

Article

VIETNAM: Cam Sa Raid—aka “The August 4 Caper”



Photo by Cpl Dwight Williams

Description:

A POW from the Cam Sa Raid is escorted to an interrogation team on, or near, Hill 55. Most of the high-value prisoners were taken back to Camp Lauer to be interrogated by 1stLt Tom Marino, 3d CIT officer, and the ITT team.

Author:

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Lieutenant Colonel William G. “Bill” Leftwich Jr. of Germantown, Tenn., was one of those rare individuals with a keen intellect, born to be a Marine officer. When it came to combat tactics, he thought outside the box or beyond what was standard operating procedure for by-the-book officers.

In his first tour in Vietnam in 1965, assigned to the Vietnamese Marine Brigade as an advisor, he earned a Navy Cross and a Purple Heart. In 1970, Leftwich returned to Vietnam to command 2d Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. He reaffirmed his reputation as “a water walker,” someone who could do no wrong when it came to innovative tactics.

On 4 Aug. 1970, Leftwich and Major John S. Grinalds, 2/1’s operations officer, sat down with the 3d Counterintelligence (CIT) officer, First Lieutenant Thomas H. “Tom” Marino, and 2/1’s intelligence officer, Second Lieutenant Gilford A. “Gil” Robinson, to come up with what the division called the Cam Sa Raid (Marino favored the more flippant “The August 4 Caper” for the name of the operation).

They planned a daring daylight heliborne raid against an estimated 30 Viet Cong (VC) cadre commanders and their small security detachment. The local enemy leaders gathered regularly in a large field just inside the Republic of Korea Marine Corps' area of operation below Cam Sa, between Phong Ha and Quang Ha, seven kilometers or "clicks" due south of Camp Lauer.

The Marine battalion was working off intelligence from a captured female member of the VC's District III Da Nang Headquarters Complex. The Marines assaulted the area by foot and tracked vehicles on three occasions after they received the information without success.

Coordinating the air operation was LtCol Douglas A. "Doug" McCaughey Jr., commander of Marine Light Helicopter Squadron 167. McCaughey would be aboard the command and control (C&C) UH-1 Huey. McCaughey was surprised when Leftwich and Grinalds came to the Marble Mountain Air Facility (MMAF), near Da Nang, and sat down with all the flight participants, which included aircraft from his squadron, HML-367, call sign "Scarface," and the "Purple Foxes" of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364, to plan every detail. He was impressed at how well the daytime heliborne assault was organized and that everyone was able to provide input.

On 2 Aug., "Sundance," a 16-year-old Vietnamese youth who came "over" to the Marines under the Chieu Hoi, or Open Arms Program, found out that the target area had minefields to the north and south, but none to the east or west. The VC's evasive tactics would be to lure any approaching Marines into the minefields, through which they knew a path either to the north or south. Sundance saved many Marines from serious injury or possible death with that important information.

The Marine AH-1 Cobras were assigned to stop the enemy's escape. The Marines on the ground would pursue any VC trying to run out of the area to the east or west.

The 3d Platoon, Company G, 2/1 platoon leader, 2dLt Michael R. "Mike" Greene, would offload from CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters on top of and around the objective in the northeast corner of Dien Ban District. Reinforcing Golf-3 was an S-2 Recon squad and 3d CIT/Interrogation Team (CIT/ITT) personnel. The battalion S-2, 2dLt Robinson, and Sergeant Wayne "Rock" Inouye would control the Recon squad, while 1stLt Marino was in charge of the 3d CIT detachment. Altogether, 63 Marines, corpsmen and a few CIT/ITT Vietnamese troops would be in the heliborne assault.

Due to the tight security, the bush Marines wouldn't be briefed on their target until one hour before liftoff. The innovative aerial envelopment didn't include the use of blocking forces or recon overflights that might give the plan away. The closely guarded "Top Secret" operation kicked off at 1415, Tuesday, 4 Aug., as four Sea Knights from the Purple Foxes squadron arrived at Camp Lauer's landing zone to pick up the assault force. The transport helicopters headed north rather than directly toward the suspected enemy meeting site to the south.

At the same time, the HML-167 C&C Huey gunship flown by 1stLt L. M. "Larry" Thrasher and copiled by LtCol McCaughey, with Maj Grinalds and 1stLt Marino aboard, flew southwest toward Hill 55 from 2/1's LZ. The two Scarface Cobra gunships led by the HML-367 commander, LtCol Harry Sexton, also flew over Camp Lauer, giving the Sea Knights overhead protection as 2/1's grunts ran aboard the transports. The Cobras broke off their gunship escort of the Sea Knights near Marble Mountain Air Facility and went into a holding pattern.

The four HMM-364 pilots/copilots were 1stLts Steve Cook and Jim Gillies; 1stLts Walt Wise and John Narney; 1stLts Bob Marshall and Gary Benson; and the flight leader, Maj Duane Jensen, and 1stLt Pat Kenny. Aug. 4 became part of the Corps' rich heliborne-assault history.

