

Rick Patterson, A/2/503d

I am writing in response to a request for recollections from the Battle of the Slopes on June 22, 1967. As a survivor from the battle, I have attached my recollections and an article from *Stars & Stripes* regarding SP4 Reynolds. The more I thought about that day the more I found myself writing. I thought you would find the story on Reynolds interesting because he risked his life to save mine and in the process was saved from serious injury by his pocket Bible from a bullet that was meant for me.



Rick, ready to blast

Memories of SP4 Richard E. Patterson Senior Medic, Alpha Company 2/503d Battle of the Slopes

The Battle of the Slopes is well documented by Edward Murphy in *Dak To: America's Sky Soldiers in South Vietnam's Central Highlands*. I was the senior medic assigned to Alpha Company 2/503, and one of the survivors from the Battle of the Slopes. Hardly a day goes by that I don't relive the events of that day, as well as reflect on the incredible heroism by the men of Alpha Company against overwhelming odds. While there are

many historic battles from the Vietnam War, I would have to believe that the casualties suffered by Alpha Company in the course of this one battle were the highest of the war.

After spending several days in the hills to the west of Dak To, June 22nd was supposed to be no more than a march back to base camp at Dak To. In the several days leading up to June 22nd I, as well as everyone else in the company, had a strong sense that we were in an area that was heavily used and well-traveled by the NVA. I was struck by the heavily fortified bunkers we used for two to three days before beginning our fateful march back to base camp – they were made from heavy logs and dug deep enough for a man to stand upright while in one of the bunkers. The trail through the jungle was wide and very well marked with log steps cut into the hillside, no doubt to make it easier for the NVA to transport soldiers and material.

At 0658 the point squad from LT Judd's second platoon made contact with what was thought to be a small element of NVA soldiers. (LT Judd had been with the company no more than two days. He and two men returning from R&R were helicoptered in a couple of days before June 22nd). As the senior medic for the company I was with CPT Milton when he received a radio call from LT Judd that they needed a medic to the front because the 2nd platoon medic was wounded.

Believing I would go forward long enough to tend to the wounded and then return to my position in our marching order, I left my rucksack right there on the trail and moved to the front with my medic's kit as fast as I could. On my way, I passed the wounded medic who was being tended to by two other members of 2nd platoon so I proceeded forward and arrived at a small jungle clearing where members of 2nd platoon were gathering. None of us had any idea of the hell that was to come!

In the beginning it was all a bit surreal, with no real sense of the gravity of our situation. As I am trying to determine what I need to do, rifle fire and screams from the point squad intensified. I will never forget what happened next when one member of the point squad appeared, thrashing his way back from the point into our clearing without his weapon and a look of utter terror on his face – the point squad was overrun and he barely escaped with his life. As he was being restrained and calmed down we started to receive heavy small arms fire from what we still thought was a small group of enemy soldiers.

(continued....)



The reality of what was happening had still not struck me until I, and another medic, were tending to one of the wounded. We were both bent over the wounded soldier agreeing on how we would coordinate our efforts once we had this soldier bandaged when, before my eyes, he took an AK-47 round to the side of his neck and was killed. It was at that moment that the reality of the battle hit me. Almost immediately, weapons fire intensified; screams of “Medic!” were coming from what seemed like every direction, and I felt completely overwhelmed. I had arrived, in-country, two months earlier as a 19-year old medic and now I found myself in one of the most intense battles of the Vietnam War.

With so many screams for a medic I knew I had a job to do but felt completely overwhelmed. While crawling toward one of the wounded I took an AK-47 round to my right hand; within seconds a grenade exploded behind me and wounded my right ankle. The weapons fire was incredibly intense and explosions were occurring all around us from grenades and mortars as the NVA was close. Because of the intense fire and my wounds I had trouble moving, so I responded to the screams for “Medic” by throwing bandages to the wounded.

2nd Platoon was fighting hard to beat back attacks from the NVA. They had us surrounded with fire coming from all directions. Our situation was made worse by the fact we were in the midst of thick jungle, but our position was a small clearing in the jungle which probably made it easier for the NVA to pinpoint our position. It was obvious to everyone that the NVA had us outmanned and outgunned and we were in a battle for our lives.

In the course of the day-long battle we received support from bombing runs, gunships overhead, and artillery fire. Unfortunately, the efforts we made to mark our position with smoke only intensified the attacks and mortar fire from the NVA.

We were running low on ammunition and men able to carry on the fight. I was wounded twice more from mortar shrapnel to my right thigh and left buttocks.

Our situation was dire and it seemed that hope was lost when a cheer came from the surviving members of 2nd platoon. LT Sexton and the brave men of 1st platoon broke through the NVA lines to help fortify our position with his men and extra ammunition. I can still see the smile on LT Sexton’s face as I looked to my right to see him entering our perimeter with his men, walking very low to the ground to avoid incoming weapons fire.

LT Sexton and his men gave us hope and a renewed sense that we would make it! Unfortunately, it was short-lived as the NVA intensified their unrelenting

attacks. The attacks continued resulting in more casualties and exhaustion of our ammunition. We were probably down to no more than 10-15 effective members from the two platoons. The battle had already raged on for several hours, we had repulsed several attacks and were running out of options.



**Alexander Zsigo, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

I was severely wounded, had lost a lot of blood and on the verge of giving in to what I thought was the end. Just as I think that none of us are going to make it out alive, I see Platoon Sergeant Hostack, a combat veteran of WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, moving through our position and assessing what we should do. He was now the ranking member of the two platoons since LTs Judd and Sexton had been killed. He decided that we were too low on ammunition to survive another attack and that anyone who could should make their way back up the hill to CPT Milton and the rest of the Company.

(continued....)



It all happened quickly; I heard someone say *"Here they come!"* About that time those of us who could (no more than 12 men) split into two groups to make our way through the jungle back up the hill to CPT Milton's position.

I started to crawl in the same direction as SGT Hostack and at least four other men when I was shot in the right hip from an AK-47 round. I couldn't walk so I pulled myself into some bamboo with my hands, along with SGT Hostack and three others. We listened as the NVA overran the position we had held for many hours during the long battle. We could hear them talking and executing those who were too wounded to move. The NVA were very close, but they could not see us because of the thickness of the jungle.

SGT Hostack had two of the men pick me up and carry me up the hill. With one M-16 between us, we got very close to the perimeter of CPT Milton's position when the NVA came up behind us. While we were pinned down 3-4 men from CPT Milton's position left their perimeter to help rescue us. While under heavy weapons fire SP4 William Reynolds, Wambi Cook, and two other Sky Soldiers tied a rope around me so I could be dragged up the hill inside CPT Milton's perimeter.

