

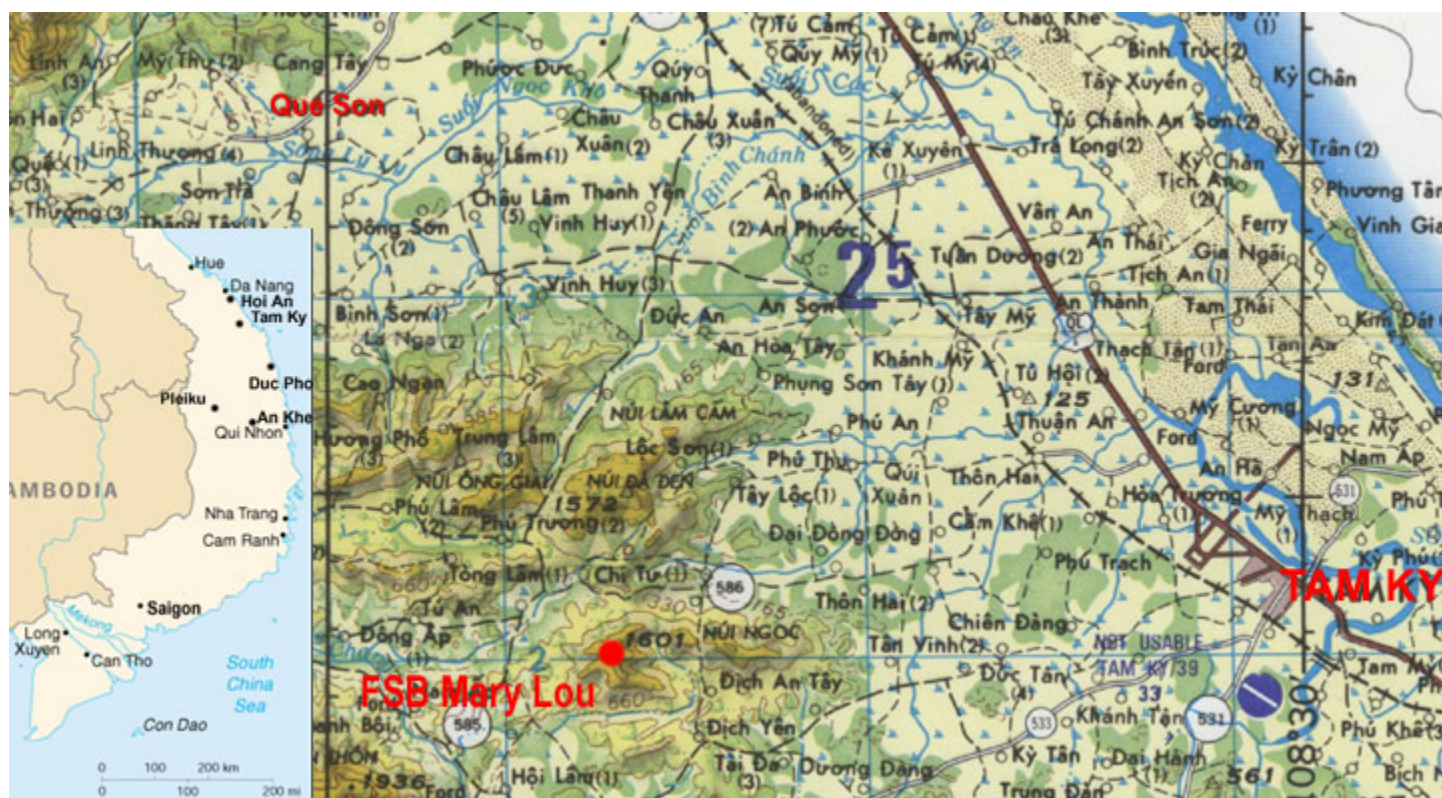
## Alpha Company 1st Battalion 35th Infantry Regiment - OCTOBER 9, 1967

By Dick Arnold 2nd Platoon and Tim Peters 3rd Platoon

*These comments are our memories as we can best reconstruct them. We have also incorporated information from other men who were there and other sources in an effort to expand this writing into a more complete recounting of the action of October 9, 1967. Our comments are hampered by the limitations of our perceptions and whatever distortions are created by our biases. We have been at pains to be both accurate and complete. The process of preparation has compelled us to draw on every memory and to analyze these events in depth. As participants we cannot claim nor presume total objectivity. Nonetheless we have made every effort to be fair, candid and honest. Frankly these memories are more painful than redeeming. However we have discharged our responsibility to tell the story. We have made our best effort but freely acknowledge the formidable difficulties presented by the passage of time and the decades of isolation from others who were there. Any discrepancies involving different soldiers' memories have been left intact as 100% accuracy in reconstructing combat is likely impossible to achieve.*

### Movement North (Dick Arnold, Tim Peters)

On October 4, 1967 our battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry, the "Cacti Green", was ordered north from Duc Pho to Tam Ky and Fire Base Mary Lou (southern Quang Tin Province) to join "Operation Wheeler". We were under the operational control of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Fire Base Mary Lou sits atop a mountain that towers over the Que Son valley. This valley was a prime rice-growing region surrounded on three sides by jungle-covered mountains. Control of the Que Son valley was fought-over for the entire war. Most enemy fortifications were found on the heavily vegetated valley slopes, never far from the valley floor and the rice crops according to the after action report for "Operation Wheeler".



FSB Mary Lou (BT 132 203) was named after 4th Infantry's Col Kimmel's wife. Each blue lined grid is 10 K's

## **The Morning - October 9 (Tim Peters)**

The dawning of that new day was a blessed relief. We had endured a hurricane, a typhoon in Asia, for two days and it had finally passed. We literally could not get out of the rain. A torrential rain driven sideways by hurricane force winds. It was the only time in Vietnam that we had been cold. We set ambushes in the violent storm and then joked that no one would be so crazy as to be out in that weather. It was a matter of laughing to keep from crying. In the middle of it all one platoon had some contact and that was a confused mess. The helicopters could not fly and we had run out of food. It was the most miserable situation in memory. We were cold, hungry, wet, the wind was howling, the rain was driven and then that wonderful dawn came. None of us could know that before the sun rose again some of us would be dead, more still would be wounded and all of us in the second and third platoons who survived would have lived through one of the most difficult days of our lives. A day so intense and traumatic that it is forever a part of you, one of those few memories that is never far away. Our beloved Company A would suffer its most casualties for any single day of the entire Vietnam War. October 9 would be my final day as an infantry officer in the field.

My first memory of that morning is taking my boots and socks off to let my feet dry. I along with many others had wet ring - worm on the tops of my feet. The itching was driving me crazy. Like I said before, this was one miserable situation. The condition would not go away until I stopped having wet feet all the time. In short, as far as I knew, it was not going away any time soon. The medic had told me not to scratch that itch. When I got those boots off that morning I scratched the tops of my feet until they were raw. We were starving and looked forward to a receiving food in the afternoon. We rested. All was reasonably well except the occasional inaccurate sniper fire.

## **The Patrol (Tim Peters)**

Late that morning plans were made for an afternoon reconnaissance patrol with representatives from each platoon to scout ambush locations for the coming night. It was not my turn to lead the patrol and I did not go. I had led the last patrol. Sergeant John Dorow, Sp4 Hector Baez and a radio operator went from our platoon. Dorow thinks he may have been the patrol leader. Normally there would have been a Lieutenant. No one remembers with certainty who led this patrol. If it was an officer, it would have been Lt. Jerome McAfee, the First Platoon leader. The patrol, probably ten to twelve men, left early in the afternoon. The dark and ominous fate of the second and third platoons traveled as a silent, invisible companion to that patrol, waiting for the events that would soon be set in motion.

The patrol had not gone far and had reached a point approximately three kilometers northwest of LZ Mary Lou. The first sign of trouble came from the distant sound of a burst of AK-47 fire followed shortly by a burst of M-16 and M-60 fire. It was obvious there was serious trouble. The radio confirmed the patrol had walked into NVA in prepared positions along the trail or on the side of the ridge. The point man from first platoon had been shot multiple times in the chest and things were not looking good. Our guys had retreated behind a terrace bordering a hillside rice paddy and called for a dust-off chopper. The position offered them cover but they needed help "right now". The call went out all over the company to "saddle up". The immediate problem was getting everybody ready to move out. We had men asleep, almost everybody had their boots and socks off, and equipment was scattered around. It was not like a normal break when we were on the move. Everyone, with the exception of two squads from second platoon who apparently did not get the word, were frantically trying to get all their clothes and equipment on and get lined up to move. Our third platoon was the first to leave. The others would follow shortly. At first we followed the tracks of the patrol. When that failed I had the patrol fire shots in the air as necessary to guide us.