Greene explained that the VC knew where helicopters were headed by the direction in which they left Camp Lauer, so the diversionary tactic was to fool the VC early-warning system. That system involved hand signals and raising farm implements (e.g., a hoe) to indicate the Marine helicopters' general flight paths, which they passed along village to village down the coast so the VC could disperse into tunnels and nearby villages.

Robinson said there were enemy air guards on Marble Mountain who were part of the VC's early-warning system. The Marine units usually ran heliborne operations early in the morning, looking to drop in on any unsuspecting VC, so it was essential that no operation kicked off from Camp Lauer in the early morning, or the air guards would sound the alert for their compatriots to scatter. The VC relaxed around midday to midafternoon since they knew the Marines never ran a heliborne operation in the heat of the day. That's why 1400 was chosen as the time to launch the mission.

Just north of Da Nang, the unescorted Sea Knights took a heading due east over the South China Sea. The helicopters disappeared over the horizon beyond Monkey Mountain, leaving Da Nang Harbor behind before dropping down to below 800 feet in their turn south out over the South China Sea. At a predesignated point, Maj Jensen's flight of Sea Knights turned back west toward the shoreline and passed along a code word for the Huey and Cobras to break off their holding patterns and head for the VC commanders' meeting site.

Receiving the code word, the C&C Huey orbiting Hill 55 to the west headed east, and the two Cobras near MMAF flew back to the south at 130 knots. The three flight paths had a time and distance calculation predetermined to make their turns toward the target area so they would arrive simultaneously from the north, east and west.

"I remember we flew out to sea and couldn't see the land anymore. Then we flat-hatted so low we thought we were gonna get our feet wet! The idea was to stay out of sight [of shoreline pickets] as long as possible. The 46s turned until we were headed back due west toward shore and came in right over the sand dunes [4 clicks inland off the South China Sea], dropping us right on the money! I was amazed!" said Greene. VC commanders and bodyguards were caught flat-footed.

“Our planned landing scheme was for me as division flight leader to land forward and to the right in the LZ. My wingman would have landed to my left, perhaps 50 meters. The second section leader would have landed at my 6 o’clock, and ‘tail-end Charlie’ would have landed at the section leader’s left,” recalled Maj Jensen. “By design, we would have formed a square 50 meters on a side. Because there were buildings and paddy dikes in our LZ, each plane commander had to pick his own landing site, and that may have skewed the actual landing pattern somewhat.”

The HMM-364 helicopters carrying the three squads and attachments landed far enough apart to encircle the bunkers of the suspected VC cadre commanders’ meeting area. The bunkers were adjoining dugouts formed in what was a small semicircle so that they could stay hidden in bunkers and still hold a conference as though they were sitting at a corporate conference table, according to Kenny.

The 63-man Marine/Vietnamese ground force had action from the get-go. The C&C “bird” and Cobras arrived at the same time and menacingly orbited the four insertion points over a 1,000-meter square area.

“It was a classic assault. We landed 20 yards from the main VC bunker ... and were ordered to not open fire so as not to hit friendly troops offloaded on the ground taking prisoners. As we hit the ground, we could see the VC in the bunker in front of us and to both sides of the helicopter,” said Kenny.

“There was a VC who jumped up 10 to 20 yards in front of us and could have easily killed both Major Jensen and me. But he was so shocked, he decided to take off running and fired his AK47 back at us over his shoulder without looking. The rounds kicked up all around the front of the aircraft as he was shooting low. If he had taken the time to aim, I wouldn’t be here.”

Greene enthusiastically recalled, “We ran off the ramps and could hear the ‘Pop! Pop! Pop!’ of AK47s taking us under fire! My guys aggressively started chasing the people who were firing at them. This was a first for them to have legitimate targets in broad daylight!”

“I ran off the second helicopter to land. We caught them in the middle of eating. The VC were just stunned that the helicopters came in so fast right on top of them! They were running around like gnats on speed. We weren’t supposed to be operating that way,” said Robinson, who disembarked with his S-2 Recon team and 3d CIT/ITT troops.

Golf-3 and its reinforcements chased the VC all over the wide field that was sprinkled with bunkers used to protect them from artillery fire. Cornered in a bunker, some VC threw grenades at the Marines, who returned the favor by throwing in their own concussion grenades. Robinson noted that rather than trying to kill the VC in the bunkers with M26 baseball grenades, the idea was to use concussion grenades to stun them and take them prisoner.

“As we discharged the troops, Bob [Marshall] reached for his camera to document the scene. At that moment three men popped up over a shallow dune to our 1 o’clock about 50 yards away. One guy in a white shirt appeared unarmed, but the other two had AK47s and began to raise their weapons in our direction. Bob ordered our gunners to fire. At that point, I was yelling at them, ‘Run! Run!’ but I’m not sure if it was audible. Our aircraft, named ‘The Grateful Dead,’ was armed with two .50-caliber machine guns and a mini-gun, which fires about 6,000 rounds per minute,” noted Benson.

“Our door gunner [crew chief Sergeant Kenneth V. “Buzz” Sawyer] and door gunners [Sergeant Major S. D. Brant and Lance Corporal D. J. Hyche] opened up on them as they turned to flee. One of them was lifted off the sand and appeared to be undergoing multiple hits and amputations in midair while one of the others briefly appeared to accelerate from the impacts,” recalled Benson. “I’ve always wondered who the guy in the white shirt was and if he might’ve been one of the principal objectives of the mission.”

