

Apr 4, 1968 LZ Mile High

(This is from a letter Capt. Richard H. Beal sent to his parents concerning the 35th Infantry Regiment fight at FSB Mile High on April 5, 1968. Capt. Beal commanded A Co. 1/35th during the fight. The letter came into our possession when former 25th Division President Tom Jones, who served with Capt. Beal in the 1/14th during Beal's first tour, connected with his brother. The letter has been left verbatim except for some minor grammatical changes. A few clarifying entries can be found in parentheses and italics. Capt. Beal describes in a very straightforward manner combat. His recollections of same have been left intact. This is Capt. Beal's view of the fight and may not be as others saw it. Dick Beal, then a Colonel, died prematurely on 08/15/1989, age 49.)

8 April, 1968

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am doing very well; hobbling around all over the place. In fact, I never was knocked out of action or anything. Just had to be evacuated to get the fragments out of me and have the holes sewed-up. I should be completely repaired in another week or so.

We had a pretty big fight. I will start at the beginning, which was 3 April. On that day I took my Company down the west side of Hill 1198 (*FSB Mile High*) into a valley which was known to have a quantity of enemy set up in it. We had been rushed to the base of Hill 1198 a few days before that. The 4th Division needed Hill 1198 as it commanded the terrain west of Polei Kleng to the Cambodian border. The 3/8 Infantry had not had any success in taking the hill and had lost a lot of people in the attempts they had made. Then the NVA hit them really hard at Firebase 14 (*LZ Incoming*) and succeeded in overrunning part of their position before they were driven back. You sent me an article about that. This was all taking place as we were moving from Bong Son to Kontum Province. Before the brigade and the battalion could even get the support elements set-up and supplies stockpiled, we were thrown into the breach so to speak to help the 3/8 Infantry. So on or about 1 April we were flown to the base of Hill 1198, about 2,000 meters north of Firebase 14. There my Company and D Company relieved two bedraggled 3/8 Infantry companies. I directed an air strike onto the top of Hill 1198, and we started up the side of the heavily vegetated mountain at about 1300 hours with A Company leading. On the way up we recovered seven or eight missing U.S. troops, all dead. Mixed with them was a bunch of dead NVA. We picked up four AK 47 rifles, a carbine, two rocket launchers, and large quantities of ammunition. We moved on up to the top without any enemy resistance at all. I heaved a sigh of relief as I had had visions of another Dak To (*Hill 875*) located just north of us. We immediately had to set to work clearing the trees and jungle off the top of the hill so that helicopters could bring in supplies and equipment. The next day and a half was spent blowing down trees, cutting brush, etc.; and almost without any water supply. Hard work, but we got the LZ cut; indeed, the first helicopter was able to get in on the first day to deliver ammunition and more demolitions to us. This then gets us to the morning of 3 April.

We went down the west side of Hill 1198 and after about 800 meters we ran into a heavily used NVA trail running along the side of Hill 1198 from NE to SW. There was comms wire running along it so we cut it. The man doing that was mildly shocked, showing it was in use. Five minutes later an NVA came running up the trail from the SW checking out the cut wire. One of my flank men shot at him but missed. Ten minutes after that another NVA came running down the trail from the NE, again to check the wire. Another flank man shot at him with an M-79 grenade launcher; wounding the NVA but he too got away. So here we were between two

groups of NVA with only 20-minutes between their positions. This is the approximate distance between NVA rifle companies when they set up in battalion base camp areas. (I remembered this from my first tour over here; that intelligence work has paid off for me quite often during this tour). At any rate, I reported what I suspected to be a battalion and was told to move back up the hill a ways and that they would try to get me some air strikes. We went back up the hill a bit and I found a climbable tree. I put a radio on my back, climbed the tree, and when the FAC came over I was able to talk him into where I suspected the NVA to be. He was able to get three air strikes, six jets, in and we bombed them for about 2 ½ hours. Then Battalion said to go back down the hill and see what we had gotten.

In going back down we took the NVA trail to the SW, and in about 30-minutes of slowly stalking along, we ran into a bunker complex in a deep gully. The jets' bombs had hit all over them. Some were broken open, a lot of the camouflage was blown away and there was a quantity of NVA equipment lying on the ground throughout the area. There was one NVA still in the complex, and the first platoon killed him as they began working into the complex. We were on a higher ridge looking down on the positions and so we had a tactical advantage. Also, I had artillery and my own 81mm mortars, still up on top of Hill 1198, firing all around me to keep anybody off of us that might try to flank us. Obviously the NVA were off balance, and I attributed that to all the air strikes. Here we were in a bunker complex recently occupied and everything pointed toward the complex being a HQ; comms wire running into it, HQ-type equipment such as binoculars lying about, and the bunkers themselves were in a deep gully for protection rather than for fighting.

