

Echoes from a Distant Battlefield

When First Lieutenant Jonathan Brostrom was killed by Taliban fighters in 2008, while attempting a heroic rescue in a perilously isolated outpost, his war was over. His father's war, to hold the U.S. Army accountable for Brostrom's death, had just begun. And Lieutenant Colonel William Ostlund's war—to defend his own record as commander—was yet to come. With three perspectives on the most scrutinized engagement of the Afghanistan conflict, one that shook the military to its foundations, Mark Bowden learns the true tragedy of the Battle of Wanat.

By Mark Bowden



THE WAR AT HOME The family of Jonathan P. Brostrom, who was killed at Wanat. From left: Brostrom's mother, Mary Jo; his father, David, a retired colonel; and his brother, Blake, a lieutenant.

(Photo by Jonas Fredwall Karlsson)

See story in the December 2011 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Pages 214-237.

[Sent in by Ed Privette, HHC/2/503d]



The Battle of Wanat

The Battle of Wanat occurred on July 13, 2008, when about 200 Taliban guerrillas attacked NATO troops near the village of Wanat in the Waygal district in Afghanistan's far eastern province of Nuristan. The position was defended primarily by U.S. Army soldiers of the 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team.

The Taliban surrounded the remote base and its observation post and attacked it from the village and the surrounding farmland. They destroyed much of the Americans' heavy munitions, broke through U.S. lines, and entered the main base before being repelled by artillery and aircraft. American casualties included nine killed and 27 wounded, while four Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers were wounded. The U.S. combat deaths represent the most in a single battle since the start of U.S. operations in 2001.

The Battle of Wanat has been the focus of widespread debate, generating *"a great deal of interest and scrutiny among military professionals and from outside observers."* This is primarily due to the relatively *"significant number of coalition casualties"*. Several investigations were launched into events leading up to the battle. The initial investigation was completed in August 2008. In July 2009, Senator James Webb requested that the U.S. Army formally investigate the battle and previous investigation. Lieutenant General Richard F. Natonski conducted another investigation in late 2009 which led to orders of reprimand for the chain of command. In June 2010, the U.S. Army revoked the reprimands. They stated that no negligence was involved and said of the soldiers that *"by their valor and their skill, they successfully defended their positions and defeated a determined, skillful, and adaptable enemy"*.



US Army soldiers guard Vehicle Patrol Base (VPB) Kahler the day before the battle.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Wanat.jpg



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AO ROCK

THE BATTLE AT WANAT

By **Bill Ostlund, Col.**
Commander, 2/503d at Wanat



I trained then deployed 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry – The ROCK – for 15 months to rugged, austere, remote, undeveloped, and highly contested Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, Afghanistan adjacent to Pakistan in the Hindu Kush Mountains in support of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. I am personally and solely responsible for anything viewed as improper or negative that happened in my Area of Operations, AO ROCK, and/or throughout my time in command. I remain emphatically proud of our Paratroopers, The ROCK, our training path, and our cumulative and lasting effects in AO ROCK. In addition, throughout my command, I highlighted the need to remain inextricably linked to our veterans.



Sky Soldiers receive awards for Battle at Wanat:
CPT Myer - SS, SGT Denton - SS, SFC Dzwik - BSMV

Following is a brief description of our tour and some information about Wanat and post-Wanat.

During our tour, The ROCK occupied an area half the size of Connecticut and was dispersed over 15 bases, conducted over 9500 patrols, and was in nearly 1100 engagements with the enemy. The ROCK gained and maintained freedom of movement and had development in 17 of 17 districts as we dispersed 80% of the brigade's development budget. We lost no one killed to an IED, friendly fire, accident, or suicide and lost no aircraft – we recovered an American KIA in another unit's sector after he lay on the ground for nearly 48 hours.

