

Battle of Trung Luong

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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Memo: Vietnam: 25 Years Later

A VILLAGE, A HILL AND HORROR A TRAGIC BATTLE EARLY IN THE WAR STOOD AS A HARBINGER OF THINGS TO COME FOR U.S. TROOPS.

By David Zucchini, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Trung Luong was a remote hamlet folded into a fertile valley in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, not far from the South China Sea.

None of the young American soldiers who fought there, and died there, and left pieces of themselves there, had ever heard of Trung Luong until they approached the village on a brutally hot day in June 1966. Today, 25 years after the war ended and 34 years after an airborne battalion spent three unforgettable days in the hamlet, there are still very few Americans who have heard of Trung Luong.

By the time the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975, more than 58,000 Americans were dead and 153,000 had been wounded. Thirty-one died at Trung Luong, many of them teenagers. In addition, 155 were wounded, some grievously.

For the men who survived the terror of that place, it is difficult to comprehend that the most searing events of their lives could pass with such little notice, then or now. You will not find Trung Luong ((pronounced trung long) in Gen. William C. Westmoreland's official account, Report on the War in Vietnam, nor in Stanley Karnow's seminal work, Vietnam: A History.

"This was a big, but not a huge, battle. It was a significant, but not an overwhelming, battle," says John Carland, a military historian who is writing Stemming the Tide, about Vietnam battles in 1965 and 1966. "It was like so many, many battles of that war."

Some guys got killed. Some got busted up. Some survived to fight again. Everybody moved on. That was Vietnam.

Yet Trung Luong was a crucible for Rich Montgomery, who came home to Montgomery County with his leg blown apart. Trung Luong still intrudes daily on the consciousness of Bruce Masters, settled now in South Jersey, part of his trigger finger sheared off by a bullet. And the hamlet still haunts Tony Burgee, who came home to North Philadelphia with a medal and a crushing sense of loss.

All three men were still boys when they saw their friends die at Trung Luong.

Their medics were killed as they treated the wounded. Their sergeant bled to death in a creek bed. Their captain reached out to pull a wounded private to safety and came away with only the boy's arm. Their lieutenant was executed by an enemy officer when he happened to moan in a field of corpses. It seems to the veterans of Trung Luong, deep now into middle age, that such things should be remembered.

Every soldier believes his battle was the bloodiest, the most wrenching, the most enduring. In Vietnam, that sense of monumental sacrifice was undercut by ambivalence at home. Like Trung Luong, the war was so painful that it begged to be forgotten.

For those who survived, Vietnam is forever, and so is Trung Luong.

The Second Battalion of the 327th Infantry Regiment, a unit of the 101st Airborne Division, was commanded by Lt. Col. Joseph Wasco of Trenton, known as "Wild Gypsy." Wasco was 44, an aggressive veteran of World War II and the Korean War.

In June 1966, it fell to Wild Gypsy and his 400 men to find and engage a North Vietnamese unit of unknown size and location. Intelligence officers had detected North Vietnamese regulars around Trung Luong; it was feared the troops would take a U.S. Special Forces base at nearby Dong Tre.

It was a typically vague mission in a war in which the enemy was elusive and ephemeral. Wasco and his men had spent months pursuing Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. They killed a few. Most got away.

Westmoreland's strategy was to force the enemy into set battles, where the American advantages in air power, artillery and armor could be brought to bear. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong pursued a guerrilla war of ambushes and hit-and-runs. Ultimately, they won, at a cost of 3 million dead soldiers and civilians.

At Trung Luong, Wasco figured he was up against a battalion - roughly 300 men. What he couldn't know was that elements of three hardened North Vietnamese regiments were dug in around Trung Luong - 3,000 to 4,000 men. American reconnaissance plane crews could not see that the troops were hidden in one of the most elaborate tunnel networks of the war, or that beneath golden haystacks were fortified bunkers, and in the winding creeks, bunkers were carved into the banks.

And so, on the afternoon of June 19, 1966, the young men of Alpha Company of the Second Battalion, heavy with ammo, eager to fight, and utterly unknowing, choppered down toward the valley of Trung Luong.

Just minutes after the Hueys swept down, the company began taking casualties. Several paratroopers pitched forward and collapsed face-first in the grass. It wasn't from enemy fire. It was from the heat. The temperature exceeded 100 degrees, a damp, suffocating heat.

The men were loaded like mules. Pfc. Rich Montgomery, a skinny, burr-headed 19-year-old from Philadelphia, tried to run after he jumped off the Huey, but

he could manage only a stumbling jog because of his gear. He was trying to outrun the fires set by artillery and helicopter gunships.

