

In the early morning light, I held my last company formation on the road leading to the airfield at Duc Pho, South Vietnam. Platoon Leaders and Sergeants went through the ranks making a final equipment check. I studied my map and conferred with my Artillery Forward Observer, SGT LeBouef, an easy going Cajun from Louisiana. We had been on two previous operations in the area and knew that there were no friendlies in this province. We were ready.

As we marched down to the airfield the sun was just coming up over the South China Sea. It cast an orange glow over the rows of helicopters that had already been warming up. The dirt airfield had been oiled to retard the dust that would have been churned up by the rotors that were turning faster now.

Our attachments for this mission included an Engineer squad and an NBC reporter, and his crew who planned to record how the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division “was doing things differently” up in the Northern provinces. We were Company A (Abu) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 327<sup>th</sup> PIR.

Unlike other Company Commanders I did not wear a .45 caliber pistol. I carried a rifle. I had only enough magazines to fill two ammo pouches. I did not wear my rank as Captain. I had an olive drab towel wrapped around my neck.

With my rifle cradled in my right arm I waved the men aboard the helicopters. The mission that would be the last for many of us had begun. Waves of helicopters lifted off into a clear blue sky. The 1/327 was headed into combat in the mountains to the west.

The choppers flew in pairs of two and close together. Too close, I thought. When we were buffeted by air currents the rotors of our two choppers made loud rapping noises that sounded like they were chewing each other up. It was one of the few times in Vietnam that I felt alarmed for it would be a long way down knowing what the end would be.

We flew high over the coastal highway but one could still make out the cratering and blown bridges along Highway One that ran from north to south. We continued west to our landing zone, a small hill, covered only by the long grass of the highlands.

As we approached the LZ gunships were making passes and covering the hill with machine-gun fire and rockets, not to clear it of enemy but to explode mines. The choppers flared to land, but didn't, fearing mines they hovered while we leaped the 5 or so feet to the ground. Wearing packs of 80 or more pounds it was very hard on our legs. Those who landed first spread out to form a perimeter.

The company was organized on the hill and headed out in column. The lead platoon was followed by the Company Headquarters, the Engineers and the rest of the platoons. In front of me was the reporter, Howard K. Tuckner, then of NBC News, and his crew, a sound man and a camera man. He was reading a paperback, without covers, that appeared to be written in French.

As we reached the bottom of the hill firing broke out at the front of the column. Everyone immediately hit the ground. I grabbed the radio handset from Private Snow and called the lead platoon leader to find

out what was going on. I knew that when I called him the platoon leader did not have the time to assess the situation, but that was the way it always went.

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I had been in command of the company for 5 months and had been at Battalion Headquarters for 6 months before that. This was likely to be my last mission and in two weeks I expected to go on R&R in Hong Kong, take a 30 day leave at home and then to return to Vietnam.

Some weeks prior to our move north I had called the company together to talk to them. We had just completed a short FTX (Field Training Exercise) and I started by complementing the machine gun crews. I had stood next to them on a hill as each team purred out an unbroken stream of fire while the platoons maneuvered in front. I had wanted to get the troopers acclimated to machine gun fire going over their heads. Then I told the troopers how proud I was of them and how proud I was to be with them. I said that we had accomplished more than the other line companies in the past months and that it was partly due to luck, such as having an AO rich in targets, but it was mostly due to their skill.

(When I think back on things I wish I had done at the top would be praising the troopers more as a group and as individuals. I think the reason I did not was because when I gave my first Field Order I had the whole company gathered around. They did not seem to pay much attention. Another reason was that much of what we did had assumed a certain routine. It was as though it was only natural that we got up, went to work, killed a few people, and then returned home.)

I concluded my talk by telling them that what I was most proud of was that we had not had anyone killed in combat and that I intended to do what I could to see that we all got home safely. That, however, was not how things turned out.

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The firing had stopped and as the platoon leader went to check on his point I made a map check with the FO in case I was called on for a fire mission. At the same time, the reporter was kicking and shoving his Korean crew and yelling, "Get him, get him, he's good." Apparently he thought my radio chatter would have looked good on the evening news.

The contact had been a couple NVA or perhaps locals. They had no weapons or gear, just the ubiquitous black pajamas. The reporter wanted some newsreel of the troopers searching a body. I said, "Go ahead." Two troopers opened and closed the shirt, patted the trousers, and rolled the body to check underneath. It only took a few seconds to do the search. The reporter wanted a second take and then a third. By then the troopers were practically flinging the body about. I was starting to dislike that guy.