ROCK personnel were awarded more than 400 valor awards, to include the first Medal of Honor awarded to a living Soldier since Vietnam (two are pending), two Distinguished Service Crosses, and 27 Silver Stars; 169 Purple Hearts were awarded – 26 Task Force ROCK members (including a Navy Corpsman and Marine embedded tactical trainer) perished and 143 Paratroopers were wounded. In addition, The ROCK was one of the few units in the GWOT to be awarded the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC), the nation's highest unit award, and I'm told the only unit to also be awarded the Valorous Unit Award (VUA), the nation's second highest unit award, for the same tour.



"Small Arms Failures Contributed to Wanat Debacle"
(Defense Tech)

The Battle of Wanat began on 13 July 2008, less than three weeks before Task Force ROCK was to conclude a well-documented [nearly] 15 month combat tour in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, Afghanistan. The battle is well documented as we lost nine Paratroopers killed and 27 wounded – the largest loss of life in a single ground battle in Afghanistan. Misinformation about ROCK methods and leader actions in AO ROCK, particularly leading up to and during the Battle of Wanat, was purposefully disseminated in the media and prompted a CENTCOM Investigation.

(continued....)



Echoes from a Distant Battlefield, written by Mark Bowden, accurately if not completely captures the reasons for the misinformation.



Air support over battle site

As a Task Force, like all other Task Forces in Afghanistan, we didn't have everything we needed for the full-spectrum COIN fight we were tasked to affect and we certainly didn't have everything we wanted but we did have a mission and like Paratroopers throughout our Army's history, we did the very best we could with what we had v. what we needed or wanted. I would be remiss if I didn't highlight the fact that we had continuous unparalleled support from our artillery, STB, and BSB brethren – their support mitigated many needs and wants we shared with other Task Forces. ROCK Paratroopers knew a combat tour is from entry into the battle space until exit out; there is no stand down or respite in combat. I/we believed it would be imprudent to lessen activity in the area or lessen pressure on the enemy before a new and less experienced unit is to take responsibility for such a complex and contested AO – thus operations continued through our entire tour.



Army absolves commanders at Wanat Battle
(CBS News video)

The post-battle writings were extensive and include an original investigation (enclosure 36 of the CENTCOM Investigation, located at: http://www.army.mil/article/41241/Wanat_Review/); an agenda driven, purposefully leaked, unofficial (and grossly inaccurate) Combat Studies Institute report written by Doug Cubbison, located at: <http://www.battlefieldtourist.com/content/battle-of-wanat-historical-analysis-rough-draft-release/>; the subsequent *CENTCOM Investigation* led by Marine LTG Natonski and accepted by CENTCOM and the DODIG), located at: http://www.army.mil/article/41241/Wanat_Review/ (same as above); General Campbell's review (unavailable to the public); and an official Combat Studies Institute report – *Wanat, Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008* is located at: <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/carl/download/csipubs/Wanat.pdf>. *Echoes from a Distant Battlefield* is at: <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2011/12/battle-of-wanat-201112.print>.

Long after the Battle of Wanat, the chain of command was engaged by persons who sought to discredit The ROCK and make the Paratroopers at Wanat victims of the Taliban and the chain of command. I viewed it as an obligation to ensure the truth and facts were made available to the Army, ROCK Paratroopers, and the families of those that fought and died at Wanat. I organized and forwarded the facts and information to all reviewers – the same information I had made available to each of the investigating bodies. In addition, I sought to protect the honor and reputations of my subordinate leaders and all ROCK Paratroopers. I sought to perpetuate the story of selfless honor and valor of The ROCK – which included ensuring individual Paratroopers and The ROCK were recognized for the effects achieved. Throughout our tour, we received incredible support from ROCK and 173d Veterans. I believe protecting the legacy of The ROCK, and all Sky Soldiers, is an obligation.

The Battle of Wanat was an honorable and heroic tactical victory but the victory was had at a tragically high cost. I did not anticipate the scale of the enemy's attack – nor did any asset or agency in theater. Ultimately, with respect to Wanat I made the best decisions I could based on the information and resources I had at that time. I have soul searched daily, and with objective rigor; given the same information and resources I had in July 2008, I would draw the same conclusions and take the same actions – perhaps tragically.

(continued....)





Sky Soldiers presented awards for bravery during combat action in Afghanistan.

