



Death Of CAP 2-7-1

Submitted by: Roch Thornton

On May 9, 1970, our neighbors to the north in CAP 2-7-1 were overrun and nearly every Marine was KIA or WIA.

At CAP 2-7-2, we were in our night position and most were asleep. Very late at night or early in the morning there was a string of shots, a couple of explosions, then a godawful roar of automatic weapons fire and explosions from the 2-7-1 night position about 800 meters north of us (6-digit grid coordinates roughly 631030). CAP 2-7-1 was in heavy contact and immediately called for help.

As the closest unit, 7th Co. HQ ordered us to react. The bulk of our CAP saddled up and moved out within five minutes, carrying only weapons, ammo, medical supplies and water. We left two or three Marines and a couple of PFs at our night position to bring in our claymores and watch the rest of our gear until we returned.

We set off for CAP 2-7-1 at a run, led at point by Cpl. Charles H. "Willie" Williams, a from Opelousas, La. That long, sweaty run was especially troublesome to me since I was assistant to machine gunner Chon Perez of Beeville, Texas. I was carrying 800 rounds of 7.62mm gun ammo in pouches, plus my M-16 and 21 magazines. I remember my gear and helmet bouncing as I tried to keep up with Chon and the others.

We weren't on the move long before we could hear the sounds of fighting dying down at CAP 2-7-1. By the time we were halfway there, it was mostly silent. Within 200 meters of the 2-7-1 site, we spread out in line abreast and slowed to a fast walk, anticipating an ambush. But there was no ambush. We arrived at the 2-7-1 site and some of us set up a perimeter while the rest went to treat and medevac the wounded and collect the dead.

My memory is far from perfect, but I recall that "Doc" Brown, the corpsman, was the only American in CAP 2-7-1 who was not killed or wounded. At least he's the only one I remember seeing on his feet. A letter I wrote to my parents a couple of days later mentions four walking wounded remaining out of 14 members of CAP 2-7-1.

The letter also says ...

Four of them (the wounded) will probably die including a good friend of mine who lost his right eye. If he loses only his eye he'll be lucky.

We (CAP 2) went to help them soon after they were attacked and got there just as the most seriously wounded Marines were being flown out. We helped evacuate the RF's and civilians who were wounded.

I got all bloody carrying wounded to the choppers. I thought I would get sick when I saw people who were all blown to pieces but I didn't. One guy kept asking us to find his leg so he could take it with him to the hospital. We didn't find it until after he had been flown out so we burned it with the rest of the broken or useless equipment.

Many of the CAP 1 PFs were also KIA or WIA, plus a couple of Vietnamese civilians whose house was at the center of 2-7-1's night position.

The story I recall is that the sergeant leading 2-7-1 was infatuated with a girl who lived with her parents in an isolated house near the south side of their area of operations (AO). He frequently chose that house and the rather small, poorly

protected area around it as a night position for CAP 2-7-1. They often arrived early in the evening and stayed until daylight or later.

Since the mobile CAPs depended on frequent, unpredictable movement for their survival, it was dangerous to establish a predictable pattern. CAP 2-7-1 fell into such a pattern and it cost them dearly. The VC were able to plan a lightning attack, based on the knowledge of where 2-7-1 was likely to stay at least five nights out of 10. They even used the same fighting holes and machine gun positions again and again.

My memories of the incident are no longer very detailed, but a few things stick in my mind. Among the litter and debris left over from the attack was an M-16 that had been hit by a bullet about halfway down the barrel. The plastic handguard was gone and the steel barrel was bent at a 30-degree angle.

The morning after the attack, I was carrying bodies and equipment from the 2-7-1 site to a nearby LZ for removal by helicopter. To keep from getting my utility shirt bloody, I hung it on a tree, and during the next hour somebody (likely a PF) stole my non-reg .25 caliber semi-automatic pistol from my shirt pocket. I was pretty angry at the time, since it was my grandfather's pistol. Years later I realized that it made no sense to carry a .25 caliber popgun with a 2-inch barrel, and somebody probably did me a favor.

CAP 2-7-2 Marine Ernesto Rivas pulled a shrapnel-pocked transistor radio out of the pile of personal gear left by the death of CAP 2-7-1. He took it apart and got it working again. Later he even rigged it to run off discarded PRC-25 batteries. CAP 2-7-2 was still using that radio to listen to AFVN when I rotated home months later.

Also the morning after the attack, I was among those searching the surrounding area for booby traps, blood trails and other signs of the enemy. About 20 meters from the CAP 2-7-1 site I found the bottom half of a jungle boot with the foot still inside. A dog tag was attached to the laces, belonging to:

LAWRENCE, E.D.
2592082 O
USMC M
ROM. CATHOLIC

The boot went out on a chopper, but I took that dog tag and have kept it ever since. There's no E.D. Lawrence on the Wall, so I'm pretty sure he survived the loss of his foot. I scanned the dog tag and the gif is attached to this message.

CAP 2-7-1 was rebuilt with new PFs and Marines brought in from other CAPs, and it was back in action in a day or two. As far as I know, they never again spent two nights in a row in the same place.

Roch