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## Quarter Cav

Jess Lockhart

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The First of the Fourth (1/4) Cavalry was the cavalry unit assigned to the First Division. I was op-con (assigned for operational control) several times to them. Being a mechanized unit, they had their pluses and minuses. On the plus side, they had armored personnel carriers and tanks. This meant they could carry all the ammo, rations, and water we needed. They also had a Delta Troop, a company of helicopters, assigned to them. In addition, 1/4 carried their own doctor. But the most important plus was that I didn't have to walk. On the minus side, they had to travel roads that were landmine and RPG (rocket propelled grenade) magnets. They couldn't very well sneak up on the bad guys, and the motorized units had to be refueled every few days.

In the spring of 1969, Alpha Company had just arrived in Lia Khe for our monthly two nights and three days of R&R. This meant we could get a "few" cold beers, a hot shower, semi-clean clothes, and real food. The XO met us early in the afternoon at the helipad with trucks and a Deuce and a Half trailer with iced beer and sodas. By supper time, the beer was gone; the men headed for the Vietnamese village just outside the wire. I took the officers to the Division Officer's Club. We had only been at the club a few hours when the bartender told me I had a phone call. Today that would not seem unusual, but in Viet Nam we never got phone calls, just radio transmissions. "Lt. Lockhart here." On the line was the battalion duty NCO with the unwelcome news that our mission had been changed. My platoon was being op-conned to the 1/4 Cav. We were to move out the next day. I told the duty NCO to contact the company first sergeant and have him start trying to round up my men. The majority were somewhere in the village. I picked up my drunk FO, Dennis Sharkey, loaded him in my jeep, and went looking for the 1/4 Cav headquarters.

The roads of Lia Khe, a former rubber plantation, were laid out in grids. The cav unit bivouacked on the west side of the compound. I found the cav headquarters, got the mission info,

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then Sharkey and I headed home. On the way back to my company area, I had to make a left turn. Halfway into the turn, I fell out of the jeep. I may have been going too fast for my own state of inebriation—anyway, I fell out. I remember sitting up on the side of the road to watch the jeep chug down the road, and yelling, “Sharkey, take over.” Dennis was puking out his side of the jeep when I suppose he looked up and I was gone. The jeep veered into a ditch and centered a rubber tree. I ran to check on Sharkey. His head had cracked the windshield. Jeep windshields are thick, but apparently not so much as Sharkey’s head. I checked him out; other than a bump, he was okay. The jeep was another story. The impact had caved in the front grill and the radiator fan was eating into the radiator. But the vehicle still ran and we were only a few blocks from the company area, so I drove it back. When in the field, the company supply sergeant took care of my jeep. I woke him up and told him the jeep was making a funny noise and to check it out.

The next morning, I rounded up my hungover platoon and left for the cav’s tank park. We loaded onto the tracks then moved out of the compound. Clearing the outer perimeter, the track two vehicles ahead of mine pulled out of line, stopped, and lowered its rear door. A young Vietnamese girl ran inside. The door closed behind her and we continued to head out. She got out a few hours later as we went through another village.

I learned an important lesson working with the cav: never yell, “Incoming RPGs.” One evening, we were on a sweep mission. A unit near us had the artillery firing illumination rounds for them. When an artillery piece fires an illumination round, the projectile travels a preset distance, then pops open to release a piece of phosphorous attached to a parachute. This lights up the prescribed area. A lot of math is involved to make everything happen properly. That evening we sat on the tracks, watching the illumination rounds go off like fireworks. Suddenly,

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something zoomed over my head to land behind me and kick up dust. Before I could grasp what was happening, another projectile zoomed by.

On instinct, I yelled, "Incoming RPGs." This, I learned in the next few moments, was a very wrong thing to yell. The cav has an SOP to start firing with every weapon they have in all directions. Soon, another canister came overhead; I figured it was just an empty canister from the illumination rounds. The cav erupted into a wild shooting spree. I shouted at my FO, Sharkey, who was shooting his .45 pistol in no particular direction. I knew him well enough to understand he was nervous and scared easily. I yelled, "Why and what are you shooting at?" He emptied his magazine, and as he reloaded shouted back, "I don't know." Then he continued shooting. I finally got him to quit and the situation calmed down. Most of the troop were embarrassed, and a few of us laughed pretty hard over the fact that the commotion started over our own illumination rounds.

In the darkness, the cav troop CO ordered the tracks to move forward. I was in the commander's hatch of my vehicle as we sped forward. The driver could hardly see where we were going; he hit a big stump. Everything stopped moving forward but me; I was tossed out of another vehicle. When I landed after tumbling down the front of the tank, I'd split my right index finger (trigger finger) from the tip to the second joint. The cav's doctor looked me over, sewed up my finger, put a splint on it and told me to go do my duty. I was disappointed because I had visions of being medevacked to the rear for a couple of days. I healed up okay, but feared with all the germs in the jungle my finger would rot off. I did lose feeling in that upper part of the finger for a couple years, but it's alright now.

In 1970, the army relocated the First Division (really only the Colors) back to Ft. Riley, Kansas. I'd been reassigned to Riley from Vietnam in December 1969 as the assistant G-1 for

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the division. I still held a fondness for the 1/4 Cav. One day, the squadron commander held a small ceremony and a friend of mine (the Delta Troop Commander, Ace Cozzalio) awarded me a set of cav spurs. Today, I display them proudly in a shadow box with the ribbons I wore on my dress greens.

I've told my son that when I die to take all my medals and memorabilia. If he doesn't want them, he should burn them. I do not want them to end up in a yard sale in the hands of some collector or wannabe.