The forest we were in was open and sunlight showed through in some areas. There was one hut at this location along with a water buffalo pen dug into the hillside. Near the pen was a wood and straw shrine. At the hut was a Montagnard woman with her three children clustered about. A dying cooking fire sent up a few tendrils of smoke into the still, moist air. She sat stoically on the ground and breast fed the smallest child.

I called for my Vietnamese interpreter, Tahn. He was an older man and wore glasses. He had been an English teacher before being drafted. He blushed as he spoke to the woman.

She spoke a mountain language which Tahn barely understood. He had to translate that in his head to Vietnamese and then into English. We got as much value out of that as one would get out of "How are you?" "I'm fine, how are you?"

The reporter came over and said, "This is great. It shows that life goes on even in the midst of war." He pulled some chocolate from his breast pocket and started to hand it to me. He tried to get me to feed the oldest child while he filmed. I was getting really irritated. Next he was trying to interrogate the woman himself. I got up and left.

Finally we were done and got ready to head back to the rest of the company. The reporter wanted me to have someone shoot the water buffalo. I refused but did agree to let him release them from their pen. He pulled out some of the bars so that he could quickly release them, but as he started his story for the camera they bolted, knocked down the last bar, and almost trampled him. It was a pleasant sight for me.

As the troopers walked on they passed in front of the shrine. It was on fire and the reporter was filming them as they passed it. No one claimed responsibility and I felt sure that it was the reporter who did it because he had asked me to have it done earlier. Meanwhile I heard the reporter saying, "And the 101<sup>st</sup> is doing things differently now." We obviously were not but what I was planning on doing was a lot different from what he could have imagined.

When we were back with the rest of the company the reporter wanted me to call in artillery across an open field. I looked at the FO and we just shook our heads. I said, "There is no need for it, No." He said, "If you don't do it I won't have a story."

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We didn't call in the artillery and I got rid of him as soon as possible. Months later when I got home I was told that there had been a broadcast of that contact and after the newsreel was shown John Chancellor announced that I had called in artillery and gunships.

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After he was gone I called in artillery across that open field. We were going that way. It seemed the prudent thing to do.

We crossed the short distance over that field to a grove of trees. We took a break and most of the troopers broke out rations. I looked around the area and thought about what an otherwise lovely site this was. It was a bright sunny day. Our senior aid man, Doc Smyth, a red head from Ireland, who had been drafted, stirred a concoction in a C-ration can. Next to him Doc Ainsworth lay back and rested his head on his pack. A slight breeze swept over the brown grass. Our stop was short as we had a long way to go, across a small shallow river and up a finger along a ridge line to the top of the mountain chain.

At the river crossing there was a water buffalo. It had a bad wound in the knee joint of its left front leg and just stood there with its front legs in the water. I thought it should be put out of its misery. The buffalo took a whole magazine and was still standing when we left. These were not animals to mess with.

Across the river we started entering the forest. Colonel Collins, the battalion commander, called me on the Battalion net and told me that he had a reporter from ABC news that he wanted to send out to me. I forget the words that came out of me but they were strong ones. He remained calm and said that he had sent another news crew to Charlie Company and CPT Northquest had accepted them. Bully!

The reporter arrived. He was Ken Gale of ABC news and he turned out to be a decent fellow. He wanted to interview me and I agreed. When he was done with the interview he explained their procedure and then he started asking the same questions again while the camera filmed him. After each question he nodded his head a few times. I knew they wouldn't use anything I said now so I answered in nonsense phrases contradicting all I had said before. I was trying to break him up. In the finished version the nodding would be him responding to my answers.

We came up to a large hut which showed signs of a hasty departure. There were water buffalo in the adjacent dried up rice paddy and a dozen piglets running around. I directed the reporter to a nearby plot of ground upon which the NVA had erected a miniature double apron barbed wire fence along with tiny watchtowers and other assorted little buildings. I wanted him out of the way while I attended to other business.

While the cameraman, "Tony" Hirashiki, filmed that training aid I went back to the hooch. Several of the troopers wanted to kill the piglets. I was all for it. A husky trooper, who was nicknamed "Killer," was chosen for the task and he pulled out a large knife and was looking forward to his assignment. When I turned to leave I thought the piglets were getting the best of him as he was frantically trying to catch them, pick them up, turn them belly up and stab them. Those piglets had tough skin and as I left I saw the knife slide off one belly. But my attention was turned to the water buffalo.

