

THE BATTLE AT FRENCHIE'S PLANTATION

September 7-10, 1969

Ty Dodge

The Terra Rouge rubber plantation, known to cav troopers as “Frenchie’s Plantation,” was located in and around Quan Loi, some seventy miles north of Saigon. (See red circle on map at right.) On September 6th, the 3rd Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (The Blackhorse Regiment) road-marched 100 miles from Blackhorse base camp, southeast of Saigon, to



Quan Loi. It was an all-day and most-of-the-night affair, and we were tired, having been shot at along the way.



On the morning of the 7th, the day of our arrival, an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldier by the name of Tran The Hung rallied to friendly forces under the *Chieu Hoi* program. Loosely

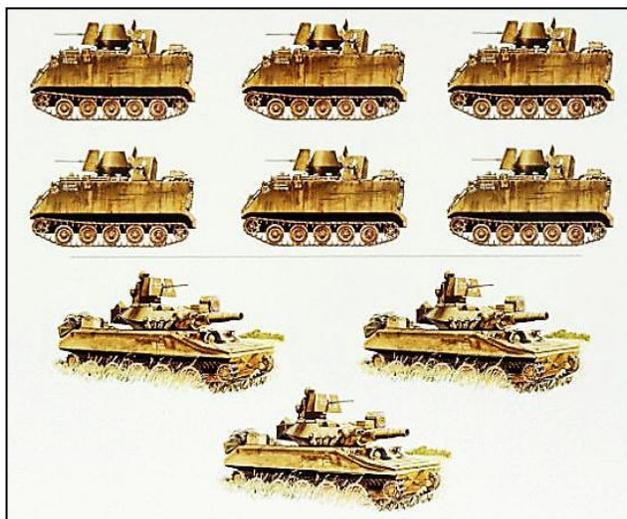


translated as “Open Arms,” *Chieu Hoi* was an initiative by the South Vietnamese to encourage defection to our side by the Viet Cong and their supporters. On



this *Chieu Hoi* pass it says, “SAFE-CONDUCT PASS TO BE HONORED BY ALL VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND ALLIED FORCES,” and shows a picture of a smiling South Vietnamese soldier welcoming his “former” enemy as he points the way to a better life! Tran revealed that elements of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of the NVA 9th Division were operating in Frenchie’s, so I Troop and M Company were given the task of rooting them out.

I Troop, to which I was assigned as 3rd Platoon Leader, had three cavalry platoons, each with six ACAVs (Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles) and three Sheridans (light tanks). We referred generically to all them as “tracks.” A cavalry platoon was the most heavily armed ground force of its size in the world. Each of my ACAVs brought to bear a .51 caliber machine gun and two M-60 machine guns, and each Sheridan mounted a .50 caliber machine gun, a 7.62mm coaxial machine gun, and a 152mm (that’s *huge!*) main gun. In total, we carried twenty-four



machine guns and three main tank guns, not to mention all the miscellaneous small arms, C-4, Claymores, and other destructive paraphernalia we could load on board. For any 19-year old kid bent on breaking things, a cavalry platoon was a dream come true.

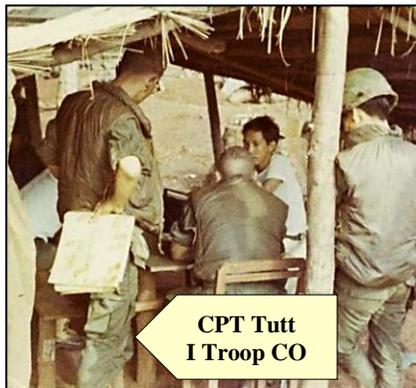
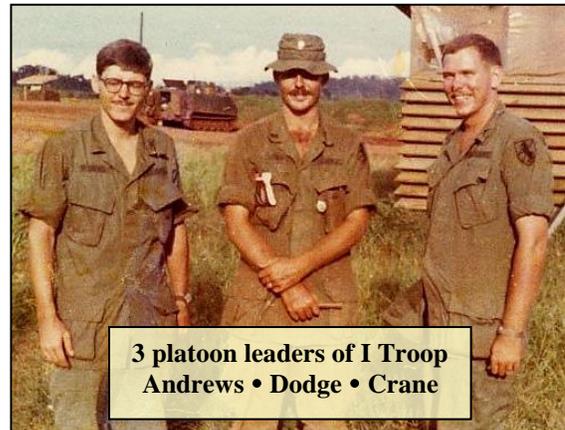