Montgomery carried three days' worth of C rations in heavy cans. He also carried bandoliers of M-60 machine gun ammunition, almost 600 rounds. He had his M-16 rifle, extra ammo clips, claymore mines, grenades, clean socks, sleeping bag, poncho, entrenching tool, and two canteens of water.

Montgomery had volunteered for the war, eager to prove his manhood. Born in Philadelphia and reared in Oreland, Montgomery County, he spent his teens drinking beer, getting into fights, serving school detentions. The first time he tried to enlist, his run-ins with police got him rejected as "morally unacceptable." With the intervention of a priest and a family doctor, he was accepted. He signed up for airborne, unaware that would require him to jump out of airplanes. He was afraid of heights.

Now, on the hot afternoon of June 19, Montgomery and the other 138 men of Alpha Company marched almost three hours pushing north toward Trung Luong.

At nightfall, Montgomery's platoon was sent out on ambush patrols. The men marched out into the blackness, finally setting up at the edge of a dry creek bed.

Montgomery was asleep when his buddy, Pvt. Gary Housley, spotted North Vietnamese soldiers moving down a trail. Incredibly, one of them was singing an American pop song - in perfect English. Housley waited, then raised his M-16 and fired a single round that caught a soldier under his chin and blew off the top of his head.

The next morning, some of the men went over to stare at the corpse. One soldier remembers the head looked like an empty bowl.

At 8:30 a.m., the company commander, Capt. Tom Furgeson, got an urgent radio call from Wasco. The battalion's Charlie Company was pinned down by heavy enemy fire. Alpha Company was ordered to move west through Trung Luong to reinforce its sister company two miles away.

Furgeson, 28, was a career officer who made it a point to know each of his men by name. He tried to find out the strength of the enemy that had stopped Charlie Company. All he could get over the radio was that it was between a squad and a rifle platoon.

Furgeson led his company about a mile to a ridge finger known as Hill 48. He sent a platoon, led by Lt. Walter Eddy, into the hamlet. About 10a.m., Eddy radioed to say the hamlet was quiet.

Furgeson told Eddy to check the rest of the hamlet. Then he moved the main body of the company down the ridge finger, along a creek bed. Standing atop the creek bank, Furgeson could see Eddy and his men as they checked out a hedgerow made of thick bamboo.

Then Eddy was suddenly gone, and the still air erupted with automatic weapons fire.

Furgeson did not realize it until much later, but North Vietnamese soldiers were firing from bunkers beneath the haystacks and behind the hedgerow. Eddy was hit in both legs and tumbled into a pit. His radioman was hit in the head and killed.

Pfc. Patrick Mooney, the second gunner on the platoon's three-man machine-gun crew, crawled to where Eddy had been. He was calling out, "Lieutenant! Lieutenant!" when a North Vietnamese soldier leaned out from the hedgerow and shot him in the belly. Mooney fell into the pit with Eddy and died there in the lieutenant's arms.

In the creek bed, Furgeson could hear the barrage but could not see what was happening. He led his men down the creek bed to a barn near the hedgerows.

It took a sustained effort by a private and a sergeant, firing from behind an embankment, to suppress fire long enough for other men to rush out and drag in the wounded and the dead. Somebody hauled Eddy, badly wounded, from his pit.

Rich Montgomery, toting M-60 ammo, had reached the barn after running past the enemy machine gun fire. He was sprawled there in the dirt when he realized he had taken cover next to a body on a poncho. It was the ammo bearer, Pfc. Alton Munn. Montgomery had gone to jump school with Munn, shipped out to Vietnam with him. Now - just like that - he was gone.

After 90 minutes, the firefight was over. Furgeson radioed for permission to pull back to the ridge and call in air strikes. The survivors marched back up the ridge, exhausted, and watched as Navy aircraft laced the hamlet with napalm.

Through the flames, Montgomery could see men emerge from holes in the ground. He dropped his C rations and grabbed his M-16. He emptied his magazine. Montgomery saw the figures go down. Later, in the hamlet, he saw enemy corpses where he had fired, but he did not feel avenged, or even satisfied. He just felt empty.

At his command post on the ridge finger, Furgeson got on the radio with Wasco. Charlie Company still desperately needed help. Both officers agreed: Alpha Company had to go back into Trung Luong.

Early that same afternoon, June 20, Bravo Company was preparing to chopper down to a landing zone atop Hill 258, just northwest of Trung Luong. The company had been yanked from another battle and ordered to take the hill, then link up with Alpha and Charlie Companies.

Aboard the last Huey in, loaded with battle gear, rode Pfc. Tony Burgee. He was a tall, powerful man, just 23, a 1961 graduate of Edison High in North Philadelphia. He had joined the Army to get away from street gang life around 11th and Susquehanna Streets. He figured that if he was going to fight, he might as well get paid for it.

