

On Aug. 5, 1972, 92 members of Delta Company, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry of the recently deactivated 196th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB) performed a historic last mission. Reconstituted as Task Force (TF) Gimlet, they were combat-assaulted by helicopter into the Antenna Valley 10 miles southwest of Da Nang on what was to become the last U.S. infantry combat patrol of the Vietnam War.

To the infantrymen or "grunts," the patrol appeared no different from any other that had been carried out since they acquired the Da Nang area of operations (AO) in April 1971. The men of TF Gimlet did not know they would be closing the curtain on American ground combat involvement, first opened by U.S. Marines at Da Nang in March 1965.

From the latter part of 1971 through the summer of 1972, constant media coverage indicated the war was ending for U.S. ground troops. On the grunt level, such news was met with various reactions, ranging from total indifference to disbelief and cynicism.

This was commonly known as the "11 Bush Blues" (11B was the military occupational specialty designation for light weapons infantrymen.) As former rifleman Larry "Short Round" Varner of Vacaville, Calif., said, "Jesus . . . It got as though I thought hearing it was some kind of cruel joke."

Task Force Gimlet Formed

In early 1972, remaining U.S. infantry units were standing down and going home. When the 196th LIB stood down on June 15, TF Gimlet was formed from the approximately 400 men of the 3rd Bn., 21st Infantry. They were handpicked by officers, led by battalion commander Lt. Rocco Negriz, for their exceptional skills as infantrymen, as well as their unblemished personnel records.

The 3/21 had become a sort of holding unit for many men who had belonged to recently inactivated infantry outfits. Members of the 1st Air Cavalry Division at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, the Americal Division in Chu Lai and the 101st Airborne Division at Camp Evans near Phu Bai were reassigned to 3/21 either because they didn't have enough time "in-country" to leave Vietnam when

their units stood down, or had extended their tours.

Varner says, "Yeah, I remember when the 1/20th of the Americal stood down, I only had three months in-country. When I saw that my next unit was 3/21, I wanted to go, but I didn't want to go, know what I mean? That was farther north than I wanted to travel."

To further illustrate this come-one-come-all process, former SP/4 Bill Doyle, now a CWO2 helicopter pilot stationed at Ft. Drum, N.Y., says, "When I first came in-country I was with the 101st. During that time my platoon was sent to Da Nang to relieve a platoon of 3/21, which had been sent to Chu Lai to relieve some

John Bruce of Justice, Ill., then a radio operator.

Grunts in Vietnam believed the most likely time to "get hit" was during the first three months in-country while learning the ropes, or the last three months when one became "short" and thoughts of DEROS (date expected to return from overseas) became all-consuming.

Unofficial SOP in some units allowed "short timers" to finish up their tours in relatively secure areas working safer jobs such as a mail clerk or driver. Otherwise, they were usually given the *option* of walking point or slack man positions on the squad or platoon level.

What happens when an entire

The Last Patrol

Twenty years ago this month, a life-event occurred in Vietnam. A Vietnam emotions surrounding the last U.S. patrol of the war.

by Hugh M. Stovall, Jr.

other unit in the Americal that was standing down.

"From the 101st I was sent to the 2/17th Air Cavalry and when that unit stood down, then I was sent to Delta Company of 3/21. Ironically, I was assigned to the very platoon I had been sent to relieve a few months before."

Wild Rumors Abound

Life in the last combat infantry unit in Vietnam was difficult during the spring and summer of 1972 with the abundance of rumors flying. "When I first heard that we were all possibly getting 'short' as a unit, my first reaction was surprise, but considering we'd been hearing that since the beginning of 1972, I didn't really go for it and figured we'd all, or at least I, would be reassigned to another unit, possibly one of the remaining air cav units," remembers

task force becomes short simultaneously? Who walks point? Who doesn't? Who doesn't want to be the last man hit on the last patrol of the war? Everybody.

AFVN Radio did not help matters with its optimistic reports of the Paris Peace Talks and the progress, or lack of same, as conducted by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Le Duc Tho.

Rumors, innuendoes and opinions from USARV, MACV headquarters, to the slums of "Dogpatch" outside of 3/21 Battalion HQ in Da Nang only added to the anxiety of the grunts.

Doyle recalls, "I was up on the ridge line at Charlie Ridge when *mommasan* and her girls came up to ply their wares. During the course of my conversation with her, she told me matter-of-factly, 'Very soon GI go home. Very, very soon.' Since the in-

formation out of the 'ville' had been accurate as-often-as-not, for some reason, I believed her. Wishful thinking perhaps..." As it turned out, "very, very shortly," *mommasan* had been dead right.

Final Bush Walk

Finally, a few days prior to the patrol, the men of TF Gimlet were assembled at their base camp headquarters located on Hill 510 to prepare for the field. Despite months of endless speculation, optimism prevailed — maybe this was the last patrol after all.

The mission entailed sweeping through the Antenna Valley to make contact with enemy forces that had

Perhaps it was a blessing that it wasn't known for certain this was the last patrol. Too much caution can get you killed just as sure as carelessness. As Doyle said, "Coming out of our night-laager and onto that day's patrol, I was on point when I noticed a wet mound of dirt on an otherwise dry path.

"I called up the platoon sergeant and we concluded it was another booby-trap... We left it alone and continued our march by cutting a completely new path through the bush."

After a couple of days in the field, it became increasingly apparent: This mission was different. Unlike missions of the past where the bush

This ambivalent feeling of wanting to go home and then not, reflects the love and friendship that only men in a combat unit will ever know. Dale Tuttle of Muskegon, Mich., says, "Regardless of which way the war went, I didn't want to leave my platoon and the men I had come to know and love as brothers."

John Bruce agrees, "You are buddies. What can be said? I didn't want to leave them. I didn't feel that our job was done and I worried about the South Vietnamese we were leaving behind."

Bidding Farewell

While the transfer of troops occurred in the bush between TF Gimlet and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), they learned the Americans were leaving the field for good. They asked for, and the Gimlets gladly gave them, 30-round M-16 magazines as well as grenades.

Along with the ARVNs came a helicopter full of reporters to record the event. They landed, asked questions, took pictures and stayed with the ARVNs while TF Gimlet loaded up to leave.

Bill Doyle, the last man of the last platoon to be extracted, was on the last of the slicks (UH-1 helicopter troop carriers) that took off for Da Nang Air Base. He remembers, "Everybody on the other choppers, including ours, popped a victory smoke grenade and the smoke trailed from the slicks as we left the valley."

On Aug. 11, 1972, in a ceremony back at "Camp Swampy" in Da Nang, with the late CSM George Green and Lt. Rocco Negris officially retiring the unit colors, the men of TF Gimlet, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry, quietly ended the American infantrymen's ground war in Vietnam.

"As I reflect on that moment, I view with pride the men of Task Force Gimlet who were handpicked from their parent unit, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (Separate) which was standing down," wrote retired Maj. Gen. Negris. "To the man, they were outstanding soldiers who carried out difficult and dangerous missions that included endless days in the field, frequent patrolling and daily helicopter and ground combat operations."

Hugh M. Stovall, Jr., a VFW member who lives in Houston, Texas, participated in the last patrol.



Members of Delta Company, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry, Task Force Gimlet, make the final U.S. infantry stand down in Vietnam at Da Nang on Aug. 11, 1972. Photo courtesy CWO2 William Doyle

been setting up 122mm rocket tubes which targeted Da Nang and to block VC and NVA forces in the area.

Former SP/4 Richard W. Miller of Kermit, Texas, says of the last flight out to the field: "Our last combat assault out to the bush was damn near like the first time for me. The feeling in my gut, the sweat, and the fear. I remember thinking that I've heard the standing down BS before and even if this was our last patrol, everybody knew you could die on the last as quick as you could on the first."

This feeling was underscored by the fact that while this patrol was, as patrols went, by-and-large uneventful, two men in the "Killer" platoon were wounded and had to be MEDEVAC'ed as a result of triggering booby-traps on the second day out. SP/4 James McVicar, 20, had the dubious distinction of being the last American grunt wounded in action in Vietnam.

would be humped from dawn-to-dusk, it was obvious that specific destinations had to be reached within a set time.

It was as if it had been prearranged to link-up earlier with other platoons in the area. On the patrol's fourth day, members were told, "We're linking up and heading to the landing zone (LZ) to go in." This seemed odd. A four-day patrol? As was the saying in Vietnam, "Never happen, GI."

At the LZ the men were met by South Vietnamese soldiers being combat assaulted in to replace them. Roy Hager of Frankfort, Ky., couldn't have been happier. "All I wanted to do was just for us to get through this patrol in one piece and go home, but from previous experience, I kept asking myself where were we going to be next? I wanted to go home, but then again, I didn't."