When we reached them I'm not sure who was happier. My fear had been that the small patrol would be overrun. My relief was followed shortly by the news that the point man had died. The dust-off chopper had been late because it went to the wrong coordinates. The point man, PFC Wayne Emerton of the first platoon, from Dallas, Texas, died in the meantime.



**SGT John Dorow**

### **Decision and Preparation (Tim Peters)**

As the company arrived and the news spread the prevailing emotion was shock followed by anger. We wanted revenge. A lone helicopter gunship made a run firing its mini-guns and rockets in support of the patrol. Don Burkhart remembers the rockets knocked down two trees. I remember seeing it pass overhead with mini-guns firing. The patrol had not seen many NVA. We had no sense that we were facing anything other than a small number of enemy. In hindsight it is easy to see that the patrol had only made contact with a security position along that trail. That said nothing definitive about the size of the enemy unit. Our anger and the fact that in our past experience the enemy had always run from us colored our perceptions. In our operations at Duc Pho they had never been willing to hold contact. Our entire effort had been to find them and hit them hard. We were the predators and they were the prey. Yet in the five days or so since moving north to Tam Ky and LZ Mary Lou things were somehow different. The ambushes had been set in platoon size instead of half platoon size because of the perceived strength of the NVA. There had been little contact in the night ambushes, but the sniper fire continued during the days. No one was hit but the NVA were staying in touch. We realized they were in strength in this new area of operations, but we felt that we could lure them into our ambushes and destroy them. Our confidence, or some may say arrogance, was born of experience. Our operations under Captain Geoff Ellerson had been decidedly successful and in the process we had perfected and in some ways developed excellent ambush techniques. In a real sense we were different and more effective than other rifle companies and we knew it. We alone had been given permission to abandon search and destroy operations in favor of moving into the areas of the enemy and setting night ambushes on the trails that they used after dark. From August 25, 1967 to September 21, 1967 we killed forty-three enemy by night ambush, without a single friendly casualty. In the Duc Pho area of operations the NVA had never been able or willing to stay in a fight with us.

We could not have known or fully appreciated the difference in the NVA unit we were facing. First, they were simply more willing to fight and less inclined to run, at least for a while, if they could draw us into their prepared positions. Second, they did not seem to move as much at night and did not walk into our ambushes easily. Indeed, on October 9 we bumped into them, they did not stumble on to us. Still there is no reason to believe that they were looking for a fight that day. This was, after all, three or four months prior to the Tet Offensive. Supposedly the NVA were gathering their strength and resources for that historic operation that would involve attacks across South Vietnam. The firefight on October 9 occurred by chance, not design. The two units simply made contact by accident. For some reason, almost certainly security concerns, the NVA were unwilling to leave until cover of darkness. In contrast, we were angry, impatient and itching for a fight, even if the NVA were in unknown numbers in prepared and concealed positions on high ground. Our instinct to strike quickly before they could get away was misplaced. Our war had changed and we had not yet realized it.

If we knew we were facing a main force unit, the normal doctrine of "Search and Destroy" would have required us to call for the rest of the Battalion to trap the enemy. Then air strikes or other superior firepower would be used to destroy the trapped enemy. Our problem had been twofold: first, we had not been in recent contact with any main force units; second, the enemy would not wait until other units arrived to become trapped. They took off quickly. I suppose it appeared to Captain Ellerson that if we hesitated, the enemy would simply vanish. We had no idea the enemy was as strong as they were.



**Aerial view of FSB Mary Lou**

And so it was that afternoon that we faced this new enemy unit with a resolve to kill them before they got away. Our experience taught us that no doubt they were moving out as we stood there trying to get the entire company up and organized. Captain Ellerson called a meeting of platoon leaders. Attending the meeting were the captain, me, Lt. William R. Bray, the second platoon leader, Lt. Robert J. Lazaro, the weapons platoon leader and Lt. Jerome McAfee, the first platoon leader. Of those five officers, within a short time Bray and Lazaro would be dead. By that evening the captain and I would be wounded and only Lt. McAfee would be left standing.

That afternoon the five officers stood in a circle near the rice paddy terrace and discussed the situation. The meeting lasted only a couple of minutes. The captain gave us our orders. Those images come to mind often. I can't remember much of what was said, but the images are vivid. I had no idea that those painful scenes would play over and over in my mind for the rest of my life. In my youth and preoccupation with the deadly issues at hand I did not sense that one of the most poignant moments of my life was occurring. I never saw Bray or Lazaro again. They were gone. The captain decided to immediately attack. It seemed to me the right thing to do. However I remember the captain saying in the meeting that artillery fire would be walked in front of us. Of course we had a direct support artillery battery, Battery A, 2/9 Artillery, that is six 105mm howitzers as well as a 4.2 mortar platoon at Fire Base Mary Lou. The captain ordered our third platoon and Bray's second platoon on line. We were on the left and Bray on the right. The captain placed our third platoon in front of where he thought the NVA were concentrated. He and his radio operator went with us. Captain Ellerson remembers ordering a platoon to follow the second platoon on the right. That was the weapons platoon. A re-supply helicopter arrived just about the time the assault was starting and a few men from weapons platoon may have stayed behind to help unload it and secure the supplies. First platoon was left waiting in reserve with our packs and may also have been involved in the effort to unload the helicopter.

### **The Re-supply Helicopter (Tim Peters)**

The re-supply helicopter was unloaded in an open area some distance from the First Platoon position. It was getting dark. A few men were left only temporarily with the supplies. Apparently they did not send enough men to carry all of the supplies back to the First Platoon position and did not take whatever steps were required to secure the supplies left in the open area. The supplies were left unguarded in the darkness. That night some enemy soldiers were able to take some of these supplies. The next day these supplies were found nearby and recovered.

### **The Assault (Tim Peters)**

We were in position facing a heavily vegetated ridge and waiting on the artillery or 4.2 mortar fire to begin. It was late afternoon. The after action report for Operation Wheeler says the contact started at 1830 hours, that is 6:30 p.m. For whatever reason, there was no artillery or any other support that I remember. The order was given to advance and advance we did. Without hesitation, on line and alone, two platoons, approximately sixty-five or so lean, hard, and angry men attacked. The weapons platoon followed the second platoon. There were thirty-two men in third platoon that day. It must have been quite a shock to the young North Vietnamese. To this day I am not sure of their exact strength, although it was substantial, or their purpose on that ridge. But whatever it was, they were going to have to fight Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry. However foolish that attack may seem in hindsight or actually have been, we were in earnest. We meant business, we meant to kill them. We did not march up that hill to get killed. In truth, when it was all over, we probably killed more of them than they did of us. There is no way to know for sure. As I will detail, what we do know is that what occurred was intense, close in and mortal combat. It was an infantryman's fight. There were no air strikes, helicopter gunships or artillery, just man to man fighting. There also was no significant relief from the reserve platoon or any other unit in our battalion.





**3rd Platoon RTO Dannhaus with 3rd platoon medic Heubaum**

As we moved up the ridge we tried to stay on line but it was difficult. There was too much vegetation. We were forced to fall into single file. We were screaming, firing at anything that presented itself and conducting reconnaissance by fire. A few stragglers were encountered but we met no real resistance. Towards the top of the ridge we killed an NVA officer and four soldiers. It seemed we caught them by surprise. Captain Ellerson remembers being impressed by the quality of their uniforms. He thought they looked better than we did. Looking back, I realize that the NVA were in positions to our right and holding their fire. They would not fire unless we ran directly into them and we didn't. Bray's second platoon also was on our right and became visually separated in the vegetation. Part of second platoon moved to their right in an attempt to find a better way up the ridge. This further separated the two assaulting platoons. The captain maintained communication with Lt. Bray by radio. Also near the top we encountered a structure and tossed in a grenade. A disturbed water buffalo came out and gave my radio operator Reinhardt Dannhaus some trouble. It was a brief moment of comedy, but we continued over the top of the ridge and into the valley beyond. All the while we could hear firing coming from second platoon. The valley opened into an expanse of rice paddies. We didn't know that we had simply failed to make contact with the main body of NVA.