We also had a bit of bravado emblazoned on our tracks. COL George Patton, Jr., who had recently served as commanding officer of the 11th ACR, had stenciled in cavalry yellow on the hatch cover of every track, “Standing Order for Troopers of the 11th US Cavalry: Find the Bastards - Then Pile On.” The tactic



was to send a small force to find the enemy and tear into him, while a larger force was brought in, if necessary, to finish him off. So, that’s what we set out to do.

The plan was for I Troop to move into the rubber from the south while M Company, our tank company, moved in from the northeast, the object being to catch the enemy between the proverbial rock and a hard place. L Troop, to the northwest of Frenchie’s, served as a blocking force to engage any NVA who made a break for the Cambodian border. I Troop and M Company went into the rubber with about 120 guys, and we learned later that we’d taken on an enemy force of several thousand. But an armored cav platoon being so well armed, and our M Company tankers being pretty well-armed, too, the odds weren’t really all that bad. I’m glad, though, that no one



told me the odds before we jumped off that morning.

CPT Tutt, my troop commander, moved two platoons of I Troop to a large field just south of the rubber where we fanned out into battle formation. My platoon was online to the left, and Jack Andrews’ 2d Platoon was online to the right. CPT Tutt stationed his command track at the center of our line between the two platoons.

As we moved toward the rubber we began taking heavy small arms, machine gun, and RPG fire. The closer we got, the more intense it became, and by the time we were actually in the rubber it was quite a firestorm.



CPT Tutt was one of those commanders who liked to be in control, and even though things were getting pretty hectic, we were a smooth and cohesive fighting force, with CPT Tutt radioing instructions to Jack and me.

Then something happened that made CPT Tutt's blood boil. Operating among rubber trees, radios often quit talking to each other even when you could see the person with whom you were trying to communicate. And so it was now. Communication between CPT Tutt and Jack ceased to exist. But all was not lost. Tutt could still talk to me, and I could still talk to Jack, so CPT Tutt relayed instructions to Jack through me. We remained a well-coordinated fighting force.

But in combat, as in life, just when you think you've got it under control, you don't. Suddenly my commo with Tutt went out, too, and I could see him, only 50 meters away, having a very bad day. He wanted to talk to his platoon leaders, but couldn't; he was losing control, and that didn't sit well with his personality. I knew that if I didn't get my radios straightened out pretty quickly, I'd soon have more trouble from CPT Tutt than I would from the NVA.

Squatting down into my track, I turned knobs and flipped switches trying to get the radios up, but nothing seemed to work. And now, with no communications at all, we morphed from a single troop fighting a coordinated battle into 18 individual tracks, each fighting its own little battle. Not a great scenario. Of course, we were cocky enough to go after a win anyway, but it would be a lot easier *with* good commo ... and CPT Tutt would be happier, too.

Having no success with my radios, I stood back up in the hatch. Track crewmen wore a CVC (Combat Vehicle Crew) helmet equipped with ear phones, a boom microphone, and a "spaghetti cord" that connected the helmet to the radios. As I stood up, I noticed a flechette stuck, at heart-level, through my spaghetti cord. The Sheridans in my platoon, and the M Company tanks moving toward us through the rubber to our right front, fired main gun rounds we called beehive. Each round blasted a thousand 1-inch long steel darts into the air. It was an extraordinary anti-personnel weapon, and I now found myself on the receiving end of our own guns! Fortunately, only one flechette zeroed in on me, and it was stopped by my spaghetti cord. I changed out the cord and we were back in business, communicating once again and fighting a single, coordinated battle.



Hoping to take my wounded spaghetti cord home as a war trophy, I stuffed it into my duffel bag, but when I was medevaced in November my prize was "liberated" and I returned home without it. Oh well, could have been worse. Or, as we were fond of saying, "Hey, it's just another day at The War."