Understanding I was responsible for Paratroopers in combat – and have been in command of our nation's elite counter-terrorism forces since – I appreciate the implications and consequences of decisions I made; I never took (or take) such decisions without careful thought and due consideration. I remain proud of our Paratroopers, The ROCK, our training path, and our cumulative and lasting effects in AO ROCK.

Sky Soldiers and Sky Soldier supporters, thank you for your continuous support of our Paratroopers – they deserve nothing less.

Very Respectfully,

Bill Ostlund



Colonel William B. (Bill) Ostlund is an Army Senior Service College Fellow at Tufts University in Boston, MA. He earned his B.S. degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and an M.A.L.D. degree from Tufts University in Boston, MA. Colonel Ostlund has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States, Korea, Europe, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, most notably as commander of 2d Battalion (Airborne), 503d Infantry in Vicenza, Italy, and Kunar Province, Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom VIII.



2/503 Nicknames

We can suppose nicknames have been a part of armies since the beginning of armies, and our battalion is no different. Here are nicknames of some of our guys, and in most cases they have nothing to do with the trooper's first or last name:

Airborne	Arne	Aussino	Bazooka	BDQ Roy
Bear	Buzz	Cap	Doc	Dom
Dukes	Eskimo	Frenchy	Fribley	Greek
Griff	Hammer	Hank	Jack	Jackattack
Jake	"JJ"	Joe	Johnny	"K"
Kemp	LT	Luke	Moe	Murf
Nick	Paddy	Pat	Pointman	Ragman
Ranger	Rat	Rob	Robbie	Rock
Rocky	Sarge	Scotty	Shortround	Shorty
Ski	Skid	Smiley	Smitty	Sulli
Tucker	Tulip	Whip	Wild Bill	Wilkie
Wolfman	Woody	Z-Man	Zac	

Military Monikers: According to the American Legion, *"In a world of uniformity and discipline, a nickname can ease the stress, break the tedium and, of course, stick with you for life."*

My personal favorite is of WWII 503rd trooper, Maurice Linton, reported to be a hell of a fighter. But like many troopers, he developed a special knack for catching a few zzz's whenever the opportunity arose. What was the nickname his buddies gave him you ask? But of course, it was *Sleepy*. Ed



Sleepy Linton, 1919-2007
Husband of Margee

Attack...Recover...Attack



Our own B/2/503 RTO and tunnel rate extraordinaire, '65/'66, Larry Paladino during February fencing meet in Detroit.

"Wore baseball pants 'cuz didn't have fencing pants, but not much different anyway. There's no sliding, but when you lunge and don't have good shoes you might do some sliding that won't allow you to get back in your en garde stance. The socks were my fencing socks from the University of Detroit 1962-63 team." ljp

Note: Now, if a VC in a tunnel saw Larry coming at him in his fencing get-up with épée in hand, he'd surely surrender, or die from a heart attack. Ed





INCOMING!



~ Get it Done ~

On Page 37 of last month's issue is a photo of the BULLS (below). Three of those BULLS have died since that photo was taken. The message is: If there is something that needs to be done, do it. If there is someone you need to see, see them. If an apology needs to be made, get it done. We are all getting close to the end of the trail.

Jim Robinson
B/2/503d



2/503 Bravo Bulls

~ Scout Dogs ~

I served with the 39th Platoon Scout Dog (IPSD). The first dog handlers for the 173d arrived in June '66 as the 39th IPSD and were "attached" to the Herd and deactivated in July '71. We worked with all battalions from '66 to '71. I was there '70-'71 at English with dogs named Tiger and Kelly. We have unofficially accounted for 76 war dogs that served with the Herd of which 17 were KIA and officially 8 handlers were KIA. I have hosted the 39th Scout Dog's annual reunion at my place in upstate SC since 2001. Thanks,

