PROLOGUE

A Hard Day at Tam Ky

21 May 1969 is a brutal day for Delta Company. It is our first, heavy combat at Tam Ky. An estimated 100 disciplined North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers wait quietly and patiently in concealed, fortified bunkers, holding their fire. Their bunkers are expertly positioned and camouflaged in heavy brush, unseen from air or ground. Approaching troopers of the 101st Airborne are unaware of their presence.

The overgrown, football field-sized bunker complex rises several feet above the surrounding long-abandoned dry rice paddies. Like an emerald island, the enemy fortification looks serene and beautiful against a sea of brown dirt under a brilliant blue sky. Late in the morning, an already hot, broiling tropical sun climbs higher overhead. Our 2nd Platoon of 30 combat-experienced troopers cautiously crosses the open 50 m of sun-hardened ground. Once safely across, the platoon enters part way into the thick brush and stops pending further orders.

Jungle fatigues already soaked and dark with sweat, the soldiers welcome a short break. A sharp-eyed young soldier in the lead squad sees what may be an old bunker immediately to his front. In the past five days, dozens of such bunkers have been found without incident. Given permission by his platoon leader to clear the bunker, the soldier approaches in a low crouch, hand grenade in his right hand, M-16 rifle in his left.

Five meters from the bunker, an enemy AK-47 fires two sudden bursts of five 7.62 mm rounds. The soldier is hit, violently slammed to the ground by the sledgehammer blows of several rounds. Bleeding and in pain, he somehow holds on to his grenade and rifle. Lying on his back, cradling his rifle in one arm, he pulls the pin and throws the grenade into the small open firing port of the bunker. The ear-shattering violent explosion startles everyone. In the deathly quiet that follows, eyes and ears of friend and foe are now anxiously alert. Both know their enemy is at hand.

Hearing the enemy rifle fire and explosion, platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Pedro Rios, instinctively knows his young soldier is in trouble. Rios immediately moves toward the soldier's position, approaching in a low crouch. An

enemy sniper positioned in a tree above the bunker sees Rios, shoots, and instantly kills him. The wounded soldier Rios sought to help returns fire and kills the sniper. Again, all is silent.

SFC Rios, age 40, is Delta Company's most experienced senior sergeant. With 20 years of Army service, he is both father figure and mentor to his platoon's young soldiers. All are in their first or second year in the Army. Rios is loved and respected by his men. Their crusty sergeant cared for them as sons. They knew, if need be, he would give his all on their behalf. Today, he did. Rios is also father of three young children. His wife expects his return home in three short months. Sadly and unexpectedly, he will come home sooner to be mourned and buried by his grieving family.

This is Delta Company's introduction to a fierce day of combat at Tam Ky. A long, seemingly endless day with high casualties. Today is only a prelude of things to come. No one yet knows a longer, more grueling ten-day battle on Hill 376 is just days away. The soldiers of "Never Quit" Delta Company will live up to their name. They will fight understrength along with their sister companies with increased casualties and loss of leaders, under harsh battlefield conditions. On "the Hill," after many setbacks, a new "Never Quit" commander will lead them to victory.

INTRODUCTION

Into the Fray

"Courage above all things is the first quality of a warrior."—Carl Von Clausewitz

An Untold Story About Infantrymen

Courage Under Fire is the untold story of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment at Tam Ky during *Operation Lamar Plain*. It is a true tale of infantry soldiers in combat who live up to their "Never Quit" motto. An infantry company of young soldiers, many not long out of high school, with the US Army's hardest job—fighting as infantrymen on an unfamiliar battlefield far from home. In their late teens and early twenties, they are a mix of draftees and volunteers. Except for their current company commander, CPT Bobby Begley and SFC Rios, all are first-termers on their initial Army enlistment. Most arrived in Vietnam with less than a year of training and service.

Battle weary after 26 days of continuous combat at Tam Ky without a break, much reduced in numbers by casualties, they do more than hang on. They fight a decisive battle on Hill 376 against a tough and determined enemy under a new company commander, CPT Leland Roy. They are courageous young infantrymen in an unpopular war. Men who will carry memories of combat at Tam Ky the rest of their lives. Some good, some bad, many troubling. Some withheld even from family. They will forever remember those who didn't make it—honored fellow soldiers known only to these men, their families, and friends who loved them.

Battlefield conditions facing these young soldiers surprise many. Replacements are few as casualties multiply, including loss of junior officers and experienced enlisted leaders. They fight as frontline soldiers bearing the brunt of high-level political decisions adversely affecting their circumstances. Without wavering, they faithfully do their duty despite danger and death. It is a story of tough combat and tougher men, courageous soldiers upholding the US Army's Infantry's long, honorable lineage. Men worthy of the infantry's memorable battle cry, "Follow Me."

Background

The year 1969 is a turning point in the Vietnam War. The number of US military in Vietnam hits an all-time high of 549,500. US casualties in 1968 were the highest yet, 16,899 killed in action. Casualty rates in early 1969 begin to surpass 1968. Total war dead is now over 31,000 with more than 200,000 wounded. The American public is tiring of the seemingly endless war and its heavy casualties.

In late 1968, President Nixon is elected on his campaign promise to end the war. US national media and war protests are increasing strident demands to stop the war. Five days after Nixon is sworn in as president, he sends negotiators to Paris to begin direct peace talks with North Vietnam. Fast-climbing US casualties are a top concern for the new administration, more so for families sending soldiers to war.

In May 1969, sensitivity to staggering US casualties gets much worse. The 101st Airborne Division, the storied "Screaming Eagles" of World War II, fights two major battles. Each begins less than a week apart separated by 100 miles. This is the renowned 101st Airborne Division, known by an older generation for its valor in Normandy on D-Day and later in the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne, Belgium. It is the same 101st introduced in 2001 to a new generation by the popular HBO World War II series *Band of Brothers*.

Today, few know the seven-year history of the 101st in Vietnam. The Screaming Eagles suffer nearly 20,000 casualties killed and wounded, twice their 9,328 WWII casualties. They fight in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972, a period much longer than their valiant one-year service in WWII (from 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945). Their Vietnam service exceeds the entire six years of WWII (1939–1945). In Vietnam, 19 101st soldiers receive the Medal of Honor, most posthumously.

The 1st Brigade of the 101st is the first of the division's units to deploy to Vietnam, arriving in July 1965, and is one of the US Army's first combat brigades to join the war. The rest of the division, including the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, arrive in Vietnam in December 1967 in the largest and longest airlift to date directly from the US to a combat zone. Despite its early arrival in Vietnam, the 101st is the last combat division to leave Vietnam in 1972.

In just over 30 days during May and June 1969, the 101st suffers its highest casualties in the Vietnam War, the direct result of two major operations. One becomes well known and famous, the other is undisclosed and hidden for strategic political and military reasons. The first, *Operation Apache Snow* fought by the 3rd Brigade, is better known as the "Battle of Hamburger Hill." The second, *Operation Lamar Plain*, fought by the 1st Brigade, is hardly known at all and is now mostly forgotten.

Hamburger Hill—A Familiar First Battle

The term "battle" is used here in a general sense. The Battle of Hamburger Hill is not the official name for the combat on Dong Ap Bia. The official US Army name

Casualty Table 1: Two Intense 101st Battles

Operation	KIA	WIA	MIA	Total	Remarks
*Apache Snow** 3rd Brigade, 101st (Hamburger Hill) 10 May–7 June 1969	78	536	7	621	*Source: The 101st Operational Report for Period Ending 31 July 1969 dated 9 December 1969. See bibliography.*
*Lamar Plain*** 1st Brigade, 101st (Tam Ky) 15 May–13 August 1969	120	404	1	525	*Source: Coffelt Database and Official US Army Casualty Records. A detailed accounting of Lamar Plain's casualties is found in Chapter 20.*
Total	198	940	8	1,146	

*Most casualties occurred in the first 12 days of *Apache Snow*, 10–21 May 1969
**Most casualties occurred in the first 28 days of *Lamar Plain*, 15 May–12 June 1969

is *Operation Apache Snow*. Similarly, the later reference to *Operation Lamar Plain* as a "second battle" is not made in a technical sense. As a matter of official policy, the US Army in Vietnam preferred to use the term "operation" instead of "battle." However, "battle" is widely and informally used in and out of the Army and it is used in that sense here.

"Hamburger Hill" was the central battle of *Operation Apache Snow*. It was fought primarily on Dong Ap Bia, the mountain the Vietnamese call "The Crouching Beast." On military maps it's simply Hill 937, the number designating its height in meters. *Operation Apache Snow* is unfortunately first known by its negative press accounts. The 1980 film *Hamburger Hill* and later the 18-hour 2017 documentary *The Vietnam War* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick add to the battle's notoriety.

The personal courage of the young soldiers who fought the battle was initially downplayed or overlooked. It is unfortunate that Vietnam War movies too often portray infantry soldiers who fought in the jungles, coastal plains, and mountains as victims or pawns in the lost cause of an ill-advised war. That inaccurate description is a grave disservice to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who answered their nation's call and faithfully fought in combat in which tens of thousands died.

