

05-01-96

21 Days In The Bush,  
Alone.

by former LLDB Sgt Cu'Van Nguyen  
with Tony Spletstoser

Tony O'Ng CO.p: One day Cu' Van and I were looking at aerial photos of the forests in the mountains of Vietnam's central highlands. He was telling me about how these had been the kinds of places that he had jumped into on his recon missions. To me they looked vast. I asked Cu' if he had ever been lost when he had been dropped in the bush like that. Cu Van said, "No, in our Special Forces training we study very hard how to navigate in our land. You put me down anywhere in that picture and I know where I'm at and can find my way out. But all things are not perfect, I remember one time when I was like your Daniel Boone, I never got lost, but for a while I was pretty confused."

According to Cu' Van, that mission should have been a normal recon into an area of the extreme western DMZ, near Laos. Unfortunately everything went wrong from the team insertion on.

Cu' Van: In late 1972 my unit moved to new base. It is not near any town. It had been an American Army base for the 101st Airmobile troops, called "LZ Sally". It was about 17 km north of Hue. At this camp we are not allowed to go outside except for missions.

We are a team of only four men this time. That morning we take off for a recon to an area that we never check out much before. It is all mountains and heavy forest and we have been given a two square section of the map to search out to find what is going on there. In my team is my very best friend, Cuong. We have been through a lot together and have been close like brothers since our training days. We are looking forward to an easy job and no problems.

Our 'Slick' (UH-1H) pilots have found a B-52 bomb crater on the top of a hill near the map coordinates of our target area. The pilots like these bomb craters because they make good LZs. This crater is about 30 meters across, maybe 10 meters deep, and half filled with water. Flying over the top, we can see nothing out of the way. The 100 meter tall trees have been blown away and down the hillside. (mountain?)

As usual, on a Special Forces mission like this, we are accompanied by two Huey gun-ships<sup>1</sup> armed with rockets and mini-guns, in case anything unusual

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<sup>1</sup>VNAF, Vietnamese Air Force used the Bell UH-1D as gun-ships. They were armed with a 7.62 m/m minigun on each side, it's barrels just below and to the rear each pilot's seat. The mount and ammo boxes were attached midway of the cargo deck. Also there was a 7 hole rocket pod on each side, hung on a system, the XM-158 serving as an improved M-60 door-gunner's mount positioning them and outboard of the mini-gun.

comes up.

What our leaders did not realize, was that the NVA had figured out that our pilots liked these Bomb craters for LZ's, and this one, because it was on top of the mountain, was one of the few around that could have been used for that. So they had set a very good ambush by building a camouflaged watch tower on the bomb crater's edge. They used the broken off trees left from the B-52 bomb for the legs and had covered the roof with the same clay and mud as the crater. From the air it was invisible, everything look natural. That is the situation our pilot run into when he dropped our Slick into that bombed out clearing. The pilot had just rocked the aircraft around setting the left skid on the inside crater edge, I jumped off, and my friend Cuong, we sit together, was about to follow me, when the NVA gunners hidden in the tower opened fire on the chopper. I am on the ground; I hear the AK-47s firing and the noise from the helicopter get louder as our pilot immediately pulled pitch. I looked up, I could see that somehow, my friend was still hanging there on the skid with blood pumping out of his mouth. I can't tell you how come he didn't fall out. You know, at that moment, I don't have time to study something like that. Our Slick is climbing away and the gun-ships roll in to do a job on the enemy shooters. (This is the last time I see my friend.)

I have to get out of there as fast as I can. I have to take care of myself and the pilot takes care of his business. Because I am dressed just like the enemy, if the gun-ships see me, they will shoot at me too, so I run, tumble, fall, slide, any way that I can, to get down the side of the crater and the hill into the valley to get away from their mini-guns. When I get down into the trees and bush at the bottom, I find a good place to hide and stay there. I expect at any time for the communists to be out looking for me. Because they on the other side of the bomb crater and I know that they see me already on the ground. I can hear the gun-ships up there tearing the place up for some time even after I find a place to hide. Boy! They really do a job on them! I never go back and check because I'm not sure what else may be there, maybe another check-point tower on the hill across? The way things are for me, I have no mission now, except to save myself for when my leaders can find me and pull me out.