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As the first reporter had noted, the 101<sup>st</sup> was supposed to be doing things differently. I had told my platoon leaders that, among other things, we had orders not to burn hooches or kill the animals. I had thought to myself that this didn't make much sense as we had moved from an area in which some of the inhabitants were on our side, or at least neutral, to an area in which they were all against us.

On a previous operation we were tasked to search the village of Duc Pho. It was on the ocean. We landed on the southern edge of the village. The marines had been here before. I was in the first wave of choppers. We were met by small arms fire upon landing. Not much resistance but enough to not take chances. I directed two platoons to sweep the village on the right.

My headquarters and I were facing the middle of the village. There was a long ditch in the sand about four feet deep that stretched a long way from that middle to our south. We sat on the piled-up sand on the left side. Occasional rounds cracked overhead.

The other half of my company was now in the air and Colonel Collins informed me that they were ready to land. I asked him to hold off as the LZ was under fire.

A Vietnamese in black pajamas broke from the village and was running to a lone house on our left. My RTO, PVT Snow, raised his rifle to fire but I saw that the person was running erratically and then recognized that it was a pregnant woman so I pushed his rifle down.

I was preoccupied with the platoons going through the village and with those in the air. At one point I just happened to be looking at that brown house to our left and noticed spurts of sand kicking up and fast approaching. Without thinking, I swung my left arm around hitting Tahn in the chest knocking him backwards into the ditch and Snow and I went over, too. Rounds cracked over our heads.

I finally had the other two platoons land several hundred meters south of my headquarters. I instructed the machine gun crew to set up to my south and had them direct their fire towards the angle between the steps and the house where I suspected the fire had come from. There was no more fire from the house.

The strain of months of trying to “seek out and kill or capture the enemy” while trying to keep us alive was wearing on me. I did plan to do things differently. While I would not harm innocents like that woman and her children at our first contact, I intended to kill everything, and everyone, that we came across and burn everything that we could. It was I who shot the water buffalo at the river.

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The water buffalo were agitated. They were looking in our direction with their tails flicking from side to side. I let one of the troopers fire at them. They retreated to the cover of the trees. I called for an M-79 grenade launcher. I wanted those water buffalo dead. I fired a couple of rounds and they went off next to one water buffalo. One went off on it. It didn't flinch; it stood there looking at us. Finally it took several steps forward into the open, leaned to its left and fell over dead.

I had wanted the water buffalo killed under cover so as not to be seen from the air. Shortly there came the sound of a single helicopter. It was Rough Rider.

I was soon talking to Colonel Collins. He wanted an explanation for the dead buffalo. He saw the one in the field in front of me and had seen one in the river we had crossed. (So that one had finally died, I thought.) I told him about the “horrible wounds” I had seen on the one in the river and I said that the one in the field had charged. It had, after all, moved forward. He told me that Charlie Company had a trooper who had been charged by a water buffalo and it struck him but they had let it go. How nice of them. Bully!

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I liked Colonel Collins. He was a decent caring gentleman and had a steady hand, a fine commander. He was the son of J. Lawton Collins, Lightning Joe, who was a famed four star in WWII. He was also a cousin of Michael Collins who was in the command module when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

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The Colonel had given me a pass on my minor transgression and with some final words of advice and encouragement he was off to talk with Bravo Company. I thought about that dead water buffalo in the stream with its blood and other effluent from its body flowing down the river because I knew from Colonel Collins, that downstream my good friend Bill Northquest, and fellow company commander, and his men were filling their canteens.

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Captain Northquest and I had been instructors, together, at the Mountain Ranger Camp near Dahlonega, Georgia. At the same time that I was amused about the buffalo that was flavoring the stream I recalled that Bill and I had taught Ranger students: Never use a road or a trail unless they were 10,000 meters behind enemy lines. So, now, here we were, as we usually had been, on a well traveled trail and there was no enemy line.

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We had to get rolling and I sent Lt Rivello, and his platoon, ahead to the ridge line at the top and then to hook left down that ridge to check it out. I would take the rest of the company to the top and then to the right. His platoon would be in a blocking position, if necessary, to cover our exposed flank as we made the turn to the right.

I started the rest of the company moving. As we left the area all of the piglets were dead, the buffalo were dead and Rough Rider was at lunch so the hooch went up.

A shot was fired in the platoon ahead of me. I hurried up to the head of the line. A Vietnamese boy, probably a trail watcher, had appeared on another trail that went down the side of the ridge. SGT Simpson saw him and instinctively shot him. Firing from the hip he had put a bullet through his heart. There was a potato masher grenade next to the body, a loop of string hanging out. The haircut, sharp features and cast of the skin told a story. This was hard core VC or NVA. We left him with an Ace of Spades. We had received those in a deck of 52 Bicycle playing cards all of which were Aces of Spades. They were a bad luck symbol for the Vietnamese.

As we continued up the ridge line I looked ahead at the column, rifles were held at the ready in two hands some aimed to the right, most to the left. For one final time I reflected on what we were actually doing. We were hunting humans. But now I no longer thought of that with any amusement or thoughtfulness, this is what we did. It was decades later that someone pointed out to me that they were also hunting us.

Occasionally I could see through the trees and I would check my map against the distant hilltops. I carried my rifle on my right side with the magazine resting on my ammo pouch and the butt of it in my arm pit. That way I had both hands free. I needed to do that as I was constantly pulling the map out of my leg pouch, putting it back in and taking it right back out again.

No trail showed on the map but by taking an azimuth and pacing the distance of a segment of the ridgeline one could get a good idea of where they were located. This would work at night, too, but we didn't move then. Knowing where the company was took up most of my time as we moved forward.

A call came in, Lt Rivello's platoon on the left had found some hooches and killed nearly a dozen of the enemy. I understood from the platoon leader that the enemy had been running back to their base camp when they were shot. I said, "Good work" and told him to hold his position.

We continued up the ridge and that Lieutenant called again, more and more of the enemy was returning. I could hear the tension in his voice and I said, "OK, good, take them as they come."

Bravo Company on our left was under attack, the enemy was apparently returning to their base camp for more supplies and as still more returned the platoon leader was back on the line, and this time he was more insistent in his needs. He wanted to pull back. I knew he had good judgment so I said, "Fine, we'll meet you at the top." As he departed from that base camp I had the FO call in artillery to cover his withdrawal.

Shots ahead indicated the presence of Lt Rivello's platoon. They were at the head of the trail I was on. That platoon leader always amazed me by how fast he was able to move his platoon, particularly since he wasn't as slim as the rest of us. The platoon appeared tense and a little spooked when I arrived. There were enemy bodies scattered about. One was facing down the trail I was on. The top of his head was blown off. In a touch of humor, I set his upper lip on a broken twig so that he would be looking at the rest of the company as it came up.

The platoon leader showed me some of the weapons his men had captured; they were mostly M-16's. He gave me his report and we talked over the situation. It was evident that we were in the middle of something. I decided to keep the company together for the rest of the operation.

I had picked a hilltop just ahead for our night position and told the platoon leader to lead the way. He didn't want to do that. I understood, but his platoon blocked the way for the rest of the company and it was just a short trip to the top. (I should have realized that he had just been in two firefights, but it was many years later that I found out just how vicious the enemy had been.) I put a hand on his shoulder and told him it would be all right, just a short hike.

It wasn't all right. I had a final look at the enemy with top of his head shot off and then heavy firing broke out near the top of the hill. A fierce firefight erupted. Rounds were cracking through the air around me and I pointed to a hollow and ordered my headquarters group into it. Lt Rivello was soon calling for help and said that the enemy had taken one of their machineguns.

I had already alerted the FO. Rough Rider was on the horn. I told him the situation and about the loss of a gun. He wasn't sure what that meant. (I probably should have said "machinegun.") The FO called in a smoke round 100 meters on the other side of the hill. The Platoon Leader was back on and said they had retrieved the gun and he needed fire support NOW. Two rounds of HE were already on their way in. Rough Rider was back. I told him that we got the gun back and alerted him that we were firing artillery. I sent a second platoon, under SSG Birmingham, up the right side of Lt Rivello's.

The artillery rounds struck. The Platoon Leader yelled, "DROP 100, DROP 100." I told the FO, "Drop Five Zero, Fire for Effect."

The rounds struck. The battle was almost over. Several more long deep bursts of machine-gun fire dispatched the last holdouts on the far side of the hilltop, and then it was done. We had taken the hilltop but we had also taken casualties.

I directed the Engineers to cut a clearing. Medevacs were called in, the wounded were gathered and treated, the enemy dead counted, and weapons collected. Most of the weapons were M-16's. I gave a report to battalion about the fight, the number of enemy killed, KIA and KBA (Killed by Artillery), weapons captured, our casualties, our night disposition and my plan of operation for the next day.

The company was moved into a perimeter formation around the hilltop as the casualties and weapons were extracted. I thought that the hill I chose was too small and steep for the whole company but it was almost dark now and we were committed. I picked a spot on top for my CP and had two of my RTO's, Snow and Peterson, drag the bodies away and throw them down the hillside. I told the Platoon Leaders to dig in as much as possible and I did the same.

The FO, SGT Le Boeuf, and I planned defensive concentrations making adjustments from the last artillery barrage. There were just two. One covered our back trail, the other the trail we would take the next day. Our other two sides dropped off steeply. I asked the FO what he thought of the situation. He just gave a weary grunt and looked over in the direction we would be going, towards the place where he would die tomorrow.

As the last light faded I walked around inside the perimeter to gauge the mood of the troopers. As I expected it was subdued. I talked to some of those on guard duty and told them that I was going to keep the whole company together from now on and that we could overcome anything out there, just stay alert for now and the night would pass. For the most part they only nodded.

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Years later one of my medics wrote to me that he had spent the night resting his head on an enemy body. I thought that was a bit of bravado. so I told him how I had ordered the bodies cleared from the hilltop and wrote back saying, "I'd like think I had a pillow thrown to you."

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Several months earlier we had been on an operation to the south. The terrain looked promising but we had made no contacts and saw few signs of activity. At one point we were simply retracing our steps. I went out to check the trail ahead for some distance and all the boot prints appeared to have been made by us two days ago when we were going in the opposite direction so I hurried the company along so that we could set up early and have some time to relax.

I kept pushing faster and I could hear the labored breathing of the troopers near me. When I looked back I could see that everyone's web gear was shifting off one shoulder or the other and they were clearly uncomfortable. I called a halt. One good thing about being a Company Commander is that you know you can stop whenever you want and because of that you can keep going. Some things aren't so good and one of those was waiting for me in the future.

We set up on a large, partly open hilltop in a wide valley. As usual, the view could have been printed in a vacation brochure. There were a number of tall trees that provided some cover. Scattered clouds drifted above. Down where we were the wind was calm. I reported to battalion and gave them our location. This was a mistake, I should have waited. Someone obviously noted how early it was so they ginned up a small operation.

Charlie Company had made contact in a valley nearby and one trooper was shot dead and had toppled into a stream. Battalion wanted to see if there was anything in a small, narrow valley next to us.

I picked a platoon and briefed the platoon leader. I felt that, on occasion, some of the platoon leaders, and one in particular (I found out much later that he was nicknamed "Nomad."), became uncertain of their location so I decided to send my FO along. If they got into trouble I had full confidence in him to get support on target so they could get out of it.

(There was the next thing I wished I had done. In Ranger School when students had a navigation leg we would occasionally stop them and ask them where they were and graded them on that. It was a good technique and also a handy way for an instructor to have a break when he wanted one. I should have tried a similar technique with my platoon leaders and senior sergeants to judge their land navigation abilities.)

The patrol didn't make any contact but the platoon leader called in that they had seen some signs. When the patrol returned a couple of the troopers eyed me strangely, they were tense. The FO came over and said, "Cap'n, don't ever send me out like that again." I laughed and started to make a joke of it. He said, "No, I'm serious." He told me about the patrol, the deadly quiet, the narrowing valley with the walls closing in on them. It had looked like the Valley of the Shadow of Death and he had felt the evil. They had all felt it. I promised to keep him safe with me. That was not to be.

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The night passed without incident. The 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1967, Mother's Day, dawned clear and windless, the air was cool. There was little chatter as the company went about its early morning routine. I wasn't hungry so I took the opportunity to scout the area. I put on my web gear and helmet, picked up my rifle

and scouted ahead on the trail we were to take. I passed through our lines and a machine gun team set on the trail looked up at me as I passed. I came to the place where the spotting rounds had landed.

Trees had been hit and branches had been scattered about. I had come across several bodies but I didn't think that they had been hit by artillery. One had the top of his head shot off. He was lying there with the pull string of his hand grenade wrapped around four fingers of his right hand. It must have been that final burst of machinegun fire that had done this.