The 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (supported by the Marines' 3rd Division and several battalions from the Army of South Vietnam) bravely fights the 11-day Battle of Hamburger Hill. Most of its US casualties occur from 10–21 May 1969, though *Operation Apache Snow* continues for 28 days until 7 June. The battle is the 3rd Brigade's "most intense and brutal conflict" since its December 1967 arrival in Vietnam.[3]

With the battle raging, on 14 May newly elected President Nixon makes his first, national, television address announcing his new war policy and its key tenet: "We have ruled out attempting to impose a purely military solution on the battlefield."[4] Unfortunately, the battle underway on Hill 937 seems to openly contradict Nixon's just proclaimed, but not yet implemented, policy. In the battle, the NVA's 29th Regiment is decimated with 630 enemy soldiers killed. An unknown, much larger number are wounded. US casualties are high. But much less than the enemy: 78 killed, 536 wounded, and 7 missing, a total of 621 casualties. Major General Melvin Zais, 101st commander, aptly calls the battle a "tremendous gallant victory" and by military measures, he is right.

But outside Vietnam, and particularly in Washington DC, the general's words fall on deaf ears. Media reports filed in Saigon and amplified in the US national media call the battle a "meat grinder." Emphasis on the high US casualties further underscore "the failure" of successive frontal attacks on the enemy's mountain stronghold. Some major media outlets conclude the battle was not worth the cost in US lives. The obvious, tough political question is hard to answer: "If the US no longer seeks a purely military solution, why are we fighting big battles with such high casualties?"

Other accounts fault the 101st for abandoning the mountain fortress just days after capturing it at such a high cost. Colonel Joseph Conmy, the 3rd Brigade commander, is accurately quoted, but his words, "the mountain has no strategic value" are misconstrued and taken out of context. Ignored by the press and those against the war is the truth that the mountain was targeted only because the enemy was located there. Once the enemy was destroyed, there was no reason to keep battle-worn soldiers on the desolate, decimated mountain top.

Despite the military victory, media accounts of battle casualties create an uproar among President Nixon's political adversaries in Congress and anti-war protestors. Just as the fighting ends, on 20 May, US Senator Edward Kennedy hotly denounces the battle on the US Senate floor. He calls the repeated frontal assaults and high casualties "senseless and irresponsible." His words unleash a firestorm of protests and political fallout on the home front against Nixon's conduct of the war.

In response, President Nixon accelerates his plans drawn up in March 1969 to withdraw US troops from Vietnam. On 28 March 1969, after a National Security Council review of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's visit to Vietnam and his trip report, President Nixon decides to begin comprehensive redeployment planning.[5]

General Creighton Abrams, the astute and competent Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) has been under constant pressure to reduce large US offensive operations and their high casualties. Hamburger Hill becomes the impetus to accelerate implementation of Nixon's new strategic "Vietnamization" policy to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese government, permitting early withdrawal of US combat troops. In support, MACV initiates a new policy

of highlighting South Vietnam's military forces and downplaying the role of US forces. There is just one complicating problem—a second major battle by the 101st is already underway.

A Troublesome Second Battle

The second 101st battle begins 15 May and is fought by the 101st Airborne's 1st Brigade at Tam Ky, some 100 miles south of Hamburger Hill. Despite the battle's lackluster name, *Operation Lamar Plain* resembles *Operation Apache Snow* in two ways: bitter fighting and high US casualties. Both are hard fought by 101st soldiers against well-trained, well-equipped, and disciplined enemy forces. Most of *Lamar Plain*'s casualties (85%) occur in the first 28 days of fighting from 15 May to 12 June though the operation doesn't officially end for 60 more days on 13 August. Casualties for the two operations shown in Casualty Table 1 underscore the problem faced by MACV, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Defense, and the President.

Operation Lamar Plain's high casualties occur while shock waves from Hamburger Hill's losses are still reverberating in Washington DC and the nation. The timing couldn't be worse for the Nixon administration. News of a second major battle so soon after Hamburger Hill with a high death toll could be politically disastrous. Like the 1968 Test Offensive the previous year, the announcement of over a thousand US casualties in a matter of weeks could result in an immediate, significant loss of popular support for the war, louder demands to stop the war, and undermining President Nixon's goal to achieve peace with honor.

To prevent damage to on-going strategic military initiatives and Nixon's war plans, General Abrams manages to keep *Lamar Plain* and its high US casualties undisclosed to the media and thus to the US Congress and the American public. The intent is both clear and understandable—avoid escalating the growing outcry against Nixon's conduct of the war and buy more time to implement Nixon's new strategic policies of Vietnamization and US troop withdrawals. General Abrams and his staff at MACV are successful in keeping *Operation Lamar Plain* off the front pages and out of TV coverage. As a result, 1st Brigade's battle and its high casualties at Tam Ky are largely unknown even today over 50 years after the war's end. Also unknown is the bravery and sacrifice of the young soldiers who fought there.

For those interested in a full account of why and how the battle at Tam Ky was hidden see Appendix 1. However, readers should note that *Courage Under Fire* is not about the MACV decision to keep *Lamar Plain* hidden. Operational reports of the battle are no longer classified and are readily available. Nor is this book about Nixon's new policy of Vietnamization or his decision announced 8 June 1969 to begin troop withdrawals. These important matters are mere backdrops to 1st Brigade's heavy combat at Tam Ky. The story here is about the young soldiers who fought at Tam Ky and their courage in combat.

Why It Was Fought

Lamar Plain begins out of military necessity. In early May 1969, just south of the 101st Airborne Division in the I Corps Region, the enemy is increasing attacks in the Americal Division's area of responsibility (AOR). North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong (VC) forces are overrunning South Vietnamese units. They also threaten LZ Professional, a US Army firebase, and Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province. With one of the largest divisional AORs in Vietnam and with limited mobility, the Americal Division is unable to immediately stem the enemy advance and declares a "tactical emergency." MACV orders the 101st to send an airmobile brigade to destroy the enemy forces.

The 1st Brigade led by COL Richard Bresnahan answers the call. Since their arrival in 1965, the brigade has earned the reputation as MACV's "fire brigade." As the saying goes, "If you want it done, call the 101." The emergency requires swift, decisive action. The brigade's new operational area is just southwest of the coastal city of Tam Ky.

The 1st Brigade deploys to Tam Ky with two airborne infantry battalions, the 1-501st "Geronimo" and the 1-502nd "First Strike." Each has six companies (four rifle companies, one combat support company, and a headquarters company). A third battalion, the Americal Division's 1-46th Infantry "the Professionals," is also attached to the brigade. All will fight bravely and take heavy casualties at Tam Ky. (For more information on how the 101st Airborne was organized for combat in 1969 at Tam Ky, see Appendix 3.)

Other vital elements of the 101st Airborne deploying with or supporting 1st Brigade include air cavalry, assault helicopters, artillery, medical, engineers, signal, maintenance, and supply units. Counting augmentation from the Americal Division, all total the 1st Brigade's formidable combat force is well over 3,000 soldiers, a large offensive operation by any measure.

Veterans of *Lamar Plain* will later call their operation "The Battle of Tam Ky." Some simply refer to it as "Tam Ky." It could be called "The Forgotten Battle of Tam Ky" though veterans who fought there remember it well. They paid for the privilege to call it what they will and it is their story to tell.

The Story of Delta Company

The brave young men of Delta Company fight alongside their sister companies of the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (Geronimo). The battalion's history dates back to 1942 and its activation at Toccoa, Georgia and its follow-on training at Fort Benning during the early years of World War II. The 501st is the US Army's first airborne unit with a memorable tradition of fighting at Normandy on D-Day (June 1944) and in the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944) to stop the last German offensive.

The name "Geronimo" was attached to the 501st Infantry Regiment early. During initial parachute training, just after having watched the 1939 movie *Geronimo*, two soldiers got into an argument about who was scared to jump. One of the soldiers said he would prove that he wasn't scared by yelling the Apache battle cry "Geronimo" as he jumped. He did and the cry "Geronimo" became a favorite among 501st soldiers. The 501st finally adopted Geronimo as their nickname and it remains so, reportedly with the permission of Geronimo family descendants. Today the 501st regimental crest features an Apache Thunderbird symbol of power and strength.

Delta Company is front and center in *Courage Under Fire*. Their fighting spirit in battle matches their company's motto "Never Quit!" Delta's sister units in the 1-501st Battalion: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Headquarters Company (along with Echo Company's battalion reconnaissance platoon) are frequently mentioned. At Tam Ky, they all fight faithfully and honorably in close support of one another while political considerations, war protests, and diplomatic peace initiatives in Paris overshadow their courageous fighting and sacrifice.

Delta Company's story is told in three parts following this introductory chapter. Figure 2 shows the three operational areas in which they fight (Hue, the A Shau Valley, and Tam Ky).[6]

Part 1: Combat Operations Before Tam Ky (Chapters 1 and 2) covers 1 March to 15 May 1969, combat operations at or near Hue and near the A Shau Valley. At Hue, Delta Company warily expects a repeat of the previous hard fighting during Tet 1968. Next, in the A Shau, they anxiously anticipate the heavy combat experienced there by others, departing just as the fighting begins at Dong Ap Bia to their north. To their surprise, engagement with the enemy and casualties in Hue and the A Shau are limited.