As the Hueys touched down on Hill 258, they came down slightly off the intended landing zone, into a swarm of enemy fire. By the time Burgee landed in the last chopper, about 3 p.m., the dead and wounded littered the ridge top.

Just past the landing zone, Burgee stumbled into Capt. Joseph Mack, who had collected a group of wounded. Mack ordered him to take his squad, eight men, to the top of the hill to secure the high ground.

Burgee and his men hiked up to the highest ridge, where they immediately came under fire from a heavy machine gun on the far side of a crevasse. The men got down on their bellies, but they still were not low enough. They took off their pistol belts and ammo packs, trying to make themselves smaller.

Burgee set up his M-60 machine gun, and a "thump gunner" set up an M-79 grenade launcher, and they went to work.

About 5 p.m., almost two hours into the firefight, Burgee was pouring M-60 rounds into the machine gun nest when it erupted in several explosions.

For two more hours, Burgee and his men stayed flat on the ground, worried that they would be hit if they raised their heads. Finally, at dusk, they managed to crawl about 25 yards down the hill.

They spent the rest of the night there, low on ammunition, out of water, terrified that North Vietnamese would come charging down the hill.

At daybreak on June 21, air strikes lit up enemy positions across Hill 258. Burgee's squad was ordered back up to the top. There, in the morning light, he saw five dead North Vietnamese in a foxhole, sprawled across a heavy machine gun.

Bravo Company had taken Hill 258.

Burgee looked down into Trung Luong, illuminated by explosions and tracer fire. He thought: Please, please, don't send me down into that village.

At the ridge finger, the men of Alpha Company did not want to go back into Trung Luong. But they dragged themselves to their feet and filed back down the hill shortly after 2 p.m. on June 20.

The men moved down the same dry creek bed they had used without incident that morning. But this time, the North Vietnamese had moved through their tunnel system and into bunkers in the creek bank. When the Americans appeared, they were overwhelmed by machine gun fire from the front and side.

A thump gunner went down, wounded in both legs and his belly. Bullets tore open the leg of a medic who ran over to treat him, and ripped apart the leg of a lieutenant.

Montgomery was at the rear of the column with a fellow gunner, Pfc. Bob Krepps. They heard the shooting and then a command: "Machine gun up front!" The two ran up the creek bed, hauling their M-60.

Montgomery skidded down onto the creek bank, ready to feed more rounds into the M-60 for Krepps, who was already on his belly and firing. Montgomery felt something explode in his thigh. He saw his left leg dangling behind him, twisted completely around. Two machine gun bullets had pulverized his thigh bone.

He had always thought a wounded man should shout something inspirational. He screamed, "The motherf-ershot me!"

A medic rushed over and shot Montgomery full of morphine. Montgomery stared at a tattoo of a skull on the medic's chest.

Krepps came over, and Montgomery persuaded him to twist his shattered leg back into its original position.

Several men grabbed Montgomery and the other casualties and dragged them back to a clearing where medical evacuation choppers were able to land.

The firefight was still raging when a helicopter brought in Col. Hal Moore, a brigade commander with the First Cavalry. Moore was now in charge.

Moore remembers his command helicopter landing within 40 yards of Furgeson's men in the creek bed without receiving a single round of enemy fire. He thought Alpha Company was too "spooked," too "shook up." He thought Furgeson should "jack up" his men a bit and move them forward into the hamlet.

Furgeson felt insulted and demeaned. He had already fought so relentlessly here that he was later awarded a Silver Star.

Furgeson remembers a comment from the colonel that incensed him: "Looks like you're opposed by about one rifle squad."

An enemy rifle squad numbered no more than a dozen men. Furgeson knew he was up against hundreds of enemy, or more.

Furgeson, exhausted, stoked with adrenaline, felt his temper rising. "Sir," he said, "it's the toughest f-ing rifle squad you or I ever went against." He wasn't about to get into a screaming match with a colonel, so he turned and stalked away.

Rich Montgomery was lying between two dead soldiers, watching a medevac helicopter swooping down, when an enemy machine gun nest opened fire on the dead and wounded. The soldiers fired for what seemed like a long time until Furgeson squeezed off several rounds, killing two of them and ending the attack.

The medevac finally was able to land, and Montgomery was strapped to a stretcher and tied to a lower skid on the chopper frame. Above him was another stretcher; he wasn't sure whether it carried a wounded man or a corpse.

As the chopper pulled up and away, Montgomery looked up to see a torrent of

blood gushing from the man above him. It drenched Montgomery. He screamed and screamed at the crew, but no one heard him above the roar of the rotors.

