

Ranger Team Bills

The narrative below about Ranger Team Bills came from the Company L (Ranger) unit history available from this link.

<http://www.lcompanyranger.com/unithistory.html>

The month of Nov 1970 was a particularly hard one weather-wise and the Ranger Company was only able to field 13 missions. Those teams, shifted to the Rong Rong Valley due to flying conditions, still provided timely intelligence reports. One of these teams, Ranger team Bills, headed by SSG "Spear" Houser determined the location of the 1/803rd NVA Regiment. Unfortunately, for this information, Company L (Ranger) was to pay heavily. On day 4 of their mission the Bills made chance contact resulting in 1 US WIA immediately. The NVA maneuvered to within 30 meters of the Bills hasty perimeter and continued to fire for approximately 10 minutes. At the end of this time the team leader stated he suspected he was being surrounded. Again the enemy initiated fire this time wounding another Ranger. The team began employing artillery in the area until gunships could get on station. The bird attempting to McGuire one of the wounded Rangers out took heavy fire wounding several inside the helicopter and the Ranger in the McGuire Rig fell out and hit the trees. At this time (three hours after contact) the 2/17 Cav Blues hit the ground and linked up with Ranger team Bills. The combined element searched the area for the fallen Ranger and shortly thereafter recovered his body. Before final extraction of the team could be completed another Ranger was killed by an RPG.

1st Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery Support of Ranger Team Bills

I was the night shift Battalion Fire Direction Officer with the 1st Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, 108th Artillery Group, at the time we fired in support of Ranger Team Bills. Interestingly, what I remember and the account above do not completely agree. First it was a long time ago and second most of the information received in the Battalion FDC came out of the "fog of war," information gained through short snippets of radio chatter or second hand through the Battery FDCs and other units. You will notice of the differences. Some of our own unit members have different recollections of the amount of firing done by their batteries and the individual guns within the batteries. My account below is how I remember it. I did receive an email from Sid Johnston, Battalion FDC RTO, saying this is close to how he remembers it.

Artillery support for Ranger Team Bills initially came from an organic 101st Airborne Division, 155mm howitzer battery on a firebase to the north of FSB Bastogne. I don't remember the firebase name. This unit fired until it became low on ammunition, saving its last rounds for self-defense. Because of poor flying weather, the battery could not be re-supplied.

Based on information I received, our A Battery and a battery of the 101st Division Artillery on FSB Bastogne somehow communicated and coordinated as to whether A Battery could fire in support of the Ranger Team. Other than the 155mm battery that at

initially fired, our batteries were the only other artillery units that had the range to shoot that far out.

After contact with the 1/803rd NVA Regiment, and the ensuing firefight in which Ranger Team Bills took casualties, an extraction was attempted during which the helicopter was shot down, resulting in more casualties. With the Ranger team still on the ground and now with some of the helicopter crew on the ground with them, the 101st Airborne Division inserted an Air Cavalry troop. After this insertion, the weather closed in and no more air operations were possible. The Air Cav troop and Rangers eventually moved to more easily defended terrain near or on a mountaintop.

Note: I'll take the narrative from the Company L unit history concerning the aircraft and casualties as actually what occurred on the ground. In the 1/83rd FA Bn FDC, we were getting our information from various radio transmissions. We mistakenly thought the helicopter had been shot down.

Our support for the Air Cav troop started that night sometime around or shortly after midnight when our RTO, SP4 Sid Johnston, heard the "squelch break" on a radio several times, but heard no voice. Turning up the volume, we heard someone whispering our call sign. Upon answering, the whispering voice requested a fire mission. It was the Air Cavalry troop commander. He informed us that he was surrounded by NVA and they were coming up the hill to attack. It was not a "Fort Sill" type request for fire, but rather a plain grid and a plea to get it there fast. When asked about the proximity to friendlies, he responded, "Let me worry about that, just shoot it." The desperation in his voice was very evident.

