

THE BATTLE OF TAM KY

By Thomas Pozdol

Introduction

As the years go by some memories fade, and others are as clear as they were the day they happened. To the best of my memory this story is being told, not only to honor those who died at the Battle of Tam Ky, but also to put an end to the many sleepless nights I've had about this battle for many years. The Battle of Tam Ky began on the morning of May 13th, 1969 with a Combat Assault into a hot LZ and ended at dawn on the morning of May 15th. (1)

MAY 12th

Just before dusk on May 12th, 1969, all the platoon leaders and squad leaders of Charlie Company 3/21, 196th Light Infantry Brigade were called to a meeting at the company CP (command post). Our orders for the following day had been changed. At dawn, we were to hump 2 kilometers in full gear to secure a defensive perimeter near the South Vietnamese village of Tam Ky. My squad was to walk point. When I got back to my squad, it was already dark. I hunkered down in a foxhole, put a poncho over my head, lit a cigarette, turned on my flashlight, and focused on my map. I checked the lay of the land, compass directions and tried to imprint as much information into my brain as I could. After a couple of hours, I finally closed my eyes, and tried to get some sleep feeling confident I knew where I was going.

MAY 13th



At dawn on the 13th of May "Charlie Tigers" were saddled up and ready to move out. Each rifleman carried a rucksack weighing about 70 lbs. The pack was filled with chow for three days, extra water, claymore mines, trip flares, personal belongings, and extra ammo. In addition, each rifleman carried three bandoliers of M-16 ammo, 2 to 4 hand grenades, and one field dressing.

Sgt. Tom Pozdol, 1st sq.
Leader, 1st platoon C Co

Just as we were to move out, the order came to stand down. Battalion had decided we were going to be choppered into the area rather than walk. Any time a grunt can get a lift instead of walking he is a happy man. I was especially happy that I didn't have to land navigate through 2 klicks (kilometers) of unknown terrain. However, an infantryman also has a sixth sense when something is about to hit the fan. We were all a little uneasy. At 1010 hours, the birds came in to pick us up. (2) They came in threes, in a V shaped pattern. We were 1st squad, 1st platoon, so we were always in the first bird. Our job was to hit the ground and secure an LZ (landing zone), so the following choppers knew where to land. The day was sunny and hot. There was very little wind, so the speed of the Hueys slicing through the air gave us some relief from the heat. We were headed to the flatlands. This was an area of operations we were not familiar with as we usually humped the mountains and valleys farther inland. The flats are where many of the rice paddies are located in South Viet Nam. It was the dry season and the paddies were bone dry. Between each paddy about 50 to 75 meters apart were islands of trees. In these tree lines is where the Vietnamese built their homes. We called them hooch areas. During the rainy season, the people would walk a short way to work in the fields. Then, go back to the shelter of their homes at night. Some of these little tree islands had no inhabitants.

A typical hooch where
rice farmers lived in
South Viet Nam.





The dark green areas are the tree islands. The light green areas is where the villagers planted their rice. Rice paddies were open areas with little cover from enemy fire. Paddies could be 50 to 75 meters wide. This photo is of an area several kilometers west of Tam Ky. This was part of C Companies regular area of operations.

At about 1018 hours, the choppers started to descend and we could feel a thump, thump as incoming rounds hit the bottom of the bird. The pilot got on the horn and advised, "Hot LZ." The door gunners opened up laying down cover fire.



PFC Ron Kociba
Rifleman 1st squad
WIA

Hueys never land on a hot LZ. They hover anywhere from a few inches to a couple of feet off the ground until all the troops have disembarked. Then they are out of there on their way back to pick up the next load if needed. First platoon hit the ground running. Off to our left at about 2 o'clock there was a tree line. There was no incoming fire from that direction. The first platoon headed toward that area. Once we were inside the tree line we fanned out to secure a defensive perimeter. There was no resistance. The CO (commanding officer) was called to report that the LZ was secure. Red smoke was popped to identify our position. There was gun fire all over the place. Over the radio I heard that the CO's bird had been hit and had gone down, but there were no injuries. Reports started coming in about what was going on around us. Another chopper had been shot down, but there were also no reports of injuries. A Chinook came in to salvage one of the downed birds. (Later, one of our squads made it to the other bird and blew it in place.) Soon afterwards all the platoons had made it into our perimeter. The CO had made it in and set up his CP. To everyone's surprise, no one was injured although there were several cases of heat exhaustion. They were either treated in the field or flown back to the rear for further treatment. Now we were put to the task of setting up a stronger defensive perimeter and better fields of fire. Since it was the dry season the ground was as hard as concrete, and to add to the problem of digging foxholes, there were rocks everywhere under the surface of the ground. After hours of digging with our entrenching tools we were only down a couple of feet. Because of the heat we gave up. We had dug down far enough to fire from the prone position and to offer us some protection in case of a mortar attack. It had to be over 100 degrees and very humid that day and after the fire fight earlier we were exhausted. The rest of the afternoon we rested. Rumor had it we were to provide a blocking force as an armored Cav unit and a unit of Koreans, ROK marines,

