

FALCONS OVER EAGLE

Military units in general are disposed to regard themselves in the light of their singular achievements, such that a soldier's pride in his outfit is proportional to its successes. Particularly is this true in combat, the ultimate test of the profession of arms.

Thus it is that the men of "A" Battery of the 2d E, Battalion 20th Artillery, the Army's first and only Aerial Rocket Artillery Battalion, can take such pride in themselves and in their organization. During the period of the battery's employment in Vietnam as a part of the 1st Cavalry Division there have been many successes, many achievements in battle, many occasions on which the unit could justly congratulate itself.

But as in most unit histories there is one singular event which stands out among all others - one which will never be forgotten by those who lived it. "A" Battery's most significant triumph was won on 30 March 1966 - a day which will long be remembered in the legends of the ARA.

This day began much as any other in the daily routine of forward area operations. "A" Battery was located at OASIS, a staging aid assembly area and support base Southwest of Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam. From this location, the battery's aerial rocket artillery helicopters flew in support of Operation Lincoln, a multi brigade effort to clear the communist enemy from his sanctuary on the mighty CHU PONG Mountain on the Cambodian border.

The first day of Operation Lincoln brought only light and sporadic contact with small elements of VC insurgents. There was consequently little employment of the swift and powerful Armed Falcons, as the aerial artillery helicopters are named. Aside from occasional preparations of landing areas for heliborne assaults, there was little need for the massive firepower of ARA. The conflict became, as so often happens, a war of waiting.

Late in the afternoon of 30 March a reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Squadron 9th Cavalry was airlifted into landing zone Eagle south of the CHU PONG massif, searching for enemy troop locations. The platoon found what it was looking for.

Before the troop lift helicopters could clear the LZ after discharging the cavalymen, they came under heavy fire from enemy gunners in the tree lines on the north and east of the open field. One of the helicopters was brought down, and burned on impact. Survivors of this incident loaded aboard a second ship, which was itself shot down and also burned on impact. There were no survivors.

The reconnaissance platoon soon discovered that it had engaged a determined and numerically superior force of North Vietnamese Regular Army troops. It is not the business of reconnaissance parties to become decisively engaged; it proved impossible, however, to break contact. The enemy on being discovered had rallied to the battle in such numbers that withdrawal of the smaller US force was prevented.

Responding to the sudden emergency, "A" Company of the 1st Battalion 12th Cavalry rapidly assembled and moved by helicopter to LZ Eagle. The troops of "A" Company immediately seized the initiative and advanced against the North Vietnamese, relieving the reconnaissance platoon, which had sustained heavy casualties in their short but desperate stand.

Upon advancing some 400 meters north from LZ Eagle "A" Company encountered the enemy's main strength - a reinforced battalion of Regular Army troops concealed in fortified positions in a densely wooded area from which his automatic weapons were firing on the US troops in the open. "A" Company suffered heavy losses, including the commander and his executive officer, and the friendly advance was halted. The Artillery forward observer with the company immediately called for all available fire support.

It was readily apparent that Armed Falcon, with its rapid response, extreme accuracy, and devastating firepower was the most appropriate means available. "A" Battery received the frantic call for assistance and within minutes the first fire unit of two rocket helicopters arrived over the beleaguered infantrymen.

The artillery forward observer directed the aerial artillery fires onto the nearest enemy positions, within 30 meters of the pinned-down 1st Cavalrymen, and within seconds the complexion of the battle changed. Powerful aerial rocket warheads battered the enemy gunners into silence, allowing the withdrawal of "A" Company to protected positions. The company quickly regrouped and prepared to launch a coordinated assault under cover of aerial artillery and tactical air strikes.

The approach of darkness, however, prompted the decision to withdraw the company from the LZ rather than attempt to continue the assault after nightfall. Once again, the aerial artillery were requested to place their close-in fires on the enemy positions while "A" Company advanced to their earlier positions to recover their casualties before the planned night extraction.

By 1930 hours "A" Company had recovered its fallen members and had once more withdrawn to LZ Eagle in preparation for the extraction. Shortly thereafter the first of the troop lift helicopters, a CH-47 Chinook, began a cautious approach to the landing zone. In the last 100 feet of the approach the ship was raked by a hail of bullets from jungle cover not 50 meters from the LZ. The circling rocket ships of the aerial artillery immediately attacked the end gunners, silencing and destroying their positions.

It was evident that the landing zone was surrounded by a well armed and well trained enemy and that further attempts to effect a helicopter evacuation could become extremely costly. The attempt was abandoned and under cover of the circling rocket helicopters "A" Company formed a defensive perimeter around the downed Chinook and prepared for the worst.

In this critically vulnerable condition, the continued existence of that infantry company on the ground was solely and directly dependent on the protective fires of the Armed Falcons overhead.

At the first sign of enemy massing or moving into any portion of the LZ, the artillery observer on the ground called for aerial artillery fire on that sector. The artillery pilots were guided by reference to a series of battery operated lights set up in the LZ to form a "tee". Given distance and direction from these lights, the Armed Falcons of Battery "A" were able to place pin-point fires where and when requested despite the blackness of the moonless night.

"A" Battery's rocket helicopters remained on station in pairs all through the night, instantly responding to the frequent hurried calls for help in stemming an enemy foray into the U. Armed Falcon thus prevented the formation of an overwhelming assault on "A" Company's lightly defended positions in the open, and is thereby credited with having saved the company from probable annihilation.

The battle at LZ Eagle will long remain one of the most memorable successes in "A" Battery's history. Like most great events it has generated a host of individual memories. Some will recall most vividly the 1700 aerial rockets and the thousands of rounds of machine-gun tracer ammunition fired through the black of night into enemy strongholds. Others will recall working all through the night in the glare of truck lights uncrating and assembling rockets to feed the over-hungry rocket tubes, while still others will remember their roles in the hurried fueling and servicing and rearming of the helicopters during their brief stay on the ground. There will be individual memories of huddling over maps in the blacked-out operations tent while following the progress of the desperate fight through reports crackling in over the tactical radios. And there will be the inevitable memories of bearded and bleary-eyed aircrews hovering around the mess tent inhaling hot black coffee between fire missions; mostly silent men, each with his own thoughts.

Every man in "A" Battery will have his own private memory of that night. But no one will ever forget that his unit saved the lives of the men of an infantry company outnumbered and unprotected in a Jungle clearing somewhere in Vietnam.

It is success in battle that makes a unit proud, "A" Battery, on the night of the Falcons over Eagle, earned the right to be proud of itself.

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