



# **In the Shadow of the Black Virgin Mountain**

On November 27, 1968 the Manchus suffered its heaviest losses since the March 2, 1968 Hoc Mon Bridge ambush. During operations in view of the Black Virgin Mountain (Nui Ba Den) in the Tay Ninh province 19 Manchus were (KIA) killed in action and 36 wounded. In addition, the aviation pilots and crews of the 187 Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) known as The Crusaders had 6 killed in action and 10 wounded.

The Landing Zone (LZ) was 3 miles Southeast of Tay Ninh city where the enemy had been massing for attacks on Tay Ninh. Unknown to the Manchus this was the well fortified base camp of the Viet Cong D14 Regiment and at full strength they were a formidable force. The LZ was poorly chosen in that it inserted the Manchus into a "L" shaped defensive perimeter that was a classic battle position for both the VC (Viet Cong) and NVA (North Vietnamese Army). There were approximately 250 bunkers, trenches, and spider holes that had been prepared for defensive fighting. The enemy was well armed with .51 caliber heavy machine guns, RPG-7 rockets, B-40 rockets, mortars, mines, and AK-47 assault rifles.

## **THE INSERTION**

The following account of THE INSERTION are excerpts from Tom Pienta's article TRIAL BY FIRE

The morning of November 27, 1968 the 187th AHC was on strip alert at a small airstrip at a rubber tree plantation at Dau Tieng in War Zone C, Northwest of Saigon. There were two lift platoons for a total of 10 helicopters of the 187th were on standby. Pilot, Tom Pienta, and Aircraft Commander Bob Trezona got the signal to crank their UH-1 Huey "Slick" from the flight leader.

As they left Dau Tieng in the early afternoon (1:32 PM) the first platoon of 5 choppers formed into an echelon left and headed to the pick-up zone for the Manchus. Each Huey carried 6 "Electric Strawberries" (as the 25th Infantry Division troops were known), the Hueys lifted off and headed for the designated rendezvous point (RP) to form up with the second Crusader lift platoon. As they orbited over the RP at 1,500 feet the LZ was being prepped with 105 mm and 155 mm artillery. The Command and Control (C&C) ship then ordered them to fly into a trail formation, with the second platoon in the lead and the first platoon following. Ron Timberlake, flight lead for the first platoon, was flying Chalk Six and ordered them into a heavy echelon left. As the final approach was made the commander in the C & C ship said "last round on the ground" meaning the artillery preparation was finished. As the helicopter reached 110 knots, they closed formation. The fully loaded Huey shuddered and vibrated violently, but that was standard for combat assaults. The unit flew in such tight formation on a short final approach that you could read the name tags of the men in the ships you were flying formation with.

The "Rat Pack" gun ship platoon flying on either side of the slick formation laid in minigun fire and 2.75 inch rockets. As the first aircraft entered the LZ (1:55 PM) it reported "Chalk three receiving fire." All following aircraft had the same report. They had flown into the midst of an enemy regiment and all hell was breaking loose. The door gunners were ordered to engage the enemy with full suppressive fire, left and right. The choppers were being wracked with intense automatic weapons fire, heavy .51 caliber machine gun fire, and rocket-propelled grenades. Tom Pienta and Bob Trezona continued the approach as the trail helicopter. It was trail's job to wait until every Huey made it out of the LZ and then radio that the LZ was clear. Tom Pienta had to pick his spot carefully because the LZ was filled with 10-15 foot tall baby rubber trees, which were hard to see until you were right on top of them. Snaring a tail rotor in the trees could kill you just as easily as a machine gun. As they were coming out of translation lift--the point at which a helicopter stops flying and starts hovering--a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) slammed into the Huey. The RPG had hit the left fuel cell, killing Jim Brady (crew chief and gunner) and blowing PFC Hoppe, on the right door gun out of the ship. The ship was completely engulfed in flames from the burning fuel. All the oxygen was immediately sucked up by the flames and the Huey fell 15 feet to the ground with Pienta still at the controls. All Manchus aboard jumped when the RPG hit and survived the initial explosion but were badly burned according to later reports.