pushed the enemy into our defensive perimeter. The Cav unit was several kilometers away, but we could hear the pounding of their big guns.

Around 1600 or 1700 hours, the decision was made to send out the 3rd platoon to recon the area. We still had some daylight left, but it was starting to cool down some. It was maybe 95. While the 3rd platoon was moving out, a re-supply chopper landed. It brought in much needed water and ammo. It also brought in containers of Kool-Aid with big chunks of ice in it. Other than beer, it was the most refreshing beverage we could get in the field. All was well until all hell broke loose in the direction where the 3rd platoon had gone (about 1720). It was not an ordinary ambush. Small arms fire and grenades could be heard as well as heavy weapons fire. Contact was not broken off in a few minutes. It was a sustained fire fight. We picked up our e-tools and starting breaking rocks. A few more inches or feet in our foxholes might be needed that night.

The 3rd platoon called in artillery and then an air strike. Contact with the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) was broken and the 3rd platoon was on its way back into our defensive perimeter. Most of the lead element of the 3rd's point squad did not make it back. They had to be left in the field. (3) The squad leader of the point squad was a new friend of mine and I would never see him again. We had only met a few days before that day. Sadly I don't remember his name. Two wounded troops were brought in with the surviving men. I walked over to see if I had known either of the wounded. I recognized one face. He had come over on the same flight from the States with me. We had gone through in-country orientation together at Chu Lai. Then we went to LZ Center (a fire support base) and waited to be assigned to Charlie Company. I went to the 1st platoon, he to the 3rd. I can't remember his name either. He had a field dressing over his chest, and it had slid partially below the wound. I put my hand on the dressing to secure it, and saw that he had a huge hole in his chest. I kept talking to him to keep him conscious. He asked me for some of the cold drink we had gotten, but I refused. I didn't know how serious the wound was, and I didn't want him to choke on the drink. A dustoff (medevac helicopter) came in and I helped to put him on it. I later heard he had died. I looked for him on the flight back to the States nine months later; he wasn't there. Perhaps he had gotten sent home early.

THE FIRST NIGHT

As the sun set, C Company braced for an assault. The night sky was clear and there was little wind. Dusk passed in a peaceful glow. However, the night was not uneventful. Off in the distance, several women were crying out, wailing, and just plain screaming. From the same hooch area, dogs were continually barking. We weren't sure if Charlie had been torturing the women or just making them react this way, but their motive was clear. No sleep for C Company. H and I's (4) were called in several times to keep the gooks honest. They tried to probe our positions a few times, lobbing in grenades. The men of C Company stood fast. Off in the distance, the big guns of the Cav unit sent Charlie their ominous warnings. The dark hours passed, and the dawn approached. We would make it through the night. A major ground assault never came.



Sp4 Wolfrum, my RTO, KIA (left)
SFC Ikeda, Platoon Leader, WIA

MAY 14th

The sun never rose in South Vietnam; it would just burst out of the east. One moment it was night, the next it was day. The morning of May 14th exploded into heat and humidity. The men of the 1st squad, 1st platoon began to stir and brush the night from their eyes. Heat tabs were lit to boil water for coffee. C rations were opened. The thought lingered; was Charlie still out there or had they moved out. Sp4 Joe Freeman, a rifleman with the 1st squad, motioned me over to him.