We turned around and started back up the trail leading to the ridge. Ron Cartwright was on point, Gary Dittmer was second, I was third and Dannhaus was behind me. I always walked third when we were in single file. It was about this time that Bray's radio went dead. Captain Ellerson immediately had us proceed along the trail in second platoon's direction. Because of the thick vegetation we had no choice but to stay on the trail to go in that direction. In any event there was a turn to the left in the trail to go in that direction. Cartwright made that turn and we proceeded a short distance when an AK-47 opened up with a burst of fire right in front of us. I mean four or five feet in front of Cartwright. Incredibly the NVA soldier fired too high and missed us all. That burst should have killed us all. Startled we hit the ground. Cartwright and Dittmer backed up so that the three of us were on the ground together. At that instant a grenade comes rolling down the trail making a fizzing sound. I looked to the left and that thing was literally within two feet of my head and within the same distance from Cartwright. I was on the right side of the trail and he was on the left with Dittmer behind him. It was the ultimate "oh sh\*\*\*" situation. We all tried to melt into the ground. All I could do was turn my head so that the steel pot provided some protection for my head and neck. The grenade exploded and it took a few seconds to realize that again, incredibly, I was not hurt. Cartwright's hand was hit.

I told the guys up front that I was going to take the next squad back and flank this guy. Sergeant Ralph Walker and his men began to follow me out to the right of the trail into a small open area. I was first, Walker was second and his men were behind him. I was about six to ten feet out into this area when the enemy soldier opened up with another burst of automatic fire. This burst was not high. He missed me and hit Walker in the left elbow. Walker screamed and went down, his men scrambled back to the relative safety of the trail. I turned around, leaned down and put my left arm around Walker, lifted him and took him to a large tree about ten feet to our front. I sat him against the tree

trunk. It was large enough to provide protection from further fire from our friend. Kneeling down, face to face with Walker, I told him that was all I could do for him for the moment. He was dazed but understood. As an aside, I will admit that I have always felt that I saved Walker's life. That is my proudest moment of all the experiences in the war. Without thinking, I did not run for cover, I stayed in the open and retrieved Walker. Anyway, I had to get this NVA guy. This thing was getting personal. As things stood I alone could fire at our friend from the right flank. Everyone else was stacked up on the trail. I presume that they backed up a little. On my knees I came out to the right of that tree, fully exposed and began firing two round bursts at ground level. I could not see him in the vegetation but I knew about where he was. I was putting two round bursts along the ground about every six inches into an area about six to eight feet wide. Back and forth, back and forth, I kept firing. At first, when I would run out of ammunition and change magazines, the guys on the trail told me later, the NVA soldier would open fire at me with green tracers. In the intensity of the moment I never realized it. In any event, tracers coming directly at you cannot be seen. I never retreated behind the tree. I just kept firing. I went through what I think was about fifteen or more magazines, one after the other, until my M-16 stopped. It didn't jam, the heat had ruined it. Somehow I became aware that the guys on the trail were moving up. I moved to the first open spot on the trail. My platoon sergeant, SFC Alfred E. Cook came up the trail holding the AK-47 of my NVA friend on the trail. We had killed him. When my weapon stopped the guys on the trail could move up. My firing of course was going directly across the trail. When I was firing I had no way to know if I had hit the guy. There was too much vegetation. I was doing the only thing I could do, keep shooting. In any event, I had kept that guy's attention and kept him down. He apparently never had the chance to fire down the trail. The whole platoon was right there in a tight group. If he had been able to fire his AK-47 full automatic he had position to fire what amounted to enfilade fire on the platoon. He could have easily inflicted heavy casualties on the platoon. I am proud to say no one else was wounded on the trail at that point. The medic went immediately to Walker who remained safely behind the tree trunk. This whole episode probably took only a few minutes.

It was after sundown and getting dark. The next portion of the trail was covered with a canopy of vegetation and was dark. I stood at the spot where I reentered the trail and while looking up the trail talked with Sergeant Cook. I told him my M-16 was ruined. He gave me his and said he would use the AK-47. We had to keep going, keep trying to reach Bray. We didn't think second platoon was very far away. There was no choice but to fight our way up the trail. At about this time I called for Ron Ensor and his machine gun to come up and be prepared to lay down a base of fire to the front and left of the trail. Shortly thereafter as the situation heated up Ensor and his machine gun were firing heavily. He would quickly fire between four hundred and five hundred rounds. In any event, the spot where Sergeant Cook and I were standing was a slight turn in the trail to the left. I was looking intently up the dark, ominous trail, some instinct, something subconscious called my attention to a dark spot on the right side about ten feet away. It didn't occur to me then, but our first NVA friend had been in a hole on the right side of the trail just up from a bend in the trail. I told Sergeant Cook to fire into that dark spot with the AK-47. Before he fired I yelled to everyone that we would be firing an AK.



**3d Platoon machine gunner Ron Ensor**

Cook fired. I told him, because of the distinct sound, it was too dangerous for him to use the AK and gave him his M-16 back. I drew my 45 pistol and started up the trail with Cook and the others following. I walked three or four steps and saw a dead NVA leaning out of that dark spot with an AK-47 in his hands. Cook had killed him with the AK burst. He had been holding his fire and could not see clearly what we were doing. I began screaming at the NVA soldier and fired several shots into him with my 45 to make sure he was dead. Like I said, this thing was getting personal.

Once again, in the darkness we proceeded up the trail. The trail at this point was in a small gully with about two or three feet of depth. It was covered completely on the top and sides with the canopy of vegetation. About ten or fifteen feet up the trail there was a turn to the right. I should have known what was coming. As I arrived at the turn a heavy machine gun opened up with a long burst. We hit the ground and the gully afforded protection. Once again I was not hit but Sergeant Cook had a round graze his nose. He immediately stood up and fired a burst back in the direction of the gun. I rolled a grenade or two or three down the trail. I don't remember how many. In the darkness they never would see them. The enemy machine gun did not fire again.

While all this was going on I could hear movement to the left. The NVA were just on the other side of the thick bamboo bordering the trail and had begun throwing grenades in on our guys who were in the area near where Cook and I had met. That area was not covered with a canopy and grenades could get in there. The bulk of the platoon was in that area on the trail. We began taking casualties from shrapnel. No one was killed but the number of wounded was growing fast. From my location up the trail I began throwing grenades as hard as I could to force them through the bamboo and other vegetation at the sounds I was hearing. Sergeant Cook and the others were passing me grenades to throw. I threw them everywhere I thought the enemy might be. It was a very effective thing to do in the dark when you can hear the enemy, provided one doesn't bounce back.



**SFC Cook**

There was a real danger that one would bounce back. If that had happened I would be dead. However, in my view I had no choice, it was the only way to stop their grenades. I was again the only one in position to strike effectively at them. It was now almost completely dark and becoming obvious that we were not going to get very far fighting up that trail in the dark. But now we had a more pressing problem. We had to protect our own wounded. At that point six men of the third platoon were wounded. They were Sgt. Cook, Sgt. John Dorow, Sgt. Walker, Sgt. Walter E. Davis, Private Clarence Robinson, and Pfc Ronald Cartwright. The captain decided we needed to form a perimeter for the night and try to get the wounded out. The fighting would, in the end, wound almost one fourth of the men in third platoon.



## **Lt. Bray and Second Platoon (Dick Arnold)**

As Tim has noted, October 9, 1967 was a very wet, miserable day—another such day in a string of many. My machine gun team was set up on the northeast side of our day laager hill; trying to stay dry like everyone else and finding amusement in whatever we could. A bunch of mostly 19-20 year olds striving mightily to be men and soldiers when we were largely still kids at heart. More accurately perhaps the last day of true innocence was being experienced. For who could predict that in a few short hours eleven men of our Company would be dead with a particularly severe blow being dealt my second platoon: our platoon leader dead, two of the most popular platoon members, Jimmy Hohstadt and Rick Irwin dead as well, plus others?

The incessant monsoon rain, heightened even more by a typhoon out in the South China Sea, had prevented resupply for several days. Consequently all of us were quite hungry and scrounging in our rucks for any uneaten C-ration cheese and crackers or fruit. There was small ville off the east side of the hill and someone had gone down there and liberated what had to be the skinniest chicken in all of Southeast Asia. It was boiled in hot water and my Assistant Gunner Don Burkhart and I were each offered a small part of one measly, undersized leg.

When the recon patrol was hit, the rest of our Company was ordered to move to their assistance. For whatever reason, my part of the hill did not get "the word" and only realized what was happening when we noted everyone else already gone. So we quickly disassembled our little hooches, threw all our stuff in our rucks, and double-timed to catch up with our platoon. From our day-laager to the patrol was not a great distance, maybe 500-600 meters, but loaded down with machine gun ammunition and the Gun itself—Don and I did not catch up with our second platoon until they were already at the hill we were to assault.

