

# No Slack's Company B at Trung Luong (Hill 258)

**20-24 Jun 1966**

**Preface:** Having received orders for the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, I fully expected to become a platoon leader in one of the Airborne Battalions. I faced two major hurdles. The first was at Camp Alpha. Upon arrival in early May 1966, the camp commander stated that my orders had been changed. I was to be the new "Post Education Officer at MACV." I explained to the AG major that my normal career path would be platoon leader, company executive office and then company commander. When this tactic didn't work I asked him..."how is it going to look on my Form 66...Infantry, Airborne, Ranger and Post Education Officer?" An unsuccessful argument.

Dejected and a little depressed I headed to the Officers Club at Tan Son Nhut, Standing at the bar I overheard several combat arms lieutenants expressing apprehension about their pending combat assignments. Leaving the bar to drain the lizard it hit me, a solution! Back in the bar, I stood on a chair and announced to all that Maj McPhee was taking interviews for any company grade officer interested in assignment as Post Education Officer - no combat or field duties. When I returned from the latrine the club was almost empty.

The second hurdle was to actually acquire a platoon leader position. No easy task when you are a senior 1LT. I made my case with LTC Wasco; and he agreed. But I first listened to his combat philosophy in Vietnam. His sage advice was greatly reinforced by Wild Gypsy's (his call sign) booming voice. I took his advice to heart and off to Co B I went.

**20 Jun 1966:** From the forward area at Tuy Hoa we were jerked to Dak To - arriving in the middle of the night and the middle of the fight. When we were ordered back to Tuy Hoa our return trip was just as hasty. Even though we knew we were needed for another operation we were ecstatic about returning to our parent battalion. Little information about our pending mission was available at Dak To but there had been a lot of enemy activity in and around the Dong Tre Special Forces camp. Rumors and conjectures flew. It was believed that our battalion had been attached on 19 June to a Marine unit recently arrived from the States and that the Marines were to make an amphibious assault North of Tuy An with our Co A and Co C acting as their blocking force somewhere in the valley near Trung Luong."

Closing into Tuy Hoa South at about 1000 hours we were quickly supplied and equipped for the pending mission. Mission briefings were held--but much of the attachment details remained sketchy. During the platoon leaders' briefing there was certainly no mention of a change in attachment. Co B's mission was to land on top of Hill 258, directly above Co C and to attack down the hill to pull the pressure off them. This was the identical type of mission we had when we were attached to the 502 at Dak To. Since this was the dry season along the coastal plains water would be critical to both sides. Hill 258 was a sparsely wooded saddle shaped like a V. The right hand leg of the V was slightly higher in elevation and had the most vegetation ... a few scrub trees and knee high grass. The left hand leg, lower in elevation, with the front edge--toward the V being the highest plateau. The hill sloped down from the plateau and slightly away from the other leg and flipped back to a knoll at the end. The point of the V was the lowest point between the two legs. We were to air assault from the SSW to NNE or right leg of the hill from the south. It was not known if Hill 258 was defended. When in doubt...It's HOT!

By 1300 hours 138 of our 144 man company were loaded into Huey's and airborne and headed to Hill 258. Still believing we were attached to the Marines, I assumed the Marines had flushed out numerous NVA units from the coast as they began deploying back into the interior where Co's A & C had set up their blocking positions. Co's A & C were trying to hold the NVA in check but as I saw it they were in danger of being overrun and wiped out. Their positions were in a valley floor between two mountain chains. Military intelligence estimates and captured NVA documents later indicated that there were between two and four NVA regiments opposing Co's A & C of the "No Slack" Battalion. The enemy had our two companies outnumbered approximately 1200 to 300; and we paid dearly.

During the period of 19-20 June, one medevac helicopter crew headed by CPT Ken Trotter and 1LT Ron Martin medevaced approximately 160 A & C Co troopers. (Oct 2005 Screaming Eagles in Vietnam)

On 20 June, Company B may have been the largest rifle company in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade with a foxhole strength of 144 troops. Despite our size we had numerous Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) vacancies. In 1st platoon, my platoon, a PFC, Carl Cuta (d.1995) was a squad leader. Trung Luong was the first time 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon had an E-7 as Platoon Sergeant. He was PSG James Hargrove (KIA 24Sep66)

who had just arrived from ROTC duty in Ohio. We barely introduced ourselves...when we took off for Hill 258.