"Look", he pointed to the tree line across from our position. Two figures were ditty bopping (5) along the tree line horizontal to our position. The gun squad had the foxhole position next to us. I yelled to the M-60 gunner that there were two gooks out there. He couldn't see them. A trooper with an M-79, a grenade launcher, was standing next to me. I told him to put a round out there as a spotter round for the M-60 gunner. He couldn't see them either. I grabbed the M-79 from him. I had never fired one before. I aimed, fired, and put a round about ten feet in front of them. They staggered backward for a moment then ran for the tree line. The gunner opened up on them. I was shocked that the M-79 round had not knocked them down. I had no respect for that weapon after that incident. (One dirty little secret about Vietnam is that in the bush the G.I.'s were terribly outgunned by Charlie. Regardless of what the experts say, the AK-47 was superior to the M-16. An RPG (rocket propelled grenade) launcher could be fired and then reloaded. The LAAW was fired once and then thrown in the trash heap. The claymore mine was good, but the gooks made booby traps from anything they had, anything from hand grenades to 105mm artillery rounds.) Another squad was sent out to find the bodies, but none were found. The 1st squad settled back to finish breakfast. The rest of the morning was spent catching up on sleep, writing letters home, and taking it easy. The gooks were still out there and our instincts told us something was going to happen soon. Charlie was being cautious, but they were still there, and in numbers. The boldness of their actions had clued us in to that. They were going to hit us; the only question was when and where. BTOC (Battalion Tactical Operations Center) finally settled the when. Charlie would settle the where.

Not much happened most of that day. Re-supply choppers came in to bring food, water, ammo, and mail. A few squads were sent out to recon the area. They didn't venture out far, just probing. Charlie sat tight, waiting. Occasionally 50 caliber rounds from the far off Cav unit would pass over our perimeter.

The hardest part of combat is often the waiting, anticipating the unknown. All ones energy is being built up inside and needed to be released. We waited, waited and waited.

Sometime that afternoon, all the platoon leaders and squad leaders were to report to the CP. We had new orders. In two hours, C Company was to quit its current position and take up a new position two kilometers to the west. My squad had point.

The "Tigers" of C Company were saddled up and ready to move out on time. Before we crossed the first rice paddy, I decided not to walk my people in single file. Two men, SP 4 Freeman and PFC Kociba, were to walk point about 10 meters apart. My RTO (radio telephone operator) Wolfrum and I followed about 10 to 15 meters behind the point men. The rest of the Company came up behind us. We made it to the first tree line. The area was about the size of a football field. We walked through an open area to the other side. There was a shallow trench line, about 2 ½ to 3 feet deep, that followed the contour of the tree line the length of the tree island on this side. We stepped into the second rice paddy. We got about half way across when we saw movement in the far tree line about 25 meters away. We opened up with automatic fire from our M-16's as we withdrew back to the trench line. I reported that we had received small arms fire from 3 or 4 positions located in the tree line across the rice paddy and requested artillery support. We waited and waited. Finally the word came down that no artillery was available. However, an air strike was on the way. A short time later the planes came into sight. The pilots must have picked up enemy movement on the other side of the tree line because they dropped their ordinance about 100 meters behind the positions where we had taken fire. When the air strike was over, we were ordered to move out again. I tried to convince my platoon leader and platoon sergeant the air strike had hit the wrong area, and we were going to have to walk 50 to 60 meters across an open field into enemy fire. They talked to the CO. BTOC had given the order, move out.

About one third to half way across the paddy, Charlie opened up with everything they had. We hit the dirt behind a paddy dike. No one had been wounded. I got on the horn and requested cover fire. I told my people on the count of three we were to haul ass. My RTO held the hand set of the radio open. The enemy fire had slacked off a little. I shouted, "One, Two, Three". I can't remember if our people opened up with cover fire, but I jumped up and ran toward the trench line. I could see rounds hitting the ground all around me. A couple of green tracers flew by me. (We



used red tracers, but Charlie used green). I jumped into the trench. Immediately I looked back at the rice paddy. I saw no one. Next to me was Hernandez, an M-79er from the gun squad. I asked him where everybody was, but he didn't know. We spotted a gook running across the paddy parallel to our position toward the area where my squad had been. I opened up on him, but missed. He had hit the ground and I told Hernandez where he was. He put a round right on top of the gook. Just then, I heard a thud behind us. I looked around. It was a Chicom grenade spinning around on top of the trench. I yelled at Hernandez to get down. The grenade must have spun around into the trench because when it exploded both Hernandez and I were hit. He was hit in the back of his lower body, and I was hit in the back of my legs and buttocks. I got up and looked over the edge of the trench. Three or four gooks were running from right to left across our position. I yelled an obscenity. Then, I opened up with my M-16. One fell. Next, I threw a grenade where the others had run behind a bush. There was no return fire. No kills could be confirmed from this action.

