

Zulu Platoon's Final Fight in Vietnam

Grant Telfer Commanding

1971

'It was a dumb operation,' said U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Grant Telfer. 'We had gone through the entire six-month deployment without having anyone wounded.' Yet at the last minute, shortly before the members of Telfer's Zulu Platoon of SEAL (sea-air-land) commandos were due to return home in January 1971, disaster struck. For five of the SEALs, the trip home would be delayed. Three of them, in fact, would be alive only through medical miracles. Telfer himself would be one of those miracle stories.

Born in July 1941 in Seattle, Wash., Telfer grew up in that area, graduating from Seattle University Preparatory School and attending the Naval Academy. He did a lot of skiing at places such as Stevens Pass, near Seattle, went out for football (defensive guard) and was a strong swimmer. Telfer remembers that he often swam from Beaux Arts, on Lake Washington, to Mercer Island, a round trip of about two miles. Unlike many SEALs, he did no shooting or hunting as a youngster.

At the Naval Academy, Telfer spent much of his first year studying under a blanket with a flashlight in a dormitory. That experience probably contributed to reduced sight in his right eye, which resulted in his nickname, 'Cyclops.' His night vision was reduced to zero, which made shooting difficult unless he wore glasses.

During his SEAL training, Telfer found it next to impossible to fire at least one weapon used by the Viet Cong (VC)—the 57mm recoilless rifle—because of the location of its sight. Telfer could not fire such weapons without glasses, yet he was unable to use glasses in combat conditions because they might become smudged and affect his marksmanship or light could be reflected off the lenses and warn the enemy of his presence. It is a tribute to Telfer's conscientiousness

and dogged persistence that, in spite of his right eye, he insisted on running night operations.

At the end of January 1971, Telfer was not particularly happy with the latest operations of his platoon. He preferred to work at night, but all the operations that Zulu Platoon had participated in so far during that month had taken place during daylight. The SEALs had been supporting a civilian resettlement effort during the previous weeks.

During the last part of 1970, the South Vietnamese government had decided to resettle the citizens of An Xuyen province, located in the lightly inhabited and VC-terrorized region to the east of Nam Can, on the Ca Mau Peninsula. Telfer's Zulu Platoon was based at Solid Anchor, a Navy Civil Engineer Corps base area on the site of badly damaged Nam Can. Zulu Platoon served as a security force to support the resettling of Vietnamese citizens into a new living complex near Nam Can. The Vietnamese government moved the people and their belongings during daylight hours, and the SEALs began to run a daylight pattern of operations in support of the resettlement.

Zulu Platoon carried out several operations using Navy transport helicopters to make daylight landings in an area known as 'the plantation,' east of Nam Can. The SEALs, along with Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and local forces, kept the VC guerrilla fighters from interfering with the removal of the citizens. Trained and conditioned as they were for clandestine missions, some members of Zulu Platoon grew uneasy about the openness of the operations. To the SEALs, it seemed that daylight helicopter landings were virtual advertisements for their operations. Telfer summarized their concern in understated fashion: 'It is difficult to be clandestine in broad daylight.'

Zulu Platoon had run one of its routine resettlement support missions on January 28. Since they had met little opposition during their security patrols, the SEALs had developed a routine approach to the daylight sweeps. The platoon members had already packed most of their gear for the move back to the United States and were going

through the period of their deployment known as the stand-down, or disengagement from serious operations. In a week, they hoped, everyone would be home.

The Vietnamese requested an additional security patrol, and Telfer began to plan a daylight security sweep. He approached the commander of the Seawolves, a Navy light attack helicopter detachment at Solid Anchor, and pried away two Seawolf choppers to be used for fire support during the mission. In the evening of January 29, Telfer and Lieutenant J.G. Nelson, commander of the two Seawolves made available for the operation, drank beer and continued planning the security sweep.

That same evening, Telfer issued a warning order to the platoon. He assigned five SEALs to the operation and listed the mandatory equipment for them to carry. Telfer also placed a three-beer restriction on his men for the evening. He and the soldiers who would join him on the next day's mission were all in good health, with no ailments that might have reduced their efficiency. Morale was high because the men had suffered no casualties and had been effective on about 58 previous missions.

