**Blackhorse Hoofbeats**

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

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**Impressions of Vietnam:**

* Most Troopers were struck by the smells of Vietnam – the unique combination of rotting jungle vegetation, human waste, and *nuoc mam*. To Charlie Troop’s Byron Skinner, who grew up in San Diego, Vietnam “smelled like Tijuana in the 1950’s.” Fox Troop’s Cary McMasters recalls: “The sights were different and the odor of the country was awful. My duffel bag still smells that way.”
* Air Cav Troop’s Chip Troiano remembers getting to Blackhorse Base Camp late at night after his days’ long airplane ride across the Pacific in late 1966. “By that time we were pretty exhausted, so we laid out our bed rolls and slept. I have a photo of the first morning in Co. [company] area, and it looks pretty dismal just the 1 tent. For the following weeks we set up Co. area and we sandbagged, and we sandbagged in the heat and in the rain, I have a great photo of 4 of us in ponchos filling sandbags with mud. And that was Blackhorse Base camp.”
* Second Squadron’s Charles Abbey “observed what appeared to be a large crumpled parachute cradled in the branches of one of the large shrubby things” at the new Blackhorse Base Camp. “Our driver – courageous and aggressive Blackhorse trooper that he was – made no effort to slow down before crashing into the cradling branches of this large shrub. Just at that crucial moment, stark realization alerted the entire crew to the true nature of this thing. Indeed, it was a gigantic tropical wasp’s nest.” The Troopers demonstrated “high performance aeronautical skills, latent in each man … Track records were set as we bailed-out in terror” – much to the amusement of the by-standers. Once the wasps had shown their displeasure and returned to their nest, the Zippo flame track was brought into action; a quick burst eliminated “about a million” enemy combatants.
* 3rd Squadron chaplain Dan Swiatek recalls that the rice paddies in the wet season of 1968 had a smell of their own, even before planting and fertilizing. Generations of rice harvests had permeated the soil. “I have no problem with manure, but the smell was unbelievable.”
* Charlie Troop’s Paul Baerman, who arrived in Vietnam in the early summer of 1969, summed up his first impression of this place called Vietnam. “I had travelled the United States and Europe as an Army brat but this environment was totally different: smaller people, pungent odors of fish and strange vegetables, a different kind of bustle, and vibrant colors everywhere … The terrain was like nothing I had seen before, lush and green but interspersed with bomb craters, defoliated areas, and napalm burns.”
* Donn Starry was invited to speak at West Springfield High School in Virginia. Just back from his first tour in Vietnam, he told the high school students about his own impressions of that country: “[T]he weather and terrain in which we must fight the enemy are some of the most difficult in the world. Roads are poorly developed or nonexistent. Dense jungle, mountainous areas, swamps, and rice paddies hinder movement by both vehicles and foot. The heat and high humidity are depressing and require careful maintenance of weapons and equipment. Insects and a high incidence of disease cause physical discomfort and, on top of all this, it rains six months straight out of each year.”
* For native Texan Gary Jay, the area east of Blackhorse Base Camp reminded him of Abilene. In a letter home written shortly after he was assigned to Golf Troop in late 1970, he wrote: “‘A friend of mine, an A&M graduate, asked how I seemed so cheerful in spite of the fact there is a war going on. I replied that one of the reasons is that the sector of the country we are in has vegetation which looks like the mesquites back in west Texas. Besides, the South China Sea looks like the Gulf of Mexico … I know this is a little far out, but when you’re in this country, every little thing helps.’”
* The double and triple canopy jungle south and west of An Loc was especially difficult and had an adverse impact on military operations. In an after-action report for Operation Montana Raider (April – May 1969), the 155mm shells from the Blackhorse Howitzer Batteries’ were described as “marginally effective. When using delay fuze, the results were adequate but not overwhelming. 105-mm Howitzers could not do damage underground … [It was] impossible to fully utilize the FO (forward observer) on the ground. He could not see or direct artillery fire through the dense jungle terrain.”
* A few days before the start of Operation Cedar Falls in January 1967, Leo Deege (Howitzer Battery, 3/11), flew over the Iron Triangle. He recalls what he saw. “I remember looking at those dense jungles and wondering about how people were actually living underneath those canopies. It seemed very wild and hostile to me.”
* What Golf Troopers found when they returned to the Ho Bo Woods in 1971 were so many bomb craters (largely invisible to the crews of armored vehicles once the jungle had grown back up around the rim) that no less than three ACAVs and Sheridans were literally ‘swallowed up’ when they drove into these massive holes in the earth in the middle of a huge firefight. Sheridan commander Leonardo Hinojosa’s vehicle was one of them, and the citation for his Army Commendation Medal for Valor for the contact on 17 April describes what happened: “While moving and placing maximum firepower on enemy positions, the vehicle fell into a bomb crater and was temporarily out of action. Staff Sergeant Hinojosa quickly jumped clear of enemy small arms fire and hooked his tank to a tow cable to be pulled back into action”.
* Sign erected by 1st Squadron sometime in 1969: “Welcome to War Zone C, Home of 1/11 ACR. No Hunting Permit Required.”
* In Hau Nghia Province, where 3rd Squadron operated during March and April 1968, the dust became like fine powder snow blanketing man and machine alike. Neal Creighton concluded that the dust was at least partially responsible for the high number of ACAV engine failures during this period (due to dust-clogged air filters). It got into your hair, your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your pores; it gave your skin a semi-permanent tint of red or white, regardless of your race, for months after you returned to The World. As one unnamed Blackhorse Trooper was quoted as saying: “‘Now I know how Pigpen in Charlie Brown feels’”.
* Less than two months later, with daily rainfall reaching up to three inches a day, the paddies of Hau Nghia Province became virtually impassable – even for ACAVs. Water stood up to a foot deep in the rainy season. During an assault against a dug-in VC battalion, 1st Squadron’s Bravo Troop had four vehicles “mired in the deep rice paddy mud”, where they became stationary targets for RPG gunners. Four Troopers were killed and nine wounded before ‘long-range’ (200-plus meters as compared to the normal 50 meters or less) covering fire from Delta Company’s tanks allowed the vehicles and casualties to be recovered.
* Delta Company’s Steve Linthwaite, remembers a time in 1969 “watching my 50 ton tank run into a stand of bamboo and be stopped dead in its tracks ...”
* Danny Leal was a radio operator/M-60 machine gunner on the Lima Troop commander’s track. He was killed in the 21 July 1967 ambush. In a letter written home prior to his death, he summed up what many Blackhorse Troopers thought about the jungle: “‘If you like being in the jungle getting sniper fire and eating C rations, you might like Vietnam.’”