Where I am at, where I hide, the undergrowth is heavy and most of the time there is thick fog. I have good cover and no one could find me. It may have been because the gun-ships did such a good job, that there was nobody up there left to report that one of us had gotten off the chopper, but I had no way of knowing that. Our training is for us to always take care no matter where we are and take nothing for granted. We have to take enough chances without giving anything away.

I stay there two days, never move, I listen and try to hear what is going

on. I have to try to find out if the communist soldiers are looking for me or not. I never hear anything, but I'll tell you I got one big problem on there - the fog, it's wet. When I think it is safe, I made my way down into the valley, following the creek downstream. At least I always have enough fresh running water, but also there is even heavier undergrowth. On the other side of the creek, the mountain starts going up again. The ground is steep on both sides.

I begin moving downstream, using the bush cover, stopping to listen, and then moving on. Most of the time there is fog so thick it is like a mist. For the next twenty-one days I stay wet from my feet to the hair on my head. The going is very hard, ruff (rough).

In the beginning when I still have food, I carry my pack and everything. The jungle is thick and the ground uneven. Rocks and pits all along the way. When you wear all that stuff it makes every move hard to do. If you want to walk here in America, 20 miles to the next town, even if you go through the woods and across the fields, it only take you maybe 5 to 7 hours. Where I'm at, it will take you a month, if you can make it at all.

As I move downstream, I have to stop and listen many times, because most of the time I can't see more than a few meters around me.

If I'm lucky, maybe around 11 to 12 o'clock noon, the fog thins out sometime, and I can see the sun, but I still can not see the sky because of the interwoven branches of the tall trees that grow along the valley walls. But the fog is still there. The trees in here are all old, some up to 100 meters tall. No man ever touched them before, except maybe the American B-52's bombs in some places. I try to stay away from all open places and stay undercover.

I walk like this for 5 or 6 days. I move slowly, away from that bad place. I don't go very far and I use my emergency radio to try to contact my leader, but he never answer back. I know that they are up there in the air but I can't hear the airplane or see it because of the fog and tree branches. (It may be because of being in the deep valley of the mountains, that the UHF radio can't get a signal out.)

In the Special Forces, we have a rule if we are down: the first seven days, they search for us 24 hours a day. If they can't find you, they cut in half, 12 hours a day for about a month. If they still can't find you, they cut it off; you are lost then for sure.

After nine days I run out of food and water, so I take off my back pack. I hide it, cover it up. I don't need it anymore, because all that it is for is to carry food. I save one canteen to carry water; I got plenty fresh water in the creek. The water come out of the ground in the mountain, it's clear and clean.

I never have any problem about water on this mission, except maybe too much

water. I keep my survival vest<sup>2</sup>, survival radio, spare ammo, AK47 rifle and the grenades. I need to travel as light as I can, but I never give up my weapons.

After I run out of food, I get hungry. In our training we learn about how to live off the land. Usually there are many things in the jungle that we can eat to help us to stay alive and in good shape, but here, it is a different kind of jungle. All that I can find to eat down there is wild bananas. There are a bunch of banana trees in that jungle. They are kind of green tasting and have seeds. I have to be careful and not eat too much at one time, because they can make you sick. At first you have to just eat a little bit, because the food is strange and your stomach not used to it. If you eat too much, you get a bellyache.

That's the way they teach us in survival school. If your belly get along with that, then you eat some more. I know that if I eat too much it will make me sick; if that happens, I'm through! My stomach gets a little uneasy, but I don't get sick. The rest of the time to survive, I eat some bananas and also I find the young banana trees that grow up maybe a foot high. I cut the top off, then spread out the inside the trunk; it's young and tender like a cabbage. I eat that too; it taste pretty good. But you know, when you hungry, everything taste pretty good. So I switch around. One time I eat banana, the next time the inside of the young tree. I move on like this. Every day I try to call my leader on the radio, but I never get an answer. I never hear the airplane fly over either. All those days I am alone.

