

# *Actionable Intelligence*

Lanny Hunter

**A**lmost half of the actionable intelligence for South Vietnam was generated by Special Forces teams in 1965. In late August, the B-Team at Ban Me Thuot had identified a reinforced NVA company in their AO. The CIDG force from B-2 would infiltrate into a blocking position west of the NVA. The C-Team, using Dodds's A-Team and Nungs, would assault an LZ just east of the VC stronghold and attack to the west. Our "hammer" would drive the VC against the B-Team "anvil." Together we would smash the unit to pieces. Herb Payne conducted the briefing. There was talk about coordinates, call-signs, radio frequencies, assembly areas, azimuths, number of lifts, order of battle, supplies and munitions, free fire zones, hours and minutes. As the briefing came to a close, Colonel Patch turned to me. "Doc, I want you to go in on the first lift. There'll be casualties."

I returned to the dispensary and took stock of the supplies I had assembled. I added a few things to my rucksack. There were ways in which I could do no more than a good Special Forces medic. Glorified first aid. And yet, there were intangibles that I brought to the field. The most important tool in my therapeutic armamentarium was the mystique of a physician. The men thought I knew more and believed I could do more. Because of battle conditions and limited medical supplies, my comrades' confidence in me was misplaced. In another way, it wasn't. My broad knowledge of medicine and surgery provided me with intuitive judgment regarding the life-threatening nature of wounds. Instinctive *triage*. I knew when a wound was minor—most of the time—a casualty that could be held in the field. I knew when a wound was mortal—sometimes—a casualty that also stayed on the ground. I knew who could survive with a

full-court press at a field hospital—maybe—a casualty that got evac'd. At least I usually knew. I had the power to save or lose a life. With that knowledge, I had the power to risk or conserve Dust Offs and their crews. A Huey and four crewmen shouldn't be endangered for non-critical wounds or body bags. I tagged some casualties for a medevac and consigned others to their deaths.

I also had a few quick tricks of the trade that gave me an edge. Maintaining an airway. Tracheotomies. Sometimes just a few 18-gauge needles speared into the suprasternal notch and into the trachea. Cut downs. Intravenous albumin or dextran. Reaching into a shattered chest to clamp bleeders. Tying-off arteries in severed limbs. My final trick was to be cool. No sweat. Everything's under control. So, the men wanted me there. Colonel Patch ordered me to be there. But he did it casually. A gentle request. Like I was doing him a favor.

I picked up my rucksack and M-16. Y-Kre and I joined the assault force at the helipad. The Hueys from Camp Holloway hammered toward us like mechanical birds of prey and touched down, whipping dust in our faces. We walked heavily toward the choppers before they had completely settled on their skids. I climbed on the command chopper with Colonel Patch, his radio man, Jerry Dodds, his Mike Force commander, and another Nung.

The moment we were aboard, the chopper lurched heavily into the air, gaining speed and altitude and set an azimuth for our LZ. The crew chief passed Colonel Patch a headset tuned to the pilot's frequency and that of his officers in other choppers. I watched the ground slip by below. Green jungle, clear patches of yellowing plateau grass, a shimmering blue lake, and on the horizon the purple humps of Cambodian mountains. I felt the vibration of the deck plates against my butt and leaned back against my rucksack. I tried to make my mind a blank and not think about what lay ahead. The Nung grinned at me, flashing gold, but the smile was tight.

Thirty-five minutes into the flight, as we approached the LZ, the pilot took the chopper down to treetop level and increased his speed. The landscape went by in a blur. The door gunners cleared their M-60s, and the machine guns roared as they swept the tree lines. Colonel Patch slid his headset off and hung it on a hook on the fuselage. The chopper flared and settled to the ground. I felt an adrenaline rush that almost made me dizzy. Guns up, we struggled to our feet and piled off the chopper.

All around us choppers were setting down and disgorging the Nungs. Their rotors flattened the grass as the Hueys hammered back into the air. Everyone moved toward their quadrant of the LZ periphery. I followed Patch and his radio man. It was like running in a nightmare—an agonizing expenditure of energy without gaining ground. I felt completely exposed and waited for enemy gunfire to cut me down. I slipped under the weight of my rucksack and floundered toward Patch where we took cover in the trees. I was exhausted. I took a long gulp of warm water from my canteen. I saw Patch's eyes on me as I capped it.

The first lift of choppers were dragonflies on the horizon. In a few moments, it was quiet. We waited expectantly. There was no firing. No noise. Nothing. We poked our heads up and looked around. The LZ lay behind us in the morning sun, smoking from grass fires ignited by incendiary bullets. Ahead of us was jungle, shrouded in grays and browns and greens. Menacing. Patch, Dodds and the Mike Force commander conferred, looking at watches. Information was exchanged on radios. We advanced into the jungle frontally, several meters between each man, securing the clearing for the second lift.

We moved slowly as the jungle canopy closed over us. Occasionally a knife blade of sunlight sliced open the gloom. If we spoke at all, it was in whispers. I could see only a few men on either side of me. Sometimes, no one was visible as the jungle forced us onto solitary paths. I

felt alone. Lost. I wanted to call out. To make contact with troopers on either side of me. I was out of breath. My heart pounded as fearfully as it had on my sprint from the chopper.

