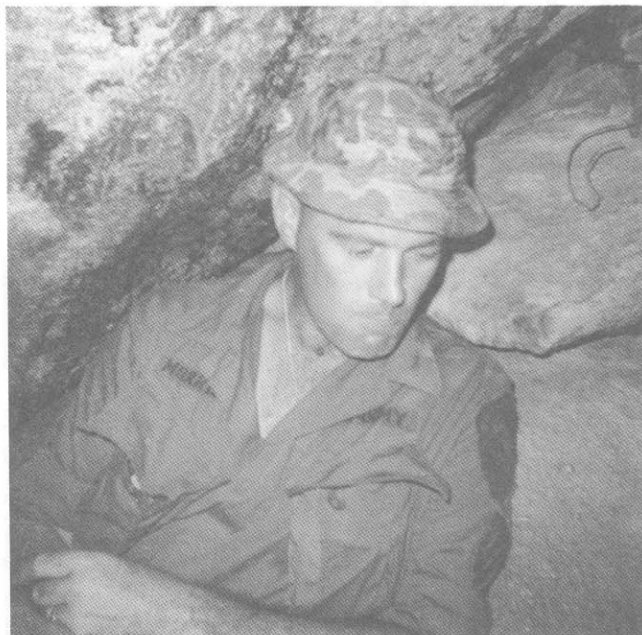


Tunnel Rats

By MSG Louis M. Morrison, USA Retired
with Dr. Burton Wright III, Command Historian, US Army Chemical School

As America comes to grips with the specter of the Vietnam War, there may come a time when the soldiers of that era are being recognized with the honors they deserve. Soldiers in Vietnam came in many varieties: the Special Forces soldiers of the famous Studies and Observation Group (or MACV-SOG), the air cavalry soldiers of the First Cavalry Division, the artillerymen of Landing Zone Bird, the "line doggies" of Hamburger Hill, and the Long-Range Reconnaissance Platoon.

Chemical soldiers can take their place with many of the more famous varieties of Vietnam heroes. Their particular group has come to be known as "tunnel rats." These incredibly brave soldiers entered tunnels of the enemy to take the war underground. Their exploits can be found in a best-selling book, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, by Tom Mangold and John Penycate.



The author, in a cautious mode, prepares to enter a tunnel.

The book details the operations of the tunnel rats who could be found in the chemical sections of most of the major divisions of the United States in Vietnam. The "tunnel rats" of the First Cavalry Division did not deal with tunnels, but with caves. I know. I was one of those cave rats.

When I got to Vietnam through Cam Rahn Bay, I thought I had a good job in Saigon in the chemical section of MACV. But at the replacement depot, I was informed that the First Cavalry Division had priority. They needed a chemical sergeant and I was told I had better get myself on the C-130 runway. I quickly complied.

The section was under the command of LTC Bradford. I was quickly introduced to the normal duties of the Chemical Corps in the First Cavalry—spreading anti-mosquito chemical malathion, defoliant operations, CS tear agent employment, flame-field expedients, and, in the last months of my tour, people sniffer operations.

One of the "old hands" at the chemical section was a PFC named D. R. Langley. He was a "tunnel rat" and told me hair-raising stories about the operations he had been on. While these stories of underground mayhem might have dissuaded others, I took it as a challenge and was tasked to form a "tunnel rat" section.

The soldiers who went into the tunnel with me were all volunteers. The first operation I went on turned

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out to be a 5-day exploration of a large cave complex in the division's area of operations.

LTC Bradford was located in the division DTOC. When an infantry unit reported that it had found a cave, we were told to report to a particular pad at Landing Zone Two Bits on the Bon Son plain and a helicopter would take us out to the location.

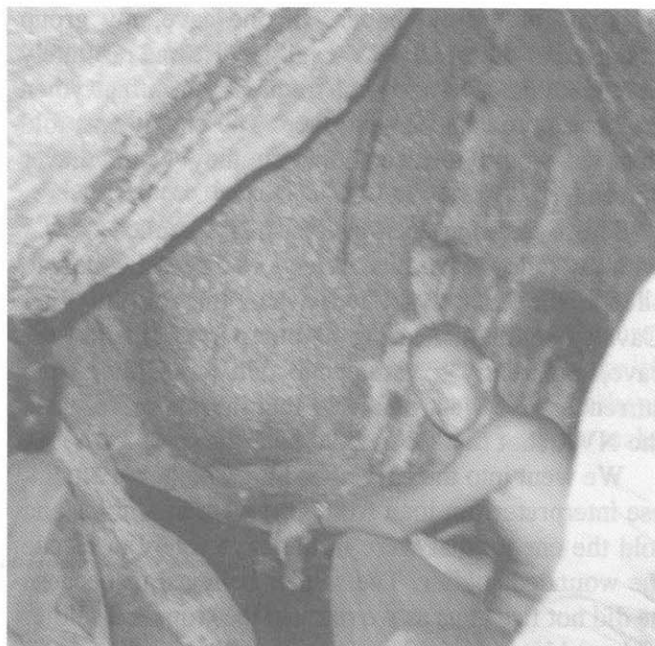
One thing I learned right away: when we arrived, I kept the team away from the line troopers. They tended to describe (in great detail) the fighting at the cave mouth and what might be inside. The volunteers sometimes looked a bit on the apprehensive side.

Normally we went into the cave with the following equipment: One M16 (which we later changed for .45 pistols), jungle fatigues and boots, floppy hat, a flashlight, knife, CS protective mask, and a grappling hook with parachute cord. The hook was used to move equipment we found to ensure that it was not booby-trapped.

In my talk with PFC Langley, I learned that the potential for NVA traps and lethal encounters in the black depths of these caves was very possible. When we moved into the caves, the lead man had his weapon and flashlight held away from his body. He was



The author and fellow tunnel rats work their way deeper into a tunnel.