Under heavy fire these brave men exposed themselves and risked their lives to save ours.

Knowing I was severely wounded, SP4 Reynolds covered my body with his own and in doing so suffered an AK-47 wound that would have struck me – Reynolds took a bullet for me and never moved from covering my body with his.

The bullet that struck him was only stopped from causing him serious injury when it traveled through his pocket bible before hitting him. I have attached an article (below) that was published in *Stars & Stripes* a month later, on July 22nd, written in regards to SP4 Reynolds' efforts to help save my life. At 1450 I, and one of the other wounded Sky Soldiers, was hoisted out on a MEDIVAC while the battle continued on.

The Battle of the Slopes was one of the most vicious and wildest of the war. There were incredible acts of heroism that day; 76 members of Alpha Company paid the ultimate price and 24 were wounded. My personal gratitude goes to SGT Hostack and the soldiers who carried me up the hill to CPT Milton's perimeter, and to SP4 Reynolds, Cook, and the others who exposed themselves to enemy fire to save my life and the lives of the other survivors who made their way from the "killing zone" to CPT Milton's perimeter.

Sp4 Saves Medic From VC; Hip Pocket Bible Saves Sp4

Stars & Stripes

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BIEN HOA, (173RD ABN-IO)

-- *"My Bible deflected the bullet and saved my life,"* said the young paratrooper after the battle.

Specialist Four William L. Reynolds, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade, was at the top of the hill when fighting broke out with an estimated North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalion near Dak To.

Reynolds, a forward observer, went down and back up the hill several times to rescue the wounded and lay claymore mines with three other paratroopers.

A wounded medic sent Reynolds and the others for the last rescue attempt. The young Sky Soldier tucked his Bible in his hip pocket and moved down the bullet-riddled hill to the aid of a wounded buddy. When they reached the out-stretched medic, they were pinned down by bursts of enemy automatic fire.

"One medic was hit bad," said Reynolds. *"Since I was the closest to him, I lay down between him and the oncoming bullets and told him he would be okay."* Just then, the specialist was struck by a bullet precisely where he had tucked his Bible.

A lull in the automatic fire enabled the paratroopers to wrap a rope around the medic and begin to inch their way up the hill while Reynolds provided rear security.

"A strange thing happened next," said Reynolds. "A North Vietnamese appeared 15 feet from me in the brush and just stood there watching me. He turned around and seemed to say something to his buddies when I blasted him with my M-16."

While Sgt. Ronald C. Palmer put down a murderous stream of lead, Reynolds made his way up the hill to the others. *"Those bullets were the sweetest sound I ever heard,"* said Reynolds.



~ A Letter Home ~

I dug thru boxes of letters and found this. First, I found out that I was a PFC. Second, we were all told they were VC when in fact they were NVA. I wrote the letter to my parents days after the battle. Third, we were told it was the biggest battle of the war but later to learn the Ia Drang Valley in '65 was bigger. Later, Hill 875 was the biggest in Dak To. Don't know if you want any of this, but look at the envelope. By the way, my wife read the letter and cried and I was choked up after all these years.

John Leppelman
C/2/503d
Survivor of The Slopes



Dear Mom & Dad June 29 (1967)

Well I finally got time to write. You've probably heard about us getting into the biggest fight in the history of the war. Well we had between 80-90 men killed & here's the story.

Every man, or practically, had been shot through the head. When the battle was over the VC came down & found our wounded guys & if they didn't beg for mercy, they shot them through the head. A few told the VC where to go & the VC split their heads with knives. When it was over I walked around & it made me want to almost cry. 80 boys between ages 18-20 dead. Most of them young guys, & about 30 of them friends of mine. June 22, is a day I'll never forget because so much happened that day. There were 6 survivors still alive when we found them. One of them had been shot seven times in the stomach & he stood up & said, "Get me out'a here."

We walked by one we thought was dead & he opened his eyes & kept opening & closing his fist. He couldn't talk but we saved him. Another guy wouldn't beg for mercy so the

VC put the rifle barrel to his head & fired. When the VC left, he got up & ran. The bullet knocked a chunk of his skull out of his head & you could see his brain, but he was lucky the bullet glanced off because he'll be all right.

For the next few days after the battle we had little engagements from the VC. We always drove them off.

The next day Bravo (B) Company fought their way all the way to our location. I helped carry their wounded & dead in. One medic had been shot through the eye & when I set him down I knew he was as good as dead. He died 20 min. later.

We killed somewhere between 400-800 gooks. The VC buried some of them when they left. We dug up their graves & searched them, finding nothing. Dead bodies everywhere Smell. Couldn't sleep, blood everywhere, bullet holes in every tree.

Some of the guys found had prayer books in their hands, others wallets looking at pictures of their girls for the last time. We worked & got all their bodies (G.I.'s) shipped out & then we went lookin' for more. We named the location the "Valley of Death".

As many times as I've almost gotten hit, I haven't. I'm still lucky. The place where the battle took place was being patrolled by A Co. We were sposed to do it, but they changed plans, or it would have been C Co. that got wiped out. I'd most likely be dead.

Call it what you like, fate, luck, God, I don't know myself, but somebody up there is watching over me. It was tragic. That's the last I'll say about it.

I got your pictures & really liked them, but the rain wrecked them eventually. Don't send anymore because they'll get wrecked. Save them till I get home. Tammy is sure cute though. Really growing it looks like.

Well, I'm getting close to 5 months over here & am happy its starting to pass, also that I haven't been hit yet. Not to many guys here that haven't been wounded, or scratched by shrapnel, most of them had it happen from 1-4 months over here.

Write

Love John

P.S. Send me newspaper clippings on battle 173rd Airborne, etc.

John



Airborne Company almost Wiped Out

Paratrooper Jungle Battle One of Most Vicious of War

DAK TO, South Vietnam (AP) -- The battle Thursday was one of the most vicious in the jungles and bamboo of the central highlands since the Ia Drang Valley action of November, 1965.

"You have no idea of the fight that took place," said Capt. David A. Milton of Dallas, Tex., commander of the 130-man company of the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade that was all but wiped out.

When it was over, 76 paratroopers of the company were dead and 24 were wounded. They had stood against three banzi-style assaults by screaming Communist regulars identified as an 800-man battalion of the North Vietnamese 24th Regiment, apparently newcomers to South Vietnam.

Milton estimated 475 of the enemy were killed. Three platoons of his company bore the brunt of the attacks. They were surrounded but held in the face of two charges. They were overrun by the third.

About 25 men were in the three platoons. Only a half dozen were found alive after a relief force got to their position 24 hours later. By that time, the North Vietnamese had moved over the battlefield, killing wounded and rifling the bodies for rings, food and money.

