

## 8 - FSB MERIDITH - Cambodia Departure

Located just west of the Se San River, on the border with Cambodia, and just northeast of the famous [la Drang Valley Battle Site](#)

*One of the reasons my Father was so sensitive about me going to Vietnam in a direct combat role was that a friend of his home town of Oxford, MA lost a son [David Vancellette](#) in the la Drang Valley with the 7th Calvary on November 17, 1965. He was born a couple of weeks after me in 1946. I was in college when he died. I never knew him.*

*May 4, 1970*

*In Ohio, National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of Kent State University students protesting the Cambodian invasion, killing two men and two women, and wounding eight others.*



*Seymour Hersh, a freelance reporter who broke the story of the Mylai Massacre, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting. Over 350 unarmed civilians, including elderly, women, and newborns were shot to death and tossed into a common grave. The atrocity was kept a secret until one sickened soldier confessed to a government official. Lt. William Calley, platoon leader of the unit responsible for the killing is scheduled to face a court martial in the near future on murder charges.*

**May 5, 1970**

At the noon briefing our battalion commander told us that we would be heading into Northeast Cambodia to attack the NVA sanctuaries! The area, reportedly, was inhabited by NVA regulars who were hiding under Cambodia's neutrality. The North Vietnam government denied having troops in not only Cambodia but Laos and South Vietnam.

*After the war, it would be divulged that small Special Operation Groups (SOG) of U.S. troops had done some reconnaissance in Cambodia. A large number were lost on these missions. In addition, the CIA ran Air America out of Laos.*

*A couple of years before, our intelligence learned that this area was the suspected headquarters of General Giap. In fact, General Westmoreland assembled a Special Forces group supported by Montaguard tribesmen to go into the area and kidnap him, prior to our incursion. The mission was called off when it was found out that a division of 25,000 NVA regulars protected him. Reference Morley Safer's book "Flashbacks; On Returning to Vietnam".*

*According to the book, "Twelve Days in May" by Berry, the incursion was called "Operation Binh Tay I" and was to attack the NVA Base Area 702 which contained the headquarters of the NVA B-3 Front. It was estimated to contain a total of 1500-2000 troops, that would probably flee rather than fight. Morley Safer had better intelligence?*

*Again, according to the book, "Twelve Days in May" by Berry, the incursion had the **1st Brigade** spearheaded by the 3-506th (Airborne) Infantry, the 1-14th Infantry, and the 3-8th Infantry, land in the northern portion of Base Area 702. They would be responsible for building three FSBs called Dragon, Phillips, and Currahee.*

*The **2nd Brigade** made up of the 1-12th Infantry, the 1-22nd Infantry, and our unit the 2-35th Infantry, would land in the central portion of Base Area 702 and build FSBs called Invasion, Valkyrie, and Conquest.*

*The southern area would be assigned to the **40th ARVN Regiment**. Kick-off was scheduled for May 5th.*

*Little did we know that Nixon had announced the invasion to the public a week before on April 30th. Nothing was ever said to the troops in the field prior to the mission announcement.*

*Nixon's Televised News Conference outlining the incursion into Cambodia almost a week before my unit invaded! Luckily the North Vietnamese didn't have access to American TV.*

*Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, had begun secret peace talks on February 21 of 1970. He had two other meetings on March 16 and on April 4th with the North Vietnamese. Did he tell them of our plans to invade?*

Up until now the NVA had used Cambodia as part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and had base camps along the border, which the US Army could not cross, even in hot pursuit. It was a perfect sanctuary for the NVA. It was rumored that we only violated it with small secret missions. Some of the older members of our platoon claimed that the platoon had been to Cambodia.

One of the "Higher Ups" in our unit was all excited that we would get an opportunity to run up a good body count in Cambodia. I wondered whose bodies he was referring to.

He assured us that it would be like the beginning of hunting season in virgin territory. We were expected to find re-supply, training, and R&R centers. The NVA were in for a surprise!

On the downside, we should expect heavy resistance going in, including anti-aircraft batteries to blow our choppers out of the sky. It was speculated by our military intelligence (S-2) that the NVA might use tanks and their MIGs against us! Nobody knew how the NVA would react.