The ship had pretty much disintegrated when the RPG hit and Trezona stood up and fell straight forward out of the helicopter. Tom Pienta had to escape between the two pilot seats and out the cargo door. The ship was blazing out of control from the JP-4 fuel when Pienta ran 20 yards and rolled to the ground to extinguish the flames on his burning body. As Pienta ran from the burning wreckage he unknowingly was running toward the VC gun positions. Fortunately, the smoke from the burning Huey may have prevented the VC from finishing him off with small arms fire. As Pienta ran back toward the helicopter he came upon a group of wounded and dead infantry soldiers, some of whom may have been on his helicopter, and told them to remove his .38 from its holster and use it if necessary, because his hands were useless from the burns.

As Pienta looked to his left he saw Trezona stumbling along, his face burnt black and his helmet still on his head. Trezona was working his way toward another Huey that had landed to pick up survivors. As it landed and faced the enemy, no less than 10 wounded would pile into the helicopter. The pilot, nineteen year old, Ron Timberlake, waited under intense fire of many RPG rockets as the wounded were loaded. He then saw an RPG gunner in a tree about 75 yards away at his 2 o'clock--with his assistant on the ground handing him up rockets. Timberlake told his gunner Nelson to kill them. Nelson's M-60 riddled them.

Tom Pienta ran and piled on top of the group already aboard the rescue helicopter and was the last on board. The rescue helicopter's instrument panel was glowing red, due to major damage, but it lifted off and was racked with machine gun fire once again. The damaged rescue chopper flew a short distance (about 1 mile), the engine quit, and Timberlake and the pilot began the autorotation of landing without an engine. The helicopter landed soft in a rice paddy and the now 14 Americans set up a perimeter around the chopper before the blades had stopped turning. Yet, another chopper landed to take out the survivors. Tom Pienta survived but spent 18 months in the hospital and underwent 14 major operations of skin grafts and internal surgery for burns.

## **THE LANDING ZONE**

Manchu Alpha Company was chosen to board the 187th AHC Crusader helicopters (a.k.a. choppers) for the assault into the area in view of the Black Virgin Mountain. The LZ was an open area of rubber trees surrounded by a wooded area and fields. It was about 1:55 P.M. as the landing zone first came into view as the helicopter crews and Manchus came under intense fire from RPG's and .51 caliber machine guns as they approached the open area. S.SGT. James Tilton was in the lead chopper as it approached the LZ. The helicopter pulled

up to a hover when it was 15 feet above the LZ with his feet on the landing skids. He and the other Manchus on board then jumped and crashed to the ground through the rubber trees. When they were on the ground he had to administer first aid to a Manchu that had his thumb severed by a bullet that had ricocheted off a bandolier of M-60 machine gun rounds that he had strapped across his chest. Once on the ground, they came under additional fire from an LZ that had been pre-wired with anti-personal mines. As the first two platoons of Alpha Company were on the ground they began to move toward the wood line under fire. The second lift came in and the trail helicopter exploded in flames from a direct RPG hit on its fuel cell. The insertion was complete and now Alpha Company attempted to move off the LZ. They moved toward the wood line and formed up into two long lines of two separate large groups. It appeared that this is when the most intense fire began. 1st Lt. Michael Parr, Alpha Company CO (Commanding Officer) , and his two RTO's were among the first to be killed in the initial contact. After only a few minutes of heavy contact most of Alpha Company's officers were killed and all radios were knocked out.

Alpha Company had to endure intense RPG rocket fire and it seemed that the enemy had an endless supply of the deadly rocket grenades. The Manchus were now in two separate groups that were pinned down and unable to maneuver for any kind of flanking of the dug in enemy. The only choice was to engage the enemy without moving off the LZ. S.SGT. Tilton's squad began making its way through the tall grass away from the rubber trees when a .51 caliber round ripped through his shirt and hit his RTO (radio communications) man who was directly behind him striking him on one side of his jaw and going out the other side. S.SGT. Tilton had to use a field dressing tied around his RTO's head to keep his jaw in place. The .51 caliber fire was coming from a machine gun being manned by a female Viet Cong soldier in a fighting bunker. David Young was also receiving fire from the woman's machine gun and said he thought she would never stop firing. The female Viet Cong soldier kept adjusting her fire from left to right as she tried to strafe the Manchus trying to get off the LZ. S.SGT. Tilton was now in her direct line of fire and she was trying to adjust her fire to kill him. S.SGT. Tilton kept moving closer until he was in range and scored a direct hit on her bunker with a LAW (Light Anti-Tank Weapon); the bunker and machine gun was silent.

