

Dalat – Pr'Line Ambush
of
Page Communications Engineers
Thanksgiving Day
November 24, 1966

Previous events as recalled by Merv Norton

During 1965 and 1966 Page Communications Engineers (PCE) constructed a new tropo scatter communications site near Dalat at a site named Pr'Line. Pr'Line was isolated and all workers had to travel from Dalat to Pr'Line daily. Initially the site had no security and there was little concern for safety.

In February 1965, Colonel Robert Terry, the future commander of the 1st Signal Brigade and later a Major General, directed that defense plans be developed for all IWCS sites with a priority on Pr'line. In addition he arranged for a Company of Montagards to be assigned to provide security. He directed that all travel between Dalat and Pr'line be by armed convoy.

During the Summer of 1966, I visited Pr'Line. Ed Hahn, Site Supervisor, met me at the Dalat Airport and we traveled to Pr'Line alone in an open jeep. Ed was unarmed and I had a 45 with the clip in my pocket.

All of the safety measures were in place on Thanksgiving day, 24 November, 1966 and the work crew left Dalat for Pr'Line at about 0730.

Ambush as recalled by Bob Phelps, Fred Varley and Ray Scudder

The Convoy

The sunrise the morning of 24 Nov '66 was so impressive; Fred Varley actually took a picture of it. The whole sky was full of blood red stratus clouds.

The Page people talked among themselves about the air strikes that they had seen from the site the previous day. Some thing was happening in the area. They had always felt a little leery of the 20 mile ride from Dalat up to Pr'Line, but most of them felt that living and working in the highlands and Dalat in particular, was worth the risk.

The convoy usually had about 10 to 15 military, sometimes more, sometimes less.

The most of the convoy personnel had their individual M-14s. There were usually two M-60 machine guns, one in first or second 3/4 ton truck and one at the rear also in a 3/4 ton truck. The military sometimes had an M-79 grenade launcher.

A review of photos indicates that Page had at least two Ford Econoliner vans and two small Japanese pickups with back covers. The Econolineers usually carried six or seven people. Since this was a semi-holiday there were probably less on this day. The pickups usually carried four to six in each.

The group assembled at the MAAG house departure point and they would even out the people loads as much as practical. The above would indicate maybe 20 to 25 total PCE people in the ambush, including drivers.

The convoy was lead by a 2 1/2 truck with a large drinking water tank on it. It was usually followed by a 3/4 ton truck with an M-60. Following that was the PCE contingent of at least four vehicles in no particular order except Bob Phelps was usually in the middle (his truck was usually the heaviest armed PCE vehicle) and Ed Hahn at end followed by another military 3/4 ton truck with an M-60. There may have been more PCE vehicles but, the radio installers and some other people were off that day.

The Ambush as recalled by Fred Varney

I was riding with Ed Hahn near the end of the convoy. At about the 3/4 point of the trip I heard heavy small arms firing near the head of the convoy and contrary to all instructions in past exercises, all the drivers stomped on the brakes. Immediately firing broke out all around us prompting us to bail out of our van into the thick roadside brush. Thank God there was nothing waiting for us there. As the firing got heavier you could hear rounds coming through the van and through the trees above our heads. It was impossible to determine from where it was coming from. There were a number of loud thumps which I later found out to be hand grenades. The firing went on for about five minutes I guess, and then died out in our area. We could still hear shooting further up the convoy it too was slowing down. During the firing Ed Hahn made two trips on his belly back to the van to call Pr'Line on the CB radio. Gutsy thing to do!

Shortly after the firefight let up in our area, the Sergeant, from the 3/4 ton started calling out for help with his wounded. Apparently he had single-handedly kept the VC from getting to the M 60 as all his troops were wounded. The GI manning the M 60 had received a round through the lower leg which had blown the bone out from the knee to the ankle. We got a tourniquet on his leg to limit the bleeding. Another GI who was lying face down in the ditch began to moan. The Sergeant had thought him dead so hadn't looked him over. The man wanted his belt removed because it was hurting him. The Sergeant didn't want to turn him over at that point so we cut through the web belt at the back. It came away in two pieces, the front part in tatters. I later learned he lived through that ordeal.

Once the Sergeant and I had done all possible for the wounded, an armed GI showed up from up the road to say that a relief column had arrived and was working its way toward us.

I decided to move forward and I was no longer need there. The pickup vehicle stopped in front of the Page van still had the driver at the wheel. He had taken a round which took off the side of his head. The rest of the people in that vehicle had been saved by two well armed, quick thinking, Page Philippine riggers who had once been in the Huk revolution in the Philippines.

As the story goes, one of the riggers had rolled under the vehicle to wait for the VC to come down onto the road to kill the two people trapped in the foot well of

the cab. (These two were Carl Borick of Page and the site translator.) He rolled out into the open, shot the VC then rolled on into the ditch to await the grenade he knew would be tossed under the vehicle. This he did several times until the VC retired.

Further up the convoy I came onto the minibus assigned to the Koreans. They had apparently jumped out when the driver stopped the bus and laid in the roadside ditch to stay out harm's way. The VC found them all there and shot them outright.

The next vehicle in front of the minibus was a Page econoliner van. It was completely riddled with holes. Inside were the bodies of Armand Fortier, PCE power supervisor, Ed Ramsey PCE civil engineer and Mariana Almoro PCE warehouseman. Along side of the van, lying up against the ditch slope I found Bob Phelps PCE. He had be shot a number of times, fortunately all non-vital, and complained only about the wound in his butt.

With help, I got Phelps into the back of a pickup that had stopped on front of the van. We drove less than 100 meters when the overtemp light came on. Obviously the radiator had taken some rounds. About this time a military 10 ton dump truck arrived from the rear of the convoy carrying the wounded and dead. We transferred to this vehicle and I rode the running board up to Pr'Line.

