

**D Troop – Second Squadron -1st Cavalry Regiment and C Company - 75th Rangers
Action in the Song Mao Mountains
August 1-2, 1969**

“Sua Sponte” is the Latin Motto of C Company 75th Rangers referring to the ability to accomplish tasks with little to no prompting – roughly translated it meant “LEAD THE WAY” as the Rangers like to say! In late July 1969, Ranger LRP Team ‘Angry Bells 25’ lead the way into the mountains near Song Mao, Binh Thuan Province not far from the South China Sea on the Vietnam coast in the south-eastern corner of II Corp. D Troop, 2nd Squadron of the 1st Cavalry Regiment received a hasty invitation in the early afternoon of August 1st to join them.

It was a Friday afternoon and our Infantry platoon from D Troop 2nd Squadron 1st Cavalry Regiment was on a stand down for the day. For the past month, D Troop’s Infantry platoon had been going on patrols around Phan Thiet in jungle areas too dense for the LOH team to visually penetrate during their air scouting missions. Most of the patrols were uneventful but gave the platoon an opportunity to train recent replacements in the tactics of LZ insertions and pickups.

D Troop was the Air Cavalry arm of the Mechanized 2nd Squadron including A, B, C and HHT Troops. Like the Cavalry of old, the Squadrons mission was Scouting in force. The Mechanized Troops were armored units with APC’s and M-48 Tanks. The Air Cav D Troop had about 9 Cobra Gunships, another 9 2-man LOH Scout helicopters and a Lift Platoon of 8 Huey helicopters for carrying our ‘Aero-Rifle’ Infantry Platoon and others as needed to complete any Scouting mission.

In addition to the Scouting mission of the Aero-Rifle Infantry Platoon of D Troop, the platoon also served as a 1st in ground combat reaction force in areas where only LZ landings were the fastest and best option. Examples included:

- helicopters were shot down and pilots/crew were in danger at a crash site, we landed;
- Long Range Patrol (LRP’s) were discovered by the enemy and in danger of being overwhelmed by numerical superior enemy forces, we landed;
- Infantry units needed help when faced with numerical superior enemy forces. we landed;

The Infantry did not respond alone, air cover (often heroic) from our LOH’s provided tree-top recon and when necessary fire support by D Troop helicopter gunships ahead of our landings. Getting the Infantry in was the job of the experienced and daring Huey Lift Platoon Pilots and Co-Pilots. It never ended there as both LOH and Cobra teams stayed on station providing fire support to any situation.

One of the missions of the Lift Platoon was to ferry Ranger teams in and out of areas of suspected enemy concentrations. D Troop always worked closely to support 5-6-man

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Ranger LRP Teams that performed recon missions deep in unpopulated areas and suspected NVA/Viet Cong staging areas.



Jungle North of Song Mao

In late July 1969, a 6-man Ranger LRP Team lead by SSgt. Harold Williams went into the Mountains 15- 20 miles north-northwest of Song Mao. The area was a series of steep slopes with sharp drops into small valleys and extremely dense jungle. As the Ranger Team penetrated deeper into the mountains, they found themselves in the middle of an NVA Battalion Staging Area. Who discovered who is not real clear to me, but the 6-man team was faced with the fight of their life in the middle of an NVA Battalion camp.

When the call came into D Troop that Friday afternoon that a Ranger team was surrounded and needed support, two teams of D Troop LOH's and Cobras were immediately airborne and headed to the AO some 15 -20 minutes airtime from our base in Phan Thiet. The Infantry Platoon's "Stand Down" was declared "OVER" and the D Troop Infantry Platoon led by Lt. Arnie Johnson and Captain Earnest Cappazoli was

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airborne within 10 minutes of the call. We went with about 22 guys with 3 M-60's. Most of the NCO's being off for the day had left the area and were unaware of the mission. A third of the platoon were new replacements, two of our guys were on 'light duty' profile and at Lt. Johnson's urging "Volunteered" to go with us. (Russ Stuecklin had just returned from a hospital in Japan for severe leg wounds received on May 11th and Stu McDiarmid was injured in a repelling accident on a prior mission). We were happy to have them with us. I can't say they were thrilled!



D 2/1 Cav Huey with Troops

Getting on the ground close to the Rangers was the 1st challenge. The Huey pilots expertly dropped us on the side of a mountain from a hovering position having us jump

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in from one side of the Huey's about 5-8 feet to a steeply sloped hill. It was the closest and appeared to be the safest route to the Rangers. Lt. Johnson was 1st off but twisted his ankle and broke bones in his foot on landing. As we trekked down the hill, deeper into the jungle canopy, we saw several NVA hooches evidencing a sizeable force was "in Residence". I'm guessing, but I'm sure they weren't happy that SSGT. Williams found them and even less happy the Cavalry showed up. The LOH's and fire support from the Cobra gunships were covering our flank as we approached the Rangers.



