**Blackhorse Hoofbeats**

**Echoes from the Regiment’s Service in Vietnam 1966 – 1972**

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***Riot Control Agents***

The 33rd Chemical Detachment, the first such unit to deploy to Vietnam, was attached to the Blackhorse from the 5th Infantry Division (Mech) at Ft. Carson, CO.  In addition to its primary missions of advising commanders and the staff on potential targets for the use of riot control agents and defense against the enemy’s use of tear gas (CS), the Troopers of the 33rd Chem inspected and repaired individual protective masks throughout the Regiment.  They also conducted classes on board the *USNS Sultan* on chemical, biological, and radiological (CBR) defense while en route to Vietnam in August 1966.  The detachment, commanded by a captain or 1st lieutenant, averaged three to five enlisted Troopers on its morning report.  They owned a ¾-ton truck and not much else.

Once in country, the 33rd Chem’s mission expanded to include operating equipment during and analyzing results from Sniffer missions (helicopter flights using electronic detectors that smelled the presence of humans), conducting CS riot control agent canister drops against suspected and known enemy positions, and base camp perimeter defoliation.  This latter mission led to the detachment’s unofficial motto: “*Only we can prevent forests*.”

Because of the close operational relationship between the detachment and Air Cav Troop, the 33rd was placed under the operational control of Thunderhorse 6 by 1969.  Once the E-63 Personnel Detector (Sniffer) was issued to the Regiment, the Troopers of the 33rd Chemical Detachment assumed a daily mission of overflying areas designated by the regimental staff.  The January 1970 edition of the *Blackhorse* [newspaper] described one of these missions.  With Private First Class (PFC) John Baumhackl at the controls, and Captain (CPT) Jerry Self (Detachment Commander) and Sergeant First Class (SFC) Gail Burch looking over his shoulder, the Huey-mounted ‘people sniffer’ sniffed the air five times a second looking for signs of humanity – sweat, urine, etc.  The Huey, accompanied by an Air Cav Troop Cobra, flew over the Mike Company night defensive position at treetop level as a test of the equipment.  The needle pegged.  Confident that their equipment was working properly, Self told the pilot to head for the designated area of jungle outside of Loc Ninh.  When Baumhackl alerted them to a positive reading, Self marked his map and Burch tossed out some Chieu Hoi (surrender) leaflets.

Back at Quan Loi, the team huddled with the flight crews.  After double-checking their readings, CPT Self turned in his report to the regimental intelligence officer (RS-2).  On more than one occasion, these people sniffer missions led to aerial and ground reconnaissance into areas of high readings.  On this occasion, an artillery mission seemed appropriate.  The barrage of 155mm shells set off a secondary explosion, destroying “a number of [NVA] bunkers and three .51 caliber machine gun positions” according to Jerry Self.

John Baumhackl recalls: “our duties included sniffer missions, CS gas drops…to get them out of the jungle or their defensive position,…and defoliation, which I later found out, that was Agent Orange… We used to run ‘sniffer’ missions around the [Cambodian] border and when finished we would call in arty to flush out the NVA [North Vietnamese Army].”

In 1969, the 33rd Chem started combining people sniffer missions with psychological operations leaflet drops.  Not only did this improve efficiency by lowering blade time, it also served to disguise the real purpose of the flight over enemy territory.  During the period August – October 1969, the detachment flew 141 People Sniffer missions in the Quan Loi – An Loc – Loc Ninh area.  They also dropped 300 CS cluster bombs during the same period, as well as 150 drums of persistent CS (designed to deny the enemy use of a specific area, such as known base camps).

Action near the end of 1968 was a perfect example of how the employment of non-lethal riot control agents led to defeating the enemy in battle.  While flying over an area of the Catcher’s Mitt east of Lai Khe on 30 December, Regimental Command Sergeant Major Paul Squires spotted an enemy soldier hiding in the vegetation.  The pilot banked the helicopter over the enemy location, and Squires dropped eight CS grenades in succession on top of the Viet Cong, ensuring that he could not aim his rifle and bring the ship down.  At low level, Squires jumped out of the helicopter and tackled and disarmed the VC, even as he wildly swung and fired his AK47 rifle.  Quick interrogation of the captured guerrilla revealed that a large rice carrying party and a base camp were located not far away.

Shortly thereafter, 1st Lieutenant J.W. Thurman, piloting a 2/11 Aviation Section scout helicopter, saw another VC in the same area and took him under fire.  Thurman landed his helicopter in an attempt to capture another prisoner.  His crew chief, Specialist 4 (SP4) Vincenzo Gambino, and door gunner, SP4 James Graham, followed their pilot into the thick underbrush.  All three came under heavy fire from a well-concealed VC sniper.  Thurman silenced the immediate threat, but additional enemy soldiers were soon headed their way.  The three-man helicopter crew, out of their element on the ground, but most certainly not out of courage, established a makeshift defensive position and held off the numerically-superior enemy force until help arrived.

Led by Echo Troop, 2nd Squadron piled-on, reinforced by the regimental Aero Rifle Platoon (ARPs) and elements of Alpha Company, 2/2 Infantry.  The ensuing battle raged from just after noon until almost dark, resulting in the capture of ten enemy prisoners.  Documents on the 13 enemy bodies left on the battlefield, as well as interrogation of the prisoners, indicated that they were from 5 separate units, including the Dong Nai Regiment and elements of VC Sub-Region 5.  The Blackhorse Troopers also captured a working printing press, designed to print fake South Vietnamese identity cards (complete with counterfeit government stamps), as well as a Chinese Communist radio and numerous weapons.

Further interrogation of the prisoners revealed that the leadership of Sub-Region 5 had a secret base in the hamlet of Hoa Loi I, about 10 kilometers to the south of the contact area.  The ARPs were inserted into the village on the last day of 1968 and found a complex of 21 tunnels.  Inside the tunnels they discovered 4,000 pounds of rice – and another 10 VC.  Among the prisoners this time was the assistant chief of military intelligence for Sub-Region 5.  His interrogation led to even more captured supplies, weapons, and prisoners.  All because CS grenades blinded that VC and prevented him from shooting down the Blackhorse helicopter.