I slammed a fresh magazine into my M-16. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement coming toward me in the trench line. It was a young soldier. He was crawling on all fours. He had no weapon. When I asked where his weapon was, he told me he had lost it. I told him to go back and find it. He sat with his back against the trench, pointed to his midsection and told me he had been hit. On the side of his stomach there were two holes, no blood, just two holes. I stared at them in disbelief. I wanted to stick my finger in them to see if they had been real. More soldiers came crawling down the trench line. One was Cauldwell, an RTO. He told me he had been separated from his squad leader. That the enemy was attacking in force from the direction in which he had come. He thought the 2nd platoon was in the opposite direction somewhere up this trench line. I was ranking man in this group so I gave the order to stay low and follow the trench line. We hadn't gone far when the trench line ended. There was a small open area and some trees on the other side. I had an M-60 gunner with me. I told him to go over to a tree about 10 meters away and give us cover fire as we crossed the open area. Then we would cover him as he crossed over. As he started to move away, I noticed that the whole back end of his M-60 was gone. It had been blown off. I yelled at him to get back. He looked at me and I pointed to his weapon, and told him what had happened to it. He looked at it then at me in disbelief. I brought up the rear. We made it to the other side without incident. The 2nd platoon was there.

Once on the other side, I sat down to catch my breath. There was one guy standing up behind a bush. It was Dak, a Kit Carson. (6) He was firing an M-79, yelling at the NVA, reloading and firing again. I motioned to another soldier. We crawled over and pulled him down. I told him to cool down. He kept yelling about the NVA. I put my hand on his chest and looked into his eyes. He stopped yelling. There were several men around me and they all looked to be in shock. I asked one soldier where the platoon leader was. He motioned to a spot not far away. I went over to him and told him I was from the 1st platoon. That there were only a few of us left and most had been wounded. He told me the CO was on the other side of the island with the rest of the Company. The gooks were between us. We decided our present position was not defensible and began to move out to find a place where we could hunker down and fight it out with Charlie.

Luckily, on the far end of this island there was more or less a natural defensive position. It was an open area surrounded by bushes and trees with a few rises on the ground to hide behind. On one end, the end where most of the enemy would be coming from, there was a low berm where firing positions could be set up. The whole area was about twice as wide as a Huey and maybe three times as long. We set up a place to put the wounded. In the meantime, the CO, and the men with him, fought their way toward us. When they made it into our perimeter, the enemy was hot on their tail. The enemy started throwing grenades in on us. I was on the far end of the perimeter by then, away from the berm, with two other guys. We had no foxholes. We were just lying there flat on the ground. A grenade landed near us, and my left foot flew up in to the air. I looked at it expecting it to be blown off, but it looked okay. A few days later, at a field hospital I discovered that I had taken one frag in my left ankle from that grenade. We laid down a blanket of fire and the enemy withdrew. By this time, I was running low on ammo and tried to move the selector switch on my M-16 to the semi-auto position. It was stuck in place and couldn't be moved. I made a mental note to only fire in short bursts from then on. I only had three magazines of ammo left. The guy next to me had only a few rounds left. I gave him one of my magazines. A little while later someone from the CP came around asking how much ammo we had. They were trying to redistribute the ammo that was left. When the battle first began, most of us had dropped our rucksacks in the rice paddy. Most of our ammo, e-tools, and claymores were somewhere out there with the November Victor Alphas. Just before dark, air strikes were called in; napalm was the last to be dropped. It was dropped very close to our positions. We needed some breathing room; the enemy was right on top of us.

The Second Night

Around dusk, a Huey was hovering about 20 to 30 feet above our position. The pilot was trying to land with a load of ammo. It seemed as if the bird was suspended up there forever. The landing zone area was very small and the chopper was under small arms fire. If the bird had been damaged and came down on top of us, many would have been injured or killed. Finally, the pilot gave up and flew off. The frag wounds in my buttocks and legs were starting to hurt. I hadn't paid much attention to them while I was on the move, but as I laid there wondering how long we could hold out the pain increased. One more ground attack maybe two and we would be finished. For whatever reason, I always carried a bayonet. I fixed it in position. I was not going to be captured. They would have to kill me and I was going to go down fighting to the end. Suddenly the night sky lit up. It was a guardian angel. An AC-47 gunship had arrived on the scene.