On lift-off for Hill 258 we did not know the identities or the size of the units we would be fighting. Much later we were informed by military intelligence (boy is that an oxymoron) that we had been fighting the 18B Regiment and portions of the 95th Regiment, NVA; and that the NVA had been using the top of Hill 258 as a combat rest area for a one to two battalion size force. Both units were North Vietnam Regular Infantry units; and the 18th B was rated as one of their very best. My first exposure to NVA soldiers was at Dak To and I thought them every bit as well trained as we were. So when you fought the NVA, you'd better have your stuff together. The major difference was our mobility, artillery and air power.

We circled near the landing zone for several minutes waiting for the prep (artillery firing) to be completed. It looked to me as though they were prepping the wrong LZ (the left leg of the V). The plan was for Co B to land on the right leg! As we began our approach all was quiet...no incoming fire. As soon as the helicopters touched down...all hell broke loose.

We had landed in grazing fire, on the slightly lower and more sloped left hand part of the hill. The enemy, on the right leg of the hill was firing across the forward portion of the landing zone. The helicopters had taken off in a specific order, to maintain platoon integrity. To make matters worse, when we landed on the wrong LZ, the helicopters were out of order and completely mixed up. I landed toward the V with my platoon headquarters section, mortar platoon, and portions of third platoon. The Mortar Platoon Leader, Lt George B Pearson III (KIA 17Sep66) landed with my platoon--damn near 30 helicopters back and all the way to the rear of the LZ. PSG James Hargrove took charge and got the platoon in a perimeter defense around the small knoll at the end of the left hand leg. Good NCOs are worth their weight in gold. The only platoon that landed relatively intact was Lt Frederick Seig's third platoon.

Within seconds of landing, everyone exiting the left hand side of the first seven helicopters - except my platoon medic Sp4 Jerold Janis, Sp4 Douglas Field (WIA 17Sep66) and myself were dead or wounded. Just before we touched down, Janis asked me if the landing zone was hot or cold. I told him I did not know. Janis, being the wily veteran that he was, dove out of the helicopter and was in the prone position before the Hueys landed - hard. I was knocked over the aircraft commander's seat onto the console.

After I regained my feet, with the help of the crew chief, I dove out of the left side as the helicopter was taking off. I don't know how Doug missed getting hit exiting the aircraft...maybe he was just a lot thinner back then.

I knew immediately we were on the wrong LZ; but it was my platoon's job to secure the LZ from 0 to 90 degrees (North to East). There were 30 plus helicopters trying to take off behind me, and I could not hear, see or feel the NVA firing. Doc Janis crawled over to me and slapped me on the ankle and said, "Sir, you'd better get your ass down they're shooting at you." Being a doubting Thomas, I kind of ambled to a small rock and laid down behind it. As I was looking around to see what was going on the rock cracked in half, there was a searing burning sensation along my neck and a huge explosion in my ear. A round had hit the rock, split it in two, ricocheted along my neck, passed my ear and landed in my rucksack. I was convinced that my jugular was severed only to find out that it was a burn across my neck. Holding the rock together with my fingers, I was clearly having second thoughts about turning down the Post Education Officers position in Saigon.

Lt Fred Seig gathered most of his third platoon and started a flanking movement on the right side of the hill. The only covered route without crossing an expansive open shallow valley between the two ridges of the hill. Within the first three minutes of Fred's maneuver, Fred and seven of his men were wounded and two were killed. Fred was hit with two or three rounds to the head behind the right ear. We brought them to our defensive position and I knew we needed a miracle if we were going to be able to save his life. Just then a single slick set down about ten feet away from Fred and the other wounded. Almost 30 years later I learned it was the slick that had brought in Sp4 Burgee's gun crew consisting of Pfc Milo Cadotte, Pfc Richard Whiting (KIA 20Jun66), Pfc Dennis Williams and B Co's soon to be "urban legend" Cpl Charles E McAdams into the battle. They had been waiting at Tuy Hoa South for a second lift. Fred was medevaced and operated on within 15 minutes of being wounded. He is alive today and lives in Columbus, Ga. I am convinced it was Burgee's slick that saved Fred's life.

Most of B Co's casualties from the initial assault lay in the open draw between the two ridge lines. Doc Phillip Nichols (KIA 2Nov68), the company medic, made several trips to and from this open area retrieving wounded soldiers. During his many trips he was wounded five times. He was one of three medics at Trung Luong awarded the DSC. The other major surprise was our "urban legend" Cpl McAdams,

a Sp5 cook who had recently been demoted to Cpl after an incident at Tuy Hoa. McAdams, a very large man for a paratrooper, like Doc Nichols made several trips back and forth into this no-man's land sometimes bringing back two soldiers at a time. McAdams was given an impact award - the Silver Star and an immediate promotion to Sgt E-5. One of the fastest demotions and promotions that I have ever witnessed.

