



# 2/503d VIETNAM Newsletter



September 2009 / Issue 5

*For the men, and their families, of the 2d Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep) ~ We Try Harder!*

## SGT Israel Garcia, KIA

SGT Israel Garcia, Long Beach, CA, was KIA on 13 July 2008, in Afghanistan while serving with C/2/503d. On Saturday, August 29, 2009, at the Joint Forces Training Base at Los Alamitos, CA, there was a posthumous award of the Silver Star. His wife, Mrs. Lesly Garcia, received the award. Members of Chapter 14, Southern California Chapter, Association of the 173d Airborne Brigade, held a "Special Meeting" that morning at the Joint Training Base. Chapter 14 provided the 173d Colors for the US Army Honor Guard and Chapter 14 President, Mr. Wambi Cook, A/2/503d presented a 173d flag to Mrs. Garcia as part of the ceremony. Ray Ramirez, HHC & D 4/503d, presented Mrs. Garcia with a Medallion from the 173d Airborne Brigade National Memorial Foundation during the ceremony.



place to reflect. It's time to change that. We are the ones to change it.

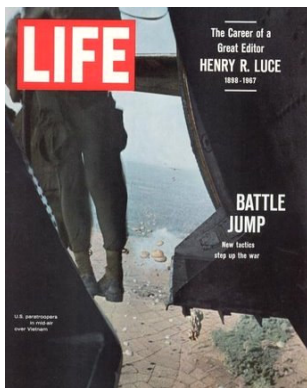
The 173d Airborne Brigade Memorial will be located at a prime site on the *Walk of Honor* at the nation's new National Infantry Museum, immediately adjacent to Fort Benning, Georgia.



## Operation Junction City

In February 1967, the 2/503d made the only U.S. mass parachute combat jump in Vietnam, the largest U.S. airborne operation since Operation Market Garden during World War II. In a future issue of our Newsletter we will feature this Operation and the men who participated in that historical jump.

Troopers: If you made the jump please send in your recollections along with any photos you wish to share. Email to: [rto173d@cfl.rr.com](mailto:rto173d@cfl.rr.com)



The 173d has many markers and monuments. Its Medal of Honor recipients are recognized throughout the nation. Our fallen comrades are named in state memorials and on *The Wall*, but, there is no place where all this comes together, no place to tell our story. This is our chance to be honored as one unit, the finest airborne troops in history. Dedication of the Memorial is scheduled for 1 June 2010, at 1000 Hrs. Contact Ken Smith with any questions: [kvsmith173@embargmail.com](mailto:kvsmith173@embargmail.com)

Donations are needed to complete our Memorial. Please send your tax-deductible check or money order payable to the "173d Airborne Brigade National Memorial Foundation", to:

**Ken Smith, 1160 Lake Road, Louisburg, NC 27549**

The 173d Airborne Brigade National Memorial Foundation is incorporated in the State of Georgia and is a IRS Non-Profit 501(C)3 organization.

## Corrections

In Issue 4 of our Newsletter, the last names of Jarad **Monti** (KIA), and Hassan **Fardan** were misspelled. Les Fuller reports the fee assessed by attorney's processing disability claims with Social Security is 25%, not to exceed \$5300. of the initial award. Thanks Les. See SSD claims in Issue 4, Page 7 of our Newsletter.

## The 173d Airborne Brigade Memorial

We have fought for our nation around the globe with no place in American to call our own. We have left our mark on history, and we need a place in which to preserve our legacy. We remember, but we have no



## Operation Silver City – Part II



## 2/503d VIETNAM Newsletter

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This is the second and final part of the report taken from the story, *The Battle at Bau San*, which appeared in Issue 4 of our Newsletter. Where the report left off, the 2d Bat had just come under attack by an unknown enemy force surrounding LZ Zulu-Zulu in the dense jungle of War Zone “D”. A Cowboy chopper had been shot down at the end of the LZ to open the battle. Fortunately for the men of the 2d Battalion, they were still in their nighttime defensive positions when the Viet Cong’s 271<sup>st</sup> Main Force Regiment prematurely opened their attack around the landing zone, and were fanatically committed to overrunning these Sky Soldiers.

**After Action Report:** “The area just north of the Song Be River in Long Khanh Province was believed to hold the Headquarters of the Viet Cong Military Region Seven and its affiliated organizations and installations. The objective of Operation “SILVER CITY” was to locate and destroy or capture all personnel, equipment and intelligence material of this headquarters.”

*“They took us in trucks that morning to the Air Base nearby, each of us loaded down with gear, already drenched in sweat from the humidity. A sickly, quiet calm seemed to envelop us; each in his own thoughts, each of us not knowing what to expect. But, we knew whatever it was it wouldn’t be good. We had gone through this routine before as we would many times throughout the year. As always, I looked up and down the long line of choppers cranking up their engines with the sticks of men ready to board and, as always, thought ‘some of you fuckers aren’t coming back alive’. It was never me, I knew I was always coming back alive – we all thought that.”* **Lew Smith**

*“Closing into Zulu-Zulu the late afternoon before 16 Mar 66, we found several heavy-duty bicycles. We needed to watch where we stepped or sat because of all the piles of human shit on the ground left there by the NVA and VC, in addition to sardine tins and wrappings from their rations.”* **Gus Vendetti**

*“The night (March 15/16) was sleepless; even aside from the few 75mm shells we were taking sporadically, something just felt wrong.... The radios came to life. The voice of 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Jackson, ‘Hammer’ they called him, rang through the handset. He was trying to get a Chopper in to pick up*



Desmond “Hammer” Jackson

*one of the boys. I forget how long it took for the Dustoff to get to Zulu-Zulu, it seems like only minutes in my memory; it must have been a lifetime to the wounded trooper. The pilot got close and then I heard him refuse to drop into the LZ. Who could blame him? He was over triple canopy jungle in pitch darkness with artillery shells being lobbed in around him. Did 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. light a flare? Can’t recall, but I don’t think so. Land his Huey in a tiny opening in this pitch dark jungle and escape? ‘No!’ the pilot said again. 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. talked to the pilot as if he were standing right next to me; it seemed as though he didn’t even need the radio. ‘I got a boy here with both his legs gone’. Powerful, resolute, resilient; Hammer could be heard across the LZ and up into the night. He talked that pilot through his fear of the canopy, down onto the LZ and got that trooper onto the Huey and away into the night... and he never raised his voice.”*

**Wayne Hoitt**



*“That morning, to the best of my recollection, we were given the order to (I can’t remember what that was called), to search or check the area in front of our position. I was pissed, I just got my heat tablet going to heat up my chocolate drink for breakfast. So, the squad saddled-up and we moved out. I had such a weird feeling; it was so quiet, not even the birds were moving. No sooner had we got back when all hell broke loose. I was positioned under this fallen tree, so I dove down. I wasn’t about to let my hot cocoa go to waste! Weirdest thing, completely calm, I sipped hot chocolate and ate my cookie! That lasted about 20 seconds when I watched Jim Gettel’s hammock bounce around and get drilled with machine gun fire.”* **Jack Ribera**



*“It took but a few minutes before I saw them coming through the bushes, heading straight towards us. Talk about my heart running a race! These weren’t VC, they were North Vietnamese Regulars, recognizable by their light green uniforms and the characteristic helmets. Fortunately, they hadn’t seen us yet and were walking upright. As they were drawing closer and closer, I waited desperately for someone to open fire on them; nobody did. Damn it! – does nobody see them but me? – What is everybody waiting for? – I don’t want to be the first one to shoot and give away my machine gun position. Please God, don’t let me get killed today, I made it so far, help me get through this! When they were as close as, say 30 or 40 feet, I couldn’t take the*







responsibility to wait any longer, I had to make the decision; I picked out the easiest target, aimed, pulled the trigger and let go, releasing burst after burst after burst...everyone joining in now."

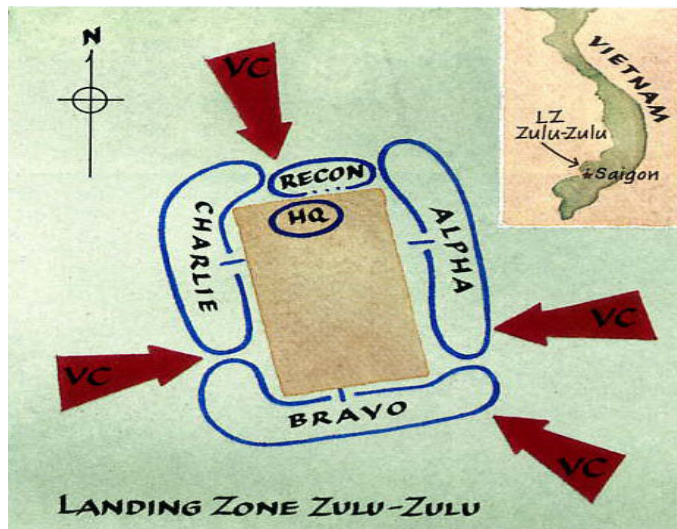
**Herbert Murhammer**

"Some hours later John T and I ran out of ammo, as did a lot of the guys. I was picked to go get more and off I went, hell bent for leather. As I was returning I could see the guys motioning me to get down – all hell broke loose and I was knocked backwards. Seems two rounds hit my steel pot." **James Bailey**

"My Platoon Sergeant, a Filipino (later wounded and medi-vac'd), had dug in for the night near our right flank where he tied-in with Weapons Platoon. He had come to my location for a coordination meeting, and seeing trash being thrown into my no-longer-to-be-used prone shelter, decided to shit there rather than dig a cat hole. When the chopper got shot down and we came under moderate to heavy fire, I dove back in my prone shelter. To my immediate left was a pile of Filipino excrement. My Platoon Sergeant hit the ground to my right, outside the hole, and said 'Move over!' I said, 'Bullshit, jump over me!' Needless to say, he lay in his own shit for the next 30-40 minutes." **Gus Vendetti**

"Knowing we were running out of ammo along our line we went out and procured as much of the ammo as we could carry, then headed back toward our lines. On our way back there we came across a wounded GI laying on the trail; we dropped the ammo, picked him up and hauled him back down to the LZ, went back to get the ammo then returned to our position." **Mike Sturges**

"Midway in the battle, some of the wounded along the perimeter started screaming that they were being shot from above, so the word went out for M-79 grenadiers to blast the surrounding trees. As they did so, some snipers started falling out of the tree lofts riddled with 40mm fragments." **Tom Faley**



"We helped with resupply after we ran out of ammo, and when they would drop some ammo which wasn't all messed up, we would break it down for the line companies 81's and our 81's. We did that until we were all wounded. Richard Fred, who was my gunner, was hit in the leg and eye. I was hit the first time at that same time." **Chuck Guy**

"From all around me came the sounds of LMG fire, HMG fire, the explosive 'crump' of hand grenades with their deafening sound, followed seconds later with the answering, death-giving sound of 600 M-16's and 22 M-60 MG's. There was little time to reflect on why I joined the army, volunteered to become a paratrooper, later graduating from OCS to become an army officer. This personal introduction to war would require the utmost of me and every man at this surrounded landing zone." **Bill Vose**

"There was a lot of shooting on my left front, and a heavy machine gun was firing from our right flank. The first time I saw NVA they were moving across our front from left to right. I could see 4-5 moving abreast, like they were on a skirmish line. My guys opened-up on them and one went down, but the rest kept moving across our front, about 20 to 30 feet in front of us. One of our machine gunners, Richard Renfro, zeroed in on them and it seemed they suddenly figured out the trace of our platoon line. They turned and came at us in a close assault. Renfro was standing up on a termite mound and placing very effective fire on them, dropping them as close as 10 feet from our perimeter." **Gus Vendetti**

"From my front there was all sorts of incoming fire. My squad was the connecting squad with Company C. From the front I could hear the NVA giving orders and rushing our line. To my right one trooper was yelling, 'Firers, watch your lanes!' C.C. Walker (KIA) was shot in the forehead – I suspect by a sniper. Later, as ammo resupply was being brought forward, William Gossett (KIA) was also shot in the head in the same location."

**Joe Logan**

"The scene that is most etched in my memory is of the tree directly behind our 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad lighting up like a giant Christmas tree with bright white lights surrounded in puffs of white smoke. I have my own thoughts as to the source of the lights, but probably best not to speculate too much. The end result was that all of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad and FDC were wounded. Thankfully, none of them were KIA, but as best I could determine, everyone with our platoon's guns, except my squad, was out of action." **John Nix**





*"On one of my dances around the perimeter I came across a young, black soldier with a gut wound, his head propped against a tree, his German Shepard scout dog obediently and calmly lying at his feet even though incoming rounds continued to zing right over our heads. I crawled over to him and held his hand for a moment, telling him he would be alright and we would get him out of there, but not believing it. He couldn't speak, but looked at me through helpless eyes. Someone had already placed a makeshift bandage on his wound. There was no way he could be moved at that time in the battle – I squeezed his hand before leaving him, thinking he would die for sure."* **Lew Smith**

*"I remember the wounded black brother on the front line, I don't remember the dog though. I for all these years wondered if he'd survived. I don't remember even trying to mend him or to get someone to patch him up. My main concern was to get the ammo back to our brothers in between getting shot at. Fuck, that was scary!!"* **A. B. Garcia**

*"I had one 20 round mag left for my M16 and a grenade or two, as did most of the rest of the guys. I vividly recall the chopper taking fire and going down near my platoon's location. Truman Thomas was on my platoon – we had two squads set up along the edge of the clearing manning a pair of 81mm mortars or piss tubes as we preferred to call them. Fairly early on in the battle Ray Thomas and a bunch of other guys in our platoon were wounded by that strafing pass. By the end of the battle, between getting strafed and taking other incoming, nearly half of the guys in our platoon were wounded."* **Don Rice**



*"At times it was almost like an aerial parking lot (above Zulu-Zulu) as fighter-bombers and helicopter gun ships jockeyed in the sky, awaiting orders to attack. The real key was the amount of firepower we put on the targets that day."* **Don Bliss/Brigade Aviation**

*"I started returning fire with my M-16 and pistol, but it seems all that did was anger the gunner and attract his attention to me; I heard them whoosh over my head and then they started to get lower, beginning to kick-up dirt in front of me. While turning to my left side to reload, I saw rounds coming, taking shovelfuls of dirt with them. Then I felt something warm in my right leg, then in my right side, then my right arm, and then I felt sick!"*

**Bill Vose**

*"I volunteered because I felt I had a score to settle with the VC machine gunner. On my way out I came across a friend named Willie Monroe who had been shot across the forehead, but he wasn't dead. I took time to call the medics and talked to him for a few minutes. The medics took him to the Medivac....I continued out to the other side of the tree and spotted the sniper. He was positioned in a tree about 10 meters from the 50 caliber machine gun. After shooting the sniper I continued to the 50 caliber machine gun. They must have been the last two out there."* **Freddie Parks**



*"The battle raged on for hours with ammunition becoming quickly depleted. On one occasion during the firefight a flicker of light gleamed from the skies above that appeared to be an aircraft. We called in air support and marked the area with smoke grenades for the plane to help assist with, hopefully, disengaging the enemy's attack. I heard explosions and saw dust coming towards me. I quickly ducked when the 20mm cannon shells intended to help us actually hit us. There were wounded people all around but I can't recall there being any panic."* **A.B. Garcia**

*"I'll never forget when a Major came over to the tree where all the wounded were being assembled and told me to get all the walking wounded to fix bayonets and to be prepared to react to any breach in the lines with a bayonet counter attack."* **Chuck Guy**



**Wounded troopers at LZ Zulu-Zulu, waiting for dustoff.  
Photo by Wayne Hoitt**





*"We brought the ammo back to the Bn HQ where it was grabbed and moved forward before we could set it down....it was truly an honor and a privilege to have been there and to have known and served with such men." John Nix*

*"The Vietnamese kept coming even when it was obvious they were losing – they didn't have radios and couldn't call off the assault. Afterward, one dead VC soldier was found chained to his machine-gun. The courage of my soldiers is what I recall most about that fight. I don't think I'll ever be in such fine company again."*

**Tom Faley**

*"I'm sure they (chopper pilots) were concentrating on keeping that chopper in the air and they cut the load of ammo loose a bit late and it dropped into the jungle between us and the VC. A.B. Garcia, John Nix and I decided to retrieve it – we were all so low on ammo that we figured we didn't have much to lose. I have often thought of that brave crew aboard the Huey and wondered who they were and if they were ever turning point in the course of the battle – without it our portion of the perimeter might have been overrun." Don Rice*

*"On the ground, things were so hot that supply helicopters couldn't land. The crews had to swoop over and throw out pallets of ammunition. Many casualties occurred as men crawled into the open to retrieve those crates. One out of every four of my men were wounded. That shows the intensity of this battle. One soldier carried on even after his jaw was shot away by a bullet. He looked at me and gave me the 'thumbs-up' sign. I'll never forget that." Tom Faley*



**Chargin' Charlies at LZ Zulu-Zulu, 16 Mar 66.**  
Photo by Wayne Hoitt

*"We found other young boys killed by our fire when we counter-attacked. The VC had tied them to trees, leaving their arms free to fire a rifle but tying their*

*bodies upright with the knots on the other side of the tree so they couldn't reach them before we came upon them."*  
**Desmond Jackson**

*"Going into the second hour, I start making bargains with God. Some of us make them sooner than that. I was trying to find some bargaining chip I could use to bargain with God to spare me in this particular fierce fire fight. After all, I was only 22 and my father (Anthony Geishauser) was killed at the same age on Iwo Jima in 1945. While it seemed like we were all looking over the edge of Hell that day, just about everything worked in our favor at the end...Any place in the perimeter that would have been breached would have caused havoc with the whole battalion"*

**Tony Geishauser/Cowboys**

*"The LT's RTO took an RPG thru the radio on his back. His lungs and heart where plastered all over Southerd's front." Tom Wallace*

*"We pushed out as far into the brush as our numbers permitted. It was thick. It made it a close-range fight at hand grenade distance in some places." John Walsh*

*"After the shooting had definitely ceased, there was a moment of absolute silence. No sound out front, no sound within, silence! Just as though nobody could believe that it was over, afraid of stirring up everything anew by making the slightest rustle. It was only after at least two or three minutes of this complete silence that I dared to take a breather, to cautiously raise my head by no more than an inch and, eyes squinted, look around, totally scared of what I might see. Boy, was I relieved to see that, at least in my immediate vicinity, everybody seemed to be alright. "Stevie P" Steets gave me a "thumbs up" sign, and David "Jody" Canady flashed the gap between his two front teeth out of his black face." Herbert Murhammer*

*"The scene of the battle was awesome. From the edges of the LZ into the brush the vegetation was brutalized. Trees were nibbled, split and shredded by bullets and shrapnel. The litter of the battle was everywhere: empty shell casings, cardboard ammo and C Ration cartons, commo wire, used battle dressings, dark blood-soaked sand and bits of dried flesh." Jim Bethea*







**Pop smoke for dustoff! 16 Mar 66. Photo by Wayne Hoitt**

*"The next day as we headed out we came across one of our guys (with no head). We carried him to the next LZ (still do not know who he was). This really didn't sit well with the guys and I do believe that because of that trooper everyone changed that day."* **James Bailey**

*"The firefight finally came to a halt and we proceeded to medivac all our wounded brothers from Zulu-Zulu; chopper after chopper, until all were extracted to hospitals for treatment."* **A.B. Garcia**



**Dustoff at Zulu-Zulu, 16 Mar 66. Photo by Wayne Hoitt**

*"Except for Phillips, I honest to God don't remember the name of another G.I. that day who Jack and I carried, between running ammo and helping other wounded. 'Holy fuck!' is all Jack and I said to each other, too exhausted to say anything else."* **Mike Sturges**

*"There was no validity to the mission for starters, and most any unit but the 2/503d would have been decimated."* **Bob Carmichael**

*"I later wrote up Vose and Renfro for the Distinguished Service Cross for their heroic actions that morning. Renfro eventually received a Silver Star. Sometime later*

*he went AWOL to Europe for two months to be with his wife. When he came back he got busted, made the rank of Sergeant again, and was later killed. Following the battle a dead VC was found shackled by his neck and chained to the heavy machine gun Vose and his men took out. Bill and his men were awarded Bronze Stars for their heroic actions."* **Gus Vendetti**

*"In May of 1968, after I received a direct commission, I was attending the Officer Basic Course at Fort Benning. In the class on the 'Battalion in Defense', they were using the battle of Zulu-Zulu as the example."*

**Joe Logan**

In August 1967, President Lyndon Johnson awarded the 2<sup>d</sup> Battalion, 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, and attached units the *Presidential Unit Citation* for extraordinary heroism at LZ Zulu-Zulu. This citation is the highest unit award made to any army organization. *"The paratroopers of the 2<sup>d</sup> Battalion can be forever proud that they never yielded a meter of their perimeter throughout the five-hour battle at Zulu-Zulu."*



**Photo taken from the wallet of a dead VC following the battle at Zulu-Zulu. Photo provided by Tom Faley**

**Observation:** Some years following the war it was reported the objective of the enemy was to overrun the LZ and destroy all troopers there. They had been monitoring our search and destroy patterns for days, and knew we were prone to sending out company-sized patrols after being settled the previous night. Their plan called for allowing these patrols to pass through their lines before attacking the remaining troops at the landing zone, and, once successful, their attention would be turned to the isolated patrolling companies. The signal to commence the attack on the LZ was to have been one of their heavy machine guns opening-up on the troopers left to defend Zulu-Zulu. Whether luck or fate, their plan was side-tracked. A resupply helicopter had been







dispatched to Zulu-Zulu carrying hot eggs for breakfast. The 2/503d commander, LTC Walsh, kept the battalion's perimeter in place, delaying the company-sized search and destroy missions, and instead sent out squad-sized clearing patrols. As the helicopter approached Zulu-Zulu it is believed by many that one enemy machine gunner may have mistook the *whoop whoop* sound of the chopper blades for that of the machine gun signal to open the attack, or just couldn't resist such an easy target, and himself began firing, shooting the chopper out of the sky as it was attempting to land. Others believe when an early a.m. patrol from "B" Co. was ambushed, this alerted the enemy machine gunner and he opened-up on the chopper. Battalion radio logs have the patrol leaving the LZ at 0710 Hrs. and the chopper being destroyed and the attack on the LZ commencing at 0725 Hrs. with no mention of the patrol. Both actions could well have occurred simultaneously. Regardless of how the battle began, once this initial firing started, the battalion was attacked from all sides. It is not unreasonable to believe the 2/503d could have been at substantial risk of being totally destroyed had our perimeter not been kept in place for the simple delivery of a hot breakfast.



Honoring our fallen at Camp Zinn.

Photo by Tom Goodwin

## Operation Silver City

U.S. KIA: 19  
U.S. WIA: 200+ (2d Bat only)  
Enemy KIA: 400+ Est'd. (Zulu-Zulu)

*"The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) Operation SILVER CITY....The combination of Viet Cong killed, equipment destroyed or captured, installations discovered and intelligence information captured makes SILVER CITY one of the most successful operations ever conducted in Vietnam. Brigade forces continued to effectively exercise the three most important capabilities of Civic Action/ Psychological Operations, Intelligence Gathering, and Tactical Operations concurrently." CG*

In 2005, following a 2 ½ hour hump into the "D" Zone jungle when 2/503d troopers Bill Vose, Gus Vendetti and Lew Smith arrived LZ Zulu-Zulu, they were welcomed back by....

## The Ghosts of Zulu-Zulu

*"Hello brothers, we've been waiting for your return, we knew you would come back one day. It's been many years since we were last here together, and much has changed since that early morning when we were all boys fighting these other boys. How senseless we all were then. Tell us man is no longer making war. Tell us we gave up our lives for something good. Our fear has been gone for such a long time now, and we've come to call this jungle our home. It's not so bad really, so don't feel sad for us. Our only regret is not having lived full lives, not having returned home to our parents, our brothers, sisters, wives and, for some of us, our children. Can you tell us about our wives and children? Did our children grow to be good people? Are they happy? In some ways we are better off than each of you today. Today we see your remorse, we feel your sorrow and your pain, we share your heavy hearts while we rejoice in your lives, and your tears are understood. You may or may not remember our names or our faces, you remember us only as brothers, as we remember you. When you leave this place today we hope you leave behind that part of you which has troubled you for so long. It is time for you to close this period in your life, it is time for you to move on, to revel in living, the living, and not us, the dead."*



Gus Vendetti, Bill Vose & Lew Smith on hump into the "D" Zone in search of LZ Zulu-Zulu.  
*Moses never looked like this!*





**This old girl has seen and survived many wars.**

This building really doesn't give a damn who seeks refuge within her confines; she will simply open her arms over the next 200 years to the newest cadre of battlefield winners and losers. And, in tens of tens of years from now an old warrior will return here, and while sipping his coffee in this serene outdoor enclave he will reflect on the warriors before him and wonder of those to come. This old majestic lady welcomes all to the comfort of her bosom, friend and foe alike. She is indeed one of the very arteries pumping blood and life into this ancient city. She smiles at the new Hyatt Hotel going up next door with its modern trappings and cookie-cutter-like façade. *"You are a façade,"* she tells her new neighbor. *"When you are long gone, and your walls have turned to dust, and that dust has been blown away, my walls will still be standing,"* Miss Continental tells her friend. *"For you see, this is my city, I am Vietnam, and you are welcome only to visit here."*

### He Ain't Gonna Jump No More!

A cherry paratrooper and his dad were sitting on the porch talking about his first jump. *"I was all excited about my first jump. Jumping out of a plane and all made me pretty excited but when the green light came on I couldn't jump,"* said the cherry. His dad said, *"Well,*



*what happened?"* The paratrooper continued, *"Well, the Jump Master came up behind me and whipped out his manhood and said if I didn't jump he'd ram it up my butt."* His dad asked, *"Did you jump?"* The paratrooper said, *"Only a little, at first."*

**Feet and knees together.**  
*Yeah, right.*



### WAS IT ALL A DREAM?

Sometimes, usually during the early morning hours before dawn, I ask myself if that war and my small participation in it were nothing more than a dream. These thought-provoking moments mostly occur as I study our photos from that era, photos of you and me and of our buddies, some dead – pictures in black and white of very young men in a strange and distant land, young men with strange and distant faces. Oft times, these faces are smiling, hopeful, even happy faces, while other times these same young faces cover sorrow, exhaustion and despair. And while studying these seconds of our history captured on film, I keenly take-in the detail of these prints of that chapter of our history; the little known details those who were not there would never recognize. If it is a dream, the dream is so complete with detail. The new fatigues and jungle boots which announce the arrival of a "cherry" or new replacement; the washed-out cammo'd pot cover which speaks of many battles the wearer had survived to those seconds when his buddy snapped that photo; so many faces, so many missions, all which seem to run together. During the infrequent times we tell our "war stories", those stories often begin with *"It was somewhere and sometime in Vietnam"*. Our stories begin that way because the dream may not be of a single occurrence or place or time – the dream is elongated, it consists of many months, many battles, many locations, many people and many hardships we all endured and survived, most survived. We study these images of ourselves and as we do this, we question their very reality. For most of us the dream was one year out of our young lives, for a few of us it was multiple years – a very long dream, indeed. God, we were so young, so strong, sometimes brave, yet always afraid. *Was it all a dream?*

**2/503d Sky Soldier**

### Our Newsletter

Please send all stories, opinions and other submissions, including photos (JPEG), to [rto173d@cfl.rr.com](mailto:rto173d@cfl.rr.com) This Newsletter will be issued periodically. If you do not wish to receive the Newsletter please send a note to the above email address. *Airborne! All the way!!*



## Retired Chaplains Corner



## 2/503d VIETNAM Newsletter

September 2009 / Issue 5

Recently I was honored to perform a wedding for a good friend, Jim, and his beautiful bride Sonda. Since my retirement from the job as a Pastor, I rarely do weddings. I had made a promise to Jim that I would do his wedding if he ever found a soul mate.



My friend is a former Army Ranger so the job fit my commitment since retirement to continue my support of the military, past, present and future. It seems that now days I feel more at home in the company of old military friends. I see many of us returning to the family we embraced as young soldiers. This is familiar territory for us older warriors in a time when changes are occurring quicker then most of us are ready to accept.

I felt very nervous around all the people at the wedding. In recent years my anxiety has become more pronounced and helped influenced my decision to retire. Since the war, too many of us struggle with social issues. We are the ones who sit with our backs to the wall, preferably in a corner. A good education helped me with my trade, but I never quite got over being a grunt.

After the ceremony, I quietly strolled out to the back porch of the reception hall. The weather this time of the year is cool in Wyoming. The golfers were busy putting golf balls out on the beautiful greens in Cody, Wyoming. I remember learning in Sniper School that looking at the color green is supposed to have a relaxing affect on the eyes.

I heard the door open behind me. Out walked a tall kid with a tight haircut who respectfully nodded at me and moved to the other corner of the porch with a drink in hand. For some reason, I felt drawn to this young man, and soon found myself engaged in conversation with him.

Turns out this young man had served three tours with the Marines in the Sandbox. He was with the 3rd battalion 1<sup>st</sup> Marines and combined forces that marched through the Sunni city of Fullujah, Iraq. The Marines earned a Presidential Citation for their efforts in some of the most brutal fighting of the war.

I shared a little of my own story with this young Marine, mostly the problems I had adjusting to civilian life after the war. He listened while I spoke, looking out on the green with that far-away stare. Then he told me he had left the Marines because they had refused to give him another combat assignment due to problems with PTSD.

He left the Marines at the end of his term disgruntled and traveled to Alaska to seek isolation. He confessed that anxiety was eating him up and that he really didn't like being around people. I noticed some anger in his words about the Marines not needing him anymore. I listened quietly, then, verified his state of mind by telling him he was in good company with me and that I had spent a lifetime living in a world that few really understand; the world of the combat veteran.

When I left the back porch to join the gleeful wedding guests, my new young friend followed me inside. I had him promise me that he would come and see me when the snow shuts his job down in Alaska. Since the groom is his uncle, he has a familiar place to return to, and his uncle and now older brother, me, will be waiting when he returns. I hope I am able to get him the help he needs early in life, unlike those of us who did the best we could with the few tools we had at our disposal. The understanding of PTSD has come a long way since our war.

Retirement is much better when one has a purpose. Our PTSD, *the gift that keeps on giving*, may come to serve us in ways we never imagine. Share your story with the younger brothers and sisters returning from war. You may find your story could act as a bridge to greater understanding and healing for them and yourself as well.

**Rev. Michael "Mac" McMillan, Retired  
4/503d**



2/503d Chapel at Camp Zinn, 1965-1967

***"AND CROWN THY GOOD  
WITH BROTHERHOOD  
FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA"***

## SKY SOLDIER EXTRAORDINAIRE



### *Sgt. Gary Cox*



Sergeant Gary Cox, better known as “Buzz” to his friends and war buddies, has lived in Cross Junction, Virginia, for the past 25 years following his return home to Illinois after his service with Charlie and Delta Companies of the 2d Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep), in the Republic of Vietnam. Gary and his lovely wife, Linda, have three daughters and ten grand children.



Following the war Gary worked in computer operations while attending college. Upon earning his degree in Computer Technology, Buzz opened and ran his own computer support business for a number of years. Much of his time today is spent on computerized photo restoration, and he just recently completed his second term as the Commander of the American Legion Post 021, in Winchester, VA.

A proud paratrooper, Sergeant Cox is a highly-decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, where he served in combat with distinction, honor and exceptional bravery with his fellow Sky Soldiers. For his heroic actions during the battles at Hill 875 at Dak To in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in 1967, Gary was the recipient of the Silver Star, the third highest medal for valor awarded to combat veterans by the U.S. Army. His other awards and decorations include the Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB), the Parachutist Badge,

the Bronze Star Medal w/Valor Device, the Purple Heart, the Presidential Unit Citation, the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry Unit Citation w/Palm, and the Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Medal w/Palm. *“Some might find it interesting that my birthday is 19 Nov 1947, as it was on that day, the 19<sup>th</sup> of November in 1967, we started up Hill 875, my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.”* Gary says he will never forget the men who walked up that Hill with him, so many never to return.

Gary likes to end his correspondences with:

*“I am too positive to be doubtful.  
Too optimistic to be fearful.  
Too determined to be defeated.”*

Yes, that best describes Gary, our friend and brother, who we thank for his honorable service to his unit and his country.

*Airborne Buzz!*