There was no mention of how long the mission would last. Because of the size of the enemy force, we would be traveling in company-size units of approximately 100 men. Regular Company strength should be about 200 men, but we were very short-handed.

I thought back to my processing at Pleiku (Camp Enari) a few weeks ago, and my run-in with the recruiting sergeant. I remembered how he tried to get all the infantry guys to sign up for four years with the promise of reassignment to a non-combat job. How many guys signed up and were removed from the field? Why would the army spend so much money to train these guys and then try to entice them to get out of the infantry? There was an acute shortage of combat troops available in Vietnam.

I wondered how our small group of men was to handle the potential NVA horde. Perhaps the other companies could be moved quickly enough to reinforce any really hot areas. I hoped that the planning and allocation of resources were meticulous.

The entire briefing centered on the “good hunting” mantra. I wondered about the commitment to winning. Body counts seemed like a narrow-minded goal. Where was the “Big Picture”? Was there any “picture” at all?

At the end of the briefing, which was very brief, we were asked if there were any questions. This was a big mistake on the "Higher Ups" part; I promptly raised my hand and asked what particular targets we would be hitting, what was the expected resistance, and how big the opposing force was going to be. He looked at me as if I had two heads; nobody asked questions at briefings. He couldn't answer my questions! I then asked what type of terrain we would be in, jungle or open fields. He answered that he would not receive that information until just prior to the invasion. I explained further that this type of information was important to a grenadier, like myself, in choosing the correct rounds. He ended the briefing without replying to my comment.

We never had another briefing. I guess the stress of answering intelligent questions was too much for a professional military leader! So much for tactical planning! At the end of the briefing, a number of people came over to compliment me on making the "Higher Up" look like an ass. Although it was not my intent, everybody thought I was a real wise guy. This type of questioning would keep me in hot water throughout my life.

*Prior to getting drafted, I worked for a wire company in Connecticut as a Process Engineer. As a rookie engineer, I had a lot to learn. My supervisor was an ex-WWII Army guy that resembled a Drill Sergeant. He kept me on a short leash and demanded that I tow the mark. He was tough and I was almost glad when I got drafted. He taught me discipline and demanded an inquiring mind that could do a quality job. This helped me as a Grunt but not with the “higher-ups” in the Army.*

An experienced grenadier from another platoon, who heard my questions, recommended I carry all grenades. His rationale was that an unarmed grenade was just as deadly as the buckshot and therefore more valuable than the buckshot, which only had a short range. I took his advice and thanked him for taking me seriously.

The rest of the afternoon was occupied with drawing ammunition, food, and water. My machete was dull so I went to the Supply Depot to get a file and a stone so that I could sharpen it. They had none in stock so they exchanged my machete for a new one! They just trashed the dull machetes! This was a common practice since they had been waiting for resupply of files and stones for years, according to the supply people! I made a mental note to ask my Father to mail me a file and stone when and if I got to write another letter.

*At the end of 1970, when I was assigned to the 101st Airborne, I would find that their Supply Depot had no machetes, but tons of files and stones. The 101st machetes were sharpened so much that they had hardly any blade left! Everyone envied my almost new 4th Division machete! I gave it away since it had become my secondary machete anyway.*

A lot of the guys were preoccupied with writing home; thinking this might be their last letter. I didn't bother; it was too morbid. If something happened to me, I didn't want my letters to arrive after the notification of death.

Sergeant Hubbard, our Squad Leader, who had become friendly with me, approached carrying a shovel. This was a full-sized shovel like we used for digging back home, not one of the Army's mini-shovels that we carried. I'm not sure how he acquired it.

*Grunts were normally issued compact folding entrenching tools for digging. When unfolded they were only about two feet long and did not provide much leverage for digging. When digging a foxhole one had to start digging from the kneeling position which was awkward and slow.*

His intention was to find another grunt to help him carry it into Cambodia so we would have real digging power if needed. This shovel would really come in handy for digging a foxhole quickly, "quickly" being the keyword. He offered me the first chance at joint ownership. I gladly accepted. Because carrying the shovel would be awkward, we would alternate days carrying the shovel, and share the shovel with the rest of the squad and platoon, after we had dug our hole first, of course.