Milton and other spokesmen for the brigade told this story:

Milton's company came to Dak To, 12 miles from the Laos border, and took immediately to the field last week after Dak To Special Forces patrols had been hit in the mountains above the town.

An enemy buildup threatening Dak To was suspected by U.S. intelligence officers. Within 5,000 yards, Milton's company found 535 fresh bunkers in the commanding ridge lines.

Thursday morning Milton's men were moving down a ridge toward Dak To.

Then it was like this:

6:58 a.m. -- Milton had two rifle platoons in front of him, his weapons platoon and radiomen 200 yards behind him and a third rifle platoon bringing up the rear.

The lead man in the forward platoon took some small arms fire and scrambled for cover.

7:55 a.m. -- Enemy fire increased. The two forward platoons grouped together in a perimeter about 1002 yards across. They came under heavy attack. A spokesman said, *"They (the enemy) came forward in a mass, banzi style assault, sometimes using their own dead bodies for shelter."* U.S. jets and helicopter gunships flurried above the company.

8 a.m. -- Another company started toward the first company from 2,000 yards to the southwest. They heard movement in the bamboo around them. A patrol found nothing and the company kept moving.

10:15 a.m. -- A third company was landed by helicopters 1,000 yards away in dense jungles to the northwest.

10:50 a.m. -- The first company had repulsed two charges from the swelling North Vietnamese force. The platoons were completely surrounded. The perimeter was growing smaller. Milton had sent his reserve rifle platoon forward as a relief.

"It took them a long time to get there," he said. *"There was a lot of fighting and a lot of North Vietnamese to step over. A platoon leader had said on the radio that our ammunition had been redistributed and they could hold out indefinitely,"* Milton said.

He sent his heavy weapons platoon forward by a different route, even though his command post had been under determined attack from time to time. The weapons platoon was repulsed and returned to Milton's position, where he had been left alone with six sound men, seven wounded and two dead.

From his three platoons forward came a radio message: *"We're bracing for an all-out attack."* *"How are you doing?"* Milton asked. *"We're laid in well,"* was the last word.

"Everyone was fighting well," Milton said. *"When the leaders would get hit, the men would jump up and take charge of the radios. At one time I was talking to three privates on the three platoon radios."*

(continued....)



11 a.m. -- Radio contact was lost. The three platoons were overrun. They were not heard from again. There were indications a completely fresh wave of North Vietnamese troops had broken over the position.

12:25 p.m. -- Another company was hit on the flank but kept moving toward the trapped company.

12:40 p.m. -- The third company encountered North Vietnamese bunkers. A small probe was repulsed, and they kept moving.

2:30 p.m. -- One relief company made it to Milton's command post. A platoon was sent to cover the 200 yards to the isolated men. The platoon was thrown back and returned to the company post. At the same time, other men on the relief company were cutting out a landing zone for helicopters. Several men from the lost platoons had crawled back to the command post.

2:58 p.m. -- The wounded, the dead, and the unhurt survivors of the original company were evacuated while a second company stayed behind for the night. At this point the 75 men up forward were reported missing.

FRIDAY

7 a.m. -- The two relief companies moved up against light resistance. One enemy sniper was killed. The two relief companies in their skirmishing had a total of two men killed and six wounded.

3:12 p.m. -- The companies officially reported that they had linked up at the main battle scene.

The paratroopers' bodies were found in little clusters of three and five men, where they had made their last stand. Enemy cartridges and some of their weapons were found among the American dead.

About half a dozen American had squirmed off in the bushes for the night while the North Vietnamese worked over the battlefield. These men said they heard the North Vietnamese burying their dead and shooting some of the American wounded.

"But they seemed more interested in money, rings, watches and food," a spokesman said.

24th NVA Infantry Regiment

4th, Battalion, 24th NVA Infantry Regiment
5th, Battalion, 24th NVA Infantry Regiment
6th, Battalion, 24th NVA Infantry Regiment

THE U.S. ARMY IN VIETNAM BACKGROUND, BUILDUP, AND OPERATIONS, 1950–1967

Even as Westmoreland shifted allied forces from II Corps to I Corps, fighting intensified in the highlands. After Army units made several contacts with enemy forces during May and June, Westmoreland moved the 173d Airborne Brigade from III Corps to II Corps to serve as the I Field Force's strategic reserve. Within a few days, however, the brigade was committed to an effort to forestall enemy attacks against the Special Forces camps of Dak To, Dak Seang, and Dak Pek in Kontum Province. Under the control of the 4th Infantry Division, the operation continued throughout the summer until the enemy threat abated.



General Westmoreland arrives Dak To 1967
(Casper Platoon web site)



Bob Fleming, A/D/2/503d, '67

I was on a TWA 707 flying across the Pacific when the Battle of the Slopes was taking place, coming from Ft. Campbell where I had spent the first 18 months of my enlistment in the 2d Battalion 501st. We had watched the 1st of the 501st become the 4th of the 503rd, and we expected to end up in one of the 101st units serving near Tuy Hoa.

Had met another 101st grunt named Jimmy Camarote, he was a 11C2P. Sadly, Jimmy was KIA at Hill 875. He was married with kids, from Philadelphia. We both had the Screaming Eagle patch on our shoulders

When we arrived at Long Binh we were taken to the replacement depot at the airport. There were soldiers from every unit in Vietnam. A few, very few, paratroopers. We weren't there long before a formation was called and all the paratroopers were culled from the group and collected into one area where they could be moved onto trucks and taken to what we later found out was the 173d Airborne's base camp and administrative area. Guess I have to take that Eagle off my shoulder.

While we were there waiting no one was telling us where we were going. I walked over to a clerk and asked, and he said, "*Hardluck Alpha*". I said, "*Wait a minute, what does that mean?*" He said "*You'll find out*". That was my introduction to the reality of the 2d Battalion Airborne, 503rd Infantry. No one would tell us shit about what we had just got ourselves into.

I don't remember exactly when it started, but Jimmy began saying that he wasn't going to make it home alive. He was deadly serious. I felt the same way but I wasn't at the time going to surrender to that line of thinking and voice it. So I used to try and argue him out of it.

We spent a couple of days at the 173d Airborne Jungle School and stayed at Camp Zinn. After completion of the course we boarded a C-130 and flew to Dak To. The C-130 landed in the dark, misty fog at Dak To. It seemed the clouds were only 50 feet off the



**RTO Bob Fleming
Hill 875 survivor**



ground. When the ramp of the plane went down both Jimmy and myself walked down the ramp and onto the ground, near the Special Forces camp. We looked around and both of us said variations of the same thing, "*Oh shit, I'm dead*"

This was the most eerie, scary looking place that I had ever seen. Now we still hadn't been told exactly what had happened to A Company on The Slopes. So it wasn't our imaginations running wild.