Typical Rangers (LRRP)

SSGT Williams had kept his team together as they repositioned from attacks by the NVA. His expert deployment of claymores and directing fire from our Cobra gunships kept the enemy at bay and allowed us to safely expand the LRP's position. Doc Tippet treated two of the LRP's who were superficially wounded from claymore back-blast and it was time for us to find a way out. Sgt. Williams and his RTO Frank Walthers moved outside our perimeter to secure a radio left behind in their initial contact with the enemy. The NVA were waiting and another firefight began. Both Sgt. Williams and RTO

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Walthers were hit. We suppressed the fire from the NVA and Doc Tippet immediately went to their aid.

Although, I never met Staff Sergeant Harold David Williams, I was less than 10 feet from him and Cpl. Frank Daniel Walthers when our medic “Doc” Tippet lost the fight to keep them alive and with us. Cpl. Walthers had taken rounds in the chest and appeared to be the more seriously wounded as Doc tried to stop the bleeding. SSgt. Williams had taken rounds in his legs and directed Doc to stay focused on Walthers imploring him to save his RTO. Little did Doc know that SSGT Williams was bleeding out from a severed artery in his leg. Although Doc had worked feverishly on both men as the firefight was raging about us, Doc’s bag of tricks including mouth to mouth on both men went for naught. I could feel Doc’s frustration!

Lt. Johnson did try to get a medivac in to evacuate Williams and Walthers. The Medivac and its crew were shot up very badly as they tried to reach a hover over us. He had hoped to use their jungle penetrator to get them out. The medivac was wobbling all over the sky after it and its crew were hit. Cobras escorted it to safety, and I believe the medivac made it safely to the Song Mao air strip. We really tried to get Williams and Walthers to safety but were unsuccessful.

Exiting the position in the NVA Base Camp discovered by SSgt. Williams and his team was another story. As late afternoon approached, the LOH’s found a small clearing about 500 yards from us that could be used as an extraction LZ. Kenny Stevens (W. Virginia), Russ Stuecklin (Omaha, NE) and myself volunteered to take point. We agreed it was a better option than extending our unwelcomed stay into the night.

We had 3 other walking wounded, and as I said, we only went in with about 22 guys. Given the challenges, *Lt. Johnson was **emphatic** that “no one would be left behind”... including Frank & Harold.* (Note: that lifted my spirits & resolve.) If you think about it, that meant 4 guys to carry Frank, 4 to carry Harold, 3 walking wounded and the Lt. with a bad wheel. That left 10 for Point & security. We tried anyway!

However, it became obvious the NVA didn't want us to leave just yet. Stevens & myself on point were wounded within 50 yards of leaving our position, Stevens needed to be carried, my wounds were more frightening than serious (For what it’s worth, compliments of my Surgeon, I still have the bullet fragments). At that point, we settled in for a lon.....g night. Cobras stayed on station well after their safe flying time with jungle (triple canopy) & mountains all around us. The Cobra pilots executed some of the most difficult and dangerous gun missions they ever experienced. I found out later that those back in base camp in Phan Thiet stopped their normal assignments and joined in breaking open rocket boxes, minigun and linked 40mm so the armorers could focus on reloading the Cobra’s itself. This was almost all day and part of the night. Even a few “H model Huey Lift ships flew gun support missions with their door gunners blazing away.