*In Peking, Cambodian Prince Sihanouk forms a government in exile. Lon Nol, the new Cambodian leader, was allowing the US to engage the NVA in his country.*

## **May 6, 1970**

The next day we loaded up on trucks, about 12 guys a truck, and headed west on Highway 19 to Cambodia. Every third truck towed a trailer to carry our rucksacks. Our truck towed a trailer.

The well-paved highway took us through the dreaded Mang Yang Pass and past Pleiku without incident. Shortly after Pleiku, the highway turned southwest and we left the highway and entered a dusty dirt road that headed in a westerly direction. The sun was bright and the day was hot and humid. The dust was so bad that we had to cover our mouths with kerchiefs, like cowboys driving cattle.

We arrived at an abandoned firebase called Meredith just short of the border with Cambodia in the early afternoon and set up our night lager. When the firebase was abandoned all the bunkers were caved in, so we had put up poncho lean-tos to get out of the sun.

There were hundreds of grunts assembled here from the 4th Division including the 1/35 and the 1/12 battalions who were to precede us into Cambodia. The place was flat with little vegetation. The area was covered with about two inches of fine brown dust that had the consistency of talcum powder. This western area of Vietnam was located on the Kontum Plateau and was as barren as the moon. To the distant north and south was a range of mountains. Not far from the old firebase there was a small blue line (stream) where we could refill our canteens.

Late in the afternoon, a Catholic chaplain came by to give us a service, and to reassure us that the action in Cambodia wasn't as bad as everybody expected. I hoped he wasn't being an army propaganda tool. We tried to sleep through a quiet night. Everybody was anxious about the invasion, and a lot of guys spent all night talking about it. I participated for a while but did not want to pull an all-nighter before the mission.

*Secretary of the Interior Hickel complains that President Nixon is ignoring the country's youth and their abhorrence for the Vietnam War.*

### **May 7, 1970**

The morning dawned with a brilliant sunrise. The day would be as hot and dusty as the previous one. In a short time, the sky began filling with helicopters. I had never seen so many before. There was a continuous stream of them heading west. I tried counting them but gave up at one hundred. None of the choppers landed at our site. We watched the procession through the morning without getting picked up. We got more anxious by the minute. I was dying to get this over with. Dying to die?

During the morning, unbeknownst to me, some Vietnamese civilians erected a small group of large canvas tents. It was a portable whorehouse! As word spread, lines began to form at the entrance of the tents. Business was good. A number of GIs on Meredith handed over five dollars for what could be their last shot. I suspect that in many a case, it was also their first shot. I wondered how it would be in a sweltering tent on a dusty plain, with a slew of guys in front of you. Poor girls, what a way to make a living! The thought of coming down with some horrendous venereal disease crossed my mind. We had been told all kinds of horror stories about specific incidents, which I won't describe.