The AC-47 was called Spooky. It carried MK-24 Mod 3 flares. Each flare would last about 3 minutes and would produce a light magnitude of two million candle power. It also was equipped with two or three 7.62mm Gatling Miniguns. Each gun could fire at the rate of 6,000 rounds per minute. When the gunship let loose with a burst of rounds, it looked like (because of the tracer rounds) a lighted rope falling from the sky. If Charlie stuck up his head with Spooky there, he was dead.

The CP used a strobe light to mark its position so the AC-47 would not fire into our perimeter. There were 4 or 5 men from the 1st platoon who were trapped in the rice paddy. They were hunkered down in a hole. One of the men was SFC Ikeda, the platoon leader. He also had a strobe light to mark his position. If the enemy tried to advance on our positions, we called Spooky and fire support was on the way. Sometime after midnight the AC-47 had to leave (fuel?).

Not long afterward, we heard thoom, thoom, thoom. It was the sound of mortar tubes. Shortly, the mortar rounds would be coming down. If they came down inside our perimeter, there would be carnage. We had no foxholes. Our entrenching tools (e-tools) were on our rucksacks and they were in the rice paddy. Some of the troops tried to dig holes with their steel pots, but that proved to be futile. The ground was too hard. All we could do was lie there and wait. The sound of an indirect fired weapon such as mortar rounds or artillery shells is something like, wshoo, wshoo, wshoo as they come down. Even if you are in a foxhole, your heart starts pounding faster and faster as the sound draws nearer and nearer. Just before impact, your heart gripped with fear stops beating for a moment. This is a moment when you are not dead nor are you alive. You are just there. Your existence is in the balance. If the shell did not come down on top of you, the air in your lungs escapes in relief. This whole event only covers a span of a few seconds. With each incoming shell, the process is repeated. Lying there in the open, unprotected, the troops of C Company waited. The first round hit the ground. It was outside our perimeter. The next round fell, and the next, and the next. They all landed somewhere in the rice paddy. Not a single troop was injured. We breathed a sigh of relief. Our hearts began to beat normally again.

That relief was short lived. Almost immediately, the enemy began to hit us with RPG's. An RPG is a direct fire weapon. It has a flat trajectory. Since we were in the flatlands, there was no angle of fire. Also in the dark, it was hard to judge distance. Therefore, the rounds went right over our position. However, the sound, something like Roman Candles on the Fourth of July, was as ominous as the mortar rounds falling from the sky. The RPG attack ended, only to be followed by another mortar attack. Had their mortar teams made their adjustments and zeroed in on us? Would the rounds fall in on us this time? Again we waited. Again the rounds fell outside our perimeter.

The last mortar round had barely hit the ground when shadows began to approach us in the darkness. They opened up on us with small arms fire and grenades. Two figures were coming toward me, parallel to my position but on a slight angle. I fired two short bursts. They went down. Three more figures came out of the darkness. I fired another burst. They went down behind a paddy dike. I pulled the pin on my last grenade and threw it. It landed right on top of them. Moments passed and then a few minutes; there was no movement in front of me. As I waited ready to fire again, a battle was raging all around me. Grenades were exploding. Everywhere bursts of fire from AK-47s and M-16s could be heard. An M-60 pounded 7.62 rounds into the attackers off to my right. Gunfire and explosions were all around me. The night smelled of gun powder and death. Suddenly, fire rained down from the sky. Spooky had returned. The roar of its miniguns filled the night air. The 2nd NVA Division broke off its attack. It was almost dawn now. Another day loomed on the horizon. C Company's ammo was almost depleted.