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AH-1G Cobra Gunship

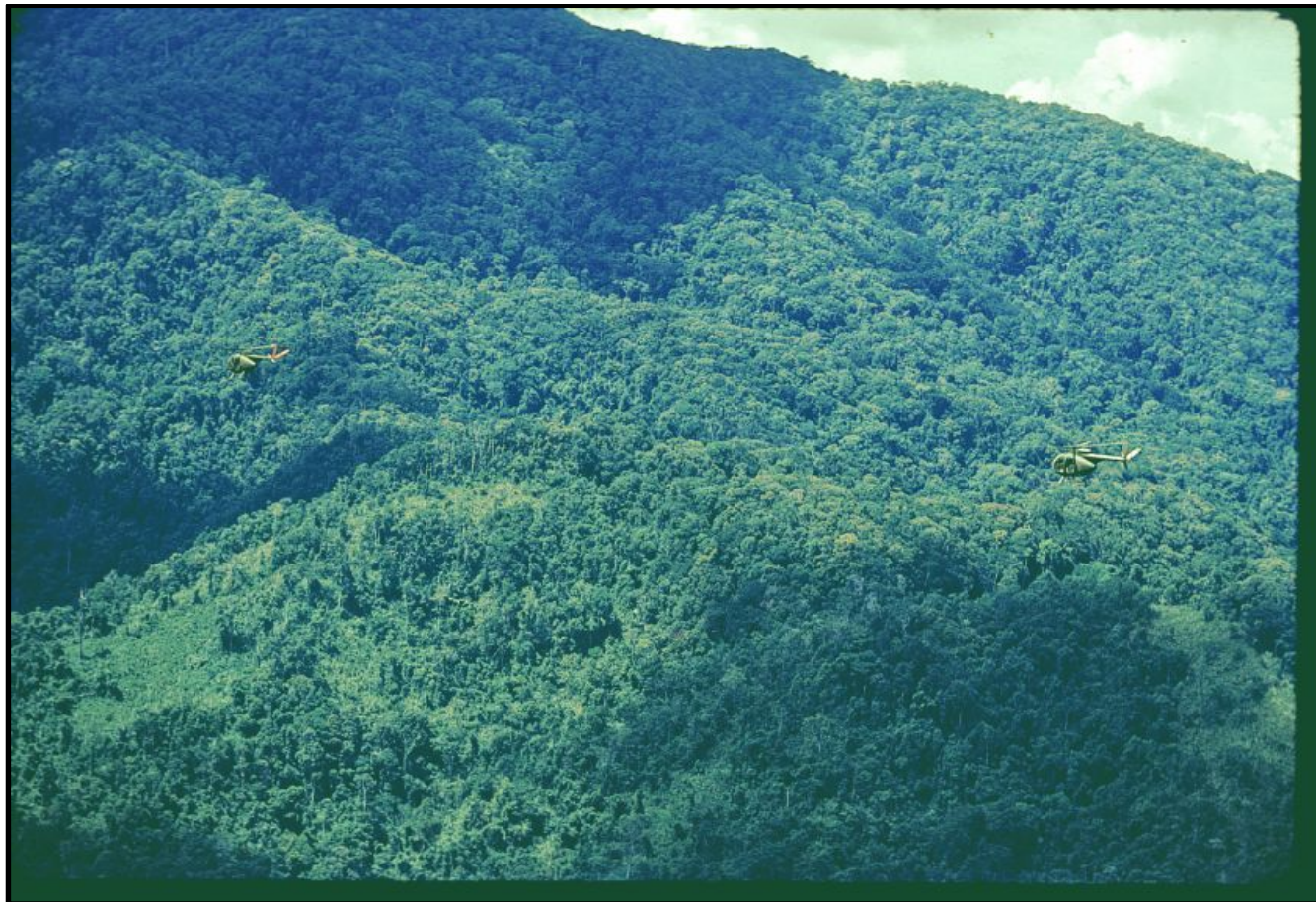
As I said, things were very dicey that afternoon and as twilight was setting in, we were not going to be reinforced before (or after dark), although they tried to send some ARVN's in to back us up. They only got as close as the makeshift LZ we were trying to reach about a 1/2 click from our position.

SHADOWⁱ came on station that night and watched over us till dawn. It was a Quiet night. (I believe the NVA were hauling ass knowing they were about to entertain more guests in the morning.) Lucky us!

In these past 50 years, I often think of that mission that our platoon responded to and the selfless courage of everyone who jumped into the LZ to help the Rangers. The Rangers were GI's, they were our guys. We all knew that this was not going to be a cakewalk. It's a bond of respect and friendship that we had for each other. Not just us on the ground, but the Huey, LOH and COBRA crews that flew heroic support. Our

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Mechanized brothers in the tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APC) have their own tales of challenges against the odds. The common thread is our Brotherhood.



Two D Troop OH-6 Scout Helicopters

Lastly, the real story is about heroism and leadership. To me, all the guys there showed Valor under fire. It was our brotherhood of Calvary and Rangers versus them. It was also about leadership that our Lt. Johnson and Capt. Cappazoli managed our movements and fire support. Many others stepped up as well. Lastly, it was about SSgt. Williams and his leadership, his professional soldiering and focus under fire on the safety and well-being of his team members. No, I never met SSgt Harold David Williams or Cpl. Frank Daniel Walthers, but I am glad to have been a witness to two heroes in action.

I think of both often, so “Sua Sponte” Staff Sergeant Harold David Williams and Cpl. Frank Daniel Walthers! Hope to meet you both on ‘Fiddler’s Green’ someday.....

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¹ Shadow – Twin Engine AC-119G model gunship equipped with 4x7.62 miniguns for close infantry support.



Time lapse of AC-119 firing at night. Each tracer, visible in the photo, has four non tracer bullets between them.