At about 0930 hours on January 30, 1971, Telfer and Nelson went together to find a transport helicopter to insert the SEALs at a suspected VC complex, which was located approximately one mile north of the Cai Ngay River. Their approach to locating transport for the team was informal. The two officers knew that a helicopter arrived with mail every day from Binh Thuy, farther north. They also knew that the mail run was not the most exciting duty available in Vietnam. Telfer had no trouble convincing the pilot, Lieutenant j.g. Dyer, that it would be more interesting to deliver the SEALs to their insertion point than to continue on his regular mail route.

Around noon, Telfer presented his patrol order to the five SEALs of the action squad. He also had the helicopter pilots attend the same briefing to ensure that everyone involved in the mission would be well-informed. He asked the team to take along a relatively light load

of ammunition and some demolition materiel, so that they would be able to selectively eliminate some VC structures.

At 1330 the six-man squad lifted off in a helicopter from the base at Nam Can. Telfer might have taken more than five men with him, but the helicopter had strict weight limits and could handle only six American passengers. Through clear skies, the chopper headed northeast for the approximately 20-kilometer trip to the insertion point.

About one mile from where they had planned to land, Gary Lawrence, the automatic weapons man who was sitting next to Telfer, shook him and yelled over the noise of the helicopter, 'Arroyo's been hit!' Telfer had heard no shooting. Thinking that Marcus Arroyo, the radioman, must have been hit by a piece of equipment in the helicopter, Telfer shouted back in some surprise, 'He's been hit by what?' He then glanced over at Arroyo and realized that the radioman had obviously been shot.

Donald Futrell, another automatic weapons man, had a large medical kit with him. He and Lawrence began to work on Arroyo. The wounded man had two 7.62mm AK-47 bullets in his left shoulder. The two men took off Arroyo's vest and shirt and applied compress bandages to the wounds. After the first shock, as the pain began to increase, they gave him a shot of morphine. In the meantime, Telfer had signaled the helicopter pilot to turn the chopper around and head back to the base at Nam Can.

The squad delivered Arroyo into a waiting ambulance at Nam Can. The SEALs were shocked and angered by the fact that they had taken their first serious casualty in six months. The attack also had a freakish, almost supernatural quality about it. After an intensive search, the helicopter crew and maintenance men were unable to locate any bullet holes in the aircraft. Yet two bullets from an AK-47 rifle had hit Arroyo within inches of each other. The bullets had entered the helicopter through one of the two open doors in the passenger compartment, making the wounding, at the least, a statistical absurdity.

As Arroyo settled into the ambulance, he managed to yell back to the rest of the team, 'How about getting one for me?' At that point, the operation began to take a new, emotional course. It was an article of faith with SEALs that, once they had come under attack by gunfire, they should withdraw and not return to the same area. But Telfer and his men were uniquely frustrated on this operation. The January 30 insertion was the last one that they could possibly make during their tour in Vietnam. Any revenge against the VC who had shot Arroyo would have to be accomplished that day, or never.

The men of Zulu Platoon were acting on emotion when they lifted off the second time. Telfer decided that they should land at the point where Arroyo had been hit. Along with the transport chopper pilots and crew, the SEALs had determined that the rounds fired must have come from a tree-and-grass-covered dike about one mile west of their original objective. Telfer ordered the two Seawolf helicopter gunships, commanded by Lieutenant Nelson, to be ready to make firing runs against the dike from south to north. The SEALs would land to the west of the dike next to another dike that ran parallel to the objective.

The loss of Arroyo severely reduced the squad's firepower and its ability to communicate. Arroyo had carried a combined over-and-under CAR-15 commando rifle (a modified M-16A1 with a shorter barrel and a short, expandable metal stock) and a 40mm grenade launcher as well as the squad's radio. Telfer had asked his second in command in Zulu Platoon, Lt. j.g. Thomas Richards, who carried a Stoner light machine gun, to accompany the patrol. Richards also carried the squad's radio, a model PRC-77. He had met the aircraft when it arrived with the wounded man and did not need much prompting to accompany the team.

About 15 minutes after taking off from Nam Can for the second time, the SEAL squad approached its new objective from the southwest. The helicopter inserted Telfer's squad at 1430 in an open, dry rice paddy about 250 meters southwest of the dike from which the gunfire had come on the previous flight. The Seawolf light fire team—the two gunships under Nelson—was hovering only a few minutes away to provide fire support if it was needed. The insertion went smoothly.