Then, the 20th day. That's my lucky day. I had been laying down there by the creek under a rock shelf and I heard that noise the first time. The sound of my leader's L-19<sup>3</sup> Bird Dog is the most beautiful that I ever hear. It's about 10:30, I pick up the radio and I call my leader. He answer, "Where you at?" I say, "I'm here, but I don't think that you can see me." But I tell him that I am almost to the end of that leaf (map) that they had given to me. (My piece of map is four km square, inside of it I have two km

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<sup>2</sup>The Vietnamese survival vest was of local fabrication. The Vn's built it into their 'Harris Rig' harness. It had the usual pockets for AK/M16 mags, first-aid kits, pencil flares, mirror, wire saw, fishing kit, field dressings, PRC-90 radio, etc. (All of the things that came with the standard aviators survival pack.) As far as I know it wasn't an issue item for US forces, although, some of our men may have copied it.

<sup>3</sup>L-19, O-1, "Bird Dog", a single engined Cessna fixed-wing observation aircraft. American Spec. Ops. had the luxury of having Army helicopters available for support and Team 'CnC'. The Vietnamese Special Forces had to make do with the VNAF's L-19. Which really worked out quite well, with less expense.

square that I was supposed to search)

I'm always supposed to stay inside my map squares, no matter what, even if the communists are chasing you, you have to stay in there. I look at that map and my compass and I see where I am at. We never know about maybe another SF team operate in the next square, and they don't know who we are and we don't know who they are. It's hard, but that's the only way that we can be safe not to have a mix up.

I tell my leader where I am located, but I have to tell it in a kind of code. I say, "Open your leaf (map) and that corner of the leaf got a spot there, I'm right in that spot." We have to talk like that using `code' words, anything to confuse the enemy if they are listening. I say something like that, maybe you don't know, but he knows.

Then he answered me. He say, "Yes, I see that pretty spot there on the leaf, but really I can't see you. I'm very glad to hear you today. I thought you lost, we almost give up." I can understand that easy, too much fog. I never see him either. "Well", I tell him, "I not lost, I know exactly where I'm at."

My leader laugh; next he ask for my Code name. He say, "As long as I can hear you, give me your code. I'm ready to try to get you out any time that we can." This is like our "password." Each of us have code word, secret. We promise even if the NVA ketching (catching) us, no mater what they do, we never give it up. If the NVA make you say something, you tell them wrong. Like if they hold your wife neck with a gun, you tell them something, but not the right thing.

I tell my leader my code name. It's a number. He say, "OK, I let you go. I waiting for you. If there is any news, let me know. Right now it is too foggy to see where I'm at and he wants me to tell him if I see the fog conditions improve.

During all that time, I never hear or see any NVA, but we still are being careful. I had never gone up the hill at all, I am all the time walking along down by that creek. I got good cover there but hard to walk. You know how the trees try to grow besides the water more than anywhere, so it's thick there. Good cover but hard to walk. I'm all wet, my boots are wet. Some times I can't go any further; I have to just lay down and rest. When I go in there, almost the next day, I am wet all over. It's cold and there's no sunshine; it's miserable. But now my leader has found me and he knows were I'm at and now I know that all that I have to do is keep hanging on, hanging on, hanging on and he will get me out.

Before that, I don't know if they are still looking for me or not looking for me. I just think about how I'm going to survive in order to get myself out. It's over 100 km to the sea and many NVA soldiers in between. I know that it's impossible, but I have to think about that anyway. I'd never give

up.

My leader, he still there, flying overhead. I think that he is trying to find a place nearby that he can see the ground.

