

Narrative Page

EATON, EDGAR W.

Rank and Organization: Sergeant, U.S. Army, Company B, 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division.

Place and date: Dai Phuoc, Republic of Vietnam, 3 April, 1969.

On the evening of 3 April, 1969 elements of Company B, 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry of the 9th Infantry Division conducted a night airmobile raid near Dai Phuoc, Republic of Vietnam. Led by the company commander, the mission of the 10 man raiding party was to locate and destroy an enemy radio transmitter. It was a clear, hot evening as the raiding party landed in 2 UH-1 helicopters at about 2145 hours less than 50 meters west of the target hamlet. Their search revealed only children and the aged--no radio. As the raiding party moved to the pickup zone about 150 meters to the northwest from the hamlet, a large group of armed men moving towards them from the wood lines to the north and south of the hamlet. The commander notified the helicopters that they needed to be picked up immediately. However, they did not arrive for 15 minutes as they were refueling. By that time the enemy force had moved within 100 meters and despite helicopter gun ship support, the helicopters were raked by crew served automatic weapons fire and small arms as they landed. Despite the heavy fire, the ships lifted out the troops, each sustaining multiple hits while the door gunners and the ground party returned fire.

The company commander made a headcount and learned 1 man was missing from the 2d aircraft. He was quickly spotted, lying in a ditch at the pickup zone. The commander ordered that aircraft to pick him up, with his aircraft following in support. That helicopter landed and the man sprung aboard but as he did so, another soldier jumped from the other side as the aircraft took off. The company commander witnessed the situation and quickly ordered his pilot to pick up the stranded man. As the aircraft headed towards him, at about 30 feet altitude, it was hit by automatic weapons fire on the left side, the pilot receiving two bullet wounds. The crippled aircraft pitched up and to the right. As it crashed, it pinned the company commander underneath. Sergeant Edgar Eaton, though painfully injured, pulled himself from the wreckage and began pulling others out. Realizing the company commander was trapped underneath, he directed the survivors as they rocked the wreckage and pulled him free. He then noticed that enemy tracers were striking near him. He saw about 30 of the enemy moving along 2 parallel dikes about 50 meters apart, leading to the downed helicopter. The enemy moved aggressively, supported by several crew served automatic weapons and firing rocket propelled grenades. Without hesitation he mounted the burning helicopter, lying on its right side, the bottom facing the general direction of the enemy.

Armed only with his damaged sniper rifle, equipped with a Starlite Scope, he began placing accurate fire on the enemy. Aside from one M16, all other rifles and machine guns of the aircraft and raiding party were either damaged or buried in the mud, with only a few pistols remaining among the group. He alone was fighting the enemy--one man against 30. The rest of the party treated the wounded and moved behind a low paddy dike, shielding them from much of the enemy fire. Several times a crew member tossed the M16 to him and he placed automatic fire on the closing enemy. He then tossed it down to be reloaded. Then he continued calmly shooting his sniper rifle, killing at least 7 of the enemy. Twice he was hit, including a piece of shrapnel that opened a gaping wound on his chin. Two Cobra gun ships provided covering fire, but soon expended their ammunition. Vietnamese artillery provided sporadic illumination as Sgt Eaton's ammunition was also running low. The 2 gun ships landed one by one 10 meters east of the crash, to take out survivors. With their tails towards the enemy and enemy tracers marking their location, the pilots waved survivors towards them. A few ran to the first Cobra and were taken out, hanging to the canopy and ammunition doors.

Sgt Eaton continued shooting at the enemy as the first gunship landed and departed, but thinking that all the survivors were being taken out by the Cobras, Sgt Eaton moved off the downed aircraft to be taken out by the second Cobra. As he loaded a badly wounded comrade aboard he saw his company commander lying wounded and helpless next to the crashed helicopter. He leaped from the departing aircraft and ran to the side of the officer, yelling to the inquiring pilot, "I won't leave the old man to die alone." Shielding the wounded man with his own body, he killed 2 enemy soldiers at pointblank range as they tried to rush him. The battalion commander in the command helicopter, told of Eaton's return to the crash, ordered his pilot to land. As they landed, 6 previously unseen survivors, lying under the tail of the crashed aircraft, boarded the aircraft. Enemy soldiers fired at the rescue helicopter, the battalion commander engaging one at close range with his pistol. The overloaded helicopter could not take off, so Sgt Eaton stepped off, giving his seat to a wounded comrade. For the second time, he surrendered his safety to help a comrade. Two soldiers were ordered to stay with him as the rescue helicopter departed but a gunship landed, under fire, and took him and his companions to safety. He had only 5 rounds of ammunition left.

One man alone, Sgt Edgar Eaton, held off a platoon of over 30 enemy soldiers as he defended 10 injured, and virtually unarmed men. Against overwhelming odds, with a damaged rifle, from atop burning wreckage, he killed nearly a third of his attackers and held the rest at bay until the survivors could be rescued. His extraordinary leadership and undaunted courage transformed tragedy into survival for 11 American soldiers.