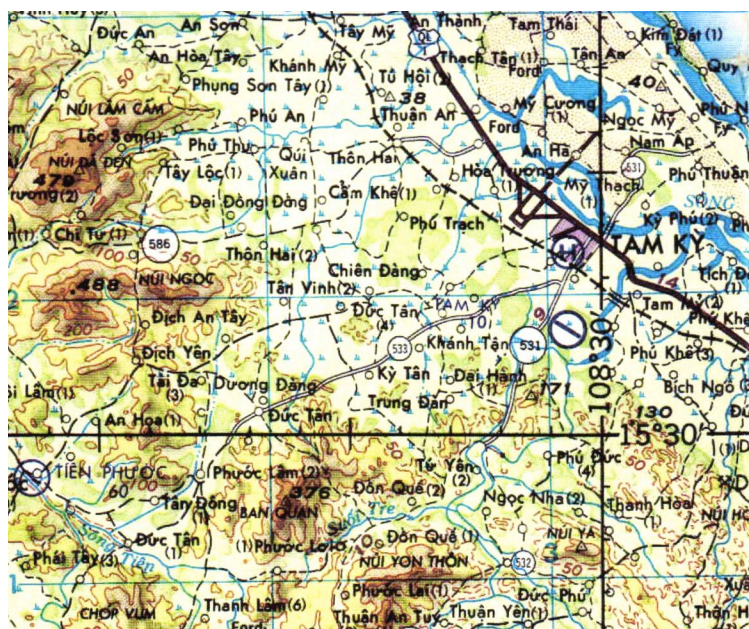
MAY 15th

Daylight did not burst onto the horizon on the morning of the 15th. It slowly crept above the tree line. We waited and wondered, was Charlie still out there. When there was enough light, patrols were sent out to recon the area. After some time had passed, the word spread, Charlie had pulled out. One patrol brought in the men who had been stranded in the rice paddy all night. The wounded were staged to be medevaced out. Five dead bodies were laid out in a straight line with ponchos placed over them. One was my RTO, Larry Wolfrum. Another was one of my point men, Joe Freeman. Everyone in my squad had been either killed or wounded.

During the Battle of Tam Ky, C Company had 23 WIA, 10 KIA. (7) There was 1 MIA. (8) The troopers of C Company along with air and artillery support were credited with 162 enemy killed.

EPILOGUE

To set the record straight at the Battle of Tam Ky I had the permanent rank of SP 4. However, on April 17th I was temporarily promoted to Acting Sergeant a rank I held until August, 1969, when I was promoted to Sergeant E-5. This story has not been told to be vainglorious. It has been written to honor the men of the 1st platoon of C Company, 3/21. All the names of the men in this story are from the 1st platoon. They were the troopers I was the closest to in the field. They fought bravely and gallantly and should have a special place in the history of this country as should all the men of C Company. They were outnumbered and outgunned during the Battle of Tam Ky, but they never wavered in their duty. May God bless them all.



C Company engaged the NVA a little south of Trung Dan



196th LIB

Footnotes

- (1) In a press release, dated 1 October, 1969 this battle is referred to as Operation Frederick Hill. It was from "Headquarters U.S. Military Command, VN APO 96222". It was written by Colonel C.R. Carlson, USAF. It was a press release summarizing all the combat activity in CTZ 1 during the month of May, 1969. Operation Frederick Hill lasted from May 13th to June 17th, 1969. The 3/21 was awarded the Army's Valorous Unit Citation for this military operation. The men of the 3/21 referred to this operation as, "TAM KY".
- (2) Daily Staff Journal (AR 220-346) S2/S3 Section, LZ Baldy. Page 8 Line No. 22
- (3) The bodies were recovered a couple of days later. There were four or five dead, and 1 MIA.
- (4) Harassment and Interdiction. H and I's is artillery or mortar fire that tries to prevent the enemy from moving about freeing and massing for an attack.
- (5) Ditty bopping is G.I. talk referring to the way the Vietnamese sometimes moved. It wasn't walking, and it wasn't running. It was ditty bopping.
- (6) A "Kit Carson" was a person of indigenous origin who interpreted Vietnamese into English for the Americans in the field.
- (7) These numbers are substantiated by The Morning Reports for the 14th and 15th of May signed by the Company's Executive Officer.
- (8) There were 6 Mias listed for the 13th. They had to be left at the site of the ambush that occurred that afternoon. On the 15th or 16th 5 bodies were recovered. The 6th MIA was dragged off by the NVA. I believe this was SP4 Larry Aiken. During a raid on an NVA hospital in July of 1969 he was killed by his captors. He has been listed KIA on the 25th of July.