BILL CRITCHFIELD'S LAST MISSION
BY Bill's cousin, Dean Lindstrom

On Dec 26, 1967, SP-4 Bill Critchfield returned from a mission with another team lead by Bob Carr in a remote area in the Kim Son Valley in the Vinh Thanh Mountains known as the Crow's Foot. He volunteered to join another mission scheduled for the next day. This mission was to be lead by Sgt. “Montana” Joe Haverland. Bill was the Assistant Team Lead (ATL) joining Pat Blewett (RTO), Don Van Hook, and two South Vietnamese scouts Qui and Phi. The team lifted off from LZ Uplift the following morning for a first light insertion in the Suoi Ca Valley. The Suoi Ca Valley lies -20 miles south of Bong Son in the Binh Dinh Province and is named for the Suoi Ca stream that meanders through the craggy valley. The insertion was successful and the team made their way to their first rendezvous point. After laying dog, they began to reconnoiter the mountainside and deep ravines in the valley thick with triple canopy vegetation. The day wore on without excitement or significant discoveries.

At approximately 5:00pm, the team located and established a night position on the side of a hill with a ~20 degree incline in an area surrounded by thick jungle with trees that afforded Montana the ability to climb a tree and view the valley floor. At around 5:30, as the team was just getting ready to eat dinner, Montana whispered down to the team, “Gook.” A moment later, “Another one.” Several moments later he said “Shit. They’re all over the place.” An NVA anti-aircraft battalion consisting of 1,500 – 2,000 North Vietnamese Regulars were moving down the valley floor, hugging the edge of the tree line nearest the team’s position. As the RTO, Pat Blewett radioed in an artillery strike to decimate the large force. As the artillery shells landed, Pat called in the coordinates, walking the artillery up the hill toward the team’s position but unfortunately the main NVA force evaded directly up the hill on top of the team.

Montana, still in the tree, called out “Let’s get the hell out of here.” The E&E plan called for the team to split up into two groups (Pat, Bill, and Phi) and (Montana, Van Hook, and Qui) and move in opposite directions around the hill and rendezvous in the valley on the other side. Bill and Phi were squatting on the ground in a defensive firing position to the left of Pat, packs on, ready to move. NVA soldiers simultaneously threw a satchel charge and sprayed the area with automatic weapon fire as it detonated. The charge landed several feet immediately in front of Bill and Phi. Pat had just pulled on his pack and was turning to say “Let’s move” when he saw a bright orange flash. He pulled the emergency release on his pack and kicked his legs out, landing prone on the ground as the satchel charge exploded. After the blast, Pat opened his eyes and looked to his left to discover Bill and Phi in a heap. The explosion blew a hole in Pat’s calf and shredded his backpack, which had not come off - likely saving his life. The explosion also blew off Qui’s heel and blew Montana completely out of the tree, injuring his back. Only Van Hook managed to escape serious injury. Pat and Van Hook immediately went to Bill and Phi who were unconscious and attempted to administer first-aid. Unfortunately, the med kit had been in Pat’s backpack and was destroyed. Van Hook found a damaged can of serum albumin but sliced his hand open while attempting to open it. Meanwhile, NVA soldiers were still overrunning the position while evading artillery. As Van Hook helped Montana and Qui, into defensive firing positions, Pat radioed in the initial distress call with request for reinforcements and immediate evacuation.

A 30-man Quick Reaction Force (QRF) from the 1st Squad/9th Cav scrambled out of LZ Two-Bits near Bong Son. The 1/9 headed south into the mountains and valleys of the coastal plain toward Suoi Ca to insert the Blues platoon, secure the area, and extract the 1st Cav LRRP team. Paul Hart, the lead lift pilot described the following:

“In the darkness of the mountains our guns ships designated a landing zone (LZ) as close as possible to the team and we proceeded to air assault our Blues into the area. As we circled above the valley floor we could see our unit(s) in "contact" and tracers streaked through the air.”

The 1st Cav team had managed to set up defensive firing positions and in the darkness was working by sound only.

In a recent email regarding the events of that night, Pat Blewett stated:

“Suddenly something set off one of our trip flares and Van Hook spun around to sweep the area on full-auto but I stopped him and got on the radio, ‘Blue, if you tripped that flare, tell me now.’ We received an affirmative reply. I answered back ‘You’re going across the mountain above us. I’m sending a man up to you. Don’t shoot.’ Van Hook went up to the Blues and we got everyone ready to go. Everyone, except Van Hook and I, were put on ponchos and carried out. Van Hook was able to walk on his own and I walked up the hill with two M-16’s for crutches and one on each shoulder. Van Hook and I dusted one gook hiding in some bushes on the way up.”

Paul Hart continued:
“I accepted responsibility for the extraction and medivac when we got the call. The other three lift birds would add the additional troopers that made up the squad I would leave behind. With the area still "hot", [still shooting] we received a call from our Blues telling us that they had reached the LRRP team and needed immediate medivac. That was my call to go. I went into a makeshift LZ at the direction of our Blues and under cover of our guns. In the few frantic and hurried minutes it took to land and load, I was able to glance around as the team was helped or placed aboard by our Blues. Some seemed to be conscious others not. My crew chief yelled "flights up" and we were gone. Fortunately, there was an aid station a short flight away. After everyone was unloaded we departed the area and returned to our base camp... As the Aircraft Commander (A/C) that evening, I was recommended for and received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Something that I continue to display and take pride in -- not because it came from an act of war, but more from an act of humanity - one soldier helping another - what more can be asked.”