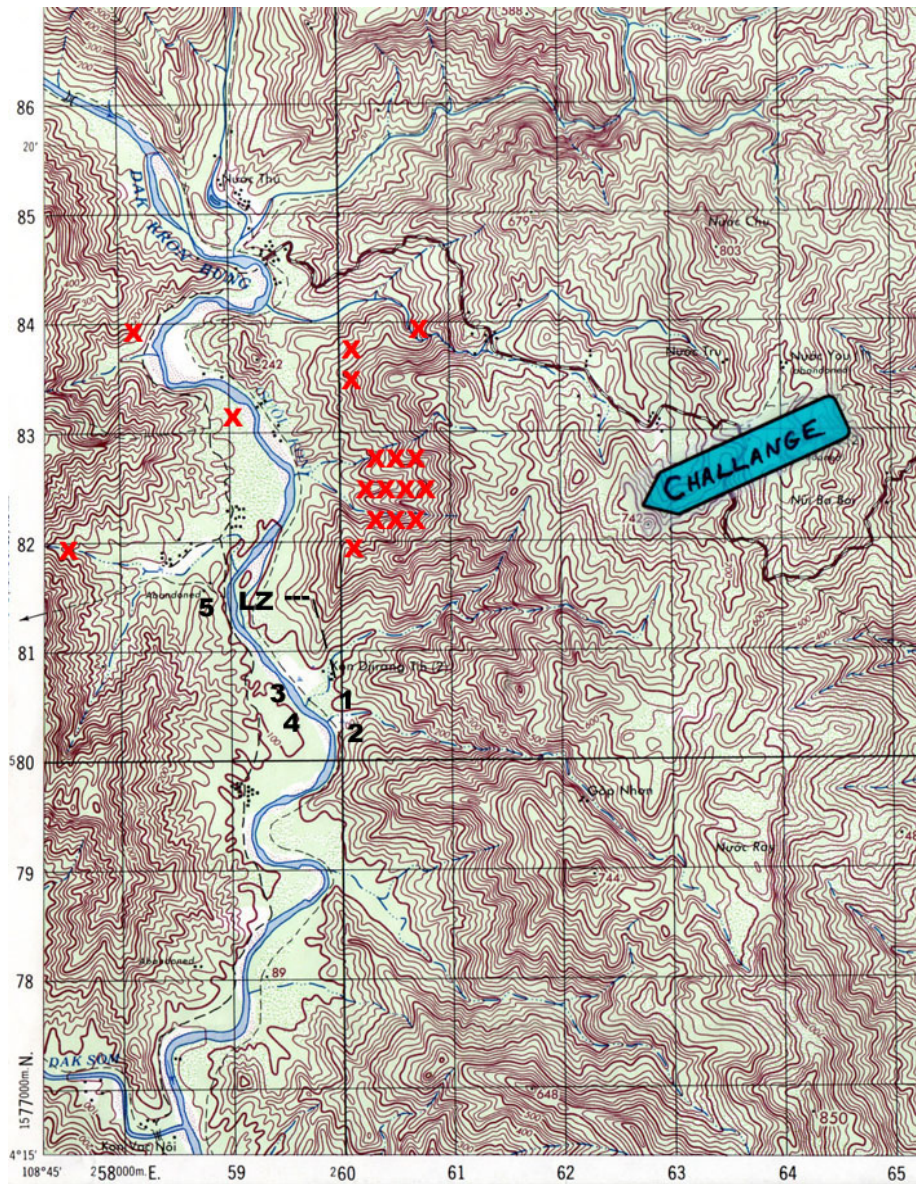


## 5 - SUOI KON RIVER MISSION

Located in the adjacent western valley below FSB Challenge

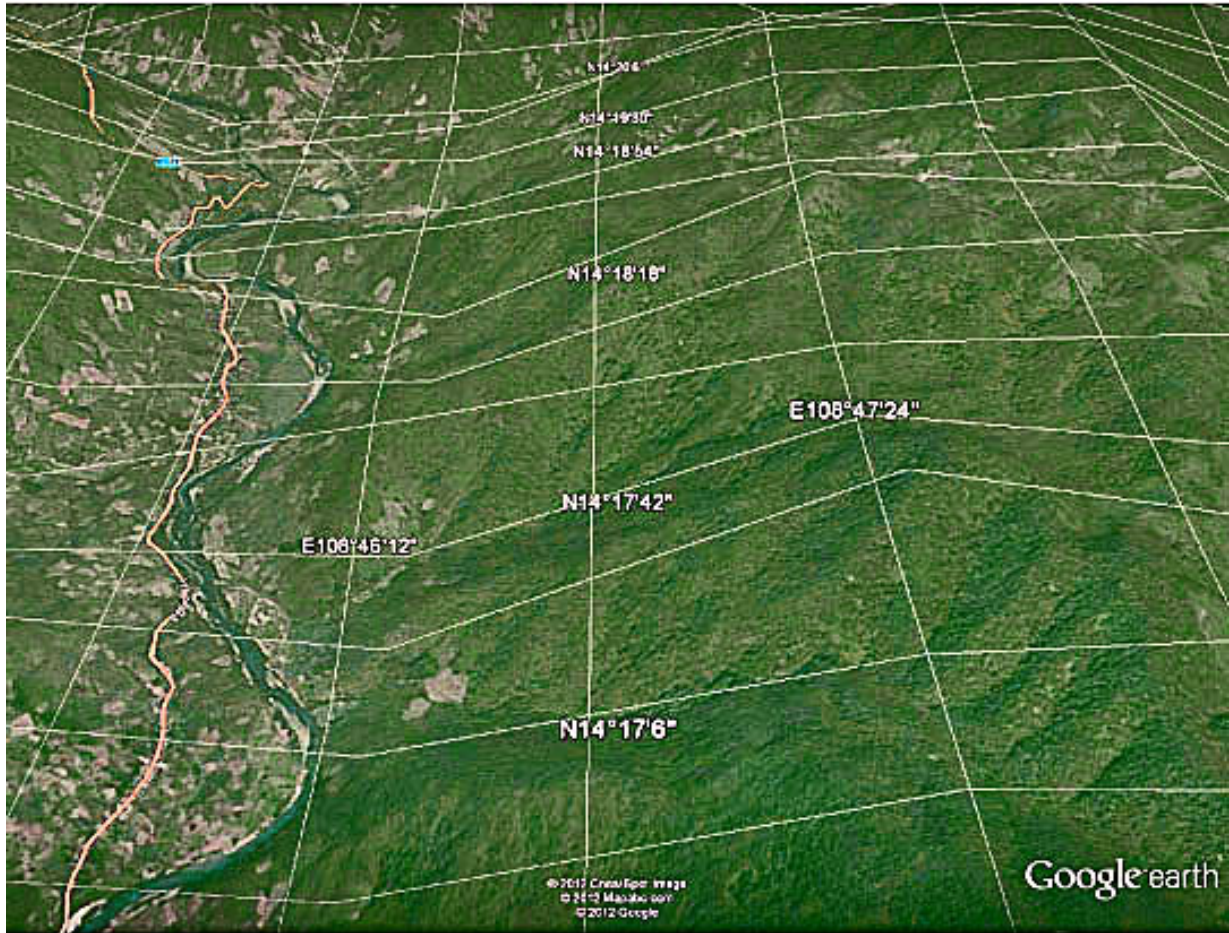
My first mission started on April 1st and was in the Suoi Kon River Valley to the west of our firebase. Units of the 2/35th were already deployed in the area on the mission that had

already begun. An earlier mission called Operation "Earhart White" had taken place in the same area during the first couple of weeks of March. Their most significant find was an enemy medical surgical center that was equipped with orthopedic, abdominal, gynecological, and cranial instruments, as well as related medicines. (This area was the home of the 3rd NVA Division consisting of approximately 4000 combat infantry plus support personnel, while our battalion consisted of approximately 450 soldiers). Our LZ would be within 1-1/2 km of this destroyed center.



### NOTES:

- The RED Xs denote firefights by other platoons & companies during the mission.
- The BLACK NUMBERS denote the areas of our movement during the first five days.



Google earth



While D Company was inserted at the base of the hill FSB Challenge was located on,

A Company was relocated to provide security for the firebase. B Company was already located in the northern part of the valley about 10 km away, and C Company was located 3 km south of

B Company. Our Recon Platoon was 15 km northwest of Challenge in another valley containing the Dak Som River which flowed into our valley.

Once the chopper made it to the valley floor it had to hover over the river about 3 feet and we had to jump into the water. I got my pants and boots soaked. We formed up on the river bank in the following order of single file march:

The Point Man led the way and to looked closely at the trail for booby traps or signs of the enemy. Our Point Man, SP4 Messer, had a reputation for being one of the best. He was from Indiana and his weapon of choice was a Winchester 12 gauge pump shotgun. The next position was Drag, which had the responsibility of covering the Point Man. While the Point looked down searching for possible trip wires and booby traps, the drag looked ahead for

enemy movement. Sergeant Hubbard from southern California usually walked drag. He was also our squad leader. Behind the drag position, was the platoon leader, LT Cassidy from Kentucky. Close behind the LT was his radioman (RTO), Waldo, who was from New York. Next was the M-60 machine gunner, Magee from Indiana. Behind the machine gun was the M-40 grenade launcher. Simms from Dallas carried this weapon and hated it. I was given the next position and carried an M-16 rifle. Behind me was Shevlin, from Long Island, followed by another person, Sgt. Brown from North Carolina, and another person all carrying M-16s. Walking last, and always keeping watch to his rear, was a Texan from the Mexican border named Rudy. Twelve men total didn't give me a secure feeling.

Because of the thick vegetation, we had to use a machete to make a trail. It was hot sweaty work. In the middle of making headway, we had a downpour. Now I was soaked from perspiration and rain. It took us about one hour to cut one hundred yards of the jungle. We cut for about four hours in unrelenting rain until we broke out into a trail that was about ten feet wide and well used.

As we broke out of the vegetation, there was a hidden bunker on our left that could hold about two men. The bunker was dug into the side of a small hill that was located adjacent to the larger hill, which had Challenge at its summit. The bunker was a small mound of dirt covered with fresh vegetation. Facing the trail was a gun slit that was about a foot high and two feet wide. The interior of the bunker smelled of charcoal, the telltale scent of the NVA. The NVA soldiers cooked with wood and left this scent wherever they occupied a place. The dirt in the bunker was also freshly disturbed. Did someone hear us cutting the trail and evacuating the bunker to report our presence?

We moved up the trail another hundred yards and carefully moved into the vegetation on our left and up to a small knoll at the foot of the firebase hill. We did not cut into the jungle, but carefully blended into the vegetation. We moved into the jungle about 50-75 feet and set up a tight encampment by carefully and quietly matting down the jungle plants and vines. We were virtually invisible from the trail. While this was happening, our squad leader, Sergeant Hubbard, took a couple of guys parallel to the trail to scout before nightfall arrived. I had no idea what our mission was at this point! I was wet, sore, and tired, and now I was getting apprehensive about our situation.

Eating was limited to carefully opening a can of C-Rations and drinking water from one of my eight quarts of chlorinated canteen water. Usually, we would heat water, using a heat tab or C4, to make either coffee or hot chocolate. Our position was too tenuous to chance the smell of coffee! I wasn't that hungry but ate anyway to take my mind off of our situation. How much worse could it get? I didn't want to contemplate the near future.

Sergeant Hubbard returned just before dark with no sighting of the NVA. I gathered this from his hand signals. What I didn't pick up was his description of picking up the fresh scent of NVA. The jungle air is stagnant and holds the scent of a person for hours if your senses are trained to pick up such signs. I was an FNG and my senses were trained to pick up subtle scents. My sense training would take weeks, during which time I was at a distinct disadvantage that could be fatal, not only to me but to my platoon. My experiences thus far were unlike any of the training I had encountered in the states. It was like the army had no idea how the war was being fought in Vietnam.

Night came suddenly and totally enveloped us, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Since I was an FNG, the first watch would be mine. The watch lasted one hour and consisted of listening to the radio while everybody slept, and guarding the encampment against penetration. About every 15 minutes the company radio would ask you for a "Sit Rep" (situation report). Since we could not talk, the button located on the handset was pressed twice to reply that everything was all right. Once my hour was up I would carefully wake the man next to me and hand him the radio.

At this point, I wrapped myself in my poncho liner and lay down to sleep. My poncho, which was spread out on the ground, protected me from the wet jungle floor but did not insulate me from every bump and twig under me. I hadn't thought to prepare my sleeping area very well. The trials and tribulations of an FNG.

I couldn't sleep. I heard voices, and they weren't American. Passing down the trail in front of us was a group of NVA. They were even using flashlights. They didn't seem to have a worry in the world, just out for an evening stroll! I was in a panic; maybe this was a bad dream. I had been instructed beforehand to keep my rifle in safety mode and to follow everybody else's lead. Do not fire unless absolutely necessary. Nobody made a move. The group passed slowly by without noticing us.

During the night a total of three groups passed by. The NVA owned the night, and we hid from them. During the night, small furry animals scavenged around us for scraps of food. One crawled over my chest; I gently moved it off and felt the smooth bare tail. It was a rat! I broke into a cold sweat and felt like vomiting. Was this a nightly occurrence in the jungle? My first night was a living nightmare. I felt on the verge of a pit of insanity. His was a living

Edgar Allen Poe story!

As dawn arrived, I lifted myself clear of the pit. This night, I thought couldn't be any worse, or could it? The memory of that night would always keep me an eternal optimist. I awoke from that night a different person.

The mission would last a total of 16 days for us. Our 2nd Squad would join us a few days later during a resupply of food. We normally got a resupply every 4 days. Although we found plenty of signs of the enemy, we never engaged them in action. Our fellow platoons in our company and the other companies were not so lucky and there was plenty of action for them.

During the mission, our battalion of approximately 450 soldiers would suffer the following losses (removed from the field):

- 3 KIA (Killed in Action)
- 12 WIA (Wounded in Action)
- 4 Wounded from Friendly Fire
- 22 Wounded from Booby Trap, plus one Scout Dog
- 8 Hurt from Accidents
- 5 Sick (Usually from fevers contracted such as Malaria)

Enemy Losses were 8 KIA and at least 6 WIA. Wounded in Action were difficult to access unless the wounded were captured. Usually, blood trails were counted as WIAs.

On April 16, 1970, our Platoon along with the other elements of D Company was extracted and placed in a valley near the source of the Dak Som River. This was about two kilometers north of the proposed FSB Welch which was to be located on a hill overlooking our new position. Our orders were to begin building a new firebase called Raquel. Upon landing at the site of the new firebase, one of our scout dogs, Skipper, sustained a punji wound.