Johnny Mayo
39th IPSD



The missing war dog tribute

~ Bob Stammersky....A Recon Trooper ~



**Leading the way is Bob with his buddies
humping the boonies**

Just to let you all know that I attended Bob's Stammersky's funeral in Liberty, MO (Kansas City) this past Friday. Went a day early so went to Bob's Retro Bowl and had a burger and a couple beers, met Bob's wife Margie and had a nice talk. She quickly filled me in on the past 45 years. The visitation was impressive with Bob's Harley friends lining the path to the entrance with American flags, standing at attention in their leathers. Met Bob's son Damian there. After the visitation I attempted to go back to the Retro Bowl for another beer but there wasn't a parking place within blocks so I moved on. Don't know if that was the usual crowd or if they were there for Bob. The funeral was very well attended and after a while I was getting into my car to leave for home when Bob's older brother came up to me (saw my 173d decal on car) and introduced himself. He said Bob often mentioned his time with the Herd in VN. He wanted to know how Sgt (Marcus) Powell was doing. Thought that was nice. He said in recent years Bob talked a lot about guys he was with in VN but his brother couldn't recall names other than Marcus. Thanks Jerry (Hassler) for keeping us updatedSee you all in Lexington.

Dave Kies
Recon/2/503d

[See farewell to Bob on Page 34]



Looking for Buddies

~ About Rusty Engle, A/2/502d ~

Do any of you happen to have any recollection of my brother's friend, **Rusty Engle** from Madison, New Jersey? He joined the 173d in November 1966; he made the combat jump on Feb. 22, 1967; and he was KIA on June 22, 1967, during The Battle of the Slopes at Dak To. He spoke slowly, with a slight southern accent. He played sports in high school, went to college for about a year, and then enlisted. He volunteered for tunnel rat duty. At the time of his death, he was a SP4, and might have been platoon RTO in 2nd or 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company. He was one of two men helicoptered back to the unit from R&R just a day or two before the battle that took his life. If anyone remembers Engle, or the names of any other men who were in his platoon, please contact me by email. Another member of your unit hopes to visit Rusty's sister in March, and it would be great if there were any recollections to share. The photo shown of Rusty was taken from his high school yearbook.



Rusty

Keith Hale

keith.b.hale@gmail.com

Russel Warren Engle

Specialist Four

A CO, 2ND BN, 503RD INFANTRY, 173RD

ABN BDE, USARV

Army of the United States

Madison, New Jersey

October 04, 1946 to June 22, 1967

**RUSSEL W ENGLE is on the Wall at Panel
22E Line 039**



***"Army: A body of men
assembled to rectify the
mistakes of the diplomats."***

~ Josephus Daniels

~ Johnny Martinez, C/2/503d ~

I've been looking for a Charlie Company brother whose name is **Johnny Martinez**. He was there in '65/'66. We used to hang around as Charlie Company was just across the way from our mortar pits. I hooked up with him after Nam in Los Angeles. He became a cop with the L.A.P.D. After I moved to Australia we lost contact of course. It is really crazy that most of us didn't bother with addresses or phone numbers on our return. Bloody pity. I've lost brothers who were with me that are no longer with us. All I wanted was to say hello or hear their voices once more. That's why I ring all you guys in the U.S. only for that reason. Love ya brothers,

A.B. (The Aussino) Garcia

HHC/2/503d, 4.2 Platoon

Note: *Aussino* – Nickname given to A.B. by his buddies on a return trip to Vietnam. A cross between an American Chicano and an Aussie Digger.

3/503 LUNCHEON SCHEDULED

Make a note on your calendars: The 3rd Batt in coordination with the National Reunion activities will be holding a Luncheon on 7 Jun 2012 at 11:30 in the Blue Fire Grill in the Hyatt, our reunion hotel in Lexington, KY. The reservation has been made with Emily Dowd, Senior Convention Services Manager, for 30-50 possible attendees with arrangement made for us to order off the existing menu. The prices are really fair.

I will be bringing a Echo Co Guidon. Paul Fisher tells me he will have one for HHC. Don't know at this point whether Mike Switzer will be present with Charlie Co's Guidon and or if Eldon Meade will there with his Charlie Co. We just might have two for Co C.