“We spotted one male with an AK47 who fired three or more bursts at our [Huey] aircraft. The crew chief [Corporal Dwight R. Williams] returned fire and killed the shooter,” stated one after-action report. “The door gunner, [Cpl John T.] J. T. Bouley, laid fire in front of three men running to make them stop. One had a rifle and another a pistol. They split up as two of the men lay down in the grass, while the third man with the pistol kept running. The door gunner shot the single man in the leg. He fell and immediately shot himself in the head.”

The suicide of what turned out to be a VC lieutenant colonel when he realized the hopelessness of the situation was a high compliment to the Marines’ successful attack plan. Other high-ranking VC officers followed their colonel’s example and ended their lives inside the bunkers.

Thrasher and McCaughey’s Huey took one hit from ground fire in its “right transmission and cowling” and saw “one VC/NVA male firing at the aircraft and tracers going by the windshield.”

A VC fired several wild shots at the Marines and began to run from the field at a fast clip. Greene pulled out a green-smoke flare and popped it. He reached for the radio handset from his radio operator at his side. “The pilots were begging for us to give them something to shoot. At first I told them I couldn’t give them a target to shoot at in this mess. So here was this guy running away straight outbound. I called overhead and told them a guy 75 meters due east from that green smoke, running like hell, had shot at me, so you can shoot at him.

“Whereupon it was ‘WA-A-A-A-A! WA-A-A-A-A!’ and their guns turned him to toast. As far as I know, we weren’t shooting anybody that didn’t need it. We didn’t sustain one single casualty.”

Robinson said one VC made it into a tunnel near the river. The two teenage Chieu Hois, Sundance and Butch, had briefed the Marines on the tunnels coming out on the river embankment. The Marines ran for the river and

shot the VC as he emerged from the tunnel. “The Intelligence officer, Gil Robinson, accompanied the raid and captured one of the Viet Cong as he ran out of a bunker into Robinson’s arms,” recalled Grinalds.

Robinson said one of his S-2 scouts ran down the ramp of the Sea Knight and immediately tackled a man dressed as a woman, taking him prisoner. Greene said his own men were seizing prisoners of war rather than killing them as well.

The final tally was 12 enemy troops killed in action and 12 POWs (three were wounded in action), four AK47s, two K54 pistols, one SKS rifle, 12 magazines, 12 M26 grenades, two ChiCom grenades, 782 gear, clothing, foodstuffs, medical supplies and two pounds of documents including top-secret papers of the VC District III Da Nang (DIIID) personnel, organization and activities. Among the 12 KIAs were several high-ranking VC leaders.

Also, three POWs who were WIA included the District III Da Nang doctor, the VC tax collector for Region 606 and the Region 606 hamlet economic cadre leader.

Later, during interrogation of the POWs, they said that if they had been given five more minutes, the assault force wouldn’t have caught them. The margin of success, in other words, was a matter of five minutes or less!

The VC who surrendered turned over important documents to the Marines. Sundance and Butch showed the Marines how to look for other documents in the scattered trash piles around the bunkers. Important lists of VC cells, planned upcoming activities and enemy rosters were uncovered hidden in the trash. With the Vietnamese interpreters along from CIT/ITT and the two boys, the Marines were able to interrogate the POWs in the field and obtain crucial information to act on in real time. Robinson said the rich intell haul led to other successful operations in quick succession.

Another one of the keys to success for the midday heliborne raid was Leftwich and Grinalds’ decision to leave their Vietnamese counterparts out of the loop.

“The major assumption the enemy made was that we would coordinate with Vietnamese authorities, where their spies were located, before we commenced an attack. We never did that, and, as a consequence, they had no warning,” stated Grinalds.

By not coordinating their raid with the local “friendly” Vietnamese hierarchy, the Marines caught the VC commanders completely unaware and so sure of their safety they didn’t have the necessary armed escort. Nor could they scurry down into their well-hidden tunnels or melt into nearby forests to await the Marines’ departure, according to Grinalds.

“The results were beyond my fondest hopes. We’ve played cat and mouse with them for a long time. We’ve had several unsuccessful efforts to kill or capture these people, and we feel this will have a significant long-term impact on the direction of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese activities in the Da Nang area,” said LtCol Leftwich. The firefight and roundup of prisoners from start to finish lasted only 25 minutes!

It turned out to be a bonanza for 2/1. Golf-3, ITT and CIT, with help from above [Cobras, Huey and Sea Knights], cut the legs out from under the VC command infrastructure in that part of the Quang Nam Province for some time. Leftwich later was awarded a well-deserved Silver Star for engineering the bold heliborne attack and its star-studded outcome.

Author’s note: This condensed excerpt comes from Chapter 12, “Book II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & ‘Docs.’ ” LtCol Bill Leftwich Jr., who orchestrated the Cam Sa Raid, was killed in a helicopter accident in the Que Son Mountains, 18 Nov. 1970. To honor his memory, the Leftwich Trophy is given each year to the most outstanding Marine captain.