I don't even remember what happened after that; where we went or what we did. Alpha Company was not at the airstrip. It was out in the jungle somewhere. We would join it whenever the next resupply would go out when we would become official members of *NO DEROS ALPHA*.

We spent a day or two at Dak To airstrip. No one did anything to help us; give us jungle fatigues, or boots. They sent us out, half assed. Jimmy, as a 11C, went to the weapons platoon and I went to a rifle platoon. Of course, military thinking, "*Oh, you're a Spec 4, here's your M60 machine gun.*" There's a guy 6 foot, 220 lbs. carrying an M79, so I get this 25 pound machine gun. Go figure. I didn't make a big deal about it but did make it known that I wanted off the gun as soon as someone else was available to take it -- big guns draw fire.

There was one other guy from Pittsburgh in Alpha Company, Wambi Cook. I met him and he was one of the guys who was there for '22 June' as I called it. He was a nice guy and we got along well. He was in a different platoon. But still, it was a bitch being an FNG in a company that just had happen to it what Alpha did. I know it's hard to believe but still we knew almost nothing about what had happened in June.

One day the platoon leader called me and asked me if I still wanted off the big gun. I said yes. He said OK. He had me give the gun to someone and gave me a PRC25. I was now the Platoon RTO.

I carried the radio all over Dak To. While the weight difference compared to the M-60 wasn't much different, at least I could rig it to my ruck. One day while Alpha was back at Dak To Airstrip I was told by one of our NCOs to get my shit together because I was going to D Company. I responded, "*There ain't no D Company,*" and he replied, "*There will be when you get there.*" Praise God, Thank you Jesus. I was released from my death sentence -- that's how I felt leaving Alpha for the newly formed company.

(continued....)



The entire time with Alpha I was carrying an extra weight of undetermined origin. The 'NO DEROS ALPHA' was real. The people who served in that company really served above and beyond.

On 1 September, when I went to D Company, I became the company commander's Battalion Net RTO. Things seemed to lighten up. It was a whole different atmosphere. All of the D Company personnel had come from other units in the battalion. I finally started to learn about 22 June from Sgt. Tenney, our 319th Arty FO. He was wounded during the battle.



"Red", A/2/503, survivor of The Slopes

On 19 November, D Company started up a numbered hill near Dak To. Charlie Company was to our right on a parallel track, Alpha Company was to the rear of both columns. The NVA, after pinning down the lead element, flanked both columns, hitting them hard, attempting to cut the unit in half. The NVA overran the bottom of the perimeter and the perimeter tightened up.

Later an F-4 Phantom Jet dropped a 500 pound bomb on the perimeter killing outright an estimated 40-50 paratroopers. Amongst those dead was my friend Jimmy (Manfred Francis) Camarote -- Jimmy was still in Alpha Company.

He lived through the fighting at the bottom of the hill but was killed by our own air support. I was wounded twice during Hill 875. I think Alpha Company was the unit which took the brunt of in-your-face combat on Hill 875. Not much had changed for Alpha since June 22.

I pray that God blesses all of our Alpha Company Heroes. They were given the extremes to deal with.

Bruce Demboski, C/2/503d

My name is Bruce Demboski, I was with Company C 2nd Battalion on February 21 when we made the jump starting Junction City I. I was 18 years old. On June 22 I was still with C Company, 2nd Bat when Company A was attacked. I had just turned 19.

I'm going to say something that not even my wife knows. I have hidden this part of my life from everyone who knows me, as I have been so ashamed of what I did.

The next morning C Company went down the hill to find A Company. Along the trail our lead point started firing and of course we all hit the dirt. Lying next to me was a young Trooper from Company A, he had been shot in the head. I looked at him and he couldn't have been any older than me. As I laid next to him I noticed his breast pocket was open, and a red, plastic cigarette container was visible. I took the plastic cigarette container from his pocket and opened it; there were four or five cigarettes in it. I smoked one of the cigarettes as I had not had a cigarette in days.

We were given the order to move out and we did. After we found the main element of Company A, I thought of only one thing (Custer's Last Stand). I saw a medic who was laying on top of another Trooper, they were both killed. You could see that the medic had been giving first aid to this young Trooper.

I asked my LT if I could then go back up the trail to help bring down the bodies (I wanted to give back the cigarette container, but I didn't let him know why). The answer was no -- so I never returned that cigarette case to whom it belonged.

I went on to serve two more tours in Vietnam 1969-1971, D/151, D/75th and L/75th Rangers, and was wounded twice.

I am now 63 years old. I could have never told this story to anyone but to the Sky Soldiers I so gratefully served with. I am so sorry.

Bruce. This is from ALL Sky Soldiers. You have virtually nothing to be sorry for, brother. Perhaps that soldier wanted you to have that case to remember him by. What is important, you remember him. You did more than your share of combat duty and that paratrooper is proud of you as we all are. It's time for you to rest easy trooper.

Your Brothers *All the Way*



One Tough Sonofabitch in a 5 Foot Frame

He was sitting on his cot in the battalion commo hooch, the end hooch, the one closest to the mess hall along the HHC perimeter when I first saw him in mid December '65. He was smiling, one of the most memorable traits of Nguyễn Phúc, and a welcome smile it was for this FNG who just arrived from the 101st at Fort Campbell. Oddly, that's all I remember from my first day with the 173d at Camp Zinn, that, and the ride from the Repo Depot to Bien Hoa, and the absence of smiles from those troopers who had come over from Okinawa months earlier -- they had little interest in smiling at FNGs. But not Phuc, he immediately befriended me for some reason, and it was good to have a new friend in this new and scary and friendless place.

Phuc was one of our few battalion Kit Carson scouts and interpreters. Phuc also had a capacity and liking for beer, and could hold his own with the biggest paratroopers tossing back 33's in beautiful, downtown Bien Hoa or later the EM Club at Zinn. Phuc liked his beer. Phuc also liked women, and whenever we could score a pass to Bien Hoa while back at base camp, or convince someone a jeep was in desperate need of washing and it would take one man to drive and one armed man to ride shotgun, my little friend and I would find ourselves enjoying the many flavors of beer and other niceties in that ancient city.



Phuc in the boonies, September '66.

(Photo by Smitty)



"Here is Phuc (on left) I think after Silver City in the EM Club at Camp Zinn. The other brother is Duro who is deceased now. " A.B. Garcia

(Photo from A.B. Garcia, HHC/2/503d)

One afternoon Phuc and I had drank our fill and were leaving a bar on a search and find mission, me leading the way out of the bar. At that same moment a couple ARVN were entering the place and, for reasons which defy logic, other than being drunk and 19, I reached out and flipped the cap off one of the ARVN. Oops!