Memories of any war are supple. For Bruce Masters, who was 19 at Trung Luong, what forms in his mind now after 34 years is other men's blood on his fatigues, infected leech bites, exhaustion, desperate thirst, and dysentery so bad that his clothes were streaked with his own diarrhea.

He was miserable on the morning of June 21, his third time into Trung Luong. This time, as the remainder of Alpha Company's men approached the hedgerow where they had been ambushed the day before, Masters was certain more were going to die.

He was waiting for the first enemy rounds to come. And they did, making a chopping noise through the thick vegetation.

Masters heard his corporal screaming: "Masters, fire that gun! Fire that gun!"

In an instant, Masters was down, his M-60 up on a bipod, and he was working the trigger.

An M-60, with its big 7.62 mm rounds, is a wicked weapon that attracts return fire. Masters had squeezed off just a few shots when a slug smashed into his helmet, crushing it. He took the helmet off, looked at it, put it back on, and resumed firing.

Masters felt his right hand fly back. He reached over to fire again, but he couldn't get the trigger to work. He looked down and saw that the trigger housing group was smashed. Only then did he notice the top of his finger turned to pulp, and blood everywhere.

By the next morning, June 22, the enemy had melted away in the face of U.S. reinforcements. There was only scattered resistance as Alpha and Charlie Companies came within sight of one another in Trung Luong, now deserted. It didn't feel like a victory.

"We never wanted the village," Wasco says. "We just wanted them" - the enemy.

By the time Alpha Company pulled back the third time, bringing out Masters and the other casualties, it had been eviscerated. Of the 139 men who had gone in on June 19, plus two dozen reinforcements, only 42 were still standing. More than 70 had been killed or wounded, and dozens more had been felled by heat stroke.

"Few, if any, United States rifle companies in the Vietnam War were more sorely tried," U.S. Army historian S.L.A. Marshall wrote in *The Fields of Bamboo*, an account of Trung Luong and two other battles.

Three hundred seventy-one enemy bodies were counted. American commanders listed 394 probable enemy kills in the onslaught of 118 tons of napalm, 107 tons of bombs, and 26,000 artillery rounds.

The North Vietnamese claimed 144 American kills. Their battle reports complain of hunger, malaria, desertions, men falling asleep, men cowering and quitting during air strikes, and a shortage of coffins that distressed the troops.

Except for the men of the Second Battalion, nobody in Vietnam thought much about Trung Luong for very long. The war lurched ahead, returned briefly to the valley in September, and raced on again. The war was barely two years old, with nine years and many, many battles to come.

After Trung Luong, Rich Montgomery spent almost a year in hospitals and physical therapy to heal his shattered leg. He drifted into alcohol and drug addiction, then recovered and began counseling addicts. Now 53, he has a master's degree in human services and works for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, conducting anti-drug programs.

Tony Burgee, 57, was evacuated off Hill 258 and awarded a Bronze Star for his actions. He served two tours in Vietnam, leaving the Army as a sergeant. He ran a bookstore in North Philadelphia and now counsels young people against drugs and violence.

He is haunted by memories of the men who died at Trung Luong. "My therapist says I have survivor's guilt," he says.

Bruce Masters, 54, now runs a microbiology lab in Montgomery County and lives in Bridgeton, N.J.

"It's on my mind every single friggin' day," he says of Trung Luong. "It's never gone away, and it never will."

Nine years ago, Masters was leafing through a military bulletin when he read that the Second Battalion had been awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for Trung Luong - in 1969. It was a rare distinction, the highest unit award possible, yet no one in the battalion was ever notified.

Last June 18, Masters and Montgomery organized an awards ceremony at Fort Campbell, Ky., home of the current Second Battalion. Thirty-four Trung Luong veterans attended; 30 had been wounded.

On a parade field with a brilliant sun beating down, the silver-haired men stood in formation in blazers and ties. With them was the brother of one man killed at Trung Luong, the son of another, and Grace Mooney, mother of Patrick Mooney, the gunner who died in Lt. Eddy's arms. Eddy was there, too, in a wheelchair, and he slowly rose to his feet for the national anthem.

Blue ribbons trimmed in gold were pinned to the veterans' chests, and throughout the long ceremony each man stood straight and tall in the fierce June heat.

This story is based on interviews with veterans of the Trung Luong battle, U.S. Army after-action reports and captured North Vietnamese documents at the National Archives, and *The Fields of Bamboo*, by S.L.A. Marshall.

Share your comments by sending them to The Philadelphia Inquirer, Foreign Desk, P.O. Box 8263, Philadelphia, Pa. 19101, or to vietnam@phillynews.com. Fax: 215-854-5185.

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