I cannot recall any in-depth instructions given on how we were to proceed, only that we were going to assault. It is also true that I arrived late and such orders may have already been disseminated. Tim has mentioned in his write-up that his platoon was together on a single trail. That too may have been Lt. Bray's intention, or he may have considered an on-line assault, if so the heavy vegetation quickly worked against that idea. I seem to recall half the platoon attempting to go straight-up while the two squads my Gun was with headed to the right.

At any rate, before moving-out I did an incredibly stupid thing. So stupid it can only partially be explained by youth and typical G.I. stubbornness. As I dropped my ruck in preparation for moving up the hill, my steel pot fell off. I was still out-of-breath from the double-time, tired, hungry, and very pissed-off at the whole situation. So, despite Don's admonishment that I should put it back on, I said "F - - - it" and left it lay. When the lead started flying a few minutes later, I admit to some pangs of regret.

So off we went. I cannot recall who was on Point, but I believe it was someone fairly new. A few minutes after starting up, we heard much firing coming from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon assault. At this point we realized that unlike our previous experiences around Duc Pho, this enemy was likely staying and fighting. Therefore, the decision was made to put a more experienced man on point. Jimmy Hohstadt has just returned from NCO School and volunteered. Jimmy was perhaps the most popular member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, a very solid guy and extremely friendly. In my mind's eye, I can still see those temporary, black E5 stripes he had on.

About half way up we came to a hooch completely full of rice and also saw many spider holes nearby. We set fire to the hooch and pushed on. Jimmy came to a three feet high rock wall that appeared to be the remnants of a rundown fence. He shifted his M16 from his left hand to his right in preparation of grabbing a bush to help pull himself over. Directly to Jimmy's right, and slightly off the trail, was a

spider hole with an NVA in it. He apparently interpreted Jimmy's actions as that he had been seen and Jimmy was preparing to shoot at him. The NVA let loose a burst from his AK47, one round caught Jimmy in his shoulder. Sgt. Tom Harris and Don engaged the NVA with grenades and killed him. Don then ran out, retrieved Jimmy, and Jimmy's best friend Tommy Keesley carried him back down the hill. Jimmy was in pain but the wound appeared to be survivable; thus we were shocked to later learn that Jimmy died during the night. There is a much speculation that he was hit again while being treated by Doc Sandel as documented in another section.

At this point in time, I had been in-country about five months and had seen a few wounded Americans and also some dead ones. However, Jimmy's wounding filled us all with intense anger and desire to "get the bastards" for wont of a better description. Though much can be said about the disorganized way the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon went about our assault; at least for the two squads I was with give us this much—we did not flinch from our duty when it became likely that many NVA were nearby. We pushed on to the top of the hill.

The top of the hill was mostly cleared and populated by several small hooches. We saw many moving targets all coming from the far left as if either recoiling from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon assault or moving to engage us—likely a combination of both. Though all the NVA saw and killed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoons during the fight had on standard NVA uniforms, some of the figures we saw now had on the traditional VC garb of black/gray pajamas. However, they were very clean pajamas plus many of these same men were distinguished/older looking with fresh haircuts as exemplified by the white sidewalls above their ears. All this has led me to conclude that perhaps some kind of high-level meeting was going on. One of the above types I particularly remember—he was running about with a very wild look on his face—as if he still in shock from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon assault and further shocked by our appearance. Whatever, Don ended his discomfort by shooting him.



**Assistant machine gunner Don Burkhart, 2d Platoon**

Their evident surprise at seeing us needs to be examined. As Tim has mentioned, I believe the NVA were taken aback both by Captain Ellerson's decision to assault and the speed that assault developed. With specific reference to the two squads I was with, they may have also been fooled by the direction we came from. They may have initially seen us start toward the middle of the hill but in going up we constantly were bearing to the right trying to find a way around the thick vegetation. We finally found a trail to the extreme right that aided us greatly. I remain convinced that if my element's assault could have been better coordinated with the rest of the Company's—the day would have turned-out much differently. I am also in agreement with Tim's thoughts on how many enemy were on the hill—at least an NVA Company, perhaps more. Enough that they could fight on two sides of the hill simultaneously though I also believe

they shifted forces where needed.

Back to the top of the hill. We instinctively spread out in a skirmish line and started engaging the enemy as represented by the targets described above. I had noticed several of the VC types running into one particular hooch; M79 man Melvin Cade and I were concentrating our fire on it. Suddenly we begin receiving return fire; it seemed to start slowly from our right but quickly built to a crescendo of AK47s coming from both sides of our formation. At this point Don and I backed slightly down the hill to a more secure place, got down and started firing the Gun in earnest. (Due to the slight decline and angle Don was laying at, the hot expended brass from the Gun was going down his back. Every time we meet he complains and I reply that well— I guess I could have let them kill us.....) Melvin however did not get down fast enough and was shot twice around his left shoulder and neck area; Tom Harris safely took him to the bottom of the hill.

The battle quickly developed into an intense affair, very intense. As Tim has also noted about his side of the hill, this was a pure infantry fight. We were still a cohesive unit, everyone I saw had backed down from the top of the hill, sought some cover, and were returning fire. Clearly though, at least judging by the sound of the AK's, the NVA were far more numerous and were very aggressive. I detected some "fire and maneuver" in what was an obvious attempt to flank us. You could also see at times grenades arching toward us from the top of the hill.

One of these grenades, they were all those very big and ugly Chicom variety, came hissing and sputtering down the trail directly at Don's and mine position. Of course it all happened in a twinkling, but at that time it was almost like slow motion. We knew it was coming at us but there were not many options for getting out of the way. At the last second it seem to bounce high in the air, I still contend it hit a tree root, and exploded just as Don and I pitched forward and covered our heads. (Yes, I sure could have used my steel pot about than). Fortuitously, most of the shrapnel seemed to go high as the blast energy seemed to be funneled downward. A piece of shrapnel hit me behind the right shoulder and another piece also wounded Sgt. Lavern Markham who was some distance behind me. We were lucky, if it had been a U.S. grenade it would have killed both Don and I. However, the explosion was extremely loud and seemed to lift both Don and I off the ground in a cloud of dust.

Disoriented by the blast, scared, (and I am not ashamed to say it) and feeling the hot shrapnel entering my body—I initially thought I had been shot and dropped the machine gun. For several seconds I was completely out of it as I struggled to both get my bearings and understand what had happened to my world. Panic is not too strong an adjective. Don had the presence of mind to pick-up the Gun, I shortly afterwards came to my senses, we moved further off the trail to a spot offering more cover, and started firing again.

The fight continued, fierce and unabated. And this is the point where our friend the enemy machine-gunner comes into the picture. The NVA had by this time brought one of their light RPD machine guns into the fray. It seemed to Don and I that he had taken an unusually strong interest in us—I mean really seemed that way. His RPD was drum fed and other 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon members listening in have claimed a "duel" went on for a few minutes—when he stopped to change drums I would pick-up the pace. I do not know if that is so—but there is no doubt we both considered the other a very attractive target.

The enemy machine-gun did catch John Howard in both legs and both feet. John was a member of either the 1<sup>st</sup> or the Weapons Platoon and a very big man—a bit over 200 pounds.





**Dick Arnold and his M-60 MG taken after the 9 October fight and after admittedly regaining a bit of his cockiness.**

Tom Harris, perhaps not relishing having to carry such a load and also probably trying to encourage him, said, "You are not hurt bad, you can stand." John gave it a game effort, turned very pale, and slumped back down. John and Don both were from the same area of Kentucky and Don knew him slightly. The firing had slackened some but it was still dangerous, and very brave, to do what Don did next. He picked-up John in a fireman's carry and slowly started back down the hill with him.

Don had carried John about ninety feet when a grenade went off right behind them. Startled by the grenade and exhausted already by the heavy load, Don dropped John. There were two other soldiers nearby and Don asked them to take John the rest of the way down the hill. Don recalls one of the two as having red hair and perhaps being Eddie Blotzer, who fit that description and was killed later that night. This may help explain why tragically John was apparently never moved far from that location. During the night he positioned his body with head downhill in an effort to slow the bleeding in his legs. After he was recovered the next morning Don talked to him. John said the NVA had fired at his head but in the dark they apparently did not realize they had missed him. We heard later John lost both his feet but have never been able to confirm that.

