Elsner that he expected that his running lights should be visible to the team in "about two minutes", and in which general direction the team should look, as he would need a precise vector into the team's location once he had been spotted by them. Elsner felt momentary relief: the pilots of the "Quarter Cav" (as the unit

was known throughout the 1st Division) had never let any of the LRRP teams down, and they were now clearly on the way to help his team. Elsner immediately canceled the artillery, deferring to Taylor for any further calls for artillery support, then switched to the gunship frequency and gave Taylor a sit-rep. He advised the pilot that he would get him started in the right direction upon sighting his lights, then, when the gunships were close on station, the team would fire star-clusters (hand-fired flares) over the known and suspected enemy positions. With that agreed to, Taylor proceeded to, himself, contact the supporting artillery battery. Having reconfirmed the coordinates of the village on his map, he advised the artillery unit that as soon as he had clearly marked the team's location he would be calling for illumination rounds to light up the village and tree lines which surrounded three sides of the team, as well as the large rice paddy behind the closest enemy positions. The battery was to commence firing the artillery flares only upon Taylor's command and he would adjust their rounds as needed. [Starting the artillery illumination prior to his arrival over the team would needlessly expose the LRRP's at this point; he did not want to "flip the switch" until he and his wingman were in position to deal with the enemy troops surrounding the team.]

When the LRRP's were first able to pick out the lights of the Cobras, they appeared to be still over a full click (kilometer) away. Elsner advised Taylor that he had the gunships in sight and their estimated distance and direction from the team. He then turned to the team and reiterated his make-shift marking plan. He told his team that he would fire a star cluster over the machine gun and troops nearest them, Cohn was to launch his towards the northern tree line, Hill was to fire his at the southern tree line, and Paddy was to fire his toward the village. [No enemy had yet



been spotted in that direction, but it had to be assumed that some were, or soon would be, there.] This would not only give the pilots target reference points, but would also pinpoint the team for the gunships. The Cobras carried a huge, deadly arsenal, but they had to know precisely where they could safely deliver it around the team. Once that was known, everything outside the team's position would be "enemy", and thereby a target for the Cobras.

Elsner got on the radio, advising Taylor of the plan with the star-clusters. Taylor answered that he understood and told them to go ahead and launch them, as he was nearly in position. When the LRRP's complied, it seemed that everyone began firing at the same time-the VC, the gunships and the LRRP's. Each of the star clusters had been "on the money", marking the enemy positions for the Cobras, now roaring in on their gun runs. The team was now receiving intense fire from the gully to their front, and also from the north and south tree lines, but as yet still no fire from the village itself. While calling for the artillery illumination to commence, Taylor and his wingman split on either side of the team, hitting the tree lines on each flank with six 2.75 in. rockets each. They were on target and devastating. Taylor then came back around and sprayed the gully with mini-gun fire, the team scrunching down as far as possible below the top of their meager paddy berm. Both Cobras then circled out into the large rice paddy to commence a second run. This time the gunships came in simultaneously on parallel runs close on either side of the team. Returning over the team, they took turns pivoting directly over the LRRP's, spraying rockets and mini-guns all around the team's position. The air over the team was split with the explosions as the rockets left their pods, the impacts coming immediately thereafter at points all round the team. The gunships then again made runs down the length of the tree lines, culminating at the edge of the village, firing dozens of rockets in the process. The enemy, however, was still returning heavy fire at the gunships and the trapped team. While the firing was now concentrated on the Cobras, as Taylor and Trickler had known it would be, there seemed to be plenty left over for the LRRP's as well.

For the next 30-40 minutes, the Cobras kept up their forays toward VC positions, now judiciously firing their rockets and mini-gun rounds at the points of heaviest enemy fire. Then, as the Cobras once again turned out over the rice paddy, Capt. Trickler reported that he was now also receiving fire from an enemy machine gun on the northeast corner of the north tree line. He could see that another large force of VC were apparently attempting to reinforce the VC already being engaged in the horseshoe. With the newly arrived VC unit trying to blow his Cobra out of the sky with machine gun and small arms fire, Trickler went around again and came back at them firing nearly everything he had left. He succeeded in knocking out the machine gun with the last of his rockets and scattering the remaining VC.

Meanwhile, Taylor, hovering at about 50 feet out over the rice paddies east of the team, conferred with Trickler. Capt. Trickler informed Taylor that he had just expended the last of his rockets. Taylor responded that he, too, was out of rockets, but they would stay with the team and cover them as well as possible with their remaining mini-gun rounds. By that time, the Cobras had already fired 152 rockets and nearly 16,000 rounds of mini-gun ammo.

For the next 15 minutes, the LRRP's remained heavily engaged. The enemy fire coming from the gully had been totally, devastatingly eliminated by the Cobras and team. However, muzzle-flashes were still winking at them from the trees, followed by the "thunk" of bullets hitting the berms behind which the team still lay. Only 2-3 feet high and across, the sun-hardened earthen berms had certainly borne the volume of fire well to this point. Fortunately most of the enemy fire remained on the Cobras. Still making gun runs to keep the VC occupied and discourage any further assault on the team's position, the Cobras fired what little remained of their mini-gun ammo.

Taylor called Elsner and advised him with that he would hit the VC in the tree line to their south, but the team would have to handle the remaining enemy by themselves, as he and Trickler were definitely now down to their final mini-gun bursts. Elsner acknowledged Taylor's transmission. Taylor soon radioed the team that he had just run out of ammo and could only make "dry-runs" to try to distract the VC and continue to draw fire toward his now unarmed helicopter while he and Elsner hurriedly identified the best "escape and evasion" route for the team to exit the area. Capt. Trickler reported that he was down to a single one-second burst of mini-gun fire. Taylor told him to save it, and then immediately broke into a series of dry runs, even turning on his Cobra's searchlight to further distract the enemy. The team now supported the unarmed gunship as best they could, firing at the muzzle flashes from guns aimed at the Cobra. Increasingly now the team was receiving small arms fire from the village proper, a direction from which the team had far less cover from the paddy berms. However, Taylor had an innovative way to deal with that threat. Quickly contacting the artillery battery, who had been continuously firing illumination rounds for him throughout the night, he requested them to adjust the bursting height of the flares to minimum altitude over the village (so the magnesium would still be burning when it fell into the hootch's on the village's near side). He quickly succeeded in thus starting some spot-fires among the hootch's, rooting out or at least temporarily distracting the VC who had been firing from the village.

Soon, however, the VC were on to Taylor's dry-run tactics and stood their ground, increasing the fire directed at him and the team. Taylor told Elsner that the LRRP's needed to be prepared to "di di" (run) across the gully and out into the open rice paddy toward the river. Elsner was told to

move his team out on an azimuth of 135 degrees as far and fast they could go, timed to coincide with Trickler's final run on the northern tree line. Elsner said he understood, and advised that the team would first fire all of their claymore mines, then use "fire-and-maneuver" to make their way further out into the large rice paddy.

Though the team did not yet know it, Taylor had decided that he would extract the LRRP's on his Cobra. He knew that the team were themselves nearly out of ammunition, and would soon be overrun at any rate now that the gunships could no longer protect them. No relief gunship teams had yet arrived and Taylor did not know when any would, and no Huey "slicks" (troop transport helicopters) were yet available. The Cobra had no internal cargo hold to carry the team, but Wildcat 2 had to be lifted out of the area immediately and Taylor knew his Cobra was the only option available to the LRRP's. The "Quarter Cav" never left LRRP's in contact, and he was determined to not even leave this team on the ground, regardless of what that entailed. He, Trickler and their co-pilots could not sit helplessly by while the team got massacred. But Taylor had yet another problem, learned of only later by the LRRP's: When Taylor had radioed his plan to extract the LRRP's on his Cobra, he was ordered by successively higher-level ground commanders that he was not, under any circumstances, to expose his valuable ship and crew in such an unorthodox maneuver. He was told that since the LRRP's were now committed to escape and evade across the rice paddies to the river, they would just have to continue with that strategy until a slick could be brought in to extract them-in the "standard" manner. Taylor immediately, and in no uncertain terms, responded that he was "exercising his prerogative as the senior on-scene commander and was proceeding with the Cobra extraction, regardless of the consequences".

Taylor stopped all illumination rounds except those over the village, and upon his command, the team detonated their claymore mines and moved out, each team member firing up his designated area of responsibility and covering each other. They immediately came under increased fire from the tree line to their south and the village behind them, but kept running and firing. Once they had crossed the gully, unbeknownst to Elsner, Cohn dropped off to lay down covering firing for the rest of the team with his M-79. Hill, still on rear-security, fired a final magazine at the VC in the village and passed through Cohn's position as the rest of the team ran further into the rice paddy.

The team was nearly a hundred meters out into the large rice paddy when they suddenly felt a powerful blast of warm air and noise coming from directly overhead. It was Taylor hovering over them without any running lights. Hill, suddenly realizing that Cohn had still not caught up to the team, turned and screamed for Cohn to "come on". As Cohn leaped to his feet and began running

towards the team, now 70 meters away, he failed to see two VC pursuing and shooting at him. Elsner and Hill immediately opened fire on the two VC and took them out before they could get Cohn. At that point, Taylor was still hovering 50 feet up in the night sky above the team. Then just as Cohn arrived, Taylor dropped the Cobra to the ground ten meters from the team's position and frantically motioned for the LRRP's to climb aboard. The LRRP's at first looked at Taylor and then each other, thinking that the pilot must be insane, but then figured it out and quickly ran to the Cobra. Taylor knew that, given the grim alternatives, the LRRP's would devise some way to secure themselves to the Cobra. Cohn and Hill continued around to the other side of the aircraft, each climbing onto and straddling one of the rocket pods while hanging on to the leading edge of the ordnance pylon. Meanwhile, back on the other side, Elsner quickly snapped off Paddy's extended antenna, and each fired off a final magazine at the enemy weapons flashing in the tree lines behind them. As the aircraft began to slowly lift off of its landing skids, the two LRRP's still on the ground secured themselves with elbow locks on the skid, finally climbing fully onto the skid as the Cobra continued its ascent from the rice paddy.

Moving carefully but steadily upward and away from the area, still taking hits from VC small arms fire, Taylor was finally able to level off at 2,000 feet (out of small arms range) and turn southwest toward Saigon. After about 15 minutes of "white-knuckle" piloting, the "Cobra-turned-troop transport", with all of the LRRP's still aboard, landed gingerly (Taylor could not be sure where Elsner and Paddy had latched onto the Cobra, but suspected they were on the right-side skid) within the fenced confines of the Saigon Waterworks, near Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The team quickly jumped off, motioning their thanks to the Cobra crew via "thumbs-up" and salutes, as Taylor lifted off for his Phu Loi base.

Team Wildcat 2 were later picked up by a Huey slick and taken to 1st Division headquarters at Dian, where they got hot showers and clean clothes and were debriefed by G-2 officers. They were congratulated and told they had done an excellent job. The next morning, Company F Commanding Officer, Capt. Price, and First Sergeant Morton (who had monitored the battle via the radio relay from the FOB team still at the ARVN compound) arrived to congratulate the team and accompany them back to their own base in Lai Khe.

Lt. Taylor, whose Cobra had taken sixteen hits supporting the team during the battle and subsequent extraction, received a Silver Star for his heroic actions that night (though the team had enthusiastically recommended that he receive the Medal of Honor). Elsner, Hill and Cohn were each awarded the Silver Star, and Paddy a Bronze Star with "V" Device, for their actions.

This possibly first, and one of the very few, "Cobra extractions" of the Vietnam war, would go down in the annals of the 1st Infantry Division's Long Range Patrol/Ranger unit and that of D Troop, "Quarter Cav".