Part 2: Initial Combat Operations at Tam Ky (Chapters 3–9) covers 15 May through 2 June 1969. Delta Company makes a surprise move to Tam Ky as part of 1st Brigade's mission to locate and destroy a large, well-trained, and disciplined enemy. Initial combat operations include uncertain, difficult days on unfamiliar terrain in scorching heat, heavy rains, and high humidity. Delta Company and the Geronimo Battalion fights its first, brutal day-long fight, suffering heavy casualties with harder times ahead.

Part 3: The Decisive Battle at Tam Ky (Chapters 10–20) tells of the 1-501st Battalion's ten-day struggle on Hill 376 (3 to 12 June 1969). Delta Company's combat-weary, young soldiers endure more hard fighting despite losing their junior officers and senior enlisted leaders. They are led by an inspiring new company commander who embodies their "Never Quit" resolve. Despite heavy losses and setbacks, they finally break the back of enemy resistance at Tam Ky.

The epilogue looks back at *Operation Lamar Plain* from the perspective of veterans who fought at Tam Ky and considers the often asked, haunting question, "Was our sacrifice and effort worth while given the high cost of lives lost?"

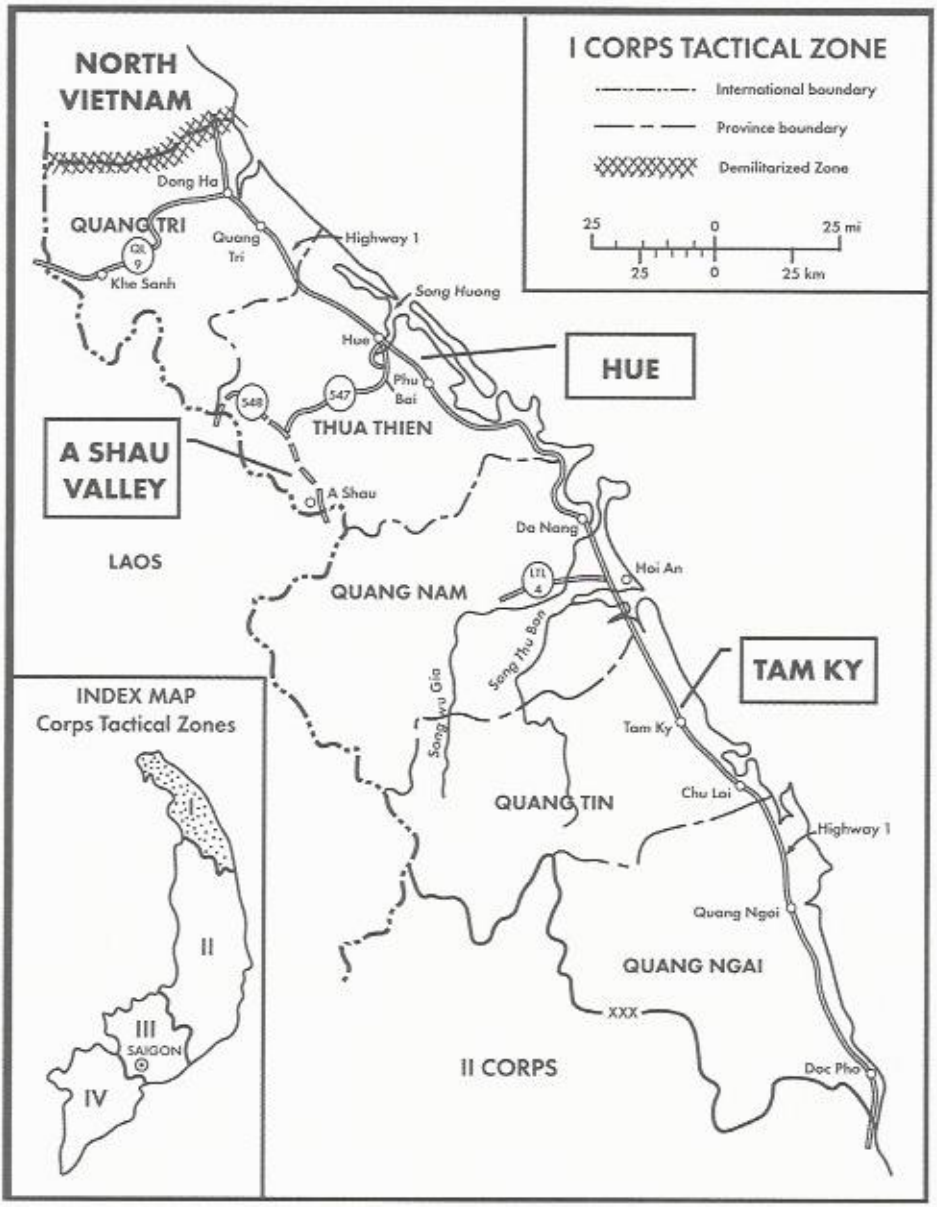

Figure 2: I Corps, where they fought

At the end of the bridge is a big, above-ground sandbag bunker. Ten feet high and about 20 ft square, the top had a parapet where we located our machine gun and M-79s. We also slept there. No one wanted to go inside the bunkers. They were too hot and rat infested. We ate our C-Rations from cans while the Coast Guard grilled steaks close enough for the smell to waft its way to our bunkers.

On 23 February 1969, the eve of the lunar new year and the beginning of Tet, LT Black's 2nd Platoon is taking their turn guarding the bridge. Our company is on full alert. As Black lies sleepless in the dark on top of one of the bunkers, he can hear the sounds of music coming from the streets on the outskirts of Hue just blocks away, He can also hear the sound of rats scurrying about inside the bunker. Having been in country just a month (like me and our other platoon leader, LT Rich Boyd), this is the first time he experiences the fear of an impending enemy attack. And for good reason. His platoon is isolated far from our company and is in an exposed position. Despite the watchful eyes of his soldiers, the bunker is an easy target, sitting just off the roadway. Sometime during the night, he falls asleep.

As Tet begins, battle accounts in other parts of South Vietnam report large enemy units are active elsewhere. Attacks are being made all over South Vietnam, but not at Hue. On 23 February, beginning in the early hours, the enemy attacks over 125 major targets and 400 lesser ones, mostly by indirect fire and sappers. Two enemy divisions mount ground assaults against Saigon.[12] That information is not being passed down to us at company level. Frankly, as Tet starts, we are surprised we are not getting reports of enemy activity around Hue, much less in other parts of South Vietnam. We know only what we can see with our own eyes and we haven't seen much enemy activity.

The common experience of US ground forces in Vietnam is that enemy units usually initiate large engagements only when it's to their advantage. Otherwise they are good at keeping their distance. Delta Company's contact with Viet Cong in the first months of 1969 remains sporadic. There are no pitched firefights in our area of operations near Hue. The VC limit their operation to hit-and-run tactics and booby traps to harass, wound, or kill soldiers. North Vietnamese Army units are nowhere to be seen in or close to Hue.

Our Infantry Mission

The US Army's infantry mission in combat is simply: "Find, close with, and destroy the enemy." Accomplishing this mission in our current area of operations has been difficult. Since the beginning of 1969, we have done a lot of looking, but not much finding. We have constantly conducted combat patrols and ambushes in the vicinity of Hue with only limited, periodic, minor engagements. No one is complaining, but it is surprising not to have more enemy contact. After all, we are infantry soldiers.

CPT Bobby Begley is our commanding officer. All three of our infantry platoons are led by airborne-ranger 2nd Lieutenants on our first combat tour and first time

leading soldiers in combat. Lieutenant Rich Boyd has 1st Platoon, Ron Black, 2nd Platoon, and I have 3rd Platoon. We will all soon be 1st Lieutenants. Our soldiers don't care about our rank. What they care about is whether we will do something dumb to get them killed. Our infantry platoons average 24–30 soldiers divided into three squads of 8–10 men. In addition, each platoon normally has a platoon leader, platoon sergeant, two radio-telephone operators, and a medic. These positions and numbers will later drop significantly due to casualties.

Our operations in the coastal plains outside of Hue are mostly independent platoon operations. Enemy contact being light, our platoons prefer to operate alone. Small unit combat patrolling is a demanding mission, but it's an opportunity for our platoons to build teamwork and hone our infantry skills. I love the independent operations. Part of the reason for that is my platoon sergeant. He does a great job breaking me in as a new platoon leader during my "training wheels" stage.

My Grizzled, Old Platoon Sergeant

The past year, during the infantry officer basic course and my first assignment with the Ranger Training Command, both at Fort Benning, Georgia, I often heard the refrain, "Don't worry about that lieutenant, when you get to your unit in Vietnam you will have a grizzled, old platoon sergeant with about 15 years in the Army, likely be on his second combat tour. He will teach you what you need to know."

When I joined Delta Company in January 1969 at Firebase Birmingham, 12 km southwest of Hue, the same helicopter that brought me in took my platoon sergeant, SSG Gary Tepner, out for his two-week R&R with his wife in Hawaii. We exchanged brief greetings on the helipad and then he was gone. I was not so much surprised by his leaving as I was by his young age. Twenty-three, the same as me. Lesson number one in Vietnam—the real world is often different from the Army school house.

Though young and with little more time in the Army than me, Tepner is a proven combat veteran who I was also surprised to learn is the second-most senior non-commissioned officer in our company. This is my introduction to the hard fact that in 1969 most of the senior NCO positions in an infantry company are filled by newly promoted junior NCOs with little time in the Army. All of the platoon sergeant and squad leader positions in Delta Company (except one) are filled by young, junior-grade sergeants. The higher grade NCOs who would normally bring years of experience and expertise to our platoons are missing.