Roger Harris, a 71L volunteer, went on every one of our tunnel operations.

followed at intervals by one or more men armed the same way. We were not in a hurry. Each movement was slow and deliberate.

One would think "tunnel rats" must be small in stature. They were not. I'm nearly 5 feet, 9 inches, and some of the 'rats' in my team were considerably taller. It wasn't the size of the man, but the size of the heart in the man. One of my favorite "rats" was Roger Harris. He was a 71L or a administrative clerk-typist. He was also a volunteer and went on every one of our tunnel operations. He was frequently the number one man in the group as we entered the caves. He had no special training to do his mission—just a yen for adventure.

Caves are not like normal VC and NVA tunnels. They are created by Mother Nature and often take on odd shapes. Cave entrances can be large and then narrow down to small passageways, then branch out again into a large cavern or vice versa. Sometimes these caves extended hundreds of feet down into the side of a mountain. The areas the First Cavalry Division then operated in were mountainous in I Corps.

Surprisingly, in all the caves I entered, I never encountered a booby trap quite the same as told to me

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by some of the old hands. In one cave, my group managed to capture an NVA soldier. He had resolutely defended his cave and shot frequently at infantrymen as they approached its entrance. The enemy was told that we would torture them, so they would never surrender.

Before entering each cave, I had a council of war with my fellow cave rats. We were discussing how to silence the enemy soldiers when one of the First Cavalry soldiers, hearing of our plans, ran into the cave, apparently to attempt to talk the soldiers into surrender. He went about 80 feet into the cave when the NVA shot him. We could hear his cries for help.

We went into the cave after him, and our Vietnamese interpreter (on loan from G5) went in with us and told the enemy that we were in the cave solely to rescue the wounded soldier. The soldier believed us because he did not fire at us as we rescued the wounded soldier and got him out of the cave to a waiting medic.

We needed to interrogate a live prisoner so, using a flamethrower we'd brought along, we sent a stream of flame shooting alongside the NVA soldier. It didn't take him long to begin talking. Although he claimed to be a "rice carrier," his uniform and demeanor spoke NVA. He had no weapons, but going back into the cave, I quickly found an SKS carbine. I don't know what happened to him after that, but he was talking up a storm as he was flown out on the helicopter.

Although danger is a ready companion to those working in caves and tunnels, there are some lighter sides as well. In one cave complex we explored, the cave route suddenly turned into five separate tunnel passageways. Since only three men were in the team, it was thought that it would be easier to use CS gas to prep the five tunnel openings and learn if any NVA were ahead.

A box of CS grenades was procured and roped down to us. Each member had a pile of CS grenades and tossed them into the tunnel opening as fast as the pins could be pulled. As a result of all this frantic tossing, a mammoth cloud of white CS smoke engulfed us with visibility similar to that of looking through milk. We got out of the tunnel fast.

The infantry support had pulled back a bit from the entrance when the clouds of white smoke began to

billow out of the cave opening. They saw the team rapidly exit the tunnel and run for the nearest water. Luckily there was a small pond nearby and all three of us jumped in. The CS was affecting our bodies where sweat had accumulated, and it was getting rather uncomfortable. The sky troopers of the 1st Cavalry didn't help us at first. They were laughing too hard to do anything.

Another incident, while not funny at the time, grew so over the years. It was the team's first use of a flame thrower to prepare the cave opening for entrance. Two members of the team crawled up to the opening with the flame thrower and proceeded to douse the opening with a sheet of flame.

Unfortunately, the cave had a sharp turn to the left, so the flame, in effect, bounced off the wall and came back through the opening. I was observing the operation from farther up the hill and as I watched the flame come out of the tunnel, it went right over the prone bodies of the flame team. I thought they were "toast," but as luck would have it, the team was hugging the ground after firing the shot and were not injured as the flame stream passed over their heads. We learned the hard way that it is much safer to shoot the fuel in first, then light it.

During another cave expedition, the team came to the field with a new M79 CS round. We were always game to try something new, so I borrowed an M79 from the infantry. Before going up to the cave entrance, the infantry commander asked me if he should pull back his unit. They had no protective masks and could be doused with the CS. Given the size of the round, I didn't think anything so small could produce much CS. I told him to hang around because we would be going in as soon as the CS dissipated.

I fired the round into the cave and within seconds, a huge billow of white CS smoke came pouring out of the entrance, engulfing not only my team but the infantry as well. We both fell back to safer and higher ground coughing and crying. My team was *persona non grata* with the infantry for a few days.

Cave exploring in Vietnam was often a dirty business. Sometimes we worked in caves for several days. When the team boarded the helicopter for a return to the base camp, I had the bird land outside in the village



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next to Landing Zone Two Bits. There we enjoyed a hot shower and a cold beer while our clothes and boots were cleaned. When we walked through the front gate, we looked like good dragon soldiers standing tall.

In all the caves we explored, we found a lot of equipment, but few of the enemy. The team captured only one NVA soldier. I might have bagged another, but the people at the top kept yelling for me to return to the surface. Finally I did.

When the team exited the cave entrance, one lone helicopter (engine running) remained of the infantry company and its helicopters that had been there when we went underground. The helicopter crew said the

company had been called to another area and had only 15 minutes of fuel remaining. Had we not come to the surface when we did, the walk back to LZ Evans would have been a bit long.

Nearly three decades after my tunnel rat days, I can still remember much of those adventures. I do so because I worked with good soldiers who volunteered to go deep underground in search of the enemy. Working with these men is something I will always treasure.

As a tunnel rat, I made almost every mistake in tunnel exploitation that a soldier can make. Perhaps my experience will help future tunnel rats not make the same mistakes.