The forest was quiet. Not so quiet as to be unsettling but there seemed to be nothing moving. No sounds came to me from the company either. I went forward a bit more and saw that the trail curved to the left. The slope of the ground indicated that a saddle between two hilltops lay ahead. Trees blocked my view of that saddle but my map confirmed it. The ground was covered with brown, dead leaves and small branches, the usual detritus of the forest. The trail was lightly covered and did not appear to have had recent heavy use. Some leaves were disturbed and I thought that surviving enemy from last night's combat must have gone this way.

I went back to the company and reported to battalion what I had found. As I spoke, I stumbled over trying to add today's body count to yesterday's and said, "OH hell, just add five more to yesterday's count." I could tell that on the other end of the line they were enjoying our body count. They told me that the artillery was very appreciative of the credit I had given them yesterday.

I briefed the lead platoon leader on our route and plans for the day. I had planned that we would go up the rise that I had seen, through the saddle and then down the other side of the mountain to continue our search for base camps. I would feel more comfortable when we started down the mountain because if should we run into something we would be above them. I used to wonder why it was that we were nearly always inserted into a valley and had to make our way up mountains instead of the reverse.

The platoon worked its way through the company. There was no chatter. The rest of the company saddled up and we got in column formation and headed out. At the head of the column was Corporal Michael Bost and his German Shepard, Lady. They were on their last patrol. Dog handlers had a very high casualty rate in Vietnam and he would be dead in ten minutes.

I was following the lead platoon and had just started up that last hill when firing broke out at the head of the column. After a heavy exchange the platoon doubled back on itself. The platoon leader reported that the dog handler was dead and that the dog had its lower jaw shot off and had run off into the woods. The chief medic was gut shot, the condition of the rest of the platoon was not yet determined. I pointed over my right shoulder and told the Platoon Leader to take a position there, take care of the wounded and reorganize.

When I turned back SSG Birmingham came charging up with the 4th platoon. He said, "Let us go." That was most admirable. I was struck by that. I looked at the men standing there and was just taken by them. Here were our finest brave young men eager to do battle.

I thought about the situation for just a few seconds. This platoon had played a major role in our success the previous day. I did not think that we faced any more enemy than we had yesterday. I told him to attack on the left of our route of march. I said, "Get them online and go." When the lead platoon had been hit, we were attacking on an eighteen inch front, as is said, now we would have the firepower of a whole platoon.

But these were hard core VC and NVA and they could not be intimidated and scattered. Firing erupted and reached a crescendo. The Colonel called. He was doing to me what I did to the platoon leaders. I asked for air support and he was already working on that. The platoon having done its best returned to the company. The Sergeant's hand was bloody. I pointed to my left rear and told him to reorganize there. I yelled to my headquarters, "Headquarters on line" and pointed to the left and right front. They quickly spread out, got on line and had their rifles at the ready. That was where they would all die.

A Platoon Sergeant in back of me panicked. I told him to knock it off and planned to deal with him later. My mind was occupied with the situation and it acted with the astonishing clarity that one gets in such circumstances where it seems that everything slows down.

The Colonel was back on the radio, the pilot of a gunship needed me on the other radio. I yelled out, "Engineers take up the rear." I wanted all of my platoons available. I told the Colonel I was busy. He had called to tell me about the gunships. I thanked him, made contact with the gunship pilot and said I would pop smoke. I called out for smoke grenades and two were quickly brought to me.

I dropped my helmet and rifle and stepped through the line. I went forward about ten meters and to our left. I pulled the pin on a green smoke grenade and threw it down an incline. I kept moving, and surveyed the area, it was quiet, no movement, no wounded visible. I moved quickly to the right flank, gave a quick look at what had been our lead platoon, they were all looking at me, I squatted down, prepared the yellow smoke grenade and gave it an underhanded toss.

Back at the perimeter I stepped between Snow and Peterson. I saw that the smoke was rising above the trees. I contacted the gunship pilot and he identified the smoke and asked me my position. I told him that I had green smoke on my left and yellow smoke on my right and asked him to rake the saddle in front of us. He was agitated, "What's your heading? What's your heading?" I told him that we were facing due east. Frame of reference I thought.

As he prepared for his run I worked on my contingencies. I didn't really think that the enemy up there would come charging down the hill, but they could get reinforcements. Had they come I would have had to take that morning's lead platoon to hit them on the flank.