In 1965, when the 101st first deployed to Vietnam and as late as 1967, infantry units had their full complement of experienced infantry sergeants at squad and platoon level. Most were on their second, third, or even fourth terms of enlistment. Now in 1969, there are multiple reasons they are missing from our units: the rapid expansion of the Army's combat mission in Vietnam; the shortage of airborne qualified NCOs; continuing casualties; physical profiles due to injuries; assignment

to rear jobs; lower re-enlistment rates; the aging NCO corps; NCOs leaving the Army to avoid going back to Vietnam, and retirements from active duty. This makes the outstanding performance of junior NCOs in combat all the more remarkable, commendable, and memorable.

With my platoon sergeant on R&R, I am pretty much on my own my first night with my platoon at Fire Support Base Birmingham. At about 2200H, my platoon's sector on the firebase perimeter receives enemy automatic weapons fire and we respond with all of our platoon weapons. An 8" howitzer battery right behind my platoon informs me they are preparing to direct fire right over my platoon. I am more concerned about that than the enemy fire. Thankfully, the artillery isn't fired as the enemy soon ends their harassing attack typical of small, understrength enemy units.

The next morning, I lead my first combat patrol to locate the enemy firing position and do a sweep around part of the base. SGT Jim Littleton acts as my platoon sergeant. I am aware he is keeping an eye on me, trying to pick up clues about my readiness to lead a platoon in combat. Littleton, I will soon learn, is my best combat leader after Tepner. All goes without incident, but I am happy to get my feet wet on day one.

When SSG Tepner returns, I am especially pleased to learn of his combat experience, knowledge, and leadership skills. Quiet-spoken and calm under fire, he has the respect of our platoon members. Tepner doesn't finish his Vietnam tour until August so I think we are set to work together for quite a while. Like almost all soldiers in Delta Company, Tepner is on his first term of enlistment and first combat tour. His leadership ability was recognized before he came to Vietnam.

After Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in infantry skills, Tepner completed the Primary Non-Commissioned Officer Course (PNCOC) at Fort Benning. Graduates of that course automatically become junior NCOs in the rank of sergeant. By some, they are derisively called, "instant NCOs" or "shake and bakes." I only mention those terms to say how much I dislike them. These soldiers were not only well above average, but they accepted the increased responsibility to fill the gaps in our infantry squads and platoons. With few exceptions, they performed admirably in combat.

Following PNCOC, Tepner and 16 of his classmates were assigned to an AIT Company at Fort Polk to gain on-the-job experience. At the end of their temporary assignments, the Army allowed one graduate per unit to be promoted from sergeant to staff sergeant. Tepner was the top performer in his company and was soon promoted and sent to Vietnam.

I didn't know it at the time, but Tepner's hometown, San Diego, California, is a large Navy and Marine community. His family did not have much when he was a young boy. His mother and father and their four children lived in a 400 sq ft duplex. Later, his father, Fred Tepner, established a career at Naval Air Station North Island, San Diego. In WWII, Fred repaired F4U-Corsairs then repaired UH-1 helicopters

and F-4 Phantoms shot up or damaged in the Vietnam War. Tepner's father instilled a good work ethic in him from an early age.

At age 14, Tepner started a printing business in his garage. Later, he worked for a printing business in San Diego and was promoted to foreman before he was drafted at age 21. He has been on active duty since 26 September 1967, six months longer than me. He attended basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington, and advanced individual training (AIT) at Fort Polk. Tepner, married at 19, was also influenced by his father-in-law, retired Marine Sergeant Major Garland Respess. He joined the Marines in 1922 and fought four years in the Pacific as a gunnery sergeant at Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and Tarawa, retiring in 1952 after 30 years. Military service and support of the military is a long-standing Tepner family tradition. As a new platoon leader, I could not have done better or been more fortunate to have Tepner as my platoon sergeant. After many years of getting to know Vietnam veterans, I learned a large number of them came from families of WWII and Korean War veterans. They served in the military with honor, ready to uphold the family legacy of service to their nation set by their fathers, grandfathers, and uncles.

Light Casualties Are Not So Light

Delta Company casualties have been light as we have had little enemy contact. None in February. In March, Delta Company has three casualties. All were in our 1st Platoon. On 29 March, while conducting a night ambush, 1st Platoon was moving into an assigned ambush position in its area of operations. SGT John Clark was scouting the ambush location at dusk along with Specialist 4th Class (SP4) Ted Blass and Private First Class (PFC) Gilbert Taylor. This is standard procedure prior to the entire platoon moving in and setting up. Clark was out front checking the position when he noticed movement near a large anthill several feet high. Just as he turned to tell Blass and Taylor to go back, they were hit by a heavy volume of fire from across a nearby canal.

SGT Clark was killed instantly. Blass and Taylor were both wounded, but managed to crawl back to their platoon. LT Boyd recognized by the sound that the firing was coming from US weapons. After several tense radio calls back and forth with CPT Begley, it was learned that a US Marine ambush patrol, either out of position or firing across a friendly unit boundary, had engaged our platoon in a grievous error.

SGT Clark was an excellent soldier. He will be remembered by those with whom he served as saving the lives of his entire platoon. There is no telling how many 1st Platoon members may have been killed or severely wounded had he not been so alert. His own family, however, still takes the full brunt of his unfortunate death.

It is hard enough to take casualties from enemy action. Taking them from friendly US forces is as bad as it gets. Infantry soldiers know firsthand the many dangers of

friendly fire. The battlefield often has friendly US units working close together with many dangerous US weapons all designed to kill. The long list includes indirect fire from mortars and artillery; bombs, napalm, and cannon fire from close-support jet aircraft; rocket and mini-gun fire of attack helicopters; and soldiers using rifles, machine guns, claymore mines, and hand grenades.

These weapons are frequently employed under conditions in which the location of other US ground forces is not precisely known. It is the nature of combat that miscalculation, poor judgment, incomplete information, lack of coordination, or a dozen other reasons may cause things to go wrong. The enemy is not the only danger on a battlefield. That is why effective training, and more training, is needed prior to combat and even in combat. No endeavor depends on continuous improvement of preparation, procedures, and practices like infantry operations.

"Friendly fire" is an innocuous, euphemistic term. There is nothing friendly about being killed by your own side in combat. It happens more than one might think and in every war. There are no accurate statistics of friendly fire incidents for the Vietnam War. In this long war, the number of friendly fire casualties is likely in the thousands with incidents occurring in all US forces, the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard. On 24 March the Army, and especially the infantry, with the most men in the ground war, has the highest number by far of friendly fire casualties.

Notification of Next of Kin

For bereaved families like that of SGT Clark's who lose a son, husband, or brother, grief will soon become their constant reminder and lifelong companion of their terrible loss. By 1969, next of kin are notified quickly. Not by telegram as in the early days of the war, but by a two-man, uniformed team that arrives at the home of parents or a wife in a military sedan. Their sudden, unannounced arrival is an unwelcome, silent harbinger of the bad news they bring.

The next-of-kin notification team are themselves soldiers from the nearest military base or a nearby recruiting station. They approach their task with great dread, but don't refuse the duty. They understand that someone must do it in honor and recognition of those who sacrificed their lives in the service to their country. The families who suffer the terrible loss deserve the courtesy of a personal notification and the team is responsible for doing it. They will be the first to see the deep sorrow and anguish of those who will likely be receiving the worst news of their life.

The notification is given verbatim, word for word to the next of kin, "As a representative of the President of the United States, it is with great regret ...." The rest of the statement is often not heard. Their mind shuts off the horror of what they have long feared. Overwhelming cries of deep anguish or anger often expressed in moans or loud shouts of disbelief arise from deep within the soul. Some faint. Some

absorb the blow with quiet sobbing. Their lives now changed forever. For families, there is no such thing as "light casualties"!

My own family knows this full well. In the last months of World War II, my 26-year-old uncle, LT Peyton Turner, a navigator on a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber, was killed. He was the beloved son of his father and the revered older brother of his two sisters, one of which was my mother, the other a dear aunt. They were sad to see their brother Peyton join the Army Air Corps. They had lost their mother to illness before the war. They did not want to even think Peyton could be killed.

Peyton had completed his required number of combat missions and was due to come home soon. He volunteered to fly one last mission with a crew short of a navigator. In just three months on 8 May 1945, the war against Germany would end. On 16 February 1945, Peyton's bomber was knocked out of the sky on his squadron's last bombing mission against a German fighter aerodrome near Regensburg, Germany.

As their bomber formation turned coming out of their bomb run, a bomb hung up in another bomber fell and hit Peyton's bomber flying below. All but two of his seven-man crew died in the fiery crash. When the next-of-kin notification was made to Peyton's father, he had a heart attack and died soon after. Generations later, that fateful day is still vividly remembered with much sorrow. My grandfather was another casualty of the war, all due to a friendly fire incident.

Combat Operations Southeast of Hue

Since 1 March, Delta Company has been participating with our battalion (the 1-501st) under the leadership of LTC John Rogers in *Operation Massachusetts Striker*. This large spring offensive by 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, led by COL John Hoefling, includes four infantry battalions: the 1-501st, 1-502nd, 2-501st, and 2-327th. They have 16 infantry rifle companies and another four combat support companies with reconnaissance and mortar platoons. The brigade's mission is to conduct airmobile operations in the southern end of the A Shau Valley to locate and destroy enemy forces, caches (weapons and supplies), and lines of communications.

In Delta Company, the name, size, and mission of the brigade-level operation are not known to us at platoon level. CPT Begley typically gives us our daily mission in simple terms: go from Point A to Point B or set up an ambush at Point C. Beyond that, we usually don't receive much information on the friendly or enemy situation. In most cases, we are not aware of the missions or locations of our sister companies in the battalion. It would be good to know more and have an idea of the bigger picture of our battalion operations.

We don't yet know of our upcoming move to the A Shau. The likely reason is the move has been delayed. The brigade's mission is dependent on creating a chain of

March Back in the World

1 Mar	Top hit *Everyday People* by Sly and the Family Stone
1 Mar	Micky Mantle retires from baseball with the NY Yankees
3–9 Mar	Apollo launches, orbits moon, safely returns
7 Mar	Kissinger forwards Secret CIA study of Student Unrest to President Nixon
10 Mar	James Earl Ray pleads guilty to Dr. Martin Luther King's murder, later retracts his plea
13 Mar	*The Love Bug released* (#2 film in '69)
20 Mar	Chicago 7 tried for inciting '68 Democratic Convention riots, not convicted
22 Mar	Protestors smash and pour blood on Dow Chemical offices in Washington DC
25 Mar	John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 14-day anti-war "bed in," record *Give Peace a Chance*
28 Mar	President Eisenhower dies, WWII top general, 34th president born in 1890

five new fire support bases (FSBs) in the southern A Shau Valley. That construction is underway but well behind schedule due to monsoon rains in the high mountains 40 miles southwest of Hue near the Laotian border.

While the bases are being constructed, the 1-501st finishes its mission near Hue and is attached temporarily to the 1st Brigade. Our new area of operations is a smaller mountainous region 25 km (15 mi) directly south of Hue. Perhaps not knowing about the move to the A Shau is for the best. We need to concentrate on the task at hand.

Seen so far only at a distance, the mountains south of Hue remind me of those in north Georgia at the southern end of the Blue Ridge chain. They are modest in size, rugged, green, and wet. It is an operating environment far different from the coastal plains. We will have to adapt our tactics and operating techniques. Movement in the mountains will be difficult, enemy concealment much easier. All three of our platoon leaders were introduced to mountain operations during three weeks in Ranger School conducting combat patrols in the North Georgia mountains. We are certainly not experts in mountain warfare, but at least the terrain is similar.

Our battalion S-3 operations officer, Major (MAJ) Warren MacDiarmid, tells CPT Begley there's a large NVA force in a 10 km (6 mi) square area in the mountainous

area where we are headed. That's an attention getter. I think, kidding myself, maybe the only thing worse than not knowing the enemy situation is knowing.

We soon learn our company will conduct reconnaissance in force (RIF) patrols only on the northern edge of the area. Perhaps we will have a "trip wire" role, giving an alert in case the large enemy force moves toward Hue. Other companies in our battalion have similar RIF missions in other sectors.

The term "reconnaissance in force" replaced the earlier one "search and destroy." By 1969 the latter was officially ended as being politically inappropriate. It conjured up negative visions of civilian hooches (small huts often with thatch sides, dirt floor, and straw roofs) being burned by soldiers with cigarette lighters and all kinds of other unpleasant images seized on by war protestors.

Infantry doctrine of the day says a RIF mission is an "attack to discover the enemy's position and strength."[13] By definition, the primary aim is reconnaissance. If enemy weaknesses are discovered, they may be exploited for tactical success. That is not exactly what we are doing. We are actively looking to attack the enemy wherever we find him.

The term RIF mission is still an appropriate term because we never know where we will find the enemy. It bears mentioning again, the usual practice of the NVA is to evade US forces unless it is to their advantage to engage. When they do engage, it is typically at very close range and under conditions favorable to them.

Our First Combat Assault into the Mountains

On 5 April, Delta Company makes a combat assault by helicopter at the base of a heavily forested mountain range south of Hue. Our entire company is lifted to the landing zone (LZ) in one flight by 15 HU-1 (nicknamed Huey) helicopters. The Huey (now designated the UH-1 for utility helicopter) is the workhorse helicopter of our airmobile division. Each aircraft can easily carry six combat-loaded soldiers. Eight can be squeezed in if need be. At a cruising speed of up to 125 mph, they can get us where we want to go in a hurry,

The flight of Hueys drops us in an open grassy area at the foot of the mountain range forming the northern boundary of the enemy's reported location. We land unopposed at the LZ and soon begin a two-hour climb up the mountain, avoiding existing trails and making our own. The going is slow, vegetation is thick, and the angle of our ascent is steep. Most in our company have never operated in jungle mountain terrain. We are moving up in a single file stretching out easily 200 m. For a rifle company we are moving quietly. No one is talking.

The steep slopes are covered with "wait a minute" vines that slow our progress. We have to be careful not to develop large gaps in our file. We are fully loaded with heavy rucksacks weighing 70–90 lbs. Some carry more. Breaking contact with the man in front of you can cause problems. Squads and platoons can become

separated. That is not a good idea in enemy territory. The temperature and humidity are high. Our jungle fatigues are quickly saturated with sweat. Monsoon rains forecast for late afternoon will be welcome, at least at first. Operating in heavy rain gets old fast.

My 3rd Platoon leads the climb with 1st and 2nd Platoons following. CPT Begley, his artillery FO, two radio-telephone operators (RTO), and company medic follow immediately behind 3rd Platoon. SGT Jim Littleton, age 21, my most experienced squad leader, is the lead squad in our platoon. SP4 James Parvin is our point man as we move up the mountain. I am following right behind Littleton's squad with my RTO. SSG Gary Tepner, my 23-year-old platoon sergeant, follows with our last squad,

Parvin is five meters out in front of Littleton's squad by himself. Littleton and another soldier stay close enough to keep him in sight and provide him cover. The point man is the most exposed soldier in our formation. His main job is to keep us from walking into an enemy ambush. His skills in detecting the presence of the enemy are critical. Point men are among the unit's best and most experienced soldiers. Typically, they volunteer for the assignment to protect their fellow soldiers and themselves. No one wants a rookie out front.

Littleton is from Wilhite, a small rural community northwest of Monroe, Louisiana. He grew up in the swamps and forests of Louisiana hunting and fishing and says he didn't know his family was poor until he went to college. With a smile, he once told me he had been elected senior class president of his small rural high school by the girls in his class. I never knew if that was true. He has a great sense of humor, but is all business on combat operations.

Littleton's father, William P. Littleton, had been an infantryman with the 2nd Infantry Division during World War II in Europe. He was captured in battle and spent nine months in a German prisoner of war camp until his release at the end of the war. Littleton remembers his dad telling stories of how he witnessed firsthand the bravery and toughness of airborne soldiers in combat.

Littleton was drafted when he dropped out of college to work. Upon completing basic and advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, Littleton volunteered to be a paratrooper. He joined Delta Company on 14 July 1968 as a PFC straight from airborne training at Fort Benning, Georgia. He has been in 3rd Platoon eight months, first as a rifleman then an M-60 machine gunner. He was promoted to sergeant a couple of months ago. I have learned to trust his combat instincts and skills.

A Brief Enemy Encounter

After a strenuous climb to the top of the mountain, we are hot, thirsty, and soaked in sweat. We could use a short break, but security comes first. Littleton's squad has come upon a well-travelled mountain trail running both directions along the ridgeline. With his left arm, palm raised, he signals for the platoon to halt. He next

drops and flattens his palm toward the ground, motioning us to get down. An index finger to his lips signals us to remain silent.

The hand signals are passed backwards to our following platoons. There is no need to talk. Everyone intuitively knows what to do. I point a finger motioning Littleton to take his squad to the left. SGT John Horan's squad is signaled to go right. Our company waits quietly taking a knee, but remaining alert while we check out the trail.

Minutes later, Littleton returns and whispers, "We hear someone on the trail about 50 m down. Maybe three or four people. Sounds like they're not moving. We heard talking and singing." "Singing?" I ask. "Yes, singing," Littleton says with a slight smile. I tell Littleton to lead me and several men from his squad back down the trail. Littleton chooses his M-60 machine-gun team, PFCs Andrew Ramos and Gerena Nieves, and his M-79 grenadier, SP4 Ralph Franklin. He positions the rest of his squad in firing positions to cover our movement down the trail, ready to reinforce us if needed.

SGT Horan's squad moves a short distance up the trail. They are set up to block the trail if an enemy force should come from that direction. Our third squad led by SGT Larry Hoffa remains in place in the middle astride the trail. My RTO informs CPT Begley's RTO, "We have an enemy position identified not more than 50 m away, 3-6 (our platoon's call sign) will soon engage it."

Littleton leads as we move slowly and quietly back down the trail. We stop about 30 ft from the Vietnamese voices. We can't see them nor can they see us because of the thick bushes between us. We assume they are enemy because we're in a "free fire zone." There are no restrictions on our use of firepower. Carefully and silently taking prone positions side by side behind the bushes, we listen with hearts pounding as we try to remain calm.

One enemy soldier is singing softly. Two are conversing with one another. Their voices aren't loud, but apparently they think they're alone and safe. They don't know death is lurking nearby. From what we can tell, it is a small team of at least three enemy soldiers. We don't know if others may be near. There is only one way to find out.

At Littleton's signal, we open fire through the bushes. Our machine gun and three M-16 rifles on full automatic open fire at the same time, creating an abrupt, thunderous hailstorm of bullets. Franklin fires an M-79 grenade over the top of the bushes. We are too close for the round to detonate.

The sound of the firing and explosions reverberates through the mountains shattering a peaceful quiet. There is no return fire. Our firing continues for ten seconds. Then we stop. Littleton and I each throw a grenade. Those of us with M-16s reload new magazines. The sudden quiet is eerie. The only sound is ringing in our ears. The smell of gunfire hangs heavy in the mountain air. Slowly, we move cautiously around both sides of the bushes ready to open fire again. Two NVA soldiers lie dead in a small clearing at a trail junction.

Littleton silently motions to the machine-gun team and grenadier to move across the clearing for security. Each takes a side of the trail. They quickly discover the

abandoned equipment of two fleeing enemy soldiers. One has run down one side of the ridge, one down the other. They dropped AK-47 rifles and other equipment as they ran. No blood trails are seen. They got away, no doubt terrified by our surprise attack.

While our machine-gun team and grenadier cover us, Littleton and I search the two bodies. The soldier I search is lying face down. He is wearing the dark green uniform of an NVA soldier. His helmet lies close by. Perhaps he is the team leader. I take hold of his shoulder and turn him over. He has several bullet and fragment wounds in his chest and arms. His face is youthful and clean-shaven without any wounds. He appears to be in his early twenties.

Searching his shirt, I find a small, black plastic wallet in his left chest pocket. Opening it, I see a black and white photo of an attractive, young Vietnamese woman. She is smiling widely. A girlfriend? A young wife? She likely will never know what happened to her soldier. I have the photo of my own wife of six months in my left shirt pocket. I put his wallet back in the same pocket. He is not carrying papers or maps. Littleton finds a large amount of Vietnamese piasters on the soldier he searches. The four soldiers were probably a supply team waiting on supplies from the valley below. A path branches off the main trail at the clearing leading down the mountain. The sound of our weapons warns those below not to make deliveries today. We leave the two NVA bodies in the clearing so they can be easily found. The NVA are good at recovering their dead.

We move back up the trail with four captured AK-47 rifles. CPT Begley and his command group are now up on the trail. I make a situation report (SITREP) to Begley giving Littleton full credit for his initiative and leadership. He and his squad likely prevented us from being ambushed. Later, SGT Littleton will receive a well-deserved Bronze Star for Valor for his actions. I'm proud of the performance of all my guys today, especially that we took no casualties.

CPT Begley decides we will stay in our current location for the night. It is late afternoon. Our attention turns to setting up our defensive position. The two escaped enemy soldiers will likely report our position. We anticipate we'll be attacked soon. If the NVA come up the ridgeline trail, 3rd Platoon will be hit first. Our 1st and 2nd platoons have taken up positions on each side of the trail behind us. We all know the enemy could approach from any direction.

End of the Day

As night falls, we are dug in. Trip flares and claymore anti-personnel mines are out. Sectors of fire for each position have been checked. Our platoon's machine gun is positioned by the trail able to fire right or left. All ears and eyes are alert in the deep darkness of the triple canopy jungle. Each jungle sound gets our immediate attention. Knowing a large enemy force is nearby, anticipation of an attack keeps our adrenaline flowing. We wait and watch, peering into the black night.

My mind is unsettled as I imagine the enemy moving up the trail toward our position. My sense of dread is unlike any I have yet experienced. Likely, I'm not the only one battling fear. Though no one talks about it in the midst of combat, fear's ever present shadow falls on us all. A soldier's survival instinct is strong in combat, strong enough to overcome his fears. Soldiers will often act to save their fellow soldiers even if it requires putting themselves in danger.

The best way to make it through danger in combat is to rely on our training and one another. For extra measure, I pray the proverbial foxhole prayer, "Lord help us get through the night." As has often been said, there are no atheists in foxholes. I am embarrassed to say it is one of the few prayers I remember praying in Vietnam. Several hours into the night, fatigue from the long climb and enemy encounter finally sets in. Everyone but those on watch falls sound asleep.

Nothing happens. On waking to the morning light, I don't remember to thank God for getting through the night. Over the next week, we have no further enemy contact. While continuing our RIF mission, often in pouring rain, our 1st and 2nd Platoons discover a major enemy cache of food and weapons. Shortly afterwards, our mission ends. We walk out of the mountains tired and wet to a pickup zone (PZ) in an open, grassy valley. The sun is shining, there is a rainbow in the late morning sky.

We set up in our pick-up positions and bask in the warming sun as we await the helicopters. We are still alert, but more relaxed than we have been in days. Prior to pick up, LTC John Rogers, our battalion commander, swoops in and drops off several waterproof bags filled with ice and cold beer, welcomed with smiles and loud shouts of "Cold beer!" This is not exactly the time or place to lounge around with a beer. We consume them quickly. I'm not a beer drinker, but it's the best beer I've ever had. At the battalion tactical operations center, plans are already complete for our next mission—the A Shau Valley.

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Casualties and Awards

During March 1969, in addition to Delta Company's casualties, already mentioned, Alpha Company has four soldiers WIA on 3 March: SGT Roger Long, SGT William Bray, SP4 Dean Neilson, PFC Michael Fredricks. Bravo Company has one soldier WIA on 21 March, PFC Kenank Kidd. Charlie Company has one soldier WIA, SP4 Jack Cumminsky. Headquarters Company and Echo Company (Recon Platoon) have no casualties.

Casualty Table 3: 1-501st Hue, 1–31 March 1969

Casualties	HHC	A Co	B Co	C Co	D Co	E Co	Total
KIA	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
WIA	0	4	1	1	2	0	8
Total	0	4	1	1	3	0	9

1-501st Soldiers Killed in Action, March 1969

Delta Company—1

29 March: SGT John J. Clark, age 20, born 25 July 1948 from Manchester, TN

1-501st Soldier Awards, March 1969 (other awards may have been made that were not mentioned in after action reports)

Bronze Star—2

Alpha Company: SGT Frederic Davis

Delta Company: SGT James Littleton

Purple Heart—awards were made to all soldiers KIA or WIA

CHAPTER 9

Change of Command

1–2 June

1 June: A New Commander

Early morning 1 June, we learn CPT Roy is now in command. Yesterday, CPT Begley had not made us aware CPT Roy had flown out to join the company and was taking command the next day. I was also unaware that yesterday he had come forward with Begley and had been wounded in the shoulder by the same RPG that killed Pilsner. But here he is taking command of his first infantry company in combat. How he got here is an interesting story, but first things first.

CPT Roy calls for me and SSG Sahrle to come to the company CP. We are meeting him and he is meeting his two platoon leaders for the first time. Sahrle is now acting platoon leader of 1st Platoon (including what remains of 2nd Platoon) and is the most senior NCO in our company. He was promoted to Staff Sergeant just a few months ago. He is on his first term of enlistment and graduated from PNCOC (the same course Tepner attended) before coming to Vietnam in June 1968. Roy doesn't know Sahrle's background or mine.

I can imagine what Roy is thinking, "This is all I've got for platoon leaders? These two guys don't even have platoon sergeants and their squad leaders are all first-termer, junior sergeants leading understrength squads." He is not discouraged. Roy's been in the infantry long enough to know you play the hand you are dealt. He will make do with what he has. After a brief introduction and cordial exchange, Roy is ready for us to get on with our first mission of the day. We are to recover PFC Pratt who was killed yesterday. That is his top priority, a fact that will be quietly noted with satisfaction and appreciation by our soldiers.

Our two platoons are to sweep through the bunker complex and find Pratt. Sahrle's platoon will lead since Pratt was a 1st Platoon member. Roy reminds us that even though we saw enemy soldiers leaving the area of the bunkers yesterday, we don't know if the bunkers were reoccupied during the night. We are to approach the bunkers cautiously. When we find Pratt, we are to take care that his body isn't booby-trapped. Once we recover Pratt and check the bunkers, we are to return to

our current location. With clear guidance, we brief our platoons and are soon ready to move out.

Our two platoons move back up the hill to the enemy bunker complex. We approach cautiously, but as expected the enemy has evacuated the position. Blood trails indicate they took casualties. PFC Pratt is found and carried back by PFC Cravens to the company CP. Pratt will go out this morning on the same chopper as CPT Begley. Our mission is completed in less than an hour. CPT Roy notifies LTC Singer that Pratt has been found and there are no enemy contact or casualties. Singer is pleased to get the word and commends Roy for his first mission accomplished.

Later that day, CPT Roy and I have a brief talk. He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "Ed, take care of yourself. You're my last platoon leader." I smile and say, "Yes sir, that's my plan." It is a good gesture on his part. We are all in need of encouragement. During the remainder of the day, Delta Company conducts limited combat patrols under the new leadership of CPT Roy.

Questions About Our New Commander

In combat, soldiers have little opportunity to get an advance look at the background, character, knowledge, and capabilities of a new commander like Roy. They will watch him closely to learn as much as they can as soon as they can. Their battlefield success, not to mention their lives, depends on his effectiveness as a combat leader.

The soldiers of Delta Company have many unspoken questions about their new commander. How does he respond to stress and pressures in battle? Is he physically tough? Mentally and emotionally stable? Does he instill confidence so his men want to follow him? Can he quickly make right decisions in the heat of battle? Is he technically competent in infantry skills?

There is more. How does he talk with his officers, NCOs, and soldiers? What level of respect and concern does he have for those he leads? What motivates him as a commander? Is he outwardly motivated merely trying to impress senior officers? Or, is he internally motivated as a soldier and leader to do the right thing? These questions and others will be answered in the days ahead.

The Army trains its infantry captains quite well to lead infantry companies. As a group they consider themselves better than average officers. A good number are excellent. Some of course are better than others and in combat, soldiers want the best. It won't be long before they will begin to have their many questions answered. If the soldiers of Delta Company knew about Roy's background and experience, their minds would be put at ease. They will soon discover they are getting just the commander they need for the difficulties that lie ahead.

The Right Man for a Tough Job

CPT Roy, age 28, was born 6 December 1940 in the rural town of Evangeline, Louisiana. Evangeline is in the state's southwest corner in bayou country. It is best known for having the first oil well in the state. His family had limited money. His father abandoned his family when Roy was an infant. He grew up in a time when single parent families were not common. His life as a young boy was spent outdoors hunting, fishing, playing sports, and spending time in the swamps. As a young man, he began to think of becoming a Marine.

World War II was not long over when Roy reached his teens. As high school graduation approached, he and a close friend decided to join the Army under its new "buddy plan." His friend backed out at the last minute, but Roy enlisted anyway in 1959. He was 18 years old. Roy volunteered for airborne because of the extra "jump pay." He sent most of his paycheck home to support his mother.

Roy completed basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, followed by advanced infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and jump school at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Airborne Battle Group, 501st Infantry (Airborne) at Fort Bragg. For his first years, Roy was an infantry heavy weapons specialist. During those early years, he volunteered for and successfully completed the Special Forces Qualification Course.

Soon after graduation, he was recommended for Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning. He waited a year for a slot in the school and finally graduated as a Second Lieutenant in 1965. After OCS, Lieutenant Roy went to Vietnam as an individual replacement from January 1966 to January 1967. He saw extensive combat as an infantry platoon leader with Bravo Company, 1-327th Infantry, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Roy was seriously wounded during operations on 4 March 1966 in Tuy Hoa located in the coastal plains of central South Vietnam. He was walking behind his three-man point team near the front of his platoon. An enemy machine gun firing from their flank hit all three point men and Roy. A round passed through the back of his helmet. Multiple rounds impacted his rucksack. One round hit his lower back penetrating deeply from side to side.

A medevac took Roy to an Army Field Hospital then he was flown to Japan for major surgery. There his back was wired together. He remained in Japan recovering prior to being returned to the States. His healing went well. Instead of going home, he volunteered to go back to Vietnam. He was allowed two weeks convalescence leave before returning to Vietnam, but refused, eager to get back to his platoon.

Once in-country, he purposely by-passed the Army replacement center and made his way back to the 1st Brigade of the 101st and his old battalion. MAJ David Hackworth, his Battalion Executive Officer, was surprised, but pleased to see him. Knowing Roy was just out of the hospital, Hackworth offered Roy any job in the

battalion. Roy asked to get his old platoon back. Hackworth said "Done!" (Hackworth later became a battalion commander and GEN Creighton Abrams, commander of military forces in Vietnam, called him "the best battalion commander I ever saw." COL David Hackworth, one of the most decorated soldiers of the Vietnam War, later authored *About Face: Odyssey of an American Warrior*, Simon& Schuster, 1990, offering a biting critique of the conduct of the Vietnam War.)

Roy was flown out to his old platoon operating independently near Phan Thiet. His friend who took over his platoon after Roy was wounded willingly relinquished it. He told Roy, "Welcome back! In two hours, your platoon will be on Hawk Flight standby as the ready reaction platoon for the battalion. You don't have much time to get ready." Roy smiled and said, "It's good to be back!"

Roy completed seven months as an infantry platoon leader and then moved to Charlie Company as executive officer for several months until the end of his tour. In that position, Roy who was now a 1st Lieutenant, became a "Fighting XO," often going on combat patrols with his company commander, each leading two platoons. He wasn't much for staying safe in the rear area.

In January 1967, his first Vietnam tour completed, Roy returned to the States and was assigned as a senior tactical officer at OCS. His leadership was recognized by the graduating officer candidate class which dedicated their yearbook to him. Roy decided to seek a Regular Army commission. With no infantry slots available, he reluctantly accepted a branch transfer to the Military Police Corps. Now promoted to Captain, Roy's first assignment as a military police (MP) officer was command of the MP company in the 82nd Airborne Division. His boss there was LTC Eugene Murdock, Provost Marshall for the division. During his command tour, Roy decided he wanted to return to the infantry, applied, and received a branch transfer back to infantry.

In September 1968, CPT Roy received orders for Vietnam and arrived in October 1968. LTC Murdock, who would be promoted to Colonel and take command of the Military Police Group at Long Binh, appointed Roy as his Assistant S3. Out of loyalty to Murdoch, Roy served seven months with the group until Murdock's tour ended.

In May 1969, when Murdock departed, Roy was finally free to seek an infantry assignment in Vietnam. His first choice was to return to the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Unfortunately, the first week in May he had a major appendicitis attack and emergency surgery at the Army Hospital in Long Binh. Released from the hospital with two weeks convalescence leave, he decided instead to make his way north to join the 101st Airborne Division and his old unit. Arriving at the 101st, for six days he was first assigned to the 3rd Brigade and 2-501st who had just finished fighting in the Hamburger Hill battle which was now over.

With the 1st Brigade heavily engaged in a new fight near Tam Ky, CPT Roy was reassigned to the 1-501st due to the battalion's heavy casualties and recent

loss of two company commanders. He was flown by Huey to LZ Professional and joined the battalion. At first, he was considered for the S-3 Air position responsible for coordinating air assets used by the battalion. A few days later on short notice, LTC Singer told Roy he would immediately replace Begley in Delta Company. Finally, he would command an infantry company in combat with the 101st Airborne Division, the position he most wanted.

CPT Roy is 28 years old as he takes command. He is the oldest young man in Delta Company and certainly the most experienced. More importantly, he is the right man for the tough job of leading an understrength infantry company short of officers and NCOs. The men who serve under CPT Roy in the days ahead will respond well to and appreciate his leadership. Many will owe him their lives and attribute their survival in combat to him.

2 June: Preparation for Hill 376

A "Never Quit" Commander

In his second day in command, CPT Roy's shoulder wound is hurting and worse than expected. My platoon medic looks at his wound and sees it is getting infected. He advises CPT Roy to get it treated by the medical staff at LZ Professional. Roy reluctantly agrees. Before going in, he calls LTC Singer to let him know his plans to return to Professional in the next hour. Singer agrees and tells him not to worry about the company. He and his operations officer, Major MacDiarmid, will keep an eye on it.

Roy takes a helicopter out in the early afternoon. It is the last time I'll see CPT Roy for 46 years. Landing at the dusty helipad at Professional, he goes straight to the 1st Brigade's well-staffed and equipped clinic. As the medic said, infection is beginning to set in. The wound is cleaned and rebandaged. A strong course of antibiotics is prescribed.

LTC Singer comes in to see him. He's concerned about Roy's ability to take the company into combat. He tells Roy he has a replacement company commander ready to go and Roy does not have to go back out. Roy doesn't tell Singer that he's also only three weeks out from his recent appendectomy. He is confident it won't hurt his performance. He has been getting stronger every day.

Roy refuses to give up his new command. He tells LTC Singer, "I'm both willing and able to get back to my company, I can fly out first thing next morning." Singer tells him, Delta Company will be making a combat assault in the morning, likely into a hot LZ. Roy responds, "I'm ready to go. The shoulder wound is painful, but only a temporary setback." Finally, LTC Singer relents, impressed by Roy's resolve. Though Roy and Singer may not be thinking it, Roy is the personal embodiment of Delta Company's motto, "Never Quit!"

Roy knows Delta Company is both understrength and short of officer and NCO leaders. He rightly believes his previous combat experience is in dire need. What he saw and briefly learned about the company was positive despite the manning issues. His decision to return and resume command is an unselfish decision. His experience, combat leadership, and "Never Quit" fighting spirit will be needed more than Roy knows.

Once his wound is treated, CPT Roy heads over to the battalion's TOC to get a detailed update on events. He talks with one of the older TOC operations NCOs. He learns more about the 21 May combat and how brutal it was. The NCO says the battalion's four companies have tended to operate close to one another since taking heavy casualties. It is understandable.

Roy talks briefly with MAJ MacDiarmid, the battalion operations officer, about plans for tomorrow. He learns this afternoon Bravo Company (1-501st) is conducting a combat assault to rescue an Aero-Rifle Platoon from the brigade's Bravo Troop, 2-17th Air Cavalry. The platoon was attacked by a large number of NVA immediately after landing on Hill 376 and took heavy casualties. Tomorrow morning, Delta and Alpha Companies will be inserted on Hill 376.

The Fight on Hill 376 Begins

For the past two weeks whenever brigade helicopters fly near or over Hill 376 they take enemy fire. Sometimes light caliber weapons, but often .51 caliber heavy machine guns in an antiaircraft role. This eventually raises the question, "Why does the enemy have heavy guns there? What are they protecting?"

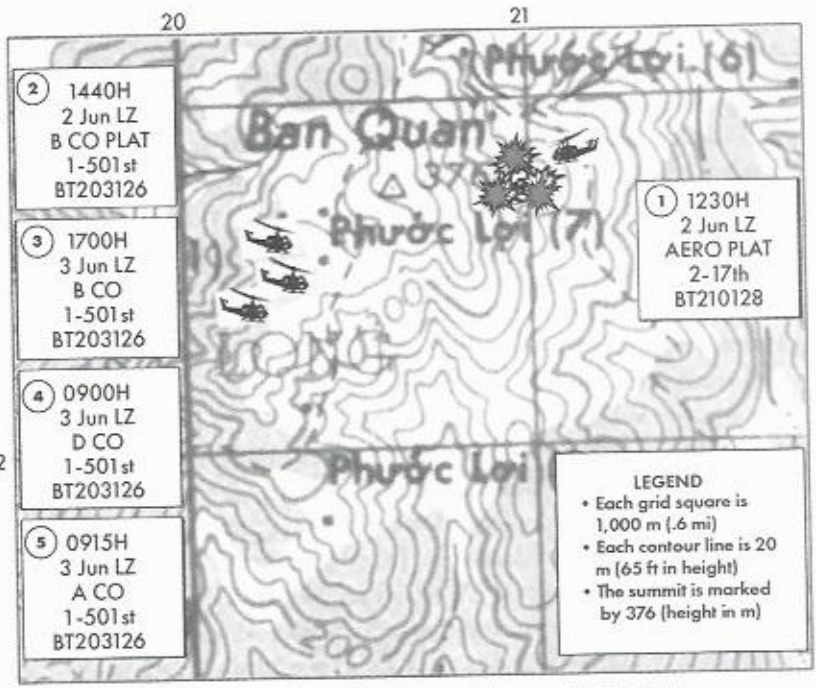
Since noon on 2 June, the 1-501st TOC has been listening to the developing situation on Hill 376. The 1st Brigade commander inserted a small 18-manAero-Rifle Platoon from Bravo Troop, 2-17th Cavalry at BT210128 on the east side of the mountain. Dropped off by helicopter, their mission was to determine the size and location of the enemy which may be there. They found out soon enough. The enemy was waiting for them in force. Within minutes of the helicopters lifting off, the platoon is pinned down by withering enemy fire. Surrounded and under attack by what is reported to be hundreds of NVA soldiers, the platoon quickly has four killed and four wounded.

SP4 Joseph Guy LaPointe Jr. is the medic for the Aero-Rifle Platoon. He immediately answers the call "Medic!" from the wounded. Going forward to locate the wounded soldiers, he runs through heavy enemy fire then begins to crawl directly in view of the enemy bunker. As his platoon attempts to provide covering fire to suppress the enemy bunker, LaPointe administers first aid to one wounded soldier and protects a second soldier with his own body. Fire from the enemy bunker wounds LaPointe, knocking him to the ground. Though wounded, he returns to the two wounded men and continues to give them aid until an enemy hand grenade kills

all three men. For his bravery under fire, SP4 LaPointe is awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously on 25 January 1972. LaPointe was a conscientious objector who chose to serve in the military to save the lives of others.

The 1st Brigade commander soon realizes "we've kicked a hornet's nest." He alerts the 1-501st and assigns the battalion the mission of relieving enemy pressure on the 2-17th Cavalry's platoon. In fact, it is a rescue mission. Bravo Company at Tam Ky North securing 1st Brigade's command post is designated the immediate reaction force. At 1440H, the 1st Platoon from Bravo Company, 1-501st is inserted into an LZ near BT203126 to link-up with the Aero-Rifle Platoon. The timely arrival and bravery of the platoon leader (name is withheld by his personal request) and his platoon reinforces and saves the Aero-Rifle Platoon from being overrun and certain death.

At 1745H, CPT Walter Shelton comes into Hill 376 with the rest of Bravo Company and the battalion's Recon Platoon attached. At the end of their first day on Hill 376, Bravo has only one wounded soldier, SGT David Holladay. Apparently, the enemy has decided to lay low and not take on a larger unit in direct combat. Alpha and Delta companies are on standby alert to conduct combat assaults into



Map 3: Combat Assaults on Hill 376

Bravo's LZ the next morning (3 June). Once alerted, the two companies monitor the on-going battle on their radios and turn their attention to tomorrow's combat assault. The fight for Hill 376 has begun.

In the afternoon, Delta Company moves to its pickup point at BT164109 for tomorrow's combat assault. Our two platoons are making routine combat assault preparations. They know the drill. Checking weapons, ammunition, grenades, radios, batteries, food, and water. So far, no additional information on the enemy situation is available other than what is picked up on the radio. What is clear—there is a large, well-armed NVA force on Hill 376. The fighting is likely to be intense. There is also no information on the battalion's concept of operations. The only thing known, and it's a guess, is that Delta and Alpha Company will likely be put down on the Hill somewhere close to Bravo Company.

Fortunately, Bravo Company takes only one casualty on their first day on Hill 376, SGT David Holladay is wounded in action. The Aero-Rifle Platoon's four KIA casualties include SSG Jimmie Reed, SSG Emmanuel Saunders, and SP5 Richard Brech. As previously mentioned SP4 Joseph LaPointe the attached medic was also killed. (Soldiers WIA were not identified in the Bravo Troop, 2-17th Cavalry after action report for *Operation Lamar Plain* and could not be identified in other records.)

My Last Day in the Field

As evening closes in, my attention is on tomorrow. Not enough on our current situation. A costly mistake. We have been in our current position all afternoon. Our claymore antipersonnel mines and trip flares are not yet out. Typically, we do that just before dark. As dusk approaches, we begin to feel secure. We have had no enemy contact in two days. A quiet stillness settles over our position. We begin to implement our nighttime security procedures. Talking in low voices. Turning radios down. Making as little noise as practical checking weapons. No fires for heating chow. My platoon's position is within a stand of small scrub trees and brush. They are just tall enough to conceal my 6 ft, 3 in frame. I am busy checking our positions. Most of my guys are already dug in for the night.

Suddenly, the quiet is shattered by an explosion just a few feet from where I'm standing. I'm thrown some 20 ft into an open area and land like a sack of potatoes. A second explosion follows the first. Both rounds are preceded by the characteristic "bloop" of an M-79 grenade launcher. I hear neither. Closely following the two explosions there is a long burst of AK-47 fire. Then quickly, again all is quiet!

I'm lying still. Not sure what has happened. I look down at my legs. My jungle fatigue pants are saturated with blood. My legs are numb. I can't move them. Like other wounded soldiers, at first I have no idea how bad I'm hit. I look over and see

the head of our platoon medic ("Doc") pop up from a foxhole dug for the night. Calmly, he says, "3-6, I'm coming out to get you."

I am not about to let Doc come out in the open to treat me. I tell him to stay put. I will come to him. I begin a slow crawl over to his position using my elbows to push myself along. Half-way there, my leg gets caught on a clump of grass. I look down and see what looks like a jagged bloody stick coming out of the top of my boot. Thinking it's my legbone, I reach down to free myself. It comes loose easily. Just a bloody stick lodged in the top of my boot. Relieved and somewhat amused, from that moment on I figure I will be okay and crawl the rest of the way with renewed strength. Doc comes out and pulls me the rest of the way and begins to treat my wounds.

The bravery of medics in combat is a much under told story. My platoon's medic is as brave as they come. Tall, lean, and muscular, he could probably take anyone in our platoon in a hand-to-hand fight. But here he is, a black conscientious objector, serving as an unarmed medic alongside soldiers in an infantry platoon armed to the teeth. (He joined us after our arrival in Tam Ky. I heard his name when he first came into the platoon two weeks ago, but we all have called him "Doc" out of respect and admiration. I am sad to say that none of the veterans in our company can recall his actual name 50 years later. In research for this book, I have tried numerous efforts over a three-year period to find him to no avail with the support of other members of Delta Company and our battalion. We won't give up until we find him.)

Days earlier I had given Doc my personal Colt Commander .45 caliber pistol. It wasn't government issue. I purchased it from my former platoon sergeant, Gary Tepner, just before he left the platoon for the battalion TOC in the A Shau. I told Doc, "Please take this for your self-protection." He took it with a smile of appreciation. Years later, I learned he carried it unloaded in the bottom of his rucksack. Clearly, he was a man of firm conviction.

As Doc bandages my wounds, I listen on the radio as a nearby medevac helicopter is called. He asks about the enemy situation near our location. He is told we have just received fire from a close-in enemy, and I hear his quick refusal to make the pickup. I can't blame the pilot. Two medevac helicopters from his unit have been shot down in recent days.

A log bird hears the refusal. He immediately volunteers to make the pickup. His instructions are simple. Put a strobe light in a hole and he will land on it. He is less than five minutes out. Log bird pilots flying in support of infantry often seem fearless. They too are usually young men in their early twenties. Many risk their lives to carry infantry soldiers to battle and bring them ammