

Ever So Quietly, Patrol Waits in Ambush

By SPEC. 4

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LAI KHE, Vietnam (IO) — Spec. 4 Denis Harihan hoped that the small, blinking light on the horizon would be an oncoming jet. He watched the approaching red and yellow lights moving against a clear night sky, his view partially obscured by high grass. Murmuring a sigh of relief, the Seaford, N.Y., native prepared to make his move as the roar of the jet was nearly overhead.

Harihan's "move" was simply to stretch his cramped legs, but he had to accomplish the maneuver without making any noise in the dry, crackling brush in which the team from the 1st Inf. Div.'s Long Range Reconnaissance Detachment (LRRP) had set up their ambush. Next

time, he told himself, he would clear his area of brush before the long, cramped wait.

Set up in ambush formation, the LRRP patrol was in an ideal position to destroy any Viet Cong column that might use a heavily-trodden path nearby. Ten claymore mines covered the "kill zone", with the LRRPs sitting as close to the backblast of the anti-personnel devices as safety allowed. Each individual carried a rifle and hand grenades.

Before arriving at the site, the camouflage-suited reconnaissance men had crossed a river. Every man was wet from the waist down, adding to the discomfort caused by mosquitoes.

Not everyone on the patrol was an old hand at bushwhacking guerrillas. Some of the men, newly assigned to the LRRPs,

would gain valuable experience to be used on far more dangerous longe-range patrols.

S.Sgt. Jack Liesure evaluated the performance of the newcomers. He listened intently for unnecessary and possibly fatal noises; a cough, a dry stick cracking with a pop.

For the first five hours, nothing happened. Liesure, who usually takes the rear security position in an LRRP column, watched one section of the trail. His preference for the rear slot would cost the enemy two dead on a patrol five days later when the Viet Cong would attempt to ambush his LRRP team. On that occasion, Liesure laid back near one end of a small bridge, giving him the chance to shoot two guerrillas who thought all the Americans had ducked into a ditch.

But on this night at five minutes past midnight several members of the ambush patrol thought they heard footsteps on the trail. First Lt. Paul Mattox, the patrol leader, peered through a light-gathering Starlight scope. Elsewhere, green-and-black crayoned "aces shifted gazes to the path. Ten minutes past midnight. Nothing.

During the night, Harihan had thought he saw two figures slipping through the chest-high grass 20 yards in front of him. He hesitated before he fired, and then it was too late to shoot.

Hours later the sun crawled up. Mattox got up on one knee and carefully searched the dim path. He and Liesure made a short reconnaissance before the rest of the patrol got up to pull in the claymore mines and

stretch long-idle muscles.

Each man carefully changed the round in his rifle's chamber before beginning the walk back. Moisture builds up in the chamber during the night and the pressure of the first round detonating might cause a "moisture seal" and failure of the expended round to eject.

Back inside the night defensive perimeter, Liesure critiqued the members of the patrol. "Too much noise," was his first comment, followed quickly with, "Once you get into position and get settled, then you stay that way until you 'blow' the ambush or it gets light.

"Or until a jet comes in low," said Harihan, who thought he had learned a trick that maybe even Liesure didn't know.