At the front end of the convoy we saw the military tanker truck on its side off to the side of the road. Evidently the VC touched off a mine as the tanker rolled over it. The two GIs on board survived the mine blast but not the firefight later I'm told.

Rescue

Based on what Ed Hahn told Bob Phelps, the first troops to arrive were ARVN engineers who were based at a large dam about 5 miles past Pr'line and were on their way to Dalat. They dismounted and advanced to the stopped convey. By the time they arrived the VC had withdrawn across the railroad tracks (to the south I believe). Shortly afterward a reaction force from Pr'line arrived. I can't remember what alerted them, but I think it was either Ed Hahn on the CB radio or the sound of gunfire (we were only three or four miles from Pr'Line)

Continue on to Pr'Line

The team continues to Pr'Line. The wounded went by 2 1/2 ton truck. Once at Pr'Line a medevac helo took at least one load to Nha Trang for treatment. The helo was crowded so there must have been at least five or six wounded. There may have been a second helo with less seriously wounded.

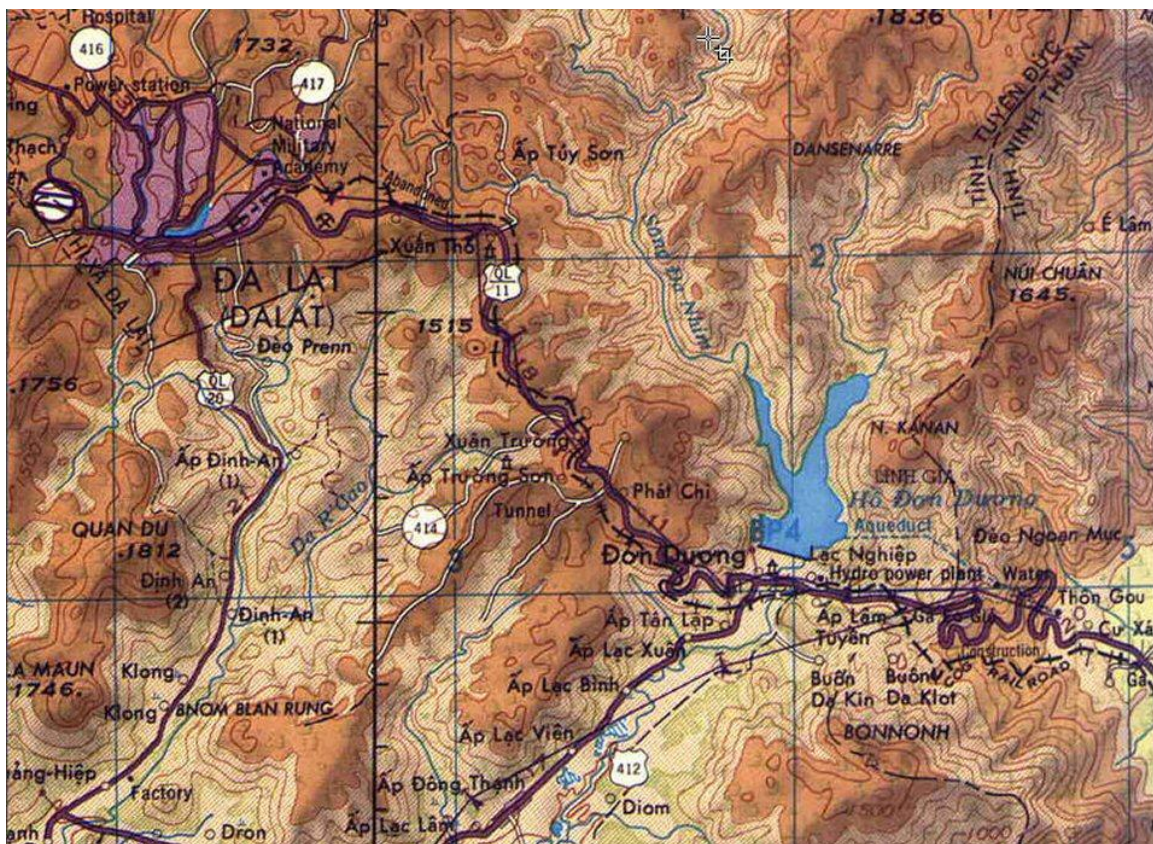
Those in the convoy – KIA names provided by Bob Phelps

Ed Hahn, Page Site Manager, uninjured
Bob Phelps, Assistant Site Manager, seriously wounded but survived
Fred Varley, PCE Engineer, uninjured
Ray Scudder, PCE Engineer, wounded
Carl Borick, PCE, Installation Engineer, uninjured

Name unknown, PCE, Photographer, uninjured
 Edward F. Ramsey, PCE, Civil Engineer, KIA
 Armand L. Fortier, PCE, Canadian Power Supervisor, KIA
 Edward J. Boivin, SP4, 362th Signal Company, KIA
 Marian S Almoro, PCE, Phillipino Warehouseman, KIA
 Myong Kuen Kim, PCE, Korean Power Installer, KIA
 Chong Su Lee, PCE, Korean Power Installer, KIA
 Jun Young Pak, PCE, Korean Power Installer, KIA
 Chul Huh, PCE, Korean Power Installer, KIA
 Phan Jean, PCE, Vietnamese Driver, KIA
 Eight ARVN, KIA

Two Soldiers Cited for Valor

Staff Sergeant Gerald H Bamberg and Specialist Walter S. Rogers were cited for valor for holding off the enemy and preventing complete annihilation of the convoy.



Pr'Line is located slightly below the center of the map just to the right of the word "Tunnel". The ambush occurred north of Pr'Line along Highway Q-11 near the "18".