I tried to observe the discipline taught at Special Warfare School. Here I was the soldier, not the doctor. Stay alert. Move quietly. Watch the trail. Watch the overhead. Look for anything out of place that might hide a booby-trap. A leaf turned. Moss brushed from a tree. Anything that resembled a straight line in a landscape askew. Freshly turned dirt. A silhouette at variance with its background. I struggled to control my panic. Mister Charles was much more expert at his job than I was at mine. I waited for the explosion. Or the fusillade of bullets. If not ripping me to shreds, then someone else. Better him than me. And better something happen, anything, than this stealthy, exhausting creep through a labyrinth of fear. Perhaps better if nothing happened. Maybe whatever happened would be the last thing that ever happened. Ever again. We reached a clearing and closed up, forming a perimeter. It seemed like we had marched a mile. We had come less than two hundred meters. Patch radioed an OK for the second lift in their holding pattern. Minutes later we heard the thud of muffled rotors. The crewmen riding shotgun didn't open up this time. We were out there. Somewhere beyond the LZ. A soldier's worst nightmare. Friendly fire.

When the second lift caught up with us, an azimuth was set for the coordinates of the B-Team and we set out in-column. A master-sergeant from Dodds's A-Team took the point and dogged compass readings using an old French map. I was in the front part of the column with Colonel Patch. The jungle was suffocating. Steaming. Unbearably hot. Sweat stung my eyes and blurred my vision. My fatigues were soaked. I learned one fact about a "hammer and anvil" operation. The sun was the hammer. We were the anvil. We stopped, and I immediately sank to the jungle floor and sucked at my canteen. Patch looked at me. "Water discipline, Doc." I

nodded and took one last swallow with two salt tablets. I left my rucksack and moved down the line, spreading the word to take salt tablets.

The morning was an exhausting repetition of the first hour. Line of march. Breaks. Noise discipline. Water discipline. Salt tablets. Fatigues white and stiff across the shoulders with crystallized sweat. Straps of my rucksack cut into my shoulders. Web gear with two canteens, pistol, and ammo pouches dragging at my hips. Muscles burning from fatigue. We sensed we were being sucked into a trap. Quick stop. Everyone sank to the ground.

"Point thinks we got contact."

"Wait-a-minute-bushes . . ."

We waited. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Thirty. Apparently nothing. We moved out again. My fear was finally defeated. Not conquered by guts and grit and mental toughness. But by exhaustion, one foot in front of the other. Point kept the azimuth. Flankers were out on either side. The rear swept the track.

We broke for a rest. I shook my canteens. Both were empty. I removed a can of C-ration peaches from my rucksack. The Cs came with a little metal can-opener called a P-38. I sheared away the top of the can and sipped the peach juice, taking care with the jagged edges at the rim. The syrupy liquid helped at first. But it was sticky and thick and did nothing to quench my thirst. I felt like I was choking. I was too proud to ask for water from anyone.

Early afternoon. We were in radio communication with the B-Team. They had had no contact. We moved again. Slower now. It was possible we had a VC unit squeezed between our two forces. More likely they had broken up into small groups and slipped away. Or perhaps the intelligence was faulty and there never was a reinforced company concealed at these coordinates. More likely, still, that VC agents informed their comrades of our operational plans,

giving them adequate time to evade us. Or move to another base camp. Or go underground in a tunnel complex of which we were unaware. The possibilities were endless. Playing a deadly game of hide-and-seek with phantoms who had the wherewithal and incentive to blow us to pieces.

We broke once more. Point was anxious they might get fired on by the B-Team. More radio exchanges. Scouts went forward. We made contact and closed with the B-Team. I sank to the ground, peeling off my rucksack and web-gear. My mouth was parched. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. My teeth were gritty as sandbags. My lips were cracked. For the first time in my life, I was thirsty. Not just ready for some water. But really thirsty. Dying of thirst. On the brink of dehydration and heat exhaustion.

The commander of the B-Team, lean, lanky and leather tough, with a two-day growth of whiskers, squatted in front of me. He handed me his canteen. "You look beat, Doc."

His observation wasn't even close. I took the canteen and lifted it to my lips. I wanted to drain it but that would have been churlish. I took a sip and held it in my mouth a long time, swishing it around and washing it into every parched crevice. I swallowed, took two more sips and handed it back.

We set up a perimeter and dug in. Demolition sergeants sighted Claymores and uncoiled detonating cord in likely avenues of attack. Two-man teams moved a hundred meters into the jungle to establish forward listening posts. With Y-Kre and my medics, I set up a small aid station in the middle of a quartet of hardwood trees.

Colonel Patch stopped by. Asked how I was doing. "Okay," I lied. He nodded and hefted my rucksack. "You're humping too much shit, Doc. You can't save everyone. Lighten up next time." He handed me a full canteen.

"No . . . no. I'm okay."

"Take it," Patch said. "The guys each shared a little to fill this."

Night fell. Our new, threatening presence in the jungle caused the insects and birds and critters to fall silent. The jungle took on a ghostly stillness. After a while, accepting our presence, the creatures resumed their jabbering, twittering, and buzzing. That was reassuring. If they fell silent again, we knew something was on the prowl; whether four- or two-legged remained to be seen. It was a long, miserable night during which nothing happened. I dozed intermittently in a sleep that was no sleep with little difference between sleeping and waking. Strange night noises freaked me out one moment, and in the next an unearthly quiet yanked my nuts up in my belly. Despite insect repellent, mosquitoes swarmed me the first half of the night, and I was teeth-chattering cold the second half. Y-Kre and I huddled together for warmth.

The next morning we secured an LZ. Hueys settled in and shuttled us back to the C-Team. We had made no enemy contact. We had fired no shots. We had taken no casualties. We struggled under the weight of every weapon, every round of ammunition, and every provision with which we had started the operation. The only thing that lightened our load was what little food we had consumed, and each trooper's personal stock of near-empty canteens.

As I trudged through the C-Team gate, I shook the canteen Colonel Patch had given me. It sloshed reassuringly on my hip. Of course, the day hadn't been the same exhausting, dehydrating day as the one before.

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