The volume of fire was intense, especially from the RPG's, with one Manchu being killed instantly by a direct hit from a rocket grenade. One by one all radios (PRC-25's) of Alpha Company were disabled by enemy fire that singled out the RTO's as primary targets so that they could not call in fire support from the artillery or gun ships. Many handsets were cut off the radios by the enemy after the RTO was killed . Many medics were also casualties this day

as they also drew intense fire as they tended to wounded Manchus. 1st Lt. Michael Parr, Alpha CO, was mortally wounded by a fragmentation explosion and Doc William Ray (Medic) was killed by small arms fire as he tried to save Lt. Parr; they died together on the LZ. 1st Lt. James Adams and his two medics were the next to die from fragmentation wounds.

David Hosenfelt and Jim Averette (Alpha Company) were in the same helicopter during the insertion. David said they were told "it was hot and they knew the enemy was there....but they (the American Army) didn't realize the whole (enemy) battalion was there." Before they could jump from their helicopter it was raked by automatic weapons fire. Jim Averette took a serious wound in the elbow and eye socket from an AK-47 round and a piece of his bone struck David Hosenfelt in the face. The force of the round knocked Jim out of the helicopter and he fell to the ground below. David Hosenfelt was hit in the right leg by a .51 caliber bullet and fell to the ground next to Jim. Jim was losing a lot of blood and David tried as best he could to stop the bleeding, using his own belt to slow the bleeding. The grass on the LZ was now on fire from the downed helicopter and explosions when Averette took yet another round from an AK-47 in the chest but still survived. Of the six who were on their chopper only one Manchu, other than Hosenfelt and Averette survived but he was never seen again after leaving to get help for the two seriously wounded Manchus. As they were wounded and trapped on the LZ, tear gas was dropped from the air and this only made a bad situation worse for the two wounded Manchus. They both had to put on their gas masks and David would remove Jim's mask periodically to see if he was still breathing; "amazed that his comrade did not choke on the blood that caked his mask." Now trapped, wounded, and unable to move the battle raged on with machine gun fire and RPG's flying just over their heads. When the shooting would began to cease as dusk came, Hosenfelt could hear Vietnamese voices talking in the darkness. Not wanting to alert the enemy that they were still alive, they laid quietly and dare not fire a shot. They lay where they fell for the next 18 hours and were rescued the following day when tanks and the remaining elements of the Manchus began the search for the missing. Both would survive, Jim Averette would spend 10 months in the hospital and be discharged from the Army; David Averette would return to duty in four months.

From this point in the battle it gets somewhat complex with additional troop reinforcements from the 4/9 Manchus, the 2/22 Mechanized Infantry, and air assets, so I am inserting a time line before continuing with the account.

The following is a time line of troop movements after the initial landing on the LZ based on After Action Reports.

1:32 PM---Alpha Company 4/9 (10 ships) off PZ XT 309386

1:55 PM Alpha Company 4/9 (OPCON 2/22) landed into a hot LZ XT 302408. Unknown number of casualties. 1 helicopter was hit, crashed and exploded. Another chopper helping was also hit and had to land in a nearby village. There are two other choppers covering overhead for the downed chopper.

2:00 PM the 2/22 Infantry was ordered to begin moving Alpha Co. 2/22 to reinforce 4/9 Alpha Company which landed in a hot LZ XT302408.

2:10 PM 4/9 Bravo Company ordered to prepare to be inserted into the nearest LZ to come to the aid of Alpha Company which was in heavy contact.

2:46 PM a second lift of 5 ships lifted off with additional 4/9 Alpha Company soldiers off PZ XT 441347

2:52 PM 4/9 Alpha Company reports receiving sporadic sniper fire from a tree line. Estimates a Platoon size force.

3:00 PM--To 2/22 S-3--Have B Co. Ready to react to A 4/9 contact. Have them ready and standing by A Dau Tieng Bridge.