There were no other Sky Soldiers on the scene (as if that would help...*fend for yourself smartass*), and in a flash I was being faced down by about six or seven ARVN who, by the sound of their voices and look in their eyes, were extremely upset with this former Puking Buzzard and ready to prove just how upset they were. It's amazing how fast one can sober-up before an ass kicking.

Just before the earned retribution was inflicted, Phuc jumped in between me and the army of combat ready little people. I couldn't understand a word he said to them, but suspect it was something like, *"Bạn có thực sự muốn đánh bại các ra khỏi đồ ngốc này? Em không thấy anh ấy là tinh thần thách thức?"* Translation: *"Do you really want to beat the shit out of this dumbass? Can't you see he's mentally challenged?"*

Nary a blow was thrown and our friendship was even further solidified that fightless afternoon in Bien Hoa.

(continued....)



Operation Marauder which began on 2 January 66 in the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta was this new Sky Soldier's cherry mission, but just another of life-long missions for Phuc. He despised communists and the French and as a professional Special Forces soldier had known only war his entire life. Phuc was wounded in the gut during Marauder and days later back at our hooch he again was sitting on his cot, smiling. The white bandage covered his new souvenir, but it didn't cover all the other scars on his chest and arms and back from previous battles.

In the field on operations Phuc was known as a 'hard charger', always one of the first into the fight, usually running to the sound of incoming fire. He was also an aggressive interrogator of captured VC or VC suspects. U.S. soldiers were forbidden to harm or torture the enemy, but Phuc was not, or at least a blind eye would often be turned as he went about his business. While I never witnessed him torturing anyone, others have; I did see him rough-up some suspects pretty badly once. A mutual buddy told me Phuc's patience with the enemy waned in 1967, and he might have become what could be described as vicious – a lifetime of war can do that to people no doubt. If, indeed, that were the case, then it was a complete contradiction to who this gentle man was, or once was.

In spite of being a dumbass and mentally challenged, I somehow survived my year with the 2/503d, di di'ing the scene in December '66, and leaving my friend Phuc to carry on without me -- he had more war to tend to.

Over the many years since that time, I had often thought of my friend, and had hoped he somehow escaped to the U.S. when South Vietnam fell; and I would find him one day and we would have a beer together, and he would smile that smile and keep me far away from any ARVN who might also have escaped. I had often hoped this.

Then, some 30+ years later a note came across my desk from one of our Chargin' Charlies who survived The Battle of the Slopes. He told me Phuc was killed charging up that hill, and some time later a few of our guys escorted his body home to his family. Two other buddies, Jerry Wiles and George "Scotty" Colson both B/2/503 (Scotty was also Phuc's and my hooch buddy in '65/'66), were on those Slopes when Phuc died -- both those troopers were also wounded at Dak To.

I will never have that beer with my friend, nor will that pixie-like smile of his ever again light up a hooch or a jungle as it once did.

Lew "Smitty" Smith
HHC/2/503d



**Nguyễn Phuc on operation with his
2/503 buddies in 1966**

(Photo by Tom Goodwin, HHC/2/503d)

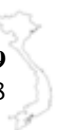
A Couple of Phuc's Buddies

Of all the things I should remember and don't, I'll never forget Phuc and the time he pushed me out of the way to check out a tunnel in Cu Chi. He knew I was scared but he said, "*You too big.*"

Russ Webb
HHC/2/503d

That photo of Phuc in the boonies next to his shelter hit me hard. I remember that smile. I remember how he was one of the first to run to the front when a shot was fired. A few tears came after seeing that photo. He was a good man.

Jerry Wiles
B/2/503d
Survivor of The Slopes



“Remembering 22 June 1967”

By Ken Smith, COL (Ret)
A/D/2/503d

For me and so many members of 2/503, 22 June started out like any other day.

By 0600 I was in the TOC located adjacent to the Special Forces Compound at Dak To. 1st and 2nd Battalions, 2/503, had moved from Catecka Rubber Plantation to the Dak To area on 16-17 June to protect the Special Forces Compound. 2/503 was at the compound while 1/503 was assigned the mission of recovering the bodies of two U.S. and eight CIDG soldiers killed in an earlier action.

A/2/503 deployed on 18 June to scour the ridge behind (south) of the SF compound, and was followed two days later by C/2/503. B/2/503 provided security to B/3/319th, the 4.2 inch mortar platoon co-located with the battery, and the Battalion Headquarters and support elements.

A/2/503's mission on 22 June was to salt some caves at the top of the ridge with CS crystals, and move to the SF Compound to replace B/2/503, who would then deploy to the field. Alpha was scheduled to move in a column of platoons north down a finger from the ridge toward the SF Compound and had reported around 0630 that the movement was underway. The battalion staff was digesting reports from higher headquarters and filing required daily reports with them. (The 173d Airborne Brigade was under the operational control of the 4th Infantry Division).

At approximately 0700, the battalion command net crackled with a report that the lead elements of Alpha Company had been engaged by the enemy. Initially, it sounded like a small contact – that assessment quickly changed. It soon became apparent that Alpha was significantly engaged.

Because of heavy fog, no C&C ship was available. The Battalion Command Group monitored the battle from the TOC until about 0830 when the weather cleared enough for us to get airborne. Battalion CO, LTC Ed Partain, CSM Vince Roegiers, the Artillery Liaison Officer and I were soon over the battle area. In retrospect, this was a futile and frustrating flight. The 200 foot tall trees and the heavy bamboo growth beneath them completely masked the battle area. We were unable to see troops on the ground or identify their positions.

Colored smoke dispersed so much while filtering up through the trees that we were unable to determine its source.

The chopper was hit by enemy fire and returned to Dak To. I went to the TOC and LTC Partain and CSM Roegiers got on another bird and went back out.

Bn XO, Major Hank Watson, was directing operations in the TOC. I resumed the mission of coordinating the artillery and the mortar fire to support the troops. The fact that Alpha was moving parallel to the gun target line made this a difficult task because of the uncertainty of friendly locations. Additionally, the NVA hugged the American positions to avoid artillery, helicopter gunships, and high performance aircraft ordnance.

For nearly four hours, the artillery and our mortars delivered as much ordnance as we could, lifting fire only to allow the aircraft and gunships to deliver their ordnance. As the battle ebbed and flowed, we adjusted the artillery to seal off the battle area. By about 1030, as the battle waned, aircraft and artillery fires were shifted west of the battle area to interdict NVA escape routes.



Hill 1338

As the extent of Alpha's losses became apparent, the staff identified a one ship LZ south southwest of the SF compound and started lifting Bravo Company to the field.

A smoke grenade ignited a fire that interrupted the lift but Bravo was soon in place and moved quickly to relieve Alpha. Charlie Company had moved west from its position along the ridge and then turned south, and by about 1300 had linked up with Alpha's perimeter.

(continued....)



MACV reported that the enemy suffered close to 500 casualties and the Brigade's *After Action Report* cited a similar number. Our soldiers, searching the area for two or three days after the battle, found a hundred or more enemy bodies and captured two low-ranking prisoners.



**Charles Harry Snow, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

Over the years I have read almost everything published about the "Battle of the Slopes." I assumed command of A/2/503 on 9 July and talked at some length with survivors of the battle while memories were fresh in their minds. Since then I have listened to many point fingers of blame at various individuals and units. Those who do so are entitled to their opinions, but in my opinion they do not appreciate the magnitude of multiple events packed into four hours of action and masked by the "fog of war."

In the TOC, over multiple nets, I heard highly trained professionals doing their job. The calm voice of Dave Milton, under intense pressure and clearly aware that his unit was engaged by an overwhelming force, was a steadying influence for his men.

When a high ranking General Officer tried to contact Captain Milton on the Alpha Command Net, "Uncle Jack" politely but forcefully told him on the Brigade Command Net to stay off of Alpha's frequency.

I heard reports of helicopter pilots flying low and taking fire in the heat of the battle with our own 2/503 warriors kicking ammunition out the helicopter doors.

The gunners worked their artillery and mortars without breaks.

Charlie and Bravo companies moved to rescue their comrades but we knew that they would arrive too late to save many of our brothers.

Of about 135 warriors with Alpha in the field, 76 were killed – many executed at close range – and 23 were wounded.

And no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't do any more than we did to help them.

It was a bad day.

George "Scotty" Colson, B/2/503d

First, let me quote myself, *"Memory is dependent on sensory input, and nothing focuses input into a smaller sphere than combat."*

Jerry (Wiles, B/2/503d) and I talked and we both remember much of the same things, except he remembered Lieutenant McBride getting killed and I did not. I remember hot chow being flown in to us before we started towards A Company. The cooks came in with the ammo, and had hot food in Mermite cans. They looked uncomfortable and looked as if they couldn't wait to get out of there.

I was point for 2nd Platoon, but another platoon was on point for the Company. We started up the trail, then there was a burst of gunfire, and the word came back down the line that Phuc had been killed. I remember thinking that I was probably the only guy in the field that day who had been with him in '65.

I remember when we got close to the A Company guys we could smell the bodies, they had been out overnight, and were getting ripe in the heat. It was a smell we all knew well, and which never leaves you, like the smell of cordite. I remember finding them where they fell, in small groups of two to five. The NVA had cut them off in small groups and overwhelmed them. At least that's the way I remember it.



Jerry Wiles, B/2/503, '67

I have much the same memories George (Colson). The only thing I could add would be the personal things that happened. Varoli and I saw several guys from A Company lined up in groups of 5 along the length of the airstrip. We went over to the first group and found Mike Waterman, Doyle Holcomb, and Martin Campbell together waiting for the choppers. They were in light LB and carrying their tin meals in a sock tied to their rucksacks. They said they were going on a one-day recon and would be back that night or the next morning. That's the last time I saw any of them alive. We did lose several men dead and wounded. You and the boys made short order of the NVA on the trail. We had to regroup and back up the hill. Varoli, Beasley and I positioned ourselves just off the trail to cover the guys out front. I saw them carrying a small body back up the hill. Little did I know that it was Phuc. Lt. McBride was killed before we could start up the slope. There was a young wounded soldier, he was carried up the slope by the weapons platoon. Just as you said, George, we picked up the smell even before we hit the area where the KIA's were. We also could smell the dead NVA -- they had a different smell. The first thing I saw was where the A Company gun crew had set up. There was a pile of spent M-60 rounds. There were parts of each man's brains in rows three each. They died fighting but must have ran out of ammo. The stack of bodies right at the gun placement took its toll on me, as well as others. We all realized that getting off that mountain alive was unlikely.

Jesse Salcedo, 1/503d, '67-'68

I was there from April '67 to March '68, Recon/ Headquarters Company 1/503rd until Dak To, then D Company. I don't have any pictures except in my mind.

When the battle started I was at the base camp across the river and not far from the hill. We watched the prop WWII aircraft trying to penetrate the triple canopy jungle. We could hear the battle. Several of us were listening to the radio telephone operator (RTO) describing the firefight as he saw it. It seemed as if he talked for several minutes; it may have been much shorter.

He was very excited, but never stopped talking until he was killed. He kept a grip on the mike even after he was



Sal in the boonies

shot. The last voices we heard were the NVA's. No Americans could be heard.

The terrible part of this experience was the feeling of helplessness. I met another trooper at one of our reunions who was with me there. When we talked of this memory we both broke down in tears. I believe that RTO's last minutes were recorded and used in the movie (*We Were Soldiers Once And Young*).

When we went to Dak To the first time about the first of June 1967, we searched for but made little contact with the North Vietnamese Army. We saw many signs of their presence including commo wire, ammunition and weapons. Steps were carved into the mountainside to make it easier for them to get up those hills. We experienced mortar attacks. For a period of time we were harassed by snipers for days. The enemy would kill one of us at a time, two or three times a day. We would stop, hunker down, look for the sniper and move on.

An Additional Note from Sal

On June 22nd 1967, I believe it was about 0900 in the morning when the battle started, we were at the base camp across the river below just a few clicks from the hill. We heard of the battle and stopped what we were doing. We were expecting to saddle-up and to help Alpha Company 2nd Bat. We were told that Bravo Company was on their way and there was no need to send more troops.

We watched WWII prop dive bombers trying to penetrate the triple canopy jungle in assisting Alpha Co. We could hear the firefight as it was going on. Someone brought a Prick 25 radio. We listened to an RTO describing the battle as it was going on. It seemed he talked for several minutes. He asked for help. He told us to hurry. We heard AK47 shots; he stopped talking. The last words we heard were North Vietnamese yelling, then the radio went off.

We felt helpless. We heard that they ran out of ammo. Everyone who was severely wounded were reading their New Testaments issued to them by the Army. We heard that up to 40 Troopers were executed and that nearly 500 of the enemy were killed.

I am still saddened by this memory. I am sure that all of the troopers that were there feel the same.

"Every soldier thinks something of the moral aspects of what he is doing. But all war is immoral and if you let that bother you, you're not a good soldier."

~ Curtis Lemay



PACIFIC
STARS AND STRIPES

Monday, June 26, 1967

475 ENEMY SLAIN AFTER HITTING GI'S

By Bill Becker
S&S Staff Correspondent

PLEIKU, Vietnam – Two North Vietnamese battalions cut off three U.S. platoons and killed 76 men from one American company Thursday before a massive counterattack killed an estimated 475 Communists.

The battle was not announced until Saturday.

The North Vietnamese wearing khaki uniforms and black and green berets, overran three platoons of the 173rd Airborne Brigade on a highland ridge 50 miles north of Pleiku.

The Communists took money and food from dead U.S. soldiers and shot wounded GIs through the head during the 11-hour battle, which took place 3 miles south of the brigade's forward command post at New Dak To in Kontum Province.

The fighting killed 78 Americans over-all and wounded 28. A brigade spokesman said 76 of the dead and 22 of the wounded were members of the company hit hardest by the North Vietnamese.

Most of the enemy soldiers were killed by air and artillery barrages after two battalions of the 24 North Vietnamese Army Regt. tossed human waves into the U.S. platoons. Another platoon of the same company and two other reinforcing companies were unable to reach the stranded units until the battle was over.

The commander of the first company gave a "good, solid, conservative estimate" that 475 Communists were killed.

The captain said his men "were up against 800 North Vietnamese – brand new fresh troops."

He said nearly all the enemy soldiers he saw were equipped with an improved version of the AK47 communist rifle which had been favorably compared to the M16.

Other Americans said the North Vietnamese ransacked American bodies for food and money. The survivors said the Communists shot wounded American through the head after they broke through the U.S. perimeter.

The company commander said that midway through the fight, a platoon leader radioed that his men were "bracing for an all out attack on our positions. We are laid out well," the lieutenant said to his CO.

"About 50 to 100 NVA are amassing for an attack on our perimeter."

After the first of three human wave attacks, the platoon leader reported that 50 North Vietnamese lay dead inside the perimeter.

Later, the leader of another platoon saw more enemy troops massing but said his defenses were still strong. "Our perimeter is in good shape," he said.

As the North Vietnamese struck again, a third platoon leader called to his captain, "How soon will help be here?"

Then all three radios went dead.

By dark Thursday the battlefield was quiet but later a member of one of the relief companies said he "could hear NVA working over American bodies all night."

Brig Gen. John R. Deane, Jr., commander of the 173rd, said the company's lead platoon walked into a column of North Vietnamese during a routine search mission. The company was patrolling just south of the Dak Poko River, Deane said, after intelligence disclosed an intense North Vietnamese buildup in the New Dak To area about 15 miles from both Laos and Cambodia.

Deane said the lead platoon spotted five North Vietnamese in khaki and berets, then pulled back to second platoon. The two units formed a perimeter as the enemy column – an entire battalion – encircled the paratroops.

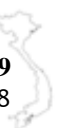
The company commander sent in a third platoon which broke through enemy lines to reach the first two units before all three were hit.

Another enemy battalion attacked as the first group pulled back.

A search of the battlefield after dawn Friday turned up 85 enemy graves. Paratroops who dug into one of the graves said it contained many bodies and added that 85 graves alone could contain 170 to 349 slain North Vietnamese.

U.S. soldiers also found 75 enemy bunkers, including 50 spattered with fresh bloodstains.

B-52 bombers struck twice in the area Saturday after U.S. troops had withdrawn.



Ed Privette, Maj. (Ret), CO HHC/2/503d

I had been wounded and hospitalized back in April '67. When I finally got back to Camp Zinn (Bien Hoa) I had to stay there until my stitches were out before moving forward to Cateca, a tea plantation near Pleiku. While waiting to go forward I was bunking with three new guys who were attending Jungle Orientation School. ERVIN L BURNS, DONALD R JUDD, RICHARD E HOOD, JR. My stitches came out about the same time they graduated from jungle school and we all boarded an aircraft headed for Cateca. In a late night rain storm in asshole deep mud we made our way to the 2/503d CP. Grabbed a space on the floor of someone's tent and crashed for the night. The next day they were all assigned to "A" Company, CPT Dave Melton's company, and I returned to my Signal Officer/Asst. S-3 position with CPT Ken Smith, the S-3.

After several battalion search and destroy missions in the local area we were alerted that we were headed to a Special Forces Camp at Dak To. The advance party flew up and received mortar fire that first night. The rest of Headquarters Company went by convoy. Dumbest move I could imagine.

We were motoring down a paved road which, in places, had three feet of weeds growing out of the cracks. It was then we lost radio contact about ten clicks out of Cateca. We had no helicopter support as we moved along the thick jungle right up next to the road. We were told to *"Call for support if you need it,"* right....with no radio contact. Father Watters was sitting in the truck in front of me with his legs hanging off the tailgate. We stopped for a piss call and I mentioned to him that I had no radio contact to the rear. He grinned and said, *"Well, I'll pray."* We arrived safely in Dak To -- I couldn't crap for a week my sphincter muscle was so tight after that trip. Remember, I'm the damn Signal Officer, I'm allowed to be scared.

On the 20th of June A Company was moving west the next morning. I talked to Dave Milton at the evening briefing. I had one of my guys send him some additional PRC25 batteries he had asked me for. I was working a two-hour shift each night in the Bn TOC in the early morning of the 22nd of June and knew Milton's A Company was across the river on the side of the mountain.

Just after daylight A Company reported that they were moving out of their overnight position and had used tear gas crystals to keep Charlie from occupying it. About ten minutes later all hell broke loose. Milton's reports back to the TOC were sobering. The platoons ahead of him were under heavy attack. By that time CPT Smith and LTC Partain were all in the TOC.

My platoon sergeant, Drayton Hatcher, put a second radio on the Company Command Net and we were listening to the platoon leaders in contact with Milton. They were in deep trouble and one by one their radios went dead. As I recall, Hatcher and I had placed one of the small tape recorders (the kind we used to mail home voice letters) and started taping the Battalion Command Net.

The Company Command Net was largely silent by then. My three tent mates from Bien Hoa, Hood, Judd and Burns, were all silent. I went back to my hammock, got another pack of Salem's and lost my breakfast in the high weeds. If no one was using those three platoon radios they were in deep shit, and so were my three tent mates. All those guys who left the CP two days earlier and wandered down toward the river on a routine S and D mission were, what? Badly wounded, dead? No one said it but the air in the CP was thick enough it could be cut with a knife, thick with fear for "A" Company's survival.

Apprehension, helplessness is what we all felt as the hours went by. CPT Willoughby's Bravo Bulls and CPT Leonard's C Company were on their way to assist Milton's Company. "Uncle Jack," Brigadier General John Deane, and LTC Ed Partain were overhead in choppers above the battle area trying to assist the men on the ground with indirect fire power and logistical support.



**Jeffrey Ross Sexton, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

All day B and C Companies made their way through the thick jungle trying to get to Alpha Company. That night the men up on the hill could hear the sounds of the wounded obviously being executed by the NVA. The following morning it was over and later the bodies of all those brave young men were brought back down.



Lost Yank Company Killed 106 Cong Before It Fell

By Joseph Fried
Staff Correspondent *The News*

Saigon, Monday, June 26 -- U.S. paratroopers, thought to have been outfought in last Thursday's jungle battle in which a company of the American fighters was almost totally wiped out, killed 100 North Vietnamese troops, a late count showed today.

Estimated from the battle area in the central highlands put Communist dead as high as 475. The revised lower figure was said to have been made on body count and confirmed sightings.

The American toll remained at 80 dead and 34 wounded from the 130-man company of the 173d Airborne Brigade. Previously the U.S. command said only 10 enemy bodies were counted.

Seize Arms, Supplies

The new count listed seizure of 28 weapons, including four artillery pieces, and two Red Chinese-manufactured radios.

In air raids over North Vietnam yesterday U.S. bombs blotted a large truck convoy five miles north of the Mu Gia pass. Large secondary explosions and fire were reported, indicating the trucks carried fuel or ammunition.

Other pilots reported dropping one end of a 180-foot double lane bridge, 21 miles northeast of the pass. Though short, the bridge serves as the main mountain portal through which the enemy funnel men and supplies to the south.

S. Viets Kill 105 of Foe

South Vietnamese paratroopers reported today a fierce battle on the coastal plains in which they killed 105 Communist troops. In the same area Navy bombers reported destroying bridges and storage areas.

B-52 bombers bombed enemy concentrations, fortifications, bunkers and tunnels near the Laos border, where six of the Communists regiments' main forces were believed still in the area.

COWBOYS UNIT HISTORY

(Excerpts)

II. OPERATIONS:

a. June began by the COWBOYS beginning their work in the new operational area of Pleiku. Four (4) slick ships were committed to LRRP missions. One (1) team was placed in and later extracted without incident. Two (2) ships were used on resupply carrying 14 troops and 12 tons of cargo. Everything went fairly smooth, however, the COWBOYS were beginning to find out what was meant by the Pleiku Monsoon season. Everyone is looking forward to a good and productive month at their new location.

r. "A"
Company 2nd
Battalion 503rd
Infantry was
walking down a
mountainside
early the
morning of the
22nd when they
met a Battalion
size unit of an
NVA Regiment.



Cowboys medivac (Tillman Jeffrey photo)

They immediately became engaged in a running battle. The Falcons were called upon immediately to give vitally needed air support to the Company. Even though bad weather prevailed at the dawn of the day the Falcons flew continuous cover for the Company, hampered frequently by A-1E "Sky Soldiers," (Skyraiders?) airstrikes, artillery and the ever present threat of rain and low cloud cover. The COWBOYS were called upon to give the Company support in other ways also. Resupply of Ammo was badly needed and eventually a Combat Assault was placed in within 200 meters of the heaviest fighting to attempt to reinforce the surrounded Company. The Falcons and COWBOYS braved the enemy's fire and successfully accomplished their mission in protecting and preventing the possible annihilation of the company. The Falcons in covering the company expended over 230 rockets and 36,000 rounds of 7.62 ammunition. As the COWBOYS returned at the end of the day everyone turned and looked solemnly to the scarred face of the mountain less than three miles South where fierce and ferocious hand to hand Combat had been fought earlier that day.



Battle of the Slopes (Dak To)

June 22, 1967

John Smith, Jr.

Squad Leader, Sergeant E-5

Company A, 2nd Battalion Airborne 503rd Infantry
173d Airborne Brigade Separate

On June 21, after a three day stay following numerous day patrols and night ambushes out of an NVA prepared base camp, the word filtered down to the troops that the company would move out and head to the airstrip at Dak To. All rucksacks and heavy equipment would be transported back to Dak To by air lift to make sure the company could make the hike to the airstrip before night fall on June 22.

The morning of June 22 seemed to be the same as any other day in the jungle. The exception being the air was thick with moisture to the point that we were surrounded by a dense fog with cool air all around.

The point squad headed out down the trail. The rest of the company followed, by platoon, in the order that was determined by the Company Commander. One platoon was left behind to spread tear gas through the old laager site, rendering the site useless to the enemy. The trail seemed to wind on a gentle downward slope with thick jungle all around - though not as thick as most - and the fog seemed to be lifting a little. While moving slowly down the trail, everyone was on guard but spirits were running high expecting to spend the night at the Dak To airstrip and pulling perimeter guard.

Rounding a slight bend in the trail and out of site of the old laager site, we heard sporadic gun fire from the front of the column; what seemed to be coming from the point man. All movement halted. It was our point man and he'd made contact with the point man from an element of the enemy. When the platoon that stayed behind to sabotage the laager site heard the gun fire, they ramped up their activities in order to pull out and take their place in the column.

Prior to that platoon passing the platoon that my squad and I were assigned to, three artillery rounds dropped in and exploded to the left of my squad about thirty feet away. By the time I saw the flash, black smoke and heard the explosion, I didn't bother to hit the dirt. Scrap metal passed in front and behind me wounding several members of the platoon that had actually hit the dirt. We immediately started to assess the severity of wounds received - patching up and applying first aid. There was not much talking; just getting the job done.

During this time, the men from the platoon that had stayed behind were passing through and headed for their assigned position in the column. The word was passed

up to my platoon to keep moving forward. We began to move out with the wounded. The gun fire was still in the distance.



John in Boise, Idaho prior to a jump with a SF Group, 1974.

My Platoon Sergeant called me over and informed me to take my squad down the trail as far as I could make it and form a makeshift defensive position to halt the enemy advances. I immediately gathered my men and informed them of our mission. I took point and headed further down the slope. We entered a slightly open area with the daylight barely making it through the canopy. We crossed over the open area forming a defensive position along the dense jungle edge and took up our positions.

We started to take sporadic gun fire above our heads. By using the sound of the enemy's gun fire for a location, we returned fire by shooting into the jungle. I noticed a paratrooper with an M-60 setting up behind us though this did not seem right to me. I quickly moved to advise him of my men's location. He indicated that he saw us.

Before heading back to my squad position, I noticed the Platoon Leader, RTO, and a medic standing up. The medic was patching up the Lieutenant. At this point there were only three people still standing - the Lieutenant, the medic and me. The medic was on his knee placing a bandage around the Lieutenant's chest while still getting and giving instructions via radio.

(continued....)