Calling artillery fire on the NVA's hill top positions was ineffective as the guns were positioned to support A and C Companies in the valley below. The explanation having to do with high angle fire and having to fire over an outcropping of rocks between their firing position and our hill top. The volleys were bracketing the NVA and our positions at the same time. The only indirect fire we were able to bring to bear on the enemy was M-79 fire. During a training period in early May we had decided to take each grenadier and mark his sling keeper to a set position on his sling and then mark various foot positions for 35, 45, 50 and 75 yards. We could then gather the gunners, tell them a distance and general direction and use them as a small mortar battery. We grabbed all the M79 gunners we could find and began directing their fire on the enemy at the reverse slope of the hill's left leg.

While all this was going on, PSG Hargrove brought the first platoon over to my position and CPT Mack instructed us to attempt the same maneuver as Lt Seig's. Because of the terrain there were not many options. Only this time, we would maneuver under cover of an air strike. We were in the bottom of the V with our back against a cliff that dropped at least 250 feet when an F105 air strike arrived. They dropped napalm and strafed the right hand leg. When they dropped the napalm, their tanks were released over the valley and it looked like they were going to fry my platoon on the cliff. When the planes passed over on their strafing runs I could have lobbed a hand grenade with an underhand toss into their intakes. They were between 50 to 100 feet off the deck. That's close air support! (Many years later I learned on the History Channel that these crews had never trained for close air support missions until they arrived in Vietnam. Boy, am I glad I didn't know that back then) We attempted to maneuver under the last strafing run but were beat back by significant automatic weapons fire.

About then, a marine helicopter appeared in the area. I thought, thank goodness, they've finally arrived; but the word quickly spread that the marines had too many heat casualties and were no longer advancing

toward us. Lord knows, that our Battalion was experiencing numerous heat casualties too.

B Company had taken approximately 44 casualties within the first two to three minutes of the landing. The fury of this combat was awesome. After our second attempt to flank the NVA, CPT Mack regrouped the company and we desperately tried to defend ourselves for the night. We were out of water, what water we had was given to the wounded; and were low on ammunition.

From my position on the cliff, I had good communication with battalion; however, CPT Mack from his position had to relay through Dong Tre Special Forces camp some miles to the east. I called for resupply. The ammo resupply arrived sometime during the night; but was dropped on the right leg of the hill which was where we were supposed to be...not where we were..

Throughout the night we could see what appeared to be signal lights flashing throughout the valley and the mountain range to the far side (south) of the valley. There had to be a very large NVA force there. I had never seen them be so bold as to use signal lights. The whole mountain seemed to have lights flickering. I thanked God that we were not over there tonight.

**21 Jun 1966:** In the morning, a brigade of the 1st Air Cav arrived. I do not remember how many companies landed on the hill. The one I do remember was CPT Plummer's B 1/8 and the Cav's Brigade Commander, COL Hal Moore (Chief Yellow Hair). COL Moore came over to my position, laid down and asked me what we had been up against. I told him what I knew; and he replied he thought it was only a reinforced rifle squad. This was almost Col Moore's last breath and the beginning of a long tour at Leavenworth for me. I wish I had the presence of mind to say, "This is the same "squad" you were up against in the Ia Drang Valley"

Also arriving were cans of coffee and hot chocolate and those god-awful Army chocolate bars--- but no water. Nice, but not thirst quenching. The Army's gritty hot chocolate leaves a lot to be desired when you are absolutely parched.

After securing the right leg of the hill with B 1/8, we regrouped. The remainder of the company, approximately 100 were extracted and sent to the far side of the valley to search for the many signal lights we had witnessed the night before. Captured documents later revealed that our "signal lights" had,

in fact, been torch bearers for the NVA!

In 1999 at the No Slack's Trung Luong Reunion I learned from the S-3 Maj Dick Hinkle, that the battalion had been attached to the Marines before the start of the battle of Trung Luong; but on 19 June we were actually attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav. So for thirty three years I had been falsely deriding the Marines. I owe them an apology...at least an half hearted one.

According to my recollection, B Company arrived at Trung Luong with 144 troopers and left with 100. Eleven troopers gave their lives on this hill and 33 were wounded--about 30% casualties.

During the month of Jun 1966, Company B 2/327<sup>th</sup> received two Presidential Unit Citations...One for Dak To when we were attached to LTC Emerson's 502d and the second for the Battle of Trung Luong (Hill 258) with the No Slack Battalion. These are the first Presidential Unit Citations awarded in the 101<sup>st</sup> Division since the Battle of Bastogne, WWII.

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