The gunship came in left to right and back again with a torrent of fire on the hilltop, it was a loud shattering noise and good to hear and I hoped the company got encouragement from it too. (Years later I found out that it didn't. It just made them more scared as they didn't know that it was us firing on the enemy.) As the gunship was making its runs the Colonel was back again and this time he had the Air

Force available with 500 pound bombs. I didn't have experience with that, and we didn't have an air support coordinator with us. No way.

I told him that we were too close, we had wounded out front and I couldn't leave them. He made another try but I wouldn't budge. From information that I had received I believed that Third Platoon was behind me to my right, the Fourth was behind and to the left, two more platoons were on (or near) the trail behind me and the trail back to our night position was held by the Engineer squad. My headquarters was online to the front. I believed that the dog handler was dead, there were no other dead, and I wasn't positive that we had all of our wounded back although there were no calls from out front and I hadn't seen any when I was out there. I couldn't chance leaving anyone to the VC or NVA and I thought that if I reversed course to our night position the Company, already on edge, could start to unravel. Even if we got back in good order I had little faith that we would escape severe damage if I called in the Air Force.

Damn it! I just had to work it out where we lay. I thought the situation over. My first priority was to get the artillery working; if we had too great a pause in activity the enemy might get reinforcements and come charging down that hill after all. As the FO was checking his map and working out a fire mission I worked on a plan of action.

We had one platoon that hadn't been under the heavy fire that the others had taken. My plan was to prep the hilltops with the artillery and I hoped that Bravo Company wasn't using too much of those assets. I would take the reserve platoon to probe the enemy position from the right. There would be no more assaults. If there was any resistance we would pin them down and pound them with artillery.

The situation seemed static and there were no moves by the enemy. I sent word to the Engineers to start working on a clearing so we could get the wounded out and then I huddled with the FO. We studied the map and decided to drop the first rounds on the back of the hill and then work them forward. The artillery was to our right rear and though not ideal it would have to do.

The first two rounds came in and hit the back of the hill. Now came the time to bring it forward and onto the enemy. I yelled my last command to the company, "GET YOUR POTS ON AND YOUR HEADS DOWN." I did the same and lay down on line with the men of my headquarters. The FO called in the mission. "FIRE MISSION, DANGER CLOSE, DROP FIVE ZERO, FIRE FOR EFFECT."

We would be getting six rounds from two guns. The FO reported, "Shot Out. The last words he would ever say. I heard a POOM, followed by another, over my right shoulder but by then the shells were already overhead. SSSHHHHHHUUU CRACK, I heard and then again. Briefly I was relieved, no shrapnel in the trees above. I thought we had hit the target or close to it. I counted the rounds in, one, two, three, four, curiously the leaves curled in front of me, I was pounded down and covered by a wave of

heat and a deep pain went through my chest. I hadn't heard the fifth round and I didn't hear a sixth. Someone was shouting, "Cease fire, cease fire."

I looked up to see a tree over my head that had somehow been damaged about eight feet up. What could that be? I started to get up and found I had branches covering me and I pulled at them frantically trying to get them out of my web gear. What was going on? I stumbled backwards and started to fall. Someone ran up and caught me from behind and I slid to the ground. The pain was back. I looked down and saw a hole in my chest above the heart. I said, "Shit." Now I knew what had happened.

I'm not sure of the sequence of things after that. I only have snapshots. There was some running around. Someone shouting. Someone was in pain – "My leg, my leg, an M-79 went off in my face." Chain saws. A new officer was there. He seemed to be trying to take everything in. Perhaps he was a replacement for me until I came back, I thought. The new Battalion XO came by and asked me to show him on the map where we were. The Brigade Surgeon came by and examined my leg wounds. (I only knew of the wound in my chest which he didn't check.) Some time later a couple of troopers came by and began to drag me and I started to pass out. I kept telling them to "Put me down, put me down." But no one was listening to me anymore. I was lifted out through the trees to a Medevac.

My uniform was cut off at the Battalion Aid Station. A staff officer wandered over to see what my wounds looked like. A medic came with two very large needles in his hands and jabbed them into my right thigh. The pain was terrific. I tried to leap up and fight him off. The Supply SGT came by and I told him to hold my R&R slot for me. An officer from the artillery investigating the "friendly fire" incident came to interview me. I told him what I have recounted here.

