

Battlefield Diaries
LamSon 719

This documentary is about a bunch of teenagers (or kids in their early 20s) from the 48th Assault Helicopter Company (the Blue Stars) whose lives were altered when they were told to move out of the relative quiet of the coast of central Vietnam, fly up North to a small area about 6 miles south of North Vietnam to setup camp, and prepare to assist in South Vietnamese Army in the invasion of Laos.

Feb 1971: Since many of you may be too young to remember, the country and Congress were demanding that the military withdraw from Vietnam during this time and someone coined the name “Vietnamization”...which meant let the South and North Vietnamese fight their own civil war ... the US will only assist (until it withdraws). The test operation of how this concept would work was called LamSon 719 (Operation Dewey Canyon II). Goal: Invade Laos, cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail and destroy the logistics center in Tchepone, Laos20 miles inside the border of Laos near the No Vietnamese boarder. Assisting during this invasion meant only helicopters to transport the troops into Laos, gun ships to provide cover to the slicks and jets to provide heavy bombing runs. No US advisors and no US forces stepping foot inside Laos.

The documentary covers the military aspects of the conflict really well, especially the lack of leadership in the South Vietnamese Army as they were being encircled by the North Vietnamese after we had reached the objectives of the invasion.

More importantly, it covers a very human aspect...a wife’s loss of her husband. 32 years after the events of 1971, thanks to the Internet, I received an email out of the blue from the wife (Karen) of one of my tent mates (Ed Bilbrey) who was shot down and killed in Laos. It took us over a day to get back into the landing zone to get his remains out of the burned wreckage due to the amount of anti aircraft and small arms fire we were taking from the North Vietnamese. Somehow, Karen found out that I was the pilot that went back in to get her husbands body out of there. She and I went through a pretty intense emotional bonding period for over a year before, thanks to the Discovery Channel, we convinced her to tell her story. She and Ed had only been married for about 2 weeks before he was killed.

Karen, who remarried and started a new life and new family, had never been really able to get over Ed’s loss. Although she’d thought about coming to DC many times, she could never bring herself to go to the Vietnam Memorial to touch Ed’s name one last time and bring closure to that early part of her life. But, we convinced her to do it for the show and for all of the other spouses out there that had a similar thing happen to them.

In the 6 week period from 8 Feb – 24 Mar 71, the US lost 1/10th of all the helicopters and helicopter crews lost during the entire 15 years we were at war in Vietnam. My company lost the most. We started with 32 helicopters and had 8 left at the end of two weeks. Everyone was shot down at least once. We’d get shot down and then go find another helicopter to fly since new ones seemed to be flown in for us daily.

Of the people with speaking parts in the show, Rick Lestor was and still is one of my closest friends. He spent 30 years in Army Special Ops. Tony Amanzio was my room mate. Steve Knowles was my room mate. Steve continued to fly and just retired from the Army last summer. And, Tony Terrana...my gunner...the guy that saved my butt more than once. He was with me both times I got shot down. I’m in still pictures when they are talking about the death of Joe Marshall (4 guys in my room) and at the end walking Karen down to the Wall.

If any of you are country music fans, and still have any Dixie Chicks CDs after the flap last summer, there is a song on the Home CD called Traveling Soldier. After the movie, play that song on the CD. The “pretty little girl with the bow in her hair” is Karen...or any wife / girlfriend that lost someone over there ... or any war. And if you know of anyone that has suffered this type of loss, tell them to listen to the song.

Thanks for taking the time to read this.

Ron

Statistics (from the once Secret PACAF Summary Report)

3 Feb – 24 Mar 1971 ~ Operation Dewey Canyon II

Tons of Ordnance dropped: 53,000
Number of NVA Trucks Destroyed: 2,011
Number of NVA Tanks destroyed: 101
Number of NVA Buildings destroyed: 431
Number of NVA crew served anti aircraft guns destroyed: 327
Number of NVA crew served anti aircraft guns captured: 1913
Number of NVA killed: 13,341
Number of ARVN killed: 1118
Number of ARVN wounded: 4081
Number of ARVN missing: 209
Number of USN / AF jets lost: 7
Number of helicopters shot down: 631
Number of helicopters lost: 103
Number of US pilots/crew killed: 137
Number of US pilots/crew wounded: 818
Number of US pilots/crew missing: 42