

This is one of John Mattinglys stories:

**DET. 2, 3rd RRU**  
**AN EXPERIENCE IN VIET NAM**  
**1965, PROBABLY EARLY AUGUST**



From left to right Rolland Schearer, next Staff Sgt Richard Roberts, third is John Mattingly and fourth is Jerome Peterson.

I was bored. We had been filling sandbags for weeks. Our equipment had not yet arrived in Bien Hoa, so we had not much to do except fill sandbags and build bunkers.

About 6 weeks after arriving in Bien Hoa, someone came around asking for volunteers to try something new: intercepting company-level VC radio communications while on a sweep. If successful, it could enable a very quick attack by the infantry guys conducting the sweep and/or possibly avoid a VC ambush. They needed 4 men: a sergeant, a linguist to translate Vietnamese, a radio man and a guy to carry extra batteries for the backpack radio (PRC-26?). At the time, it sounded better than filling sandbags, so I volunteered to carry batteries. I regret that I cannot remember the names of the other 3 Det. 2 guys.

So the 4 of us set out in a jeep. We were assigned to the Weapons Platoon of whatever company it was (maybe I can locate this info later). I had never heard of a Weapons Platoon. I learned that they are the guys with the machine guns, mortars, mines (Claymores, etc.) and explosives such as C-4. Our convoy traveled 2 - 3 hours as I recall and we set up a base camp in a rubber plantation. Deuce-and-a-halves then took us an hour or so from the base camp and dropped us off. There were 4 companies dropped off in different locations.

We set out on the sweep and over the next 3 days, I gained a real admiration for our foot soldiers. These men would walk for miles carrying heavy loads without complaining. For example, 2 men shared the load of each mortar base plate and 2 others carried the tubes. (There was a 60mm and a 90mm mortar.) Guys carried M-60s and some carried 2 ammo boxes each of linked rounds for them.

The guys with Claymores had them strapped all around their bodies. The demo guys had C-4 in pouches hanging on them. All this was in addition to their regular personal equipment.

The other platoons were regular rifle soldiers with lighter loads to react quicker. Every hour or so, word would be passed back along the column to take a break. It was hot and everyone sat on the ground. Word was passed to "smoke 'em if you got 'em." When the short break was over, word was passed to "saddle up." It was amazing to me: After a short break in very hot temperatures, not one soldier complained. They were immediately on their feet and ready to go.

On the first full day, the guys up front found a VC tunnel complex. No one was home, but I can't imagine being the first guy down the hole because he didn't know who or what he would find down there. Our demo guy went in for about 10 minutes. They came out and everyone cleared back about 100 yards, then for the first time in my life I heard the phrase, "Fire in the hole!" The demo guy squeezed the igniter and there was a large underground explosion with one secondary explosion. The ground vibrated, but it wasn't all that loud.

We hung around longer than I would have expected. Then, I heard what I thought was an incredibly long and loud burst of thunder. But there was not a cloud in the sky. As I was remarking on this, a guy sitting opposite me pointed out the 2 long streaks of smoke in the sky to my rear. Then the Huey appeared and fired 2 more 3.5 inch rockets. They were the source of the thunder and smoke. That explained why we had stayed for so long; someone had spotted some VC and the Huey was taking care of them. Later the same day we stopped and the platoon radio man said 3 VC had been spotted and were hiding in the bushes about a half mile ahead. Our guys quickly set up the 60mm mortar and fired a round. That was when I found out that mortars actually make a loud noise when fired, not the "thunk" you hear on TV. According to the radio man, the 2<sup>nd</sup> mortar round killed all 3. Then it was "saddle up" again.

The next day the grunts found a large VC rice cache. It was stored on a frame made of bamboo and small trees, deep in the jungle. The roof over the frame was made of large sheets of uncut Coca Cola cans. I can't imagine where they got those. I climbed up on the large bags of rice and saw that every one of them had an American flag stamped on it along with the statement, "Donated by the People of the United States of America." Apparently the rice had been stolen from shipments intended for villages that needed it.

It was mid-day, so the platoons set up a perimeter and we settled in to eat some tasty C rations. The demo guy pinched off some C-4, rolled it in little balls about the size of marbles and handed them out to those who wanted them. I had no idea what was going on. They guys touched matches to the C-4 and it burned fiercely to heat the C rations! This whole sweep thing was an enlightenment to me. I had taken off my steel pot and leaned my M-14 against a tree while eating. They were about 10 - 15 feet from where I sat to eat. Suddenly, an M-60 opened up with several bursts and there was some small arms fire. This was about 30 yards from where I sat. The whole thing lasted only 20 - 30 seconds. It seems that 3 VC were unaware that we were there and had apparently come to get some rice. It was a one-way trip for them.

As for me, when I heard the initial M-60 burst, I sprinted for my helmet and M-14 and ran smack into a tree. I dropped to the ground, slammed my helmet on and aimed my rifle in the direction of the action. I didn't really see anything. After a couple of minutes, someone shouted "all clear" and we started to get up. One of the guys looked at me and said, "You're bleeding." I said, "Where?" He told me that my face was bleeding. I guess I was numb, because I didn't feel a thing. I found that the area

beneath my right eye was swollen and bleeding pretty good. So I walked over to a medic who was up on the rice and asked him to take a look at it. He sealed the cut with some kind of liquid stuff and put a patch on it. Then he told me I was entitled to a Purple Heart and asked if I wanted him to report it. I told him no thanks – I would be embarrassed to tell the story of how I got wounded by a tree.