Now - is there anyone out there in A, B or D with some Airborne Esprit De Corps who might be interested in obtaining and bringing your Guidon? If so, I purchased mine at Benning Awards. It is the real deal. I keep mine on my "*I love Me Wall*" at home except for when it is at the Reunions.

Mason Branstetter

Nov Plt, D/3/503 Apr-Jun 70

TOC Dty O, Jun-Oct 70

E Co, 3/503 Oct 70 - Apr 71

503.873.3545

mason@silvertonrealty.com



2/503rd Troopers.....They Earned Their Wings



Butch Clark, HHC/2/503d



Barry (Bear) Hart, C/2/503d



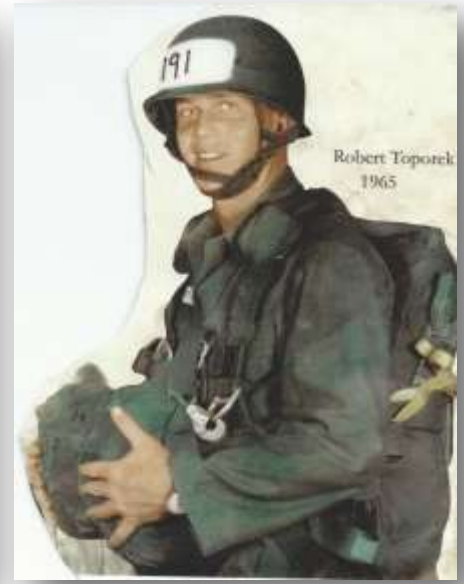
William McKenzie, B/2/503d



Jack (Jackattack) Ribera, A/2/503d



Jim Stanford, B/2/503d



Robert Toporek, B/2/503d

2/503 Troopers, send in a photo of you rigged out in your trusty T-10.



2/503 Troopers...Where Are They Now?

Stephen P. Steets, B/2/503, was born in Irvington, New Jersey on Oct. 4, 1942. He grew up on the Jersey Shore in Long Branch, NJ. He was drafted



into the U.S. Army in December 1964, took basic training at Ft. Dix, NJ, AIT at Fort Gordon, GA, and volunteered for airborne training *for the easy money* (jump pay). He was sent from jump school at Ft. Benning, GA to the 173d Airborne Bde (Sep) at Bien Hoa, South Vietnam and assigned to B/2/503 in June 1965. Steve was WIA on 2 January 1966, during Op Marauder, recovered from severe head and shoulder wounds at Long Binh Hospital and returned to service with the Bulls in Feb. 1966. He was reassigned to the WORLD in June 1966, and discharged from the Army at Ft Riley, KS in Sept. 1966, taking an early out to attend college. He studied at Monmouth College in West Long Branch, NJ for one year and transferred to California State University, Long Beach. He got married, and with a little help from the GI Bill and a lot of help from Loreta, his very loving wife, worked full time jobs at McDonnell Douglas and then Sothern California Edison Co. while taking night classes at Cal State Long Beach. Steve earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering in 1972, and started a career in Research and Development with the U.S. Army Communications Electronics Command in Ft. Monmouth, N.J., specializing mainly in switching systems and command and control systems. While raising two beautiful daughters, he worked on state of the art communications equipment, participated in numerous field exercises, developmental equipment demos and command and control system demos at sites such as the National Training Center Fort Irwin, Fort Huachuca, Fort Bragg, Fort Campbell, Fort Carson, Fort Leavenworth, Fort Hood, Fort Lewis, White Sands Missile Range, McDill AFB, and several exercises in Germany. He engineered the first ever packet switching overlay on existing tactical army communication systems (few people realize the significance of that accomplishment). In 1987, at Operation Bright Star in Egypt, the packet switching overlay was first demon-strated in a multi-service, multi-national exercise. Towards the end of his career his work was involved with biometric I/O devices for computer systems. Steve retired in October 2002, grandfathered a boy and a girl and, finally came to the realization that *Life is Good*. Now Steve spends his time not doing whatever he doesn't want to do, living that good life with his family in West Long Branch, NJ, and *waiting for the Prize Patrol*.