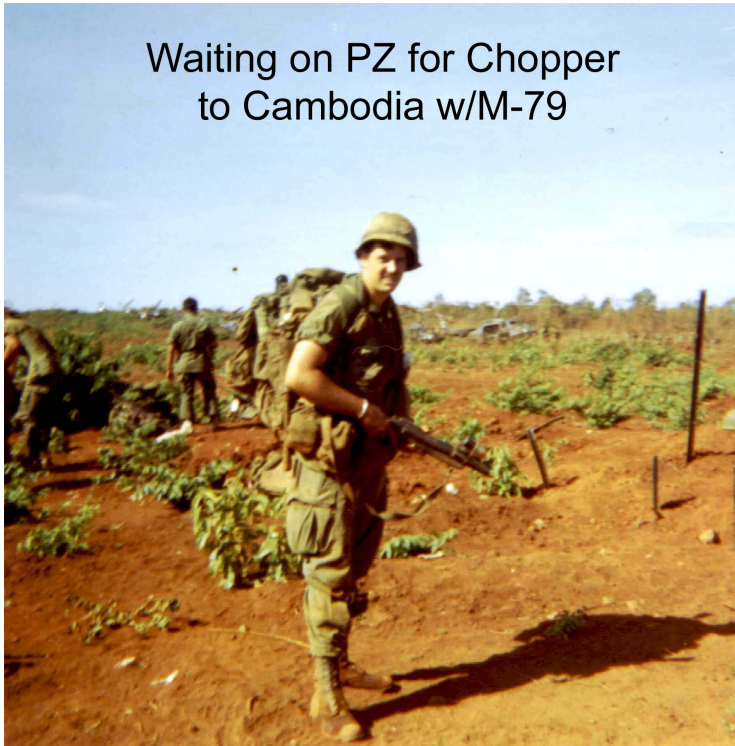
Before the birds arrived, a group of soul brothers, numbering about six pulled a wildcat strike. They refused to go to Cambodia since their orders never mentioned any other assignment than South Vietnam. Interesting, but I thought a weak argument. Evidently they won, because a truck took them back to the rear, where they would be dealt with accordingly. What was



accordingly? A bed and hot meal without being shot at? The lifers really knew how to punish the protestors. We all wondered what would happen.

*Later we would learn, from reading an issue of the Star & Stripes newspaper, that the "brothers" were sent back to the states and given a general discharge! Since the paper was an army propaganda rag, they were probably decorated and given a retirement to shut them up. So much for morale.*

Just after 10 am, our birds finally arrived. Company A went first to help finish building a firebase in Cambodia. The firebase was called "Conquest". Lucky bastards, I just loved building firebases. Upon arriving A Company numbering 109 men secured the firebase site and sent out patrols. Their insertion was complete by 11:10 am. At 3 p.m. one patrol found 2000 pounds of rice just west of the firebase. The rice storage site had been occupied within the hour. Construction of the firebase continued.



C Company, numbering 109 men left Meredith at 11:10 am and landed next to Conquest. Upon landing they headed west and found a group of 25 hootches and livestock. At the site two NVA helmets were found and a 165th air group booklet that contained all our frequencies and call signs. The booklet was effective May 11th! Continuing west C Company found three groups of hootches comprised of 15, 20 and 5 structures containing large amounts of unpolished rice. Continuing to the northwest C Company found 15 sleeping hootches housing 50 to 100 NVA troopers along with pigs, chickens, one NVA helmet, and a

destroyed AK-47. Another element of C Company found 10 hootches, 300 lb. of unpolished rice, a pair of boots, and pots and pans.

### ***Polished versus Unpolished Rice?***

*Rice fresh from the garden is usually brown and has the husk, bran, and germ intact. It has more nutrients but is tougher to store. By milling the rice, the husk, bran, and germ are removed. The rice appears whiter, and the texture and flavor are altered. White rice can be stored longer.*

*A diet of milled rice, which lacks Vitamin B1, could lead to the neurological disease Beriberi. The U.S. government mandates that white rice be enriched with nutrients.*

*Although rice can be polished by hand, it would be a very labor-intensive process using a large amount of water. To haul rice down the HCM Trail from North Vietnam a distance of 500 miles would require the human carrier to consume 5 gallons (30 lbs.) of rice during the course of 25 days to accomplish the distance. Carrying rice with a human would seem to be very inefficient.*

*Northeastern Cambodia is dry and not known for its rice production. Based on these facts, any Polished Rice found must have been trucked in from North Vietnam. Based on the amount of rice found during the incursion, there were a lot of trucks used on the HCM Trail.*

At 1:12 p.m. Recon, led by my ex-schoolmate Lt. Wajer, left Meredith also landing near Conquest. Upon landing they headed in a southwesterly direction. Their insertion was complete by 1:32 p.m. Recon was comprised of 39 men.

Our D Company, numbering 95 men, was to land on an LZ also near the new firebase. When our turn came around 1:15 PM, we loaded quickly and were on our way west to an unknown destiny. I wondered how many would make the return trip in a body bag. I was scared, to say the least.