Telfer's SEALs moved away from the transport helicopter toward an intervening dike about 50 meters to the northeast.

Small-arms fire started hitting around the squad as soon as the men began to move north, up the intervening dike. The fire was aimed, moderately heavy and clearly dangerous, and it came from the dike that was their objective, which was now about 150 meters away from the platoon. Telfer recalled that the fire seemed to be largely from AK-47 rifles. That kind of fire was a bad sign. It raised suspicions that either a VC Main Force or an extraordinarily well-armed local unit was involved. On the other hand, the SEALs did not hear any machine-gun fire, and the absence of that kind of fire was a good sign.

Telfer called the Seawolves on the PRC-77 radio and requested a heavy strike from south to north on the dike where the VC were positioned. The Seawolves put on a good show. Each gunship made one run firing rockets and miniguns (extremely high-speed machine guns capable of firing up to 6,000 rounds per minute). Telfer later remembered seeing a palm tree near the VC being lofted end-over-end into the air. Futrell was hit in the face by either a casing fragment from a rocket or a piece of palm tree. The noise, smoke and debris that resulted from the Seawolf attack were impressive, and the VC fire died away.

Over the radio, Nelson announced from his gunship that he could see two VC lying in the open, motionless and apparently dead, just to the east of the dike line. He could also see weapons near them, as well as at least one VC fleeing to the north, away from the area. In retrospect, Nelson's report represents the crucial juncture of the operation. The SEALs had been detected and fired on, and Telfer was faced with the distinct possibility that he was moving his squad into danger. But two things nagged him on. First, he wanted to be able to report some concrete evidence of VC casualties and damage when he saw Arroyo and the rest of the squad. Second, he was encouraged by Nelson's report of two VC killed in action and one running out of the area.

Telfer ordered the Seawolf commander to work over the VC who seemed to be disengaging to the north. The patrol leader then moved the column slowly northward along the grass-covered dike that paralleled what he hoped was the former VC dike positions, about 50 meters to the east. He was satisfied with the mood of the squad. No one seemed to hold back or have a premonition of disaster. To the contrary, James Rowland, the pointman, said, 'Let's go get them, Mr. T.' Telfer then passed the word: 'Don't be too sure they are all dead. Keep your patrol interval. We are going to take our time going over there.'

The day was warm, not too humid, and there were fluffy white clouds in the sky. The patrol moved north along the dike a few more meters and then turned to the right onto another dike that ran directly east toward the silent, apparently empty VC positions. Rowland edged out on the connecting dike and started slowly across. Nothing happened until Oliver Hedge, the rear security man, stepped out onto the same dike.

Rowland at that point was about 20 meters from the VC dike. Telfer, who was about 6 meters behind his pointman, heard nothing but saw Rowland suddenly spin around to the right, face almost rearward, and then fall into the dry paddy. The bullet that felled Rowland had passed from left to right through his abdomen and came out the right side of his back, lodging in a block of C-4 plastic high explosive that he was carrying. Miraculously, the projectile had not perforated a single organ in its passage through his body. As he rolled over on the ground, he was hit by one more bullet, this time in the back. Though seriously wounded, Rowland would survive.

Rowland had been hit by rounds from either a Soviet Simonov SKS 7.62mm semi-automatic rifle or a Soviet Tokarev Type 51 pistol. The rest of the platoon was now under heavy fire from VC with similar weapons and AK-47s, and the enemy was positioned in the tree-and-grass-covered dike to the front of the patrol. Instead of dropping to the ground and starting to fire, Telfer instinctively stepped forward to help Rowland. After moving about four feet the platoon leader was hit

from the left by a bullet that spun him around to the right and into the paddy. He joined Rowland there, lying on his stomach.

Like Rowland's wound, Telfer's was somewhat unusual. The 7.62mm AK-47 bullet that struck Telfer entered the front of his left knee from the left of the dike, knocking him off the dike and into the paddy. Instead of simply perforating the knee, however, the heavy-grain projectile almost killed Telfer by changing direction 90 degrees and coursing directly up the young officer's left thigh, into the left side of his groin, where it changed direction again to pass through the groin into the right leg, lodging up against the femoral artery. If the bullet had traveled an additional half inch, Telfer would have died. Amazingly, he felt practically no pain at first. Within seconds, however, both his legs began to go numb.