3:24 PM 5 ships carrying elements of Alpha Company land on LZ. XT 298409

4:50 PM---4/9 received Air Assets at XT 370314

4:54 PM Bravo Company 4/9 (1st Lift) on 2 ships lift off PZ

5:07 PM Bravo Company 4/9 lift off PZ on 8 additional ships

5:16 PM (10 ships) insert Bravo Company 4/9 on LZ Dau Tieng XT 497471

5:23 PM 2/22 Diamond Head gun ship on station

5:23 PM Bravo Company 4/9 (8 ships) off PZ XT 548421

5:36 PM Bravo Company 4/9 (8 ships) on LZ XT 497471

6:00 PM Bravo Company 4/9 (8 ships) off PZ XT 497471

6:23 PM Bravo Company 4/9 (8 ships) on LZ XT 296406

6:35 PM- A 2/22 still receiving incoming fire from A/W and RPG.

7:18 PM Flare Ship on station.

7:20 PM Air assets released.

7:44 PM--A 2/22 XT302405 got a track hit by RPG. 1 track damaged and 1 more WHA. This is the 3rd track hit by RPG fire.

8:15 PM---B 4/9 (Opcon 2/22) 5 ships off PZ XT296406

8:26 PM--B 4/9 (Opcon 2/22) 5 ships on LZ XT 298406

8:55 PM--1st Flare ship released, 2nd on station

10:05 PM--From Division-3 persons from 4/9 in downed chopper were alright and taken to tn (Tay Ninh). Names: SP4 James L. Brown, PFC Sam Williams, Jr. and Sgt. Thomas LLOYD.

10:20 PM-1/27 -Ship down (Crusaders Flare Ship) crashed. Negative survivors. Total destruction of ship.

Now the account will continue as elements of 4/9 Bravo Company come to reinforce Alpha Company which had lost all radio contact with the command of the 2/22 Infantry which had operational control of the 4/9 in this area of operations. Also, the 2/22 did engage the enemy within minutes of Manchu Bravo Company's insertion. Tragically, Alpha and Bravo Company were between the enemy positions and the .50 caliber machine fire of the 2/22 which resulted in additional casualties from friendly fire.

The account of Bravo Company are taken from excerpts from the book LETTERS TO TONY, by Ron Figueroa, Bravo Company 1968-69

Late in the afternoon Bravo Company had been alerted that the Battalion CO had lost all contact with Alpha Company. According to after action reports it was about 5:15 PM when all of the 10 choppers carrying Bravo Company had cleared the LZ and Bravo moved out to reestablish contact with Alpha Company. The 1st platoon and the CP group from Bravo were inserted and some of Bravo who could not be air lifted due to a shortage of choppers returned to base camp for a Thanksgiving stand down. As the choppers flew West and approached the LZ, the smoke was so thick that the ships circled the area trying to find another area for a clear landing. Then Bravo reinforcement headed in as small arms tracers crisscrossed the field in which they were about to land.

There was a heavy wood line 60 meters to the right of Bravo Platoon and they headed in that direction but could not fire into it because they did not know if Alpha Company was there or not. As the Bravo platoon entered the wood line they spread out and began the search for Alpha Company. S.SGT. Ron Figueroa of Bravo spotted six Alpha soldiers in an open field and headed toward them. He told them to link up and he headed back to inform his Lieutenant. The Armored Personnel Carriers (APC's) of the 2/22 Infantry who had also received the call to go the Alpha Company LZ were beginning to break out of the wood line on the opposite side of the field. Manchu Bravo had moved to outflank the defensive entrenchments of the enemy. The enemy began to open fire on the elements of Bravo and S.SGT. Figueroa could see an enemy position 5 meters from the left flank man, Spec- 4 Carlos Vega-Lopez; who would become a KIA during the battle. As Bravo 1st Platoon began to return fire, S.SGT. Figueroa crawled toward his men, dropped his pack, and found a small ditch for cover. But much to his horror he heard the .50 caliber machine guns on the APC's begin laying down an intense field of fire in the direction of Alpha and Bravo Companies. He said "Oh no, God oh no" as he realized what was happening. The barrage lasted for two minutes and then there was total silence as the smell of smoke from the burning grass and spent rounds drifted across the field. S.SGT. Figueroa began to make his way back toward the last known position of Bravo Lt. Marcus.