A chopper took me to a field hospital where I had my first operation. Sometime later I was flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. A very nice lady with dark eyebrows, served me dinner while I was on a litter. I looked at her name tag and said, "That name looks familiar." She said, "Oh yes, he's my husband." The name was Westmoreland. He was the four-star General in charge of American forces in Vietnam. Little did I know then that in a couple years I would be his Aide.

The coincidences didn't end there. I spent some time talking with her and learned that her two daughters were going to Bradford Academy, a finishing school, from which my mother had graduated. After a short stay at Clark AFB I was flown to Field 7 Hospital in Japan.

Shortly after I arrived they found out that I was an officer and they were going to put me in a room with two other officers. I demurred as I was in a private room and was on the same wing as other 101<sup>st</sup> Paratroopers. The best thing about this hospital was that I got a list every day of what was on the next day's menu. I just had to circle what I wanted.

The purpose of this hospital was to debride the wounds, a lovely procedure, and for another operation to close up the wounds – or try to. There was also a two week curfew before one could see the any of Japan outside of our compound. Naturally most of the wounded were long gone by that time.

While at the hospital I met a number of troopers who were wounded on the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>. For the most part they were simply happy that it was over for them. We traded stories about how we got wounded but there was one trooper I didn't recognize and I struck up a conversation with him. He told me that he had stepped on a gravel mine dropped by the US Air Force and the front half of his foot was missing. He asked me about my story and I told him. He looked at the floor and didn't say anything for a bit. Then he told me that he had prepared the artillery rounds that day and in the investigation he was found responsible for the short round.

I didn't know what to say and just patted him on the shoulder. I couldn't make a judgement. I had a momentary thought to ask him if he agreed with that or thought he had been wrongly charged, but the subject seemed too painful for him. It didn't matter because in the end it was I who was responsible.

Finally I was shipped to Chelsea Naval Hospital next to Boston. On the way we stopped at Elmendorf AFB in Alaska. They brought half pint cartons of milk on board. It was the best milk I ever had.

The plane's final destination was at Hanscom Field in Bedford, Massachusetts. An ambulance picked me up and, totally unnecessary, it sounded its siren all the way to Chelsea Naval Hospital.

After a few days the Naval Hospital gave me convalescent leave and I was able to go home to Rye Beach. I only had to come down once every week for some more debridement and cauterization of wounds.

It was so good to be home, but I didn't feel like I belonged there. I couldn't connect with these people or, perhaps, they with me. I wanted to be back with my unit, with the people I knew, where I felt home really was, where I felt safe.

I got a nice letter from Colonel Collins. He had returned home and he told me about his "little ankle grabbers" and he sounded glad to be there. I got another letter from the Company Clerk and he listed the wounded and dead from the Daily Report. Bill Northquest also wrote. He was his usual ebullient self and his letter was full of good cheer. I was glad he had made it.

Some months later I returned to my quarters at Fort Knox. I switched on my little black and white TV and went to prepare something to eat. There were sounds coming from the TV of someone yelling and of a firefight, the typical things one heard every day, at that time. Then I heard someone scream, "My leg, my leg, an M-79 went off in my face."

I dropped my dinner and turned to look at the TV. It was 14 May and there was my company. It was a story Ken Gale had put together and it focused on SGT Simpson in pain in Vietnam and in bitterness in Massachusetts after he had lost his leg. All the emotions that I had held washed over me.

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I went back to Vietnam and even met my brother Bob there several times. But it was no longer the same. I was with a Vietnamese unit that didn't want to fight.

For a long time the sound of a Huey overhead brought me good feelings (still do) and sudden sounds made me crouch and I would start to look for a defensible position. (Now they don't)

I've visited the wall a number of times . I now know the names of all who were killed, but three are more prominent in my memory. Crawford Snow and Michael Peterson were my RTO's and had been killed on either side of me. Next to Peterson was my Forward Observer. SSG Le Boeuf. He had lived a short time, unconscious, before he died on that hill. I was told he was snoring as his body tried to stay alive.

SSG Elton Le Boeuf, had a great laugh, a winning smile and liked to get my goat. He was assigned to my unit by the artillery. He had replaced a lieutenant. He was a Spec 4! My concerns about his arrival soon changed. He was so good that I went to see his Colonel to get him promoted. And he was.

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I had gone to Airborne School, Ranger School (I had even been a Ranger Instructor). I had also gone to CBR School and Jungle Warfare School. All of us who had gone to these schools were in superb shape, but none of those schools could prepare us for combat. We learned that in Vietnam.