Telfer crawled back up onto the dike he had just been on, intending to locate the enemy fire and counter it with SEAL fire. His crawl up the dike was tough and professional, an aggressive offensive action. Wounded in both legs and lower abdomen, he could—without risking any criticism—have handed over command to Richards, his second in command, and concentrated on doing what he could to defend himself while lying flat on the ground in the rice paddy.

As Telfer got back onto the dike, Richards came up with the patrol radio, and the pair called to the transport helicopter for an immediate extraction about 80 meters behind them and to the west. The extraction area was in an extensive dry paddy, covered by the large dike to their rear. Small-arms projectiles continued to crack and whine around them. As bullets began to dig up earth nearby, the two officers realized that VC fire was coming not only from the left of the dike—the direction from which both Rowland and Telfer had been hit—but also from the right. The SEALs no longer had cover. They were in trouble.

Lawrence, with his Stoner light machine gun, and Futrell, with his M-60, came up close to Telfer, who told them to help Rowland. Lawrence began to fire along the dike and to the northeast while Futrell gave first aid to Telfer. Seeing where the VC rounds were

striking, Lawrence also started shooting to the east and southeast. By that time both Hedge and Richards were firing as well.

In spite of his wounds, Telfer managed to get off one round with Arroyo's 40mm grenade launcher and emptied one 5.56mm magazine from his CAR 15. When he reached into Arroyo's ammunition vest, which he was wearing, for another automatic rifle magazine, he was surprised when he instead pulled out Arroyo's instamatic camera, which the radioman had stored along with his extra ammunition.

The action at that point had lasted for approximately seven minutes, and the time was about 1503. Telfer was concerned about the rescue operation, but he felt that the situation was under control in spite of his wound and the possible death of Rowland. A few seconds later, however, events took a dramatic turn for the worse. Futrell was facing away from Telfer and firing his M-60 machine gun with its belted ammunition draped over his shoulders when he was hit by a heavy 7.62mm bullet that spun him around. Now facing Telfer, Futrell exclaimed, 'I'm hit in the chest!'

The bullet had struck him in the left side of the chest, and drilled through him, passing within a fraction of an inch of his heart and missing the left lung and the big arteries and veins of the chest.

Telfer, dragging his numbed legs behind him, began to crawl toward Futrell. For the first time he began to worry that his whole unit might be annihilated. To Richards he yelled, 'Get that helo in here!' Moments later, Richards shouted, 'Ouch!' and shook his right hand. He had been hit by another 7.62mm bullet, becoming the fourth casualty from enemy fire in the few minutes that the action had lasted.

Covered by Lawrence and Hedge, the wounded SEALs crawled over the dike to the north side. Even though two of the team had been hit by bullets fired from that direction, the patrol felt that they might find cover in the small ditch that paralleled the dike along the north. And the VC fire had been heaviest from the south side of the dike, some

of it seeming to come from a small house directly to the south, about 100 meters away.

The three severely wounded men—Rowland, Telfer and Futrell—were unable to climb to safety over the bigger intersecting dike at the end of the ditch. In spite of his wounded hand, Richards pulled each in turn over the big dike. (Richards would go on to become chief of Naval Special Warfare Command, a rear admiral commanding all SEAL operations.) The transport chopper landed only a few meters away. Joined by the rest of the patrol, the men painfully made their way into the helicopter. Fingers and forearms were burned on hot weapons. Telfer's wound began to hurt along its entire complex path. The helicopter was hit several times as it lifted off. 'Barndance 59,' as the action would be called in the official record, was at last at an end.

The four badly wounded men—Arroyo included—were evacuated to an Air Force hospital in Japan, where the doctors made it plain to Telfer, Rowland and Futrell that they had narrowly escaped death. During their stay in the hospital the men discussed their last, nearly fatal mission, going over the various turning points in the operation.

As they talked, one question came up again and again: 'How did they ever get out alive?' All of them agreed that they never should have been on the dike. They also agreed that the intensive SEAL training they had received had been crucial to their survival. They had been conditioned by their training to react coolly and effectively to crises like the one they had faced together on January 30. And they came to believe that one part of their training in particular—the rite of passage in SEAL school known as 'hell week'—had prevented their unit from disintegrating when the going got tough.

