

OPERATION AUBURN

July 31, 1999

BY LANNY JOHNSON

Operation Auburn officially began on the morning of December 28, 1967. As I remember it was a clear but slightly hazy morning. At about 8:35 a.m. Echo Company 2nd Battalion 3rd Marines departed the 3/5 area where we had staged the night before. We did not have enough choppers to lift the whole company at the same time, so we departed in waves.

I was in 2nd platoon, which was one of the first waves to land at LZ Hawk. At about 9:40 a.m. the first elements of Echo had accidentally caused the N.V.A. to spring their ambush prematurely. We had not only walked into an ambush, but right into the middle of a reinforced u-shaped N.V.A. strong hold. By 9:55 a.m. the bodies of more than 50 Marines lay dead, wounded or dying. Due to a series of unfortunate events that followed, coordination of our forces broke down. Choppers were forced to land the remaining Echo troops further and further to the west. There was also a problem with receiving artillery as well as a communications problem that resulted from frequency limitations on the PRC-25 radios. Because of these and other situations, Echo Co. pretty much faced most of the rest of the day without help. Had it not been for the F-4's and the bravery of the remaining Marines, Echo 2/3 could very well have ceased to exist that day.

The following is a brief summary of the best recollections that I have of the first morning of operation Auburn: The word was, we were going to be on an operation. I later would find out the operation was named Auburn. Our primary responsibility would be that of a blocking force.

We staged in 3/5 area the night before. We got an early start on the morning of December 28th and were heading to our assigned area for the operation. I'd only been in Viet Nam for eighteen days. There were few details of the operation at that point. We'd been equipped with gas masks before leaving Echo area. Rumor was, the NVA in our area may have had tear gas. It was our understanding that we would secure an area to set up a blocking force that night and that the following day a sweeping action would take place from the west toward our blocking position. We were strongly reinforced with attachments and we had some press personnel with us.

As we moved forward from the LZ, we were spread out in a column with about ten meters between each Marine. At around 9:35 a.m., we entered an area that appeared to be an old overgrown cemetery. The cemetery was mostly to our right

and in knee high elephant grass. About forty meters to our left was a long straight tree and hedge line. Behind us were a lot of open rice paddies. For some reason the column halted. I could hear the radio and I heard one of the M-60 machine gun team's request permission from the CO to test fire a new M-60 machine gun, while we were held up. The answer came back, negative. About 30 seconds later, the word came back on the radio to let the M-60 crew shoot a few rounds low into the ground.

I heard the sound of the M-60, about ten rounds, then silence. The first elements of Echo Company were standing in a long column in front of the tree line. The tree line opened fire on us. The blood of Echo Company seemed to be all over everything. I hit the ground and began to return fire with my M-16 on full automatic. It was definitely a full automatic situation. Unfortunately, times being what they were my M-16 wouldn't fire more than three rounds before it jammed the first time. I had a cleaning rod taped to the bottom of my rifle just for that type of incident. I quickly ripped it from the tape, rammed it down the bore, knocked the jammed cartridge from the chamber and reloaded a round into the rifle. All this, while numerous enemy rounds were hitting within inches of me. I quickly fired off several more rounds on semi-automatic before my rifle jammed for the second time.

Then I smelled the gas in the air. My gas mask was fastened to the back of my pack. I was pinned down so tight by enemy fire that it made it almost impossible to get to the mask. I finally removed the mask and my backpack while lying flat on my stomach, because turning on my side was giving the enemy too high of a profile to shoot at. I put on my gas mask only to find that one lens had been broken. Luckily, the gas quickly drifted away and wasn't that much of a factor. I continued firing and clearing jams from my M-16. Someone crawled up to me and told me our situation was extremely serious. He told me to continue to fire as many rounds as I could toward the tree line. I told him that I had gotten another one of those really "crappie" M-16's and that I was having to clear every fourth or fifth cartridge from the chamber.

He crawled away and came back about fifteen seconds later. He gave me an M-16 covered with bone, blood and skin. I said to him, "Where did you get this from?" He said, "They're laying all over the place." He told me "I have to check things out. If I'm not back in five minutes or so, fall back until you see someone on our side. If you don't see anybody, you're probably on your own."