A little later, maybe about 12 o'clock noon, I been talking to him, and he say, "Look at your 9 o'clock maybe a couple of steps, you see that pretty white marble there?" (He means by the compass to the west 200 meters. Maybe look for a big rock?) Everything around me is up in almost every direction. I tell my leader, "I don't see it yet, but give me a little time, I'll look for it." He is in the air and he can see a spot where there is no foggy, but on the ground where I'm at, I can't see nothing.

I say, "Yes Sir, I go there. I try to get there as soon as I can." My leader say, "OK, I'll see you in the morning."

He have to give me that much time because he say "a couple of steps", he knows that 200 meters, and it's going to take me awhile to get there. Now at 12 o'clock in the day, I know that I will have to move all that day and most of the night to get to that place.

I am still in the thick fog and can see nothing ahead of me more than two or three meters. I set the map down and I put the compass on my spot to get a line on the way that I have to go. Then I head that way. I don't know what he see there. Maybe a open place, maybe a B-52 bomb crater. (I hope so, it's easy to get me out.)

I begin to climb the side of the hill in the direction that he tell me to go.

I walk until about 5 or 6 o'clock. It get dark. It's always kind of dark in there even in the daytime, but after 6 o'clock it really get dark, and it's cold too. I find me a place that is almost dry. I lay down, eat a little bit (them bananas). I set up my camp one more time with the string run around for the trip. This is my last night, I hope. I can't take any chances now. In the dark and fog, I can't do any good looking now for the pick-up place. So I lay down and try to take a nap.

I wake up in the morning, still dark, cold. I try to put my mind to concentrate on hope and keep walking, moving that way. When I start I'm cold and chilly then walk maybe 15-20 minutes and I'm sweating. From one thing to the other. You know walking in that kind of country is hard work. I'm climbing up the side of the hill to the left.

Pretty soon it is getting daylight and I think that can hear my leader's airplane over me. It's about 8 o'clock. I call my leader, but no answer. He can't call me. With that "Brick" kind of radio, the man on the ground have to open the channel make the radio operate. That is so the radio don't squawk, and make noise if someone try to call at a wrong time, like when VC close by.

Then I remember how my officers do most of the time. They go to where someone cook, get a cup of coffee and a bowl of noodles, then to our

operations room to check out orders, etc. It don't do any good to get out here early anyway, too much fog.

After I walk some more, I check the map and see that I'm almost there.

When I get to the point that my leader told me, I see a rock, a big rock that stick out of the side of the hill. I think probably this is what my leader mean when he say "pretty marble". There are trees around there too, but this is big rock. I'm standing under the rock, it's maybe 25 feet over me. Now it is around 10 o'clock. I call him again, no answer.

Then I walk a little further in the same direction, past that rock to see if there is anything else that he might have meant. Just in case. Although really, when I get to the rock, I think that he going to pick me up from there. I walk a little further, but I never see anything that look any better. Just thick woods and bush.

The reason that I am wondering, is that I still can't see the sky, it's so thick foggy. About 11:30 I call him again, and he answer me this time. He say, "Where you at? Did you come to the place, the spot that I told you yesterday?" I say, "Yes Sir, I'm there." He say, "You see that little white thing there?" (He mean that rock right there.) I said, "Yes Sir, I met that "marble", but I didn't know for sure if you meant that "white marble", so I been looking on a little further." He answer, " No, that's what I'm meaning. That little marble there. That's where we will pull you out, we get you from there."

I tell him that I'm going to slide back down to the rock. I have gotten a little further up the mountain when I was searching. Then my leader ask, "Are you ready to get out?" He laugh. I tell him, "Yes Sir, I'm ready to get out, I get back down there quick and be waiting for you. Then he ask, "How you doing?. I say, "I'm OK I guess? But you have to get me a cable to hook up to, I'm wore out." He say, "OK , we get you a cable. We be ready when it clears. I say, "I appreciate it, and one more thing, I'm very glad to hear your voice." Then he say, "I try to get you out any time if I have a chance. All the Band are ready."