The NVA were still around, however, and they did not like us being in their HQ; throwing grenades into their bunkers, etc. Soon we began getting some small arms fire as their infantry began moving up towards us. Then from only about 65 meters away they began firing at us with mortars; we could hear the gunners dropping the rounds down the tubes. I had my people move back quickly through the stuff and at the same time had my 81mm mortars shift their fire into the enemy mortar positions and that shut them up. They only got off about 10 rounds before our stuff fell on them; I have an outstanding Weapons, or 4th Platoon. Also, the NVA were still dazed; they were not exactly sure where we were so most of their ten rounds had been erratic and off target.

As it was I had four men lightly wounded by mortar fragments and a fifth man twisted his ankle badly in the scramble to get out of the area when their rounds were landing. One of my two RTOs took a fragment in his arm and the other was the one with the badly twisted ankle. Both had to be evacuated so I had to get two new RTOs. The metal collapsible stock of my CAR-15 had four nicks in it from the enemy mortars. Well, we moved quickly back up the NVA trail toward the cutoff up Hill 1198 which we had used to come down. As my last elements turned off the NVA trail and began proceeding up the hill they radioed that another group of NVA had just been spotted moving from the NE. I did not know what size group it was, but if it had any strength at all and we ran into them head-on, with another enemy group behind us to box us in, we might well have a bad time. As it was we made it on back to the top as the sun was setting and we were all quite sure that God had been with us quite closely that day.

On 4 April I took two platoons back down to the NVA trail and set up some hand grenade booby traps. We had the trip wires tied to the grenade pins so that when they hit the wire the pin would be pulled-out and a few seconds later, BANG! We waited around by the trail for about an hour to see if anybody would come along. They did not, so again we returned to the top of Hill 1198 by dark.

That evening the Battalion Commander, LTC William Taylor, got the C Company CO and me together and told us we both would be going back down Hill 1198 and into the bunker complex we had found on 3 April. LTC Taylor had the mission of building a fortified firebase on top of Hill 1198, so he of course wanted to keep the enemy off-balance as much as possible. This would allow the firebase to be constructed without the NVA hitting us before we were ready. The 4th Division had even sent a platoon of Engineers to help, plus they air-lifted a bulldozer into us.

So A and C Companies were the ones chosen to keep the enemy “off balance.” I knew that there were an awful lot of NVA down in that valley; at least a Battalion and probably more. Every day, Firebase 14 would get mortared and rocketed from that valley and almost every day helicopters would get shot at by 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine guns from that same valley. Shortly before being occupied by the 35th Infantry, Firebase 14 was attacked by an estimated NVA regiment who staged the attack from the valley. I had requested we get a B-52 strike into the valley but to no avail. Higher-up said it would be “too close to friendly positions.” I had told the battalion commander that I would not go back down into that bunker complex with just my company. It was too dangerous, we had almost gotten caught before, and the next time the NVA would probably have things sorted a lot better and be waiting. But the Battalion CO had to have us go down to check out the area again and he was CORRECT. He was at least going to send two companies instead of just my one. I took my company down to where our trail hit the NVA trail and waited for C Company to join me. They had the mission of moving north to check out another trail which we believed led into the big NVA trail A Company had found leading from SW to NE. It did, and while C Company was tracing it out they discovered a freshly abandoned battalion base camp with bunkers, huts, latrines, commo wire, etc. Then they came on down the NVA trail from the NE and joined A Company.

Now it was time for me to move my Company down the next 400 meters and into the NVA bunker complex I had found on 3 April. I knew the enemy was once there, likely still there, and that he would be waiting. We had found that one of our booby traps on the NVA trail had been set off and that we had hurt one, or more, of them. There were two pools of fresh, still wet, blood on the trail and there were three empty Russian and NVA field dressing packages laying just off the trail—all fresh signs. I briefed my three platoon leaders; my Weapons Platoon was left in support atop Hill 1198. on the way we would go down, what to look for, how to react, and where I expected the trouble to come from. Walter J Bernreuther, the C Company CO, listened in and was prepared to come to our aid if we needed help. Initially he was to secure the trail junction and protect our rear. As I saw it we had to stay on the high ground of the ridge that ran down to the bunker complex. If we got off that ridge, the NVA would get on it and be shooting down at us.