About 200 meters into the rubber we were brought to a standstill by an NVA .51 caliber machine gun dug into a circular emplacement that offered protection to the gun crew and allowed them to fire in any direction. An interesting note here is that, while our heavy machine guns fired a .50 caliber round, the enemy's heavy machine guns fired a .51 caliber round. The effect was that they could use our ammunition in their guns but we couldn't use their ammunition in ours. Was that a happy accident on their part ... or just plain smart? Hmmm.

Technicalities aside, we had to deal with that gun. It seemed that no matter how much fire we poured into their position, the three NVA gunners continued to do their job, and do it well. Once

again CPT Tutt, who liked to be in control and on the move, was getting restless. Something had to be done, so I grabbed an M-79 grenade launcher (we called them “Thumpers” for the unique sound they made) and fired a round their way. In my haste my aim was off, and not 10 feet from my track the grenade hit a tree. The kill zone for those grenades was 15 feet, and the casualty zone 45 feet! I was quite certain I’d just blown away part of my platoon, myself included! Fortunately, they don’t arm until they’ve been in the air for 90-feet, so nothing happened—a welcome reprieve for one impulsive lieutenant! Except for bruising my ego, no damage was done.



Then I jumped to the ground with an M-16, flipped the selector switch to rock-and-roll, and hosed the enemy position. They didn’t even seem to notice. So I decided to turn sniper. Using a rubber tree to steady my aim, I squeezed off two rounds. To my surprise I actually hit two of them and they went down. The third gunner jumped out of the hole and began running for all he was worth directly across the front of my platoon. You can imagine the reaction of twenty, teenaged, machine gun-wielding cavalry troopers. The whole platoon opened up on him, but he kept right on running till he was out of sight. I don’t know if we had very bad aim that day or he had a very strong urge to get away, but somehow he seemed destined to fight another day.

By midafternoon we’d fought our way to a large clearing in the rubber. I was on the ground at the time and witnessed a horrifying event. Across the clearing, not 50 meters away, a medevac chopper with a large red cross painted on its nose was coming in to pick up our wounded. As it hovered just a few feet off the ground, an RPG streaked from the wood line and turned it into a fireball. I could distinctly see the faces of the pilot and copilot as it went down. I just hope they died quickly. A rather remarkable post script to this vignette came some thirty years later. My wife, Florence, and I were at the National Archives in Washington researching the battle when we learned from an after action report that three of the five crew members actually survived! Halleluiah!

It was also at the edge of the clearing that we found a wounded NVA soldier propped up against a tree. He had fallen victim to a beehive round fired by one of our Sheridans, and was filled with tiny holes. But he was still alive, so we did what American soldiers have done in every war—we gave him aid. My platoon medic shot him up with morphine, stopped the bleeding as best he could, and put him on the next medevac chopper that came in. I don’t know whether he lived or died, but we had done our best to save a warrior no longer in the fight.

It had rained all day and, as the battle died down in the evening, the intensity of the rain increased. As we regrouped, we collected our dead and wounded at one central point, and sometime around nine o’clock called for a medevac. The rain and darkness would give the pilot all the challenge he needed, but we were also deep in a rubber plantation and there was nowhere for him to land. Taking stock of the situation, I told three of my track commanders to knock down enough trees to form a helicopter-sized hole in the rubber. That, by the way, was not an inexpensive decision on my part. Damaged rubber trees cost the American government \$200 each, payable to Frenchie, and that night we were breaking the bank.

Having finally created a very pricey landing pad, I stood at its center with a strobe light to direct the pilot in. With his prop wash lashing a hurricane of wind and rain around us, and his rotor tips whacking branch-tips off trees, we realized that our hole was just a little too small. But he proved once again why chopper pilots were our heroes, and brought it in anyway. We loaded our wounded, and he took his ship back up through the hole and off into the inky night.

The next morning fighting was sporadic, and we found ourselves in the middle of a mostly-deserted, regimental-sized NVA base camp. But not completely deserted. Tunnels and bunkers were all around us, and some still concealed enemy soldiers. We had to get them out.