He means that it is still too foggy but the "Band", the Slick and the gunships are ready as soon as it opens up. I ask him, "Where you at?" He say, "I'm on top of your head but you can't see because it's too foggy."

Things have changed from yesterday. Then he could see the rock; today it has closed up. We have to wait until it opens again. At least he was lucky yesterday just to be able to find that rock place without the trees. Today, he would have never seen it.

So we're OK, just have to wait a little more. Then my leader say, "OK, just been around there, don't move, if you have to stay there a few more days or a week, it don't matter. We know where you at and that's the only spot that I can get you out." I said, "Yes Sir. I be around. I'm going to

watch. Any time it clear up, I let you know." Then he said, "Just stay there and turn your radio on so that I can call in. I want keep in touch with you every 30 minutes."

I lay there by that rock. I turn the `Brick' on and put the radio by the back of my neck so that anytime it talk, I can feel the voice from the speaker. I have to be ready in one second, a very short time when they ready.

I stay by the foot of that rock. Maybe they like for me to get on top of the rock, but I can not get over that rock, it is too steep and high and I'm wore out too. Even if I could get up there, the wind from the helicopter can blow me off. So I tell my leader that I will hook up at the bottom of the rock.

They have a ring on the end of the cable that I can hook a (carbiner)<sup>4</sup>"D" ring to. If I was in better shape, they could drop a ladder and I could climb up.

Maybe about 12:30 the fog open up. My leader say, "You ready?" I say, "I'm ready, just give me the cable." A few moments later I hear the vroom-vroom, wrop-wrop of the Slick and the gun-ships fly over. I look up and the Slick is there hovering down and dropping the cable to me. I hook the cable up to a "D" ring on the shoulder of my survival vest and they lift me out of there. Boy, am I happy! The Slick pilot lift me clear of the trees and haul-ass back home. (LZ Sally)

Between where we have been and back to the base, there is no safe place to set down to take me on board. The chopper flys at almost 100 miles per hour. That makes me swing out at the end of the cable, full length, trailing behind the Slick. I'm hanging like that the whole time back. I have to hold my neck down and cover my face with my arms and elbows so that I am still able to breathe. Otherwise the wind blow by too fast and I never get my breath.

When they slow down to land, I swing back down underneath. I know that I'm home when I can look up and see the Slick above me.

If they find a safe place to set down to pull me in before that base, we got the minigun-ships flying beside us ready for anything. If anything look wrong, they blow it up. It make us feel good to know that they give us that kind of protection. But this time there can be no place, there are NVA all over.

At that time, the main thing for me, is to get out of there, I don't care about anything else. Anything else is easy.

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<sup>4</sup>Whoever invented the carabiner ring and Harris harness, should be awarded some kind of Medal, That carabiner `D' ring save more lives than all the bullets, rockets, or special weapons in the war. Without that, I die long ago, many times.



We got a small clinic at our base with nurses (medics). When they let me down, my fellows on the ground unhook me and take me there. It hurt me too much to walk.

When I get there on the table, they take my boots off and my clothes. I look at my feet. They are all white, they look like the meat all dead, skin coming off. The nurses keep me there for three weeks before my feet are fit for duty again.

One of the first things that I did when I get back, I ask about my friend Cuong. They tell me that he didn't make it.

They get him back to the base alright, but he's dead. They send him back to his family and village in the Mekong Delta. It's too far away, I'm in the service and the war never stops, so I have to follow orders and I can never have time to visit his grave or family.

Later, after I marry when my first son is born, I name my son, "Cuong".

The reason that I remember all of this is not because I did anything special, it is because I lost my best friend that time. My friend has been gone a long time now, but even this day, I still think about him.

FINI

PS: When it seemed that all of Cu' Van's stories produced only one survivor, I asked Cu' to tell me about a mission that had been successful and where everyone on the Team made it back alive.

He laughed, and answered, "Oh, there were many of that kind, but it's hard to remember much about the 'smooth' ones. It's the 'ruff' ones that stick in my mind!" Tony (Con Cop) Spletstoser