The grenade that startled Don also wounded Lt. Robert Lazaro of the Weapons Platoon. Don recalls Lt. Lazaro saying, "They got me in the butt"—or something like that. As Lt. Lazaro was one of our KIAs, this seems a light-hearted response if he were seriously injured, though Don thinks Lt. Lazaro also was hit in the stomach—so perhaps fatal internal injuries/bleeding are also possible. I have later comments regarding Lt. Lazaro and Tim also has a segment on him.

By now we had slowly retreated back down the hill reaching a point slightly above where the rice-filled hooch was set on fire. At this time there was a lull in the fighting and we grouped into a circle in a fairly clear area that gave us some fields of fires and reasonable observation. Two things may have been transpiring, the NVA could have been positioning themselves for the final assault or some of them were siphoned off to meet the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon's second part of their fight as they were desperately trying to reach us. I believe it was likely a combination of both.



**Some of the 2d Platoon guys sitting around playing cards. Ray Irwin is in the middle without a shirt. Far left is WIA Charles Bradley.**

It was near dark by then and out of the gloom came Lt Bray and his RTO Rick Irwin. Lt. Bray was trying to assess the situation and I recall a very brief conversation with him in which I imparted that there were many NVA around us and to my knowledge no American wounded had been left above us. Tom Harris was much more forceful and was strongly advocating an immediate withdrawal. Don, very nervous like the rest us, was sneaking a quick cigarette. Joel Roper asked for a drag and just as he finished, he was shot in the chest and died instantly. At that moment the NVA attack started-up again much stronger than before. Up until now, though I was afflicted with the normal tunnel vision of intense combat, I still was able to note some of what was going on around me. However, the next few minutes are a blur and I must rely on Don's memory and Tim's remembrance of a long ago conversation with Tom Harris.

At some point Tom Harris became very excited and he and a few others moved further down the hill in an attempt to escape the assault. There should be no intent of implied cowardice in that sentence. Tom Harris was an exemplary field soldier. I believe he had been an E5 before Vietnam when an altercation with an Officer at Fort Benning resulted in him being busted down to PFC. He was awarded a Silver Star for actions in May of 1967 and by this time had regained his E5 rank.

The situation was very fluid with obviously way too many NVA to be handled. Don and I moved parallel to the trail Lt Bray had come up on, found a decent size tree with a slight depression behind it and started firing the Gun again. It soon became obvious that Don's and mine position was not tenable—we were being flanked on both sides and our good friend the NVA machine gunner had again drawn a bead on us. He was chewing bark off the tree directly above our heads with very long bursts.

Don shouted out to Tom Harris asking where they were, we received an answer, and quickly made our way approximately 30 feet down hill and behind a very steep bank—maybe 8-10 feet high. For all these years I have been unclear if Lt. Bray, Rick Irwin, and Eddie Blotzer were still alive at this point;



though I always suspected not as neither Don nor I heard any American fire being returned. However, after reading Gary Dittmer's comments in Tim's "October 10" segment of this document—it appears near-certain they were not. Gary says their bodies were all found close together on a trail—the same trail they had used to reach our position. There is no logical reason for them to have moved further up the hill using that trail, as there was nothing to be gained from such a movement. Remember, Lt. Bray had clearly been told there were no Americans alive or dead above us. So it seems likely when the final NVA attack began they were still roughly where we had talked to Lt. Bray at and they were simply shot down there. Some of them however may not have died instantly, more on that later.

Don and I reached the bank and found there: Sgt Lavern Markham, Sgt Tom Harris, SSG Freddie Thomas (KIA exactly a month later on 11/09/67), Isaac Aparicio, a big Mexican who had the other machine gun in the platoon, and a soldier from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. In another segment Tim discussed how Doc Sandel and two 101<sup>st</sup> guys came out by chopper to help after the fight started. I have been told one was an E6 who stayed at the bottom to help with the wounded. The one with us was an E5—how he managed to end-up in the thick of the fighting is another example of the incongruity of war.



Steve May was also in the vicinity as he had taken cover behind a large cement bowl with legs, apparently used by the villagers to catch rain water. He was situated very near the rice-filled hooch we had earlier set ablaze. About this time that fire blazed up and the added light enabled the NVA to clearly see Steve. They began firing and tossing grenades at him. Steve saw one NVA looking directly down at him. Just as the NVA threw another grenade, Steve shot him. The grenade hit Steve on his heel, bounced off further down the hill and exploded. Someone yelled to him and he came slithering over to us—just as the cement bowl exploded from either a grenade or AK burst. He then exclaimed to no one in particular, "I killed that son of a bitch!" It was not funny at the time but the incident was much discussed later in a humorous vein.

### **Takin' a Break**

**Foreground: Ken Flowers -- Background: Steve May**

By now it was completely dark, which in hindsight is largely what saved us. The NVA had totally overrun our previous position and were firing shots into the bodies to make sure they were dead. At least one of the NVA could speak decent English as I clearly heard a taunt of "G.I. you die now."

Someone above was apparently still breathing, or hiding, as that taunt was followed by someone calling very loud for their mother— another AK burst followed. I believe that person was Eddie Blotzer



of my 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. Eddie was from Pittsburgh and had commented as we approached the hill that it reminded him of one in his neighborhood.

As can be imagined, all this was near physiologically shattering to have to listen to. However, while it is true we did not have many options, the group behind the bank did not panic and continued to conduct themselves as soldiers; for sure there was no quit. Admittedly though, the situation did not look good. Don and I have both stated since we doubted if we would make it. Don fixed his bayonet and I unholstered my .45. The NVA then attempted to pinpoint our exact location. They were reconning by fire as well as tossing some grenades our way. However, both the bullets and grenades were falling behind us, which makes me think the NVA were a bit back from the lip of the bank.

We then heard much conversation in sing-song Vietnamese and the voices were moving closer; apparently they were jabbering among themselves as to our location. I recall being able to make out the vague form of one NVA as he stood very near the top of the bank. We all pressed ourselves as close to the bank as possible and Tom Harris showed his leadership qualities by quietly passing the word we should use just grenades to keep from pinpointing our location. And so we did. I always carried a claymore bag with extra grenades and had seven with me that night. I threw all of them. The very first one failed to explode and in spite of myself I cursed under my breath a bit too loud. Tom Harris gave me a look like he was going to kill me and I apologized to all later.



**SGT Tom Harris**

In total we must have thrown 20 grenades; myself, Don, and Tom Harris were the primary throwers. Every time we heard Vietnamese voices we would throw one. I know for a fact that we did much damage as you could often hear moaning after a grenade exploded—which usually led to another being thrown at the same general location.

We also heard a female talking up above, either a nurse assigned to the NVA unit or a local villager pressed into action. I was later visited in the hospital by a guy on the body recovery team the next morning and he told me of finding large piles of bloody bandages in this same area.

Around this time it quieted down and then we heard an NVA, again in very good English, say, "Medic, we need a medic." David Farley was our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon medic. Now, I do not recall him being with Lt. Bray's group earlier but he could have been. He had either been detained below working on the wounded and was now coming to see if we needed help (my thought)—or he had been with Lt. Bray all along and was hiding (Don's contention). At any rate, we heard him say, "Here I am", we then heard an AK-47 on automatic and David was gone. He cried out "Murders" before he died. There is much more to his story that I will not go into here. However, at the end of this document there is a link that will take you to the full saga of David Littlehale Farley. I hope you will read it as David was a special person.

After this episode, we were left completely alone and the total silence was near as nerve-wracking as all that had gone before. There was however one other bit of excitement. I was at the extreme left side of our bank formation, nearest the trail. Myself and a couple of other guys on that end saw a small group of soldiers (8-10), in file, moving down the trail right past us—within 15-20 feet. The still-

smoldering rice hooch giving off just enough light to see them. At first I thought they might have been Americans because they had on helmets, But they turned-out to be NVA in full, and relatively new, battle gear including pith helmets. We held our collective breaths as they passed by us, looking neither left or right. Some folks after hearing this story have commented that we should have engaged them. Honestly, I have never felt bad about not doing so because there was no way of knowing how many of their buddies were still lurking nearby.

I would estimate that the total time elapsed from when the fight started at the top of the hill to the end behind the bank was around 30 minutes—it seemed like an eternity. We stayed behind the bank for perhaps another fifteen minutes. Then we decided that there might be artillery brought to bear on the top of the hill and we should move a bit further down. Also, while the bank offered some protection the thick foliage right below us offered much more. Joel Roper had been an RTO, I believe for SSG Thomas who may have been the actual Platoon SSG that night. In the heat of the fight, Joel's radio had not been secured after he was killed, thus we were without communication. Not sure of the status of the rest of the Company and fearful of moving at night without comms amongst what had to be trigger-happy Grunts, we decided the safest course was to move further down in the thick stuff and wait until dawn. And that is exactly what we did.

From my view, and probably for the rest of the guys as well, it was the longest night of my life—before or since. I do recall hearing the signal shots that Tim mentions firing to help other 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon members reach his perimeter and I also remember "Dustoff 54" coming and going. That must have been around midnight, from then until dawn it was nothing but silence and a cold rain that started falling around two in the morning. Everyone seemed to be lost in their own thoughts My wounded shoulder that had not bothered me a great deal up until now, undoubtedly due to the adrenalin pumping, now hurt considerably. One somewhat humorous thing I do recall is someone complaining about not having any water. Tom Harris told him rather pointedly to stop whining as we had much bigger things to worry about.

The dawn was a welcomed sight! I was not a cigarette smoker but I noticed those who were took deep pleasure in finally being able to safely burn one. We waited until full light and then set a course toward the general direction of where Dustoff 54 had landed. Our reasoning of course was that we would be most likely to find other Americans there.

When we came into view we were warmly greeted by the remaining 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon members who thought nearly to a man that we were all dead. I also recall quite a bit of discussion about "that crazy damn chopper pilot"—the legend of Dustoff 54 had already taken root.

Being among the least serious wounded, I was taken out on the last Medivac that morning. I was taken to 91<sup>st</sup> Evac. at Chu Lai. By this time I had been without much sleep or food for around 48 hours, in addition to being traumatized, so I must have looked like hell. I say this as the doctor who removed the shrapnel and sewed me up asked me how long had it been since I had last eaten. They gave me a bite to eat and a sedative and I slept almost 18 hours. I was in there just short of a month, returning to the field just in time for our big November 9 fight. My timing in Nam was seldom good.

In the hospital I talked to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon member Ralph D. Stone. Ralph had been wounded during the final assault but played dead. The NVA fired some shots to be sure but in the darkness did not realize they had missed. They then stuck their fingers in his eyes, rolled him over, and took his web gear. A true miracle he survived. He looked like he had aged 20 years. Ralph also told me of another soldier who was wounded and crawled into some bushes and hid. Ralph said he heard this soldier moaning during the night and that he lived until shortly before daybreak. By process of elimination, that soldier has to have almost certainly been Lt. Lazaro. I am wondering if he was later shot in addition to his grenade injuries. Whatever the actual cause, the death of Lt. Lazaro has always distressed me.

Though those of us behind that bank had very good reason to fear for our own safety—we never realized there were still living Americans above us. Should we have been concerned? Should we at some point during the night left the safety of our hiding place to go look? If we had done so, would Lt. Lazaro have been saved? Had all that happened previously cowed our aggressiveness and caused to think only of ourselves? Perhaps such questions have no answers and are best left unanswered. Ralph's comments also bear on the accuracy of accounts that have all the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon's KIAs found together. To have avoided detection, Lt. Lazaro surely was some distance from the others?

So that is mine, and our story. Tim has a later segment summarizing what went wrong from a Company-level and I agree with his thoughts. Lack of artillery support is very difficult to explain. I too think we were over-confident from our Duc Pho successes. Captain Ellerson both failed to appreciate the enemy strength and became so caught-up himself in "the chase", that he lost control of his maneuver elements. And the large parts of two other platoons did not even get into the fight.

From a purely 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon perspective, it is hard to say. I have never heard a coherent story from anyone who was not with my group. Some of the wounded came from that other group so they did engage the enemy at some point. It is clear we were splintered into at least three different groups that made it easier for the NVA to deal with us. It is also clear that platoon integrity went badly skewed at some point. How else can one explain the other platoon machine gunner ending-up with us, sans the rest of his team? I do not blame Lt. Bray for that as much as I do the terrain—it was simply too thick for the on-line assault Captain Ellerson envisioned. I also believe the other 2nd platoon elements missed the leadership qualities of Sgt. Harris, and others, that we had on our side of the hill. Even given all that, when I consider the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon's successful initial assault; and even ours initially, coupled with the NVA disarray I saw at the top—we were perhaps much closer to victory than can ever be imagined.

Most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon survivors went on to other combat experiences: November 9, November 13-14, November 27, February 9 and even Mile High if they stuck around long enough. And all those fights had their own unique circumstances and pain. Yet and still, when any of us gather— October 9, 1967 is still the main topic. The intensity and close quarters of the pure infantry fighting, the ebb and flow of the battle, the mistakes, the split-second decisions that had to be made, the heroism, the English-speaking NVA, the last-minute save, the strange case of Farley's death and Howard's and Stone's survival—enough drama and pure terror to last a life-time. Which it has. Not a day, not one single day, has passed since that I do not think of those we lost. I hope in some small way this story will help honor their memories. We did our best, we fought the good fight.

As an interesting footnote: on the night of October 22 1967, a few kilometers northeast, the battalion Recon Platoon ambushed and killed two NVA Officers—a Captain and a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. Among their possessions was the CAR-15 formerly belonging to Lt. Bray.

### **Lt. Lazaro and Weapons Platoon (Tim Peters)**

When the assault started the weapons platoon must have been ordered to follow second platoon. Lt. Robert Lazaro, the platoon leader of the weapons platoon was a good friend and OCS classmate of Lt. William Bray. They had arrived in the company at the same time, approximately September 9, 1967. Although the details are not entirely clear, Lt. Lazaro and some members of his weapons platoon may have followed second platoon in the assault. As stated above, a few men of weapons platoon may have stayed behind to unload the resupply helicopter. There were at least two men from weapons platoon, other than Lazaro, killed. They were Pfc Stephen Smith of Mt. Vernon, Illinois and Pfc Bernard Meindorf of Williamston, Michigan. Meindorf was Lazaro's radio operator. Smith was a very capable and aggressive machine gunner. Lazaro must have tried to help Lt. Bray. Dick Arnold does not remember any other Weapons Platoon men being involved in the Second Platoon fight.



Captain Ellerson does not remember whether he ordered Lazaro and weapons platoon to join the attack. Reinhart Dannhaus, my radio operator and Tom Birdsong the first platoon radio operator who were listening to the radio net also do not remember. In any event, Lt. Lazaro joined the attack and was killed in the deadly enemy counter attack against second platoon. I hope to develop more information on Lazaro's efforts. I suspect he was a real hero.

### **Ron "Doc" Sandel (Tim Peters)**



**Ron "Doc" Sandel on left and 3d Platoon leader Lt. Tim Peters**

Ronald Sandel of Thorp, Wisconsin had been the platoon medic of third platoon. In the late summer of 1967 he had been promoted to company medic. On October 9 he was temporarily out of the field in the rear area. He heard we were in contact and rushed to the field in the re-supply helicopter along with two men from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. The assault was underway and Doc Sandel began treating the wounded as they arrived from the fighting on the ridge. Doc was treating a wounded man in a wet rice paddy just a few feet from the edge of the rice paddy terrace.

The paddies on the side of the ridge were ancient constructions of terraces cut into the side of the ridge. At the edge of the paddy there was a drop of approximately six feet to the next level. That drop off would have provided perfect cover. The enemy advanced to the point where they began firing automatic weapons fire directly on Doc Sandel's position. Doc Sandel tried to shield the wounded man, instead of jumping over the edge of the terrace for cover. He would not leave the wounded man. In the ensuing firing both the wounded man and Doc Sandel were mortally wounded. The wounded man was shot in the neck. Doc Sandel was shot in the left thigh leaving a massive wound. A few minutes later both of them bled to death despite the best efforts of the weapons platoon medic, Nolan Jones. Doc Nolan Jones tried to stop the bleeding of Doc Sandel's thigh. Sandel's belt was used as a tourniquet. It did not work.

Doc Sandel told Jones that if he didn't get out on a medical evacuation helicopter and get a transfusion he would die. Doc Sandel soon realized that was not going to happen and told Doc Jones to work on the other wounded. There was nothing to be done for him. A few minutes later he was gone.

Ronald Sandel was awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. Frankly I would think an even higher decoration would have been appropriate. In any event, I didn't learn of his presence in the field, his heroism or his death until I returned from the hospital six weeks later. When told of his death and his actions in rushing to the field and trying to save our wounded, I was profoundly moved and distressed. Those feelings have never been forgotten. He was one of those precious few people who inspire for a lifetime. A person who one is blessed to have known, even for a short time.



**Doc Nolan Jones**

### **The Third Platoon Perimeter (Tim Peters)**

There was a somewhat large open area about twenty meters or so off to the right from the spot on the trail where Sgt. Cook and I had talked. When the Captain decided to back off the trail and establish a perimeter, we went to the open area and I began forming the perimeter with the wounded in the middle. We had about ten feet between guys with no reserve. The men were just lying on the ground. There were no claymores; they had been left with our packs. This was not a good situation. Ron Ensor tells me he and the men near him in the perimeter could hear the NVA loading their weapons. Ron had a machine gun and was down to about one hundred fifty rounds. He was holding his fire waiting on the assault he thought was eminent. The Air Force had sent a C-47 to circle over us dropping parachute flares. Those things were as bright as high noon and they just kept dropping them. No sooner would one be about to burn out then the next one would start. The area of our perimeter was large enough to land a helicopter. There was a clump of vegetation in the middle where the wounded and the captain were. I kept going from man to man on the perimeter making sure every man knew his area of responsibility. I found one guy cowering with his head in his hands crying, sobbing really. He was the only man I saw all day lose control. This guy was known to us all to be panicky. I spoke harshly to him. "Get your head up, we are all depending on you hold up this area", etc. We were all scared, but nobody else was crying and sobbing like a baby. It rubbed me the wrong way after all we had been through that day.

About an hour after we formed the perimeter we attempted to land a dust-off chopper. I went out with one or two other guys into the open in the middle of the perimeter and dropped trip flares in the shape of a "T" for the chopper. The fighting was still going on, but the Dust-off pilot from the 54<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment, tried his best but took some hits and had to pull out. He said they would be back when the shooting died down. We found out later that the 54<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment was good on its word.

Thank God, a group of men from second platoon made contact with us on the radio. They were hiding, crawling on the ground and reported NVA all over the place. They were scared, as we all were, and were whispering on the radio. We had to get them into our perimeter. I told them I would fire three shots in the air to mark our location. They heard that and crawled in our direction for a few minutes. Again, we talked and again I fired three shots in the air. They continued crawling in our direction. We kept this up until they were just outside the perimeter in relatively open area. Somehow

they communicated to me exactly where they were. This was a very tricky thing. To say everyone was trigger-happy would have been a gross understatement. Each man in that part of the perimeter had to know the exact location of the second platoon guys. I told each man and was standing there as they crawled into the perimeter. I saw "Frenchy", who had been in my platoon before being transferred to second platoon, crawl in. I was excited, happy and said, you made it! Frenchy replied in an angry voice, something to the effect that they had not made anything yet. There was about a dozen of them. One of them was Bill Slusher. I assume they had been part of the second platoon's left as the enemy counter-attack unfolded. We worked them into the perimeter.

After we got the second platoon guys into place in the perimeter I was going from man to man making sure they knew who was on their left and right. Out of nowhere a grenade exploded about ten feet away. Actually the grenade hit on the perimeter near where Bobby Bishop, Ron Ensor and Michael Dundon were located. Bobby Bishop kicked the grenade away and it came to rest in the position near me and exploded. I received three wounds in the left leg. I had one in the middle of the thigh that I didn't know about until it started throbbing a little later. Anyway, I went down and screamed for the medic. The medic was there in seconds. To my amazement and shame I was overcome with a feeling of relief. It was totally unexpected. I didn't tell anyone about that. Doc said the wound wasn't serious. In what I assume was an attempt to calm me down, he said I didn't even have to go in if I didn't want to. I thought about that for about two seconds and realized it was pure B.S. I then was put with the wounded in the middle of the perimeter. I was down to three rounds of forty-five ammunition and nothing else. No M-16 ammunition, no grenades, no trip flares, no nothing. Ron Ensor told me recently that he heard me screaming for the medic when I was hit. A few minutes later he heard me use the phrase that our platoon used frequently, "F\*\*\* it! It don't mean nothing!"

Sometime shortly after that, the firing started up and Captain Ellerson, who was standing about ten or fifteen feet away, was shot in the abdomen. The word later circulated that he was shot by one of our guys, specifically one particular guy from the group of men from second platoon who claimed responsibility. In the dark and the confusion no one that I know of saw it. Everyone that I talked to believed it. Frankly, I don't believe the story and it does not make sense. The man who was supposed to have done this was not wounded, was from second platoon and was on the perimeter. The men on the perimeter were facing out. To shoot the Captain, who was in the middle of the perimeter, a man on the perimeter would have to turn and face in and fire. Our men had no cover, were on top of the ground, and firing would give their position away. There was a serious fire - fight ongoing and a lot of NVA in the immediate area. Firing into the perimeter might even draw fire from our guys. The story sounds like bravado to me. Captain Ellerson reports that the shots came from an NVA in some bushes on higher ground just outside the perimeter. After he hit the ground he heard something rolling toward him and feared it was a grenade. It was a rock knocked loose by the NVA who the Captain saw running away and up the hill. The Captain was the last one wounded.

I don't know what time it was but the firing tapered off and stopped. The after action report for Operation Wheeler says the fighting stopped at 2155 hours, that is 9:55 p.m. It was late in the evening. With the exception of the Captain and myself no one had been wounded since we formed the perimeter. The Air Force kept dropping parachute flares but the fight was over. We of course didn't know that for sure. We kept waiting for them to hit us with a concentrated assault. It never came. Good thing! A determined rifle squad could have penetrated that perimeter. We were about out of ammunition and grenades. For the most part we had no fields of fire, no cover, no claymores and no depth. If they had knocked out one or two guys on the line they would have been in. If they had hit us with a company or even a platoon we would have been overrun in minutes.



## The Dust-Off (Tim Peters)

The quiet continued on into the night. Finally the Air Force, our loyal protectors, (God Bless Them) said they would space out the flares. A five or ten minute interval between flares was started. Around midnight, a determined and heroic Dust-off pilot, Alan Flory, call sign "Dust-off 54", came looking for us. Alan does not remember if he was the pilot that came out earlier. In any event, the problem was we had no more trip flares, no way to signal our location. This information was passed on to Alan but he refused to abort the mission. Alan spent some time going over the area at



**Dust-Off Pilot Al Flory**

low level looking for us with all his lights off, including his instrument lights inside the cabin. He wanted no glow coming from the cabin. He happened over the position of the retreating enemy and took fire from the NVA. His chopper was hit in the process. He still refused to abort the mission. At this point Dannhaus did the best job of talking on the radio that I ever heard. He had both the Air Force and the Dust-off on the net. He told the Air Force to come around and drop a flare one click south of the last one. The Air Force put the flare right on the money. Dannhaus then told the Dust-off chopper that we were directly under that flare. Al Flory, continued looking for us at tree top level. We could hear him. To my utter shock Al then asked if we wanted him to turn on his landing lights. The courage of that guy was unbelievable. For Christ's sake, as he well knew there was a major main force NVA unit in the immediate area. Before we could answer his question he appeared on one side of the perimeter. Dannhaus shouted on the radio, look to your left; look to your left. That huey turned around on a dime and landed. His rotor was touching vegetation on the left and right of the chopper. We loaded all the wounded on the Dust-off, everyone but Captain Ellerson. He refused to leave his command until morning. He was the most seriously wounded of all. Whatever can be said about him or about his mistakes that day, it must also be said that he is one courageous man. For all he knew he would be dead by morning.

The chopper was loaded, maybe overloaded, and we began to lift off. With all the sound we could not have heard firing. I am sure we were all thinking the same thing. Were the NVA waiting to let the bird load up and then shoot it down? In the darkness we rose and rose until we all knew we were safe.

## The Morning of October 10 (Tim Peters)

The remainder of the night passed for the third platoon with a nerve-wracking slowness. Ron Ensor reports that the platoon continued to receive occasional sniper fire and the men prayed for the morning to come. Gary Dittmer relates that an attempt was made to extend the perimeter by throwing grenades and moving forward. Actually, I remember Sergeant Peter J. Paele ordering this by

screaming out the order well before the dustoff arrived. Sergeant Paele was the highest ranking man left without wounds and therefore took over as platoon leader. He was later killed in action on October 21, 1967 on a patrol near LZ Mary Lou. Gary further reports that many of the guys, especially the new ones were afraid to throw their grenades. They were afraid of hitting a tree and having the grenade bounce back. Bobby Bishop told Gary about this, so Gary went to every position and threw the grenades. Everything finally settled down. Finally the dawn came. Captain Ellerson's condition was not good. As first light approached he reports he "was getting pretty fuzzy and the company medic or radio operator was nagging the shit out of me to get medevaced". The Captain was medevaced at about first light. He remembers arriving at the hospital at dawn. First Sergeant Letney was left in command of the company as far as the Captain knew.

The third platoon was put into motion conducting a patrol along the ridge looking for the lost men and the enemy. The remainder of the company, first platoon and weapons platoon, as far as I can determine, remained in their position at the bottom of the hill.

### **Gary Dittmer provides a vivid recounting of this patrol:**



**Gary Dittmer - September of 1967 at Duc Pho**

"Our plan was to transverse the ridge line and then make our way down to be extracted. The hill was full of brush, and trees - actually it was good cover. We moved in single file - spread out - it was too heavy for on line - and that made me nervous - but I just had a sense that Charlie had left and I was worried mainly about booby traps - we moved slowly. There were no villages or hootches that I remember - there were some further down the hill, but none on the crest - to our left the vegetation disappeared and you could see clearly down into the valley - again - no hootches. After humping for a while, the ridge line intersected with another hill, and as I had just turned right - to proceed down the hill - we heard someone cry out - either it was a cry of help or just a moan - We were all jumpy anyway, and I swear the hair on the back of my neck stood up - I froze - squatted and went to full automatic and looked around - I thought it was a Charlie trap.

The guy cried out a few more times and our guys were really getting spooked. I had Dannhaus call 6 and ask if there were any MIAs - he confirmed there were - so I got our squad to come online and we went toward the cries - sweeping the hill now from left to right, moving slightly down at a gradual angle. It kept getting thicker with bush, scrub and trees - then it opened up, and I came upon a trail and I saw the lead guy in the patrol that got ambushed - the rest were just behind him - the guy that was alive was about the 6th or 8th guy down the trail from the point man. I remember Bray being third - they were way too close to each other - hardly any separation at all, and they were on a clearly well

used trail. The point man was shot just below the throat - I'll never forget this because his hands were clenched and grasping at his throat, and he had the most awful look of pain on his face - frozen due to rigormortis - the second guy took rounds in the head, and Bray was hit in the chest with numerous rounds - he was laying on his back – looking peaceful - no sign of pain. This was the most dead GIs any of us had seen, and I'm sure it affected everyone - it actually made the guys in my squad perform better after this - this made the war very real."

### **Ron Ensor provides addition information on the patrol:**

"As we searched the area for our people my mind started wondering how in the world did we make it. We could see signs that we were up against a much larger force than us. I don't know who was the first to find Lt. Brays body and the rest of the KIA's. Someone yelled that they had found them and we all went to where they were. It was heart sickening to see them like that. The one survivor told us what had happened to them. We took ropes to move the bodies for fear of being booby trapped. From where they were killed wasn't far from where we dropped packs to start our assault on the hill. ( Ron said in a later e-mail he thought the distance was less than a football field) We then preceded down to our staging area to wait for choppers with supplies and body bags. From there we were finally choppered back to Lz Mary Lou. We were beaten and exhusted." Further "I kind of remember the spot where they were killed. To my recall of the place it was a path with a brush line on a small incline. There was one survivor but I don't remember his name. He was shot up pretty bad in the leg, his bone was protruding out. The area was woody with a lot on deep and shallow ditches." The wounded man Ron is referring to must have been John Howard.

That is all the information I have been able to develop on the patrol of the morning of October 10, 1967.



**October 9 participants, taken at The Wall in front of the panel with October 9 KIAs**

**Front L-R Al Flory, Tom Birdsong, Tony Taschler  
Back L-R Dick Arnold, John Knoche, Don Burkhart, Tim Peters, John Heelan, Malcom Spencer**

### **Thoughts (Tim Peters)**

As we wounded flew off to safety, what remained of the proud Company A was left shattered on the ground. The heart and soul of the aggressive company that went into the enemy's area and set ambushes every night on their trails was gone. I always thought that Company A had thirteen killed and nineteen wounded that day. I heard those numbers when I was still in Vietnam. The actual



number killed was eleven with eighteen wounded. Whatever the number it was a brutal price to pay for being too aggressive, too impatient and acting without knowing the true strength of the enemy we faced with second platoon in disarray.

The initial assault was so loud and aggressive it must have given the NVA pause. The enemy was, in the course of the fight, attacked from two directions. In addition, the enemy must have known the first platoon waited in reserve at the spot where the original attack started. The NVA had numbers and position in their favor but never decisively used the advantage. After killing Bray and the men caught with him they failed to consolidate their position or pursue the rest of second platoon, weapons platoon and the reserve platoon. They failed to strike with any effect against the third platoon after dark. Before dark we had been attacking them. A concentrated assault would have easily overrun the third platoon. They knew exactly where we were. Right under all those flares. Late in the evening they broke contact and slipped away to the north with their dead and wounded. The battlefield was left to us. I strongly suspect we killed considerably more of them than they did of us. The annual history report of our battalion and the after action report of Operation Wheeler state that twenty-four enemy soldiers were killed. I am not sure how they know that but the number seems realistic.

The exact strength of the NVA has always been a mystery. The after action report of Operation Wheeler refers to the enemy as an "NVA Company". Upon reflection, I think it was a large unit for several reasons. First, if the number of NVA had been small they would have run. The fact that they stood their ground and fought has to mean there were a lot of them. They knew the basic size of our company. They had been sniping at us for days. They were close to us before October 9, probably about a kilometer or so distant. They may have even been shadowing us! That ridge was the closest place to us where a large unit could hide and still be in striking distance and also to weather the storm that had just passed. By chance our patrol made contact with them and we came running to fight. At that juncture they had two choices, run or fight. Really only one choice, the unit was too big to put on the move in the open in daylight. They had to hold their position and fight if necessary.

Second, the point where we encountered the NVA in holes one after the other along that trail on the top of the ridge was probably at least one hundred to two hundred meters from the area where the second platoon fight occurred. There were prepared positions at that location as well. That is a substantial distance to have connected and prepared positions and suggests a large unit.

Finally, during a portion of the action the NVA were fighting both platoons at the same time. Dick Arnold remembers no intense firing from us when their fight died out. That has to mean both fights were occurring at about the same time. I remember hearing their fighting as we started down that trail on top of the ridge. Further more NVA arrived as our fight wore on. The point is the enemy had enough men to fight both platoons at once and showed no interest in leaving in daylight. If it wasn't a large unit they could not and would not have done that.

There are a number of questions. Why didn't we have artillery support or an air strike before the initial assault? Why didn't we use first platoon in some effective way? Why did first platoon just sit there? What was the enemy doing on that ridge? When the fight was joined, why didn't Battalion send reinforcements?

## The Casualties

### The following were killed in action:



**PFC Edward Joseph Dunsey** (Blotzer), 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



**2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Robert Bray**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Burlington, North Carolina



**PFC Richard Ray Irwin, Jr.**, Lt. Bray's radio operator, Arcadia, California



**PFC Willis Wayne Emerton**, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Dallas, Texas



**SP4 David Littlehale Farley**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon Medic, Brunswick, Maine

Link to an article about Sp4 Farley <http://www.cacti35th.org/special/farley/farley.php>



**PFC Jimmy Ross Hohstadt**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Clovis, New Mexico



**2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Robert James Lazaro**, Weapons Platoon Leader, Glendora, New Jersey



**PFC Bernard James Meirndorf**, Lt. Lazaro's radio operator, Williamston, Michigan



**PFC Joel Clyde Roper**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Marietta, Georgia



**PFC Ronald S. Sandel**, Company Medic, Thorp, Wisconsin



**PFC Stephen Jay Smith**, Weapons Platoon, Mount Vernon, Illinois

### The following were wounded in action:

Captain Geoff Ellerson, Company Commander

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Tim Peters, Platoon Leader, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon

PFC Ronald Cartwright, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
SFC Alfred E. Cook, Platoon Sgt., 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
Sgt. Walter E. Davis, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
Sgt. John Dorow, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
PFC Clarence Robinson, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
Sgt. Ralph Walker, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon  
SP4 Isaac Aparicio, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
SP4 Richard Arnold, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
SP4 Charles G. Bradley, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
Pvt. Melvin Cade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
PFC Harlan H. Dillinger, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
PFC Jerry A. Fletcher, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
PFC Anthony E. Gonzalez, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
Sgt. Lavern G. Markham, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
Pvt. Ralph D. Stone, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon  
PFC John Howard, Weapons Platoon

*This document was originally completed May 16, 1999. Thereafter we have made corrections and additions as new information was revealed from discussions with others whom were there or other sources. The most recent changes in this writing were made on April 5, 2005.*

**"That he which hath no stomach to this fight,  
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,  
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;  
We would not die in that man's company..."**

**KING HENRY V, Act IV, Scene 3**