I waited for what seemed like a half an hour. He never came back. I then moved back. It wasn't easy. At that point I couldn't see the enemy but they seemed to see

me quite well, rounds popping all around me. I fell back about 50 yards. In an open area surrounded by knee high elephant grass, I ran into some of what was left of Echo. It seemed like an impossible situation and then the F-4s appeared. Someone yelled out "air panels down." I had an air panel in my helmet. We laid down our air panels and the F-4s laid down their ordinance. Had it not been for the many missions that the F-4s ran for us that day, Echo Co. might have been totally annihilated well before the sun set. Between the F-4 saturations, we crawled out and retrieved what we could of the dead and wounded. We also tried to retrieve weapons so they couldn't be used against fellow Marines. As the F-4's started to take some of the pressure off, a few of the guys were able to set up an LZ behind us so that we could start air lifting the dead and wounded out. Most of the Marines we took to the choppers to be lifted out were very seriously wounded. Several asked the same favor, "Please don't let me die".

These requests were a very heavy burden for a twenty-year-old to carry, because a lot of them did die. No matter what we did to help, they are gone. One of the young Marines who stuck in my mind the most, even though he was just one of many, was Ernesto Tarango. I carried Ernest to the LZ. There was no chopper there. There were many bodies lying on the ground wounded or perhaps dead.

I laid Ernest down. His eyes were closed. I was checking his body. His shirt was covered with blood. I was concerned that he may have had a sucking chest wound. I wanted to close it up. He opened his eyes and said, "Please don't let me die here". I said "Don't worry buddy, you're not going anywhere but home". He just struggled to stay alive. He must have passed out two or three times while we were waiting for the chopper, but everytime he woke up he said the same thing, "Please don't let me die here". The chopper came and I loaded him on. I didn't even have a chance to pray that he would make it. There were more people to carry to the LZ and more people who did not want to die. Among them was my friend, John Delozier from Tucson, who I had known before I enlisted in the Marine Corps. Ernesto Tarango, John Delozier and I had all been in Viet Nam for only eighteen days. In the end, both Tarango and Delozier would die on their eighteenth day.

Many more things happened on that day and many people died. One I knew before I joined the Marine Corps, and some I had known while I was in the Marine Corps, but all of whom I was with when they died on that day of December 28th 1967, Quang Nam Province, Republic of Viet Nam. I kept a diary while I was in Viet Nam. After this incident, I didn't keep so many names.

Respectfully submitted with quiet reverence for those who gave everything.

Lanny Johnson

Killed In Action

SSGT SALOME HERNANDEZ
SGT HENRY L. MORGAN
CPL ROBERT L. BOYER
CPL RICHARD L. CARLSON
CPL JAMES B. COX
LCPL PATRICK N. ANGLIM
LCPL CARL E. CHAMBERLAIN
PFC DAVID A. BLOUGH
PFC JOHN A. DELOZIER
PFC BYRON A. GAINES JR.
PFC THOMAS B. HOLDBROOKS
PFC ARTURO M. LARA
PFC LEO MENENDEZ JR.
PFC STEVEN D. MUNDEN
PFC DENNIS C. SMITH
PFC RONALD J. STRECKERT
PFC ERNESTO TARANGO
PFC HERBERT O. ZINNEL JR.
PFC GERALD W. ZIY
HODGE

PFCC EDDIE RIGGINS

Wounded In Action

PFC ANTONY WYATT
PFC PATRICK LEMELLE
PFC PERCY TOWNS
PFC JOHN KRAUSE
PFC EDWARD GARRETT
SGT B. W. GARRETT
LCPL MICHAEL TAYLOR
PFC FRANK DYRSO
PFC JAMES WHITE
PFC ROBERT RYAN
LCPL THOMAS KLIMEC
SGT DOUGLAS KIRANY
PFC JOHN JOHNSON
LCPL JAMES AYRES
PFC TERENCE BURKERT
PFC CHARLES COX
PFC GREGORY CUSKELLY
PFC ROBERT GREEN
PFC RONALD

LCPL KENNETH KOROLYK
PFC EDDIE RIGGINS
PFC JAMES ROLAND
PFC LAWRENCE GRANT
LCPL MARK BANKS
PFC CHARLES BELL
PFC ROBERT VIOLA

THIS LIST IS ACCURATE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AT THIS TIME. MORE RESEARCH MUST BE DONE TO MAKE THIS LIST ABSOLUTLY ACCURATE AND COMPLETE. ANY NEW INFORMATION ANYONE MIGHT HAVE WOULD BE APPRECIATED.

THANK YOU. Lanny Johnson