Being a cavalry outfit, we weren't experienced in tunnel warfare, but someone had to be the first tunnel rat. Who would it be? Ringing in my ears was something my career-Army-officer dad must've told me a thousand times growing up: "Ty, never expect your troops to do anything you wouldn't do, or haven't already done yourself." It was clear to me that I needed to follow Dad's advice, so I armed myself with a flashlight and my .45, and headed in.

Vietnamese are much smaller than Americans, and their tunnels are very narrow—barely wide enough for a set of American shoulders, with little room to raise your head. You sort of had to slither into them on your belly like a snake. I might have been more comfortable about the whole affair had I been a snake just then.

A short distance into the tunnel, with the cold sweat of fear pouring out of me, I could see no farther than the beam of my light. As I approached a bend in that claustrophobic passageway an NVA soldier, grenade in hand, abruptly appeared. Now it was show time! Who could pull the trigger—or in his case, the pin—first?

When you can see the whites of your enemy's eyes and smell the *nouc mam* on his breath, your war becomes very, very personal. And in the rush of the moment, it's amazing how much you can think of in an instant of time. In that split second before I pulled the trigger, a flood of thoughts swept through my mind: "This guy's a soldier doing his duty for his country just like I am for mine ... I wonder if he has a wife back home in Hanoi just like I do in Tuscaloosa ... wonder if he has kids, too?" Then the blast of my .45 blew him back into the darkness and I backpedaled for daylight as fast as I could go. Some guys thrived on the adrenaline rush of tunnels, but after that you couldn't have paid me enough to be a tunnel rat.

The afternoon of the second day the battle died down a bit, and I found myself on the ground again, standing by the rubber tree at the left of this photo. The tracks of Jack's platoon were moving past me on the other side of the tree, each vehicle following precisely in the tracks of the vehicle to its front. "Tracking," we called it. Conventional wisdom had it that if the first track didn't hit a mine, neither would the next, or the next. Our theory



proved faulty that day. The third track in line detonated the biggest anti-tank mine we'd hit during my tour, blowing the tracks and road wheels off, as well as the driver's legs. I couldn't have been more than 5-feet from the blast, but I was shielded completely by the tree. I could hear and feel the shrapnel ripping past me, yet I remained unscathed. Winston Churchill once said, "There is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at without result." I was living proof of that! The driver of the track just a few feet away, unfortunately, wasn't. We medevaced him as quickly as we could, but two weeks later learned that he died.

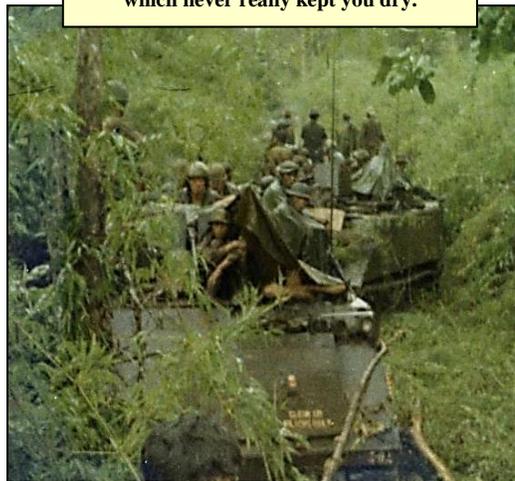


Late that afternoon, CPT Tutt moved the troop out of the rubber and formed an NDP, a night defensive perimeter, in the field where the battle began. An NDP was basically a "circling up of the wagons," just like in the Old West, so we could protect ourselves from attack in any direction.

My last assignment of the day, though, was to "bust jungle" through the bamboo adjacent to the rubber looking for trails the enemy might use to move back into position against us.

Busting jungle was simply a matter of putting my tracks in column and running over anything to our front. But bamboo presented a unique problem in that it was so thick it formed a leafy wall in front of the lead track, blocking the driver's view. He simply couldn't see what was ahead. My solution was to take a radio and three other guys down on the trail so we could voice-guide the platoon behind us. My guys provided the security and I provided the commentary—sort of a pre-Internet Garmin. "A little left ... little more ... tad right ... doing okay now..." For those of us on the ground, having nine snarling tracks busting jungle right behind us—and knowing they couldn't see us—was a pretty hairy deal.