Brothers at The Wall



The guy on the left is Bob 'Chopper' Gore, yes Jim's older brother. As you can tell he's all Herd -- a Squad Leader, 2nd Platoon, B/2/503, '69-'70, my Riding Brother. I was 2nd Platoon, B/2/503, '67-'68. We found each other in a bar one night while out riding. We didn't start out together but have been attached at the waist ever since, from June '07 I guess. The other guy is Danny Little. He was on a C130 or a 141 on his way to Okinawa with some other Herd attachments when his plane did a sharp right turn and landed in Bien Hoa. Well, he ended up with the 101st with a Bronze Star. Bob is also a hero with a Bronze Star. Bob and I were amazed at how similar *ALL* the guys in his album looked so familiar to us...concluding that a Dog Face is a Dog Face. Faces of war and men don't change, not even the names change. Are we Soldiers of Time who Return to Fight War after War, since Ancient Times?

Richard "Airborne" Martinez
B/2/503d



2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam

~ All Years ~

Years ago I began a project to collect photos taken in Vietnam by 2/503 buddies who served in-country during 1966. Figuring most of us took only a handful of snapshots while there, it seemed a good idea to capture as many pictures as possible before they went missing forever (death and divorce have already claimed many). I also believed our individual photos were not really our own but belonged to us all, and should be saved for posterity and shared within our ranks.

Within a short while, hundreds of photos were collected, with the intent of producing a not-for-profit, printed pictorial all of us could have and pass along to our families, but only for that one year. Being a novice at the computer, much of what was collected was lost due to operator ineptness and a major computer failure.

Today, computer skills have improved, and backup systems are in place. Further, the capabilities to collect, manage and reproduce photos for all years the 2/503d served in Vietnam are also in place. Plus, given the wonders of the internet, the need to produce an expensive, hard-copy of such a pictorial has become unnecessary.

A determined effort will be undertaken to produce the *2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam*, a pictorial covering all years in-country. Once completed, our photo history will be emailed to all 2/503 troopers or their surviving family members for whom we have email contacts. You will then have the option of printing the entire document or only those pages of interest to you.

To have your 2/503 Vietnam photos included, please email all your photos to me as JPEGs to rt0173d@cfl.rr.com Where you can, please include names, dates and brief descriptive info, maybe a line or two of text per photo. If that info isn't available, still send your photos. The quality of photos and lack of redundancy will determine which pictures are included in our pictorial.

If you prefer sending pictures on a computer disk or as hard copies, you can mail them to the address below. Please do not send originals or copies which must be returned.

Lew Smith
801 Maple Ridge Drive
Merritt Island, FL 32952

This project will likely take a number of months to complete. Periodic updates will be included in future issues of our newsletter on the progress we're making.

Your photos will be used only for this purpose, or some for inclusion in future issues of our newsletter. No photos will be made available to anyone without your permission, other than in the finished free pictorial. I'm hoping some of our Bde PIO guys will share their great 2/503 photos with us. We'll also attempt to obtain pictures from Army Archives.

Thanks guys. I hope your Vietnam pics will be part of this important historical work.

We try harder, All the Way!

Smitty Out
HHC/2/503, '65/'66

More Info:

By producing the pictorial as a document to be emailed, future additions of photos will be easy to incorporate. We'll invite technical assistance to help us determine the best layout and presentation of photos in year order and alphabetized by trooper name. The following four pages are one example of how pictures might be displayed in our *2/503 Photo History*.



2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam 1965

Jim Robinson, FO, B/2/503, Collection



Bravo in the rubber trees, first home in-country of 2/503d.



LT Jim, on the scene.



L-R: B Company CO CPT Roy Lombardo,
SSGT David Howard (KIA), Bn CO LTC George Dexter



Dust Off. One of the first of countless to come.



Miss Vietnam. The "D" Zone.