We would have to move extremely slow letting the point men and flankers work well out to give as much warning as possible as to where the contact would develop. We would have to check every tree along the way for snipers. We were just going to have to be damn careful. I knew once we made contact, the NVA would try to flank and surround us. My right flank, the one that would dip down toward the bunker complex, I knew would be the critical flank. All this I passed on the platoon leaders, made sure they understood it and in turn that they went to their men and passed it on.

While the platoon leaders were getting their people ready, Battalion communicated that they had an air strike for me so I got on the radio and had the EAC bring the fighters in on the SW enemy trail and bunker complex. And then we moved out carefully down the jungle covered ridge.

We had not gone over 50 meters when my point element hit the first NVA contact. The point element began firing at the NVA causing them to back-off down the hill. Or were they luring us into an ambush? This was one of their favorite tricks, using people to expose themselves to then get Americans to rush headlong after them and into the "kill zone." I passed this on to the platoon leaders, and we continued to cautiously inch our way down the ridgeline during which we were always in contact with one or two of their outposts with sporadic firing going on. My men moved very well, did not waste ammunition, and began knocking-out the outposts. We got to within about 100 meters of the bunker complex and a machinegun, or automatic rifle, finally stopped the movement of my lead platoon.

The bunker complex was to my right front, still invisible through the trees and jungle, so I maneuvered my second platoon to the right flank of my lead platoon. This would serve a double purpose: (1) the flank movement would eliminate the automatic weapon to the front of my lead platoon and (2) I would have a platoon echeloned to the right front ready to take anything moving at us from the bunker complex. I secured my rear and the trail leading back to the trail junction with my remaining rifle platoon. In fighting the NVA in the Highlands you have to think in terms of 360-degrees defense at all times; especially when you know you are outnumbered. At any rate, at the moment my front, left, right, and rear were all well-covered and each of the platoons were in position to support each other. All the while I had been using my supporting artillery, 4.2 mortars, and 81 mm mortars to match our advance. The fires were falling 50-to-100 meters to the front and flanks of our movement.

Then the enemy small arms fire picked-up in volume, especially to the right front. And then from the same area as before we could hear their mortars begin firing. From that point on we were heavily and totally engaged with the better part of an NVA battalion. As their mortar rounds began to land among us, NVA troops began appearing to the right front and directly in front of us. They were coming out of the bunkers in the deep gully that they had used for protection from our artillery and mortars. Their object was obvious, to get around our right flank and box us in. I moved the 1st Platoon (rear security) to the right rear of our formation, thus making the formation longer and harder for the NVA to get around. At the same time, my two forward observers brought the mortars in on the enemy mortars to our front and brought the artillery in closer on our right flank and also on the NVA trying to flank us. My two right flank platoons were blasting away at the NVA to the right as my lead platoon concentrated on the ones to the front. My Company CP group (eight men: me, my two radio operators, two forward observers and their radio operators, and my senior medic) was between my lead platoon and my right flank platoon. Thus we were in a position to see the whole thing unfold . . . and to catch it from both directions.

Initially, my senior medic went down. (James Alexander Pemberton) He was a large man, nearly 300 pounds and 6'5." He was kind of fat and new; when he got hit he could not or would not, help himself. My two sets of FOs moved to try to get him and this put them on the flank with my 2nd Platoon so they immediately got into a firefight with a couple of NVA that were trying to close-in. A grenade, or B-40 rocket, wounded almost all of them; but a machine gunner kept the NVA off of them; but not before the senior medic had been shot again and killed. Then, as they were trying to make it back being all wounded; a mortar round hit amongst them wounding them all again and killing my 4.2 mortar FO, SGT. Sperling.

All this time heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire was coming in at us, plus their mortars and B-40 rockets. We were giving back as much as we were taking. I then got a call from my rear security/right flank platoon leader who said the NVA were about to get around his position. I called Battalion and asked for C Company to be sent 200 or so meters down the ridge to protect our rear and right flank. This was done and the NVA were prevented from

flanking us. While all this was going on, I had moved further down the ridge with my lead elements intending to get to their mortars only a short distance away. However, we were getting a lot of fire from our front, so my two RTOs and I stopped and began firing down slope where the NVA were concealed. I had emptied my first magazine at them, had my CAR-15 sort of across my body and was about to change magazines. All of a sudden, there was a loud "KA-WHACK" all over me. My CAR-15 was knocked out of my hands in a shower of sparks and pieces of metal; I was knocked over backwards and my left abdomen and upper left leg really began to hurt. I lay there for a moment and my two RTOs flopped down beside me and began firing away at the NVA down slope. I moved my leg a little and it seemed OK, but I was really curious about my stomach. I felt around a bit; did not feel any blood although my shirt was all ripped up. There was not any intense pain so I thought, "Well, I can still move so to hell with it right now. I can not stay here anyway."

I got on the company and battalion radios (my two RTOs stayed right with me the whole time) and got readings from each of my platoons, passed on to Battalion what all was happening, and then I saw two NVA dodging behind the trees and coming upslope at us. I yelled at the RTOs to shoot at them and they sprayed the area. My CAR-15 was of course ruined and useless. We pulled back upslope with some others, as we had been sort of out there by ourselves, and I began trying to get them organized. I was afraid we had left some wounded down slope so I got a small group to go down with me a ways, not far, and some of the men got to several wounded and got them back to a safer area. I told my lead platoon to withdraw sometime during this period, they did, and we all dropped back a little in the face of heavy fire and mortars. Every time we would try to move forward people would get hit. A couple of times we would try to get up and move back down but always the mortars would stop us. All the time groups of NVA would bore into us; the riflemen and machine gunners would blaze away and I would call back to the Weapons Platoon and tell them drop their 81 mm mortars another 50 meters closer to us.

By this time my two right flank platoons were mixed and were in sort of a half-circle to the front and right, and what had been my front platoon was now acting as rear security. We were pinned down by heavy small arms fire, but the riflemen continued to fire away at the advancing NVA. We continued to receive mortar and B-40 rocket rounds. I saw one man get almost a direct hit from one, a big orange flash in front of him that picked him up and laid him out. I still had the notion that we had a few wounded to the front, and I knew we had some dead out there, so I tried to get the people moving down back down. We progressed for a short distance and then had to get down again because of the heavy fire. At this point there was a "flash-bang" in front of me about 15 feet and a fragment from an enemy mortar or rocket hit me in the neck and knocked me off my knees and over backwards. I was kind of shocked and I lay there wondering if I was going to die. "Damn, getting hit in the neck is pretty serious," I thought. I rolled over on my side and watched my blood start dripping onto the leaves on the ground. I studied the dripping intently; it was not spurting, just dripping so I thought it had not hit an artery and I still was OK. Whew!

We still were under heavy small arms fire and the NVA were still trying to rush us on the right front. Every time they would try it, my riflemen and machine gunners would just fire everything they had. We were pinned down again, this time behind a big fallen tree but the C Company CO and one of his platoons had joined my lead elements where I was. His people merged with mine and control was lost between the platoons because they were all mixed. This was terribly frustrating, especially under that heavy fire. I had to get some of the enemy pressure relieved because it was almost impossible to move, especially with the added control problem.

At this juncture I ordered a general withdrawal by leap-frogging backwards. I suspected we had left a lot of our people out in front of us, and the thought sickened me. The heavy enemy pressure continued and I remained with the lead elements and my two RTOs.

I could not see a way of getting back down to where I thought we had left some people. The enemy was still right-up against us, and I realized that had anybody been alive and left down there, the NVA would have killed them by now. Then Col. Taylor called and told me he had two helicopter gunships orbiting over us and did I want to use them? To have them come in I would have to shut off all supporting fires, precious time would be used up while I directed them in, and during that period the NVA might try to overrun us. That was the hardest decision of the whole day; but I brought them in, 50 meters closer with each pass. Soon I had their rockets, 40mm grenades, and machine guns firing right in front of us. There is a peculiar odor in the air when bodies are blown up, and after those gunships got through that was the predominant smell in the air. We still were under heavy sniper fire, but the enemy mortars and rockets had stopped firing and we were able to begin extricating ourselves. I started the artillery and mortars firing again. At about this time, a man to my right in the 1st Platoon was hit in the chest by a sniper and he fell down kicking like a jackrabbit---horrible.

Heavy fire was beginning again. The C Company commander, Walt Bernreuther, who was right beside me, and who had been hit in the back already, received a second bullet through his helmet and into his head. I turned to tell him something, saw that he was dead, and went back to my radios; adjusting mortar fire and getting status reports. Things were terribly confusing by then, but I finally got it ironed out that my platoons had managed to withdraw with their wounded through the C Company platoons who were now blocking for us. I then began moving the C Company platoons back toward the trail junction.

Once there, C Company set-up a perimeter angled back down toward the SW. I got my people's status and discovered that we had *all* our wounded. We had left no one alive but *had* left our six dead. Five were from A Company and one was Capt. Bernreuther. Again I was almost sick, but it would have meant more lives to have tried to remain and retrieve our dead.

At this juncture D Company joined us after moving down off Hill 1198. They killed a few snipers on the way down and as they joined us the NVA tried to move in again. Everybody cut loose and they did not try it again although a few times we had to systematically spray the trees to clear out snipers.

We got our badly wounded on litters and began moving back up towards Hill 1198; carrying the litters and the walking wounded moving with the unhurt troops. It was just dark as we closed into the LZ on top of Hill 1198. There we got medevac helicopters in to evacuate our wounded. The medics dressed my wounds and I waited for the last medevac ship out.

We had lost five men from Company A killed and 16 wounded. C Company had lost one killed (their CO) and only a few wounded. D Company had one man killed and a few wounded. To me those numbers were amazing. I could hardly believe that was all that had been lost although my 21 casualties comprised approximately 1/3 of the men in the rifle platoons and 1/4 of my entire Company's field strength. So we had been hurt.

The enemy had been hurt far worse, however. Over 3,000 rounds of artillery and mortar fire were delivered in close support of us from about 1215 hours until 1845 hours; six and a half hours of fighting. That broke down to 1,500 rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition (a fantastic amount, three separate emergency requests were flown in), 1000 rounds of 4.2 mortars, and 533 rounds of 105mm artillery. Plus, we had the one air strike in the beginning and had two

gunships later in the middle of the contact. We had 48 enemy killed confirmed from riflemen who shot them, another 35 “probably killed,” and an unknown number killed from all the supporting fire thrown in. But our men who were killed, my men, can never be replaced. That is war, however; I realize men will be lost, but when I think about it, it makes me ill. So I try not to think about it, but of course I do.

I was told by all my men that I did a fine job during the fight. They would come up to me and shake my hand and tell me to hurry up and get back to them. They were so sincere, I guess that is a commander’s greatest reward; the close bond of mutual respect between the CO and his men. My platoon leaders gathered around me too. Shook my hand, told me to hurry and get back; told me I did an outstanding job; that I was extremely brave to keep functioning though hit twice, etc. I do not think I was particularly brave; I was just doing my damndest to stay alive!

I was flown out on the last medevac that night and was taken to Pleiku where they operated on me. They took the shrapnel out of my neck and cleaned out the hole in my leg. The shrapnel in my neck, the surgeon told me later, was a fraction of an inch from the carotid artery. Had it hit the artery I would have bled to death in three minutes.

Likewise, I was extremely fortunate with the leg wound. Apparently I caught a burst of automatic fire from a machine gun or automatic rifle, probably three rounds. All of them hit my rifle and went through it; one hit a grenade on my belt and went through it; one hit my belt buckle and put a big dent in it. Those two put large bruises on my stomach but did not penetrate. The third bullet ricocheted down after hitting my rifle and put the flesh wound in my leg, about the size of an oblong silver dollar. My left wrist and forearm were cut-up by bullet fragments that exploded off my rifle; they are not serious wounds at all. And I had another shrapnel wound in my left forearm; a very minor flesh wound; in and out. I guess my neck was the most serious; I have got seven stitches in it now. They are going to sew-up my leg tomorrow, do not know how many stitches it will take. I also do not know how long they will keep me in the hospital. I am certainly not hurting at all however. Probably should not be here much over 10 days. I am up and all over the place and am enjoying the rest I get, too.

Today, Brigadier General Hickman (4th Division Assistant CO) gave a lot of us Purple Hearts. He sat down and talked to me for about 20 minutes; wanted to know all about the fight. Said it was a “good action”, whatever that means. Purely militarily speaking I suppose it was; but had he been along for the “good action” I do not think he would have particularly enjoyed it. They seem to lose sight of that part the further away from it they get.

God was certainly with us, he just had His arms all around us. At one point during the fight I stopped and thought, “Am I going to make it?” And I *knew* that I would. God was right there.

10 April, 1968

Well, today they sewed-up my leg, seven stitches and it hurts worse now than before. Really tight feeling, but the doctor says that will go away soon. I am still hobbling around. Some of my friends from the 1/35th Infantry came by today and took me over to Pleiku Air Force Base and we had a hamburger. Sure was *good*!

No more for now except that for the last four days I have tried to get through to you all via MARS, to no avail. You are never home! The time I can call you is between noon and about 3:00 PM (your time). Hope I get to talk to with you. By the way, it will be another 10 days before

they pull these stitches. So I probably will not be back to my company for 10-14 days. Hope this time passes quickly; at least I will get a good, solid rest.

You all take care and know that I love you and miss you, Take care and God be with you.

Dick

P.S. Do not worry about me folks. I am a pretty tough critter.

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