The place now had an eerie calm that was in sharp contrast to the explosions, gunfire, and sounds of battle only a few minutes before. The only sound heard was the cracking and popping of burning grass, no cries for Medic, and no movement anywhere. S.SGT. Figueroa approached his platoon with great dread and fear of what he would find. His men moved cautiously from the edge of the field into the woods, parting the jungle slowly in search for the rest of the platoon. Phil Rogers, Bravo RTO, tried to raise Lt. Marcus-- CP group but got no response. As Bravo moved closer their worst fears were realized. They found Billingsly



first, all shot up but alive, and Talbot was left to care for him. As S.SGT. Figueroa and Phil Rogers moved through the heavy undergrowth they found Pvt. Malcolm Lomax, Lt. Marcus, and Spc-4. Billy Hunter. Lt. Marcus had his foot shattered and the lifeless body of Lomax and Hunter lay on each side of him. It appeared that Lomax and Hunter had taken the rake of the .50 caliber fire from the APC's preventing the death of the Lt. and Pvt. Malcolm Lomax had fulfilled a self-prophecy that predicted his death. The blond headed 19 year old kid from Jeffersonville, Indiana had died as he lived--thinking, caring, and protecting the lives of others. Pvt. Lomax had arrived in Vietnam in December of 1967. There had been a fierce fire fight in which he was the only survivor of several LP's; after which he refused to return to combat. He was sent to the stockade where many officers tried to persuade him to return to duty as a conscientious objector but he refused. He said he just felt that it was not a religious or moral issue but it was simply that if he stayed in the field, he would be killed. It was said that General Abrams himself had spoken to him and somehow changed his mind with the thought of whether he would be able to live with himself if he was an embarrassment to his family and friends. However, even though he returned to the field and performed his duty well, he always said it was his destiny to never leave Viet Nam alive. (End of account by Ron Figueroa)

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It was now beginning to get dark and the 2/22 Infantry began to search the LZ for Manchus.

David Young's squad was approached by a tank that had turned its spotlight on and was sweeping the area with the beam. Two members of David's squad, nicknames of Wang and Pineapple, who both had Asian features were afraid that they might be mistaken for VC. At first they refused to get up and run back to the tank. David Young ran back together with them as the enemy fire continued. They dove into an abandoned VC spider hole. Pineapple had a round to hit his boot but was not injured. They spent the rest of the night in the spider hole. As the other survivors began to dig in, APC's would appear with Manchu Alpha Company infantry, many of which were wounded, to set up a defensive perimeter for the night.

The battle was now over with the enemy melting away into the night as they always do. It was dark when helicopters carrying additional troops of Bravo Company Manchus and a re-supply of ammunition arrived. The Manchus occupied the abandoned enemy positions and dug some new positions to prepare for a night ground attack that never came but the enemy was still lurking close by. As the 187th Assault Helicopter Company was dropping flares for night illumination for the dug in Manchus, the ( Huey Flare ship UH-1H # 65-09620)) was hit by enemy fire at 1,000 feet, igniting all the flares in the back, and went straight into the

ground from 700 feet. All onboard were killed in the crash. These brave Flare Ship Crusaders providing night support for the Manchus were; SGT. Jerome Dee Chandler, SP5 David DeWitt Creel, WO1 Allen Eugene Duneman, SP4 Fredrick Harry Frazer, and 1st Lt. August Karl Ritzau.

Out of the flight of ten 187th AHC Crusaders helicopters that lifted off on November 27, 1968 only five returned to base. Most were riddled by enemy fire; 1 exploded on the LZ, 1 was forced down due to mechanical failure, 1 was shot down dropping night flares for the Manchus, and 2 were too disabled to return to the 187th Crusader base camp.

The next day missing Manchus, dead and wounded were recovered. The enemy had left behind 3 known dead, a .51 caliber heavy machine gun, a mortar, and AK-47 assault rifles. At 8:00 P.M. on 11-28-68 the Manchus were picked up and returned to base camp for Thanksgiving. Alpha and Bravo Companies had a total of only 138 men together to finally sit down for Thanksgiving.