The rice was so deep in the jungle that it was not possible to remove it (it was many tons), so when we moved on, the demo guy and a few others stayed behind. After we had been walking for a while, we heard the explosion. I guess rice rained all over the jungle.

The next day, we had the distinct pleasure of crossing a rice paddy. Water was up to the middle of my thighs. There was no cover. It was a very exposed feeling, especially after the previous day's events. I'm happy to say nothing happened. At least not then. We returned to the base camp late that afternoon. The other companies had not yet returned. The linguist, the radio man and I were sitting around with nothing to do, so they decided to see what they could pick up on the radio.

At this point, a word of explanation is necessary. Attached to each backpack radio was a piece of voice crypto gear called a KY-8. It's a small device and very easy to use. It only requires that the key be set at the proper time(s) each day, and otherwise it worked automatically. It made it impossible for anyone without a KY-8 and the correct key to listen in on our radio transmissions. All they would hear was a steady, uninterrupted, high pitched hiss. Unfortunately, it was possible to bypass the KY-8 and talk on the radio in the clear. The frequency would be the same but the conversation would not be encrypted. The only reason to do this is if you didn't want to take the 5 or so minutes to set the key.

So we were sitting there listening to anything we could find on the airwaves and we heard something shocking. A lieutenant in one of the companies still out on the sweep was transmitting in the clear. He was calling our base camp. When he made contact, he gave his coordinates and said they would return to the base camp in a couple of hours. He said he wanted hot meals for his men – no C rations. To say that the 3 of us were freaked out is an understatement. We were stunned that he gave his location and plans in the clear. We found a captain and reported our concern. We were told, "Don't worry about it."

That night, I'm not sure what time it was, but it was dark, we heard the ambush. I'm guessing it was only a mile or so from us based on how loud the firefight was. The 3 of us knew what had happened. The VC heard the radio communication between the lieutenant and the base camp – the one we heard broadcast in the clear. Based on the company's location, there was only a single-lane dirt road leading to our camp. The convoy had to use it to return. We later learned that the VC had attached a 105mm shell (or similar explosive) to a tree limb and dropped it in the bed of the lead deuce-and-a-half. That knocked out the truck's rear end and stopped the whole convoy. Then they started shooting from the trees and foxholes. Of course, our guys bailed out of the trucks into the ditch alongside the road. The VC had run det cord down a length of the ditch, which they then set off. The firefight lasted about 10 minutes. There was no time for any of the guys in the base camp to join the fight. A little while after the shooting stopped, a truck was sent out to tow the lead truck from the convoy back to the base camp, thus clearing the road for the rest. When they brought the dead and wounded in on the trucks, I helped carry them to the medical tent for triage. After a couple of trips I was talking aloud to myself and I know I sounded anguished. I was saying something like, "Why did he transmit in the clear? What was he thinking? There was no need for this!

That was so stupid!" An infantry sergeant standing next to me told me to calm down, that there was nothing that could be done about it now. I guess what he said did help me to focus a little. I looked

down and saw a soldier lying on a stretcher on the ground. I told the sergeant we should carry him to the tent. He said it was too late and turned the soldier's head to show that a large part of it was gone. He said there were guys on the truck who needed help; that guy could wait.

They laid our dead soldiers in a row and it was surreal to look at them. Some of the wounded were very torn up, while a couple of the dead didn't look injured at all. Their fatigues were mostly wet. One, a lieutenant, had only a small hole in his chest. Every time I think of this incident, I wonder if he was the one who had broadcast in the clear.

After triage, the less seriously wounded were set aside to wait for treatment. One black guy was sitting on the ground next to a truck. He had a badly broken leg and his upper lip was mangled on one side. I sat next to him and talked with him for a while. We were about 10 yards from the medical tent.

Then an amazing thing happened: We were taking automatic weapons fire from the trees! At least that's what I first thought. Tracers were coming down all over the area. I remember thinking these exact words: "How did they get in the trees?" The black guy and I scrambled under the truck for cover. Tracers kept coming for what seemed like forever, but it probably was only 30 seconds or so. Someone was on a radio shouting, "You're shooting at US! You're shooting at your own guys!" Then it stopped. A Huey had seen a shaft of light coming out of the medical tent and opened up on it. They didn't know we were there. They thought it was VC.

Surprisingly, only one guy got hit – just a graze on the forehead. Later that night, around 2:00am, I got in my hammock and closed the mosquito net. Probably 3 - 4 times before dawn, when I heard the sound of weapons near or far, I popped the net open and rotated the hammock to put myself on the ground with my helmet and rifle. I got very good at it.

As I lay in my hammock that night, I listened as someone was reporting the results of the action on a radio, probably transmitting back to Bien Hoa. I remember it like it was yesterday: "5 Kilo India Alpha; 26 Whiskey India Alpha." It was all so senseless and unnecessary. The next morning, our sergeant told the other 3 of us to get our stuff and get in the jeep; we were going back to Bien Hoa. He declined to stay with the infantry sweep any longer. I've never felt good about leaving like that, but we had no say in it.

We never did pick up any company-level VC radio transmissions. Regrettably, they heard one of ours. The press release reported only "light" American casualties. All I know is that there are 5 names on The Wall that shouldn't be there.