The Vietnamese and American forces at Nam Can launched a vigorous follow-up to the January 30 firefight. Most of the Seawolves stationed in the delta region were scrambled and sent into the area. For the rest of the afternoon after the SEAL extraction, the helicopter gunships made firing runs on the VC dike positions. In an unprecedented display of tenacity, the VC fired on most of the gunships.

A Vietnamese agent reported several days later through an intelligence network that a 65-man VC company dominated the area where Zulu Platoon had landed. Approximately 30 enemy troops had engaged the SEALs on January 30, 1971, and had probably been joined by the rest of the company for the late afternoon engagement with the Seawolves. Clearly, against such odds, the Zulu Platoon members had been lucky to survive their encounter.

This article was written by Russel H.S. Stolfi and originally published in the June 2002 issue of Vietnam Magazine. His article is based on SEAL after-action reports at the Center for Naval History and interviews with participants. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to Vietnam Magazine today!

An add-on from Grant on 5-5-17

As an add on, I got my ass chewed royally for that op. We were the first SEAL platoon who would not be relieved, as all U.S. forces were gradually being withdrawn. We had been doing very well, getting into the groove, and we had some good intel. One of my men talked about staying a little longer, and we took a vote. As a result, I flew up to Saigon and told my O-6 boss about our desire to stay another month or two. He told me to get my ass back to Solid Anchor, get packed out and go home, and not in any agreeable terms.

I went back and passed the bad news . We did our stand down, loaded up everything and were going to leave Feb 1. On Jan 30, we got some intel about a supply depot with only an old man and a boy guarding it. I had more volunteers than I could use. We broke out our weapons and gear and went in. As the story narrates, the intel was bad. It was six of us against about 65 VC regulars, and we barely made it out, with 5 of the 6 wounded.

Next time I saw my boss was in the 3rd Surgical Hospital in Can Tho, after my surgery. He was not happy. He was with the RADM running the Navy ops in the Delta and told the admiral to pin the Purple Heart on my bare chest, "and make it hurt."

A few months later, after he got back from Vietnam, we were at a party and he told my wife about the platoon voting to stay over our tour. That resulted in a good two months in the doghouse, and she never stopped reminding me about it.

My answer to it all was that I brought all my men back alive, and all eventually went back on full duty. Plus, we had done many, many very successful ops.

That day was probably my worst active duty experience. My best was before I became a SEAL, while serving in USS Princeton (LPH-5). Princeton was an Essex Class converted to carry Marine helicopters, and was still in an axial configuration. It handled like a dream, and the captain liked to go fast. I was in communications but, because I had been a Fleet OOD on a destroyer, the captain had picked me as one of the 'combat OODs'. I had the deck and the conn for H-Hour of Operation Jackstay, then the largest Marine assault. It was into the Rung Sat Special Zone, which bordered on the bay south of Vung Tao, where all the shipping passed going in and out of Saigon.

We normally launched with the ship at 5-7 knots, in a racetrack pattern. On that day, however, the skipper was watching the Marines load into the H-34s and knew the birds were overloaded. He summoned the SLF commander and told him because of that and the heat, we were going to launch 'at speed.' The deck people were told to leave one set of tiedown chains on until each bird was launched. We got all 8 boilers on line, and I told him I wanted to take the ship out far enough to get a good build up.

We timed it all, went a good 20 miles further out, came up to speed and made the turn. I felt nothing but thrills as the 240,000 horsepower was let loose. We were at 31 knots, heading straight towards the harbor, when we began to launch. Even at that speed the helos barely made it off the deck. Anything less and we would have had dead Marines. We were entering the harbor as the last helo lifted off. We popped safeties to take off speed, and I asked

permission to do a Williamson turn to avoid the shipping. I had practiced it and knew the turn parameters. We were still doing 24 knots in the turn, and everything in the harbor scattered.

The empty helos came back aboard within 10 minutes, we reloaded them for the second wave on the way back out, and did it again. This time the harbor was all ours. After that we were taking back wounded and sending in supplies. My relief came up, but the captain waved him away. He wanted me to keep doing it. No problem. I was loving it. We accomplished the mission perfectly.

The next deployment was with the H-46, and they didn't need any ship wind.

I've driven a lot of ships and boats in my life, but Princeton will always be my favorite. The Vietnam era Princeton wardroom still does occasional reunions.