Looking toward the back of my column.
Notice the ponchos ...
which never really kept you dry.



Along the way we found a couple of items of interest. First was a booby trapped 105-mm artillery round next to the trail. Had we triggered it, much of my platoon would have gone out in a blaze of glory. Fortunately we saw the nearly invisible fishing-line tripwire before we set it off, and disarmed it. Booby traps and mines are a lot like rattlesnakes. It's not the ones you see that worry you, it's the ones you don't, and we were never sure how many more were waiting for us. Just beyond the booby trap we found the still-warm coals of a cook fire beside the trail, and rice scattered all around—a clear sign there were still NVA hanging out on our battlefield.

With dusk falling, my platoon was still in the bamboo so my dismounted patrol saddled up and we moved on toward the NDP. I had a Sheridan at the front of my column, and my track was next. Suddenly the Sheridan disappeared. It simply disappeared! One moment it was there, and

then it wasn't. Looked like an illusion you'd see in Vegas. Several of us leaped from our tracks and ran forward through the tangle of broken bamboo to see what happened. The enemy had dug a tank trap—a hole large enough to swallow a tank—and our Sheridan was at the bottom. The good news: the enemy hadn't dropped an anti-tank mine into that hole when they finished digging. So, while the crew had splitting headaches, they were still alive.

We spent the rest of the night pulling our Sheridan out of the hole, expecting at any moment to be ambushed. Fortunately we weren't. By not taking advantage of a cav platoon immobile in the bamboo, the NVA missed a golden opportunity. That was a lick on them.

The third day was spent hunting for, and skirmishing with, the enemy, and that night we NDP'd in the same field where the troop had been the night before. Poor decision. You never wanted to do the same thing twice in Vietnam lest the enemy take advantage of your routine.

As dark fell, CPT Tutt ordered two of us to take ambush patrols out on trails several hundred meters away from the NDP to intercept enemy soldiers returning for a fight. What he didn't take into account was the large irrigation ditch that ran along the perimeter of the plantation. The ditch was intended to hold water for the rubber trees, yet even with a heavy rain, the water in the ditch was fairly shallow—shallow enough for the NVA to use the ditch for protection.

In the dark and rain the enemy set up shop in that ditch and blasted away at the NDP all night long, killing one of our troopers and wounding several others. But their position in the ditch protected them from direct fire from the NDP, and they were too close for us to call in artillery. To make matters worse, the heavy rain and fog kept our helicopter gunships grounded. So far as we knew, none of the NVA in the ditch were hit that night.

My ambush site was in some tall grass along a trail just outside the rubber. The NVA knew we were out there, and we could hear them searching for us, but they never got close enough to trigger our ambush. As we lay in our positions, casings from illumination rounds whizzed through the air and thudded into the earth around us. I don't know how large those pieces were, but



Daryl Carlson pointing out RPG damage on his Sheridan.



they sounded pretty substantial, and I was glad we weren't hit. After what seemed an eternity, the misty half-light of dawn broke and we pulled in our Claymores, then headed back to the NDP, worn out from the strain of a long, wet night of waiting to kill or be killed.

Investigating the area where the enemy had taken cover in the ditch, we found a 122mm rocket still propped up on bamboo poles, ready to be fired. In this photo you can see part of the ditch at right, a few rubber trees, the NDP

in the background, and the rocket on its make-shift launcher. I'm sure it was like many others they used to devastating effect that night. They managed to do a lot with very little.

By the third day we had buried 98 enemy dead, including several Chinese advisors! But the enemy had a habit of dragging away as many of their dead and wounded as they could, never to be found or counted by us, so the final tally remains unknown, though estimates of enemy KIA went as high as 180. Predictably, a few of their dead were left behind—booby trapped. Fortunately we were on to that ploy and none of our guys were hurt.

In the course of 3-days, the NVA lost at least 98, and we lost 5 plus 27 wounded. Yet battle after battle, even with kill ratios of 20-to-1 or more, the NVA remained a determined and worthy foe.

At battle's end the NVA melted back to their Cambodian sanctuaries just a few miles away, knowing we were forbidden from taking the fight across the border.

We would no doubt face them again another day.



Let's go!