#### **4/9 MANCHUS AND 187th CRUSADERS KIA WHO ARE REMEMBERED**

##### **MANCHUS**

###### **Alpha Company**

1Lt. James Clarence Adams

PFC David Alton Bryant

PFC Dennis James Felt

PFC Eric Doran Jenkins

Sp.4 Joe Alan Johnson

PFC Anthony Eric Johnson

PFC Booker T. Lofton

Sp.4 Vincent Leo Mager

1LT Michael Grambling Parr (Alpha Company CO)

PFC Wiliam David Ray

PFC John Roger Ryan, Jr.

PFC Lonnie Williams

Sp.4 Joel David Wolfe

PFC Joe Irvin Wood

## **Bravo Company**

Sp.4 Billy Charles Hunter

Pvt. Malcolm Eugene Lomax

Sp.4 Carlos Vega-Lopez

## **CRUSADERS**

Sp.4 James Gregory Brady

Sgt. Jerome Dee Chandler

Sp.5 David DeWitt Creed

WO1 Allen Eugene Duneman

Sp.4 Fredrick Harry Frazer

1Lt August Karl Ritzau

**POSTSCRIPT:** In the TROPIC LIGHTING NEWS printed in the 5-5-69 edition, a story appeared 6 months after Thanksgiving 1968.

Tay Ninh--Five gift packages that arrived recently at Company A, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Manhus, contained useful material--candy, toilet articles, pens--articles soldiers are always glad to get. But more important, the packages contained an unwritten message of concern and understanding that had risen through the grief of the family of a man killed in Vietnam.

First Lieutenant, James C. Adams, a platoon leader with Company A, was killed in action November 27, 1968. Shortly thereafter, five gift packages addressed to him arrived at the battalion mail room and were sent back to the United States. The packages, however, were intended as Christmas presents for the men of Adams-- company. They had been collected by Adams-- sister, Mrs. Douglas R. Lawrence, Washington, D.C., through the Women's Missionary Union's Mission Action Committee of Forestville Baptist Church, Forestville, Maryland.

In a letter that accompanied the packages, the church's pastor Richard J. Sweetman, wrote that Mrs. Lawrence --planted the idea of Christmas in Vietnam in the minds and hearts of the committee, and after that the idea grew and the gifts starting coming in.-- Your loved ones back home keep you constantly in prayer and in their thoughts. Sweetman wrote the 25th Infantry soldiers. "We are, indeed proud of our fighting men, but will rejoice when you spend Christmas with your loved ones once more."

After the packages were returned to the states, Adams' brother in law wrote Manchu Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Lee L. Wilson, Salina, Kansas to say that he and his wife were sending them back to Vietnam. "Good luck to you and the men there, and may these parcels bring some comfort to each of you, as you receive them," Lawrence said. "I would also hope the knowledge that these gifts are with the men as intended will bring comfort to our grieved home."

Wilson replied to thank the Lawrence's for their "thoughtful, gracious act in sending gifts to our men." "Troops in the field are constantly in need of the small things we take for granted at home, of course, and I can assure you nothing will go to waste." Wilson added, "But the material value of the gifts is far outweighed by the truly Christian concern and interest you and your fellow church members have shown."

Wilson also thanked the family for showing that "those at home are aware of and understand the sacrifices American and other Allies forces are making in Vietnam." "Acts such as yours show that such understanding is, indeed, the rule rather than the exception," he added. "Since I did not take command of the battalion until December, I did not know Lieutenant Adams personally, ♦ Wilson added. "I do know him, however, by his reputation, that of an officer and a gentleman in the best American tradition. Allow me to convey my condolences on your loss even as I congratulate you for honoring his memory so well."

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THANKS**

There is much more to the story of November 27, 1968 but this is the account so far as best could be gleaned from many sources. Some sources are official records are some are from memories of those that were there. It is as accurate as it could be based on available information and I would like to thank the following for their help without which the details of this day in the history of the Manchus would be lost in time. A big Thank you to: Tom Pienta (Trial By Fire), Tom Stino 187th AHC (Crusaders), Ron Leonard (25th Infantry Aviation), Ron Figueroa (Letters To Tony), and Willie Gin (Manchu Diaries) who provided information for the account.

Bill Fitch, Alpha Co. 4/9 (1967-1968)