2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam 1966

Jack Ribera, A/2/503, Collection



Jack Ribera (L) and Gary Wake
Camp Zinn



Carlos Perez, "under our chute"



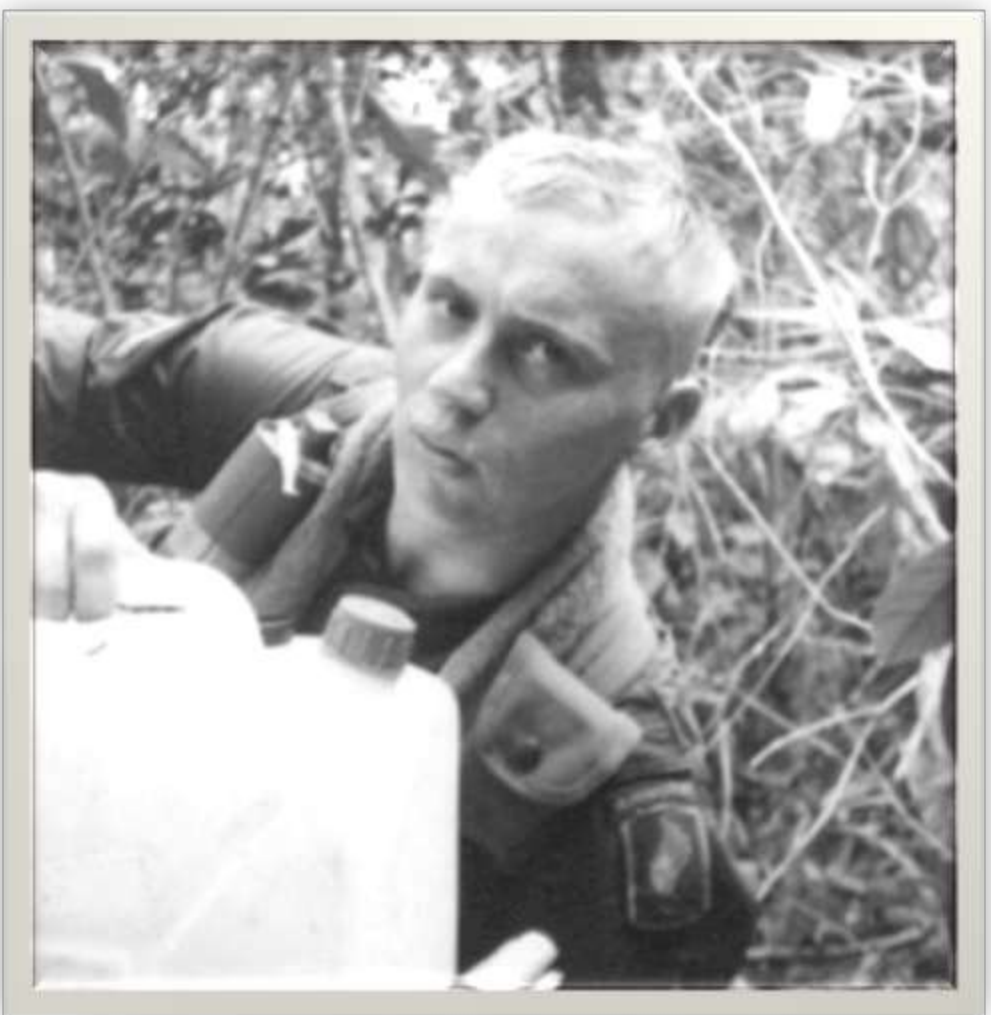
Jon Linx in front of bulletin board at Zinn



Operation Hardiwood, Vung Tau



WIA at aid station in Xuan Loc



Jack in the boonies



2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam 1967

Jerry Hassler, HHC/Recon/2/503, Collection



Briefing at DZ Charlie, Operation Junction City.



CPT Brown, Sgt. Dockery, SP4 Hassler & LT Shelby.



Jerry by his hooch in the jungle.



Mike Hargadon & Jerry at ARVN airborne facility in Saigon.



Manfred W. Dee



MSGT Stephenson



Maggio & Jim "Skid" Skidmore

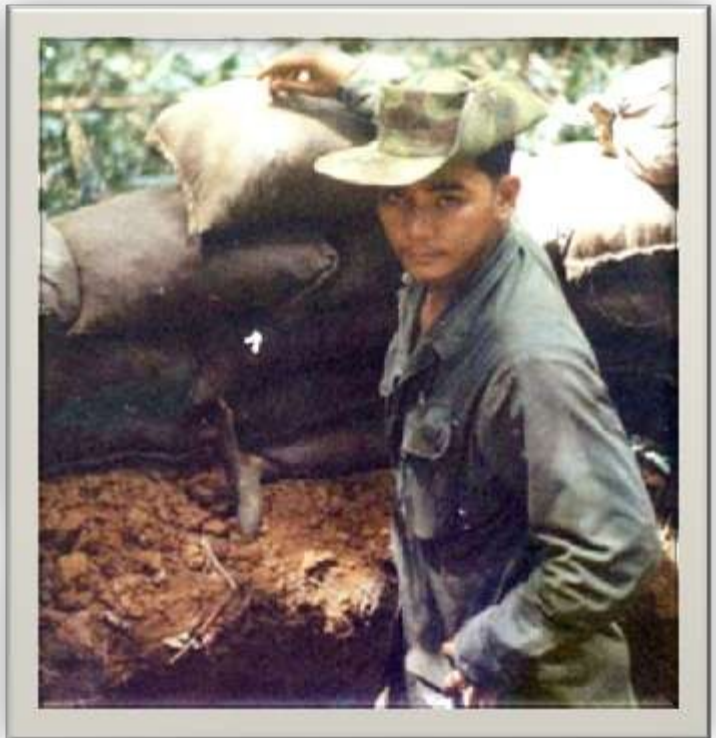


2/503 Photo History ~ Vietnam 1968

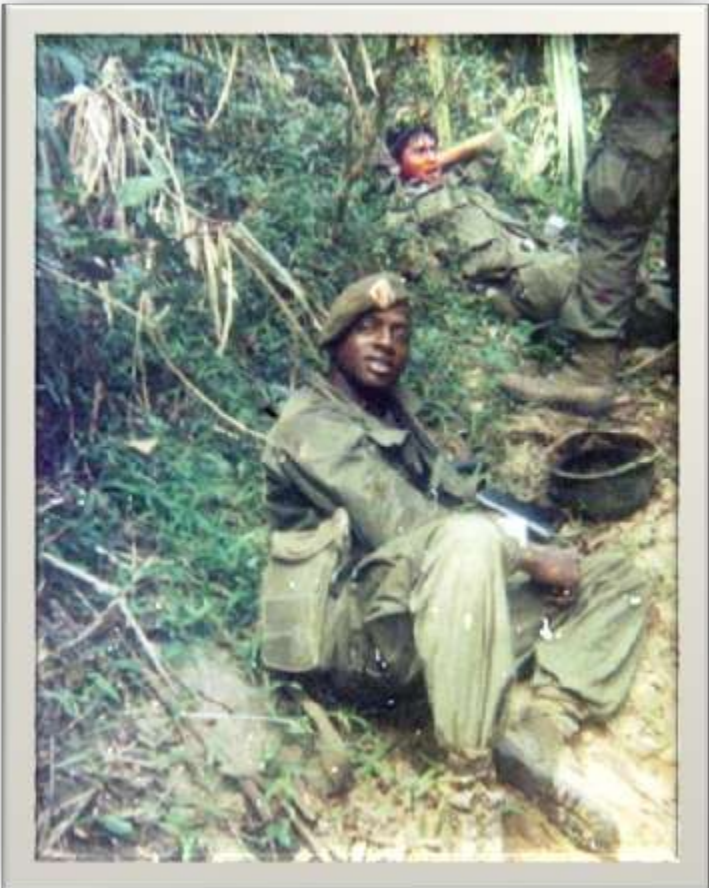
Gary Prisk, C/D/2/503, Collection



C/2/503, 2nd platoon point team, Bong Son paddies



2-man foxhole... Kontum: note aiming sandbags at front rim.
Unknown trooper, might be "Mex"



Kontum Province, a Chargin' Charlie.



SSGT Burns being hog-tied by CPT Gary Prisk's
"Hill People" before leaving for the World.