No adjustment was requested and no adjustment rounds were fired. The grid coordinates, a fire order of time on target (TOT), battalion 10 rounds, and a time hack, were sent to the batteries. Two 8 inch howitzers from A Battery at Bastogne, four 8 inch howitzers from B Battery at FSB Birmingham, and two 175mm guns from C Battery at Camp Sally(?) would fire. A Battery's 175's were too close to shoot, because of site to crest problems. C Battery's 175's were shooting near max range, around 30,000 meters, and it's time of flight would be right at 60 seconds. Fortunately the Rangers and Air Cav troop's location would be just off to the left of the Charlie Battery's gun-target line so range dispersion for the 175's would not be a problem. We were not worried about 8-inch accuracy.

The Time on Target passed and all batteries reported shot on time and shortly afterwards, rounds complete. We waited...and waited...for the Cav troop commander to call us back. The question in all our minds in the FDC was, did we shoot our own friendlies? Finally the commander came back on the radio, still whispering, quickly thanking us for shooting, said the fire was right on target, and he'd call again if he needed to. We stood by to shoot again, but no other call for fire was received that night.

Note: I was always impressed by how good our batteries were. The FDC's were fast and accurate in their computations and the guns were good. The battalion 10 was fired as quickly as I've ever seen artillery shoot, and certainly faster than I've ever seen 8 inch and 175's shoot. For the TOT, we just gave the grid and a time hack, nothing else,

no count down of seconds, etc. From all reports, the rounds were fired on time and landed on time and on target.

After the TOT that night, the enemy did not initiate contact again during this operation

If any of the Ranger Team or 2/17th Cav were extracted by helicopter, I didn't know about it, unless they considered being lifted out of Bastogne as extracted. Because cloudy weather had closed in on the mountains, they, the Rangers and Cav, had to walk to the nearest road (the road from Bastogne to FSB Veghel) where they were met by an Infantry unit from Bastogne. I'm sure of this because we fired in support of their movement to the road.

Early in the morning, after the TOT, a plan was made to move them off the mountaintop, down a ridgeline, toward the road. The infantry unit would leave Bastogne heading toward to a rendezvous point. A fire plan was devised to use "walking fire" in front of the unit coming down the ridgeline to clear possible enemy locations or ambushes. When the unit moved out, we would commence firing in front of the unit and then walk the fire down the ridgeline just ahead of the Cav and Rangers. At the appropriate time, the unit moved out and the firing commenced. A Battery shot this mission with their two eight inch howitzers. No contact with the enemy was made, although we were ready to fire close support if necessary with our other batteries, already laid in the direction of the operation. The plan worked and the Cav troopers and Rangers rendezvoused with the infantry and all returned to Bastogne.

Later, after everyone was out of the area, we fired well over 1,000 rounds into the area of the reported NVA Regimental Headquarters. This was the highest total of rounds fired in a 24-hour period while I was with the 1/83rd FA.

After all was over, the story was recounted to us. On the night the NVA were coming up the ridgeline toward the unit, the target grid coordinates were just outside the Cav's perimeter, in the direction of the enemy and danger close by standard field artillery procedures. The commander related that he could hear the NVA coming and that after our last round landed and the echoes faded, not a sound could be heard. He also said he could not hear the rounds coming in, the ridgeline outside the perimeter just started exploding. As a side comment, he said he wished they could have gotten us some BDA (battle damage assessment) or "maybe some AKs or something," but they didn't want to move. He also said walking the fire, down the ridgeline, the next morning was effective as they moved behind it down the mountain.

His words were the most gratifying words I've ever heard in my Field Artillery career.

Much of the credit for this support goes to the firing batteries. I'm sorry I don't remember many names. If you were there in November 1970, you were probably involved in some way with this support.

All the Battery FDC's computed the firing data accurately and quickly and fired the TOT perfectly. The gun sections certainly deserve much credit for firing so accurately and fast, especially considering the mission was fired in the middle of the night. The Cav troop commander thought you all saved some lives that night.

More notes:

After this information was put on the website the first time, an A Battery member emailed to say he remembered the A Battery 175's shooting that night.

I was told, but have no first hand knowledge, that some members of the Cav unit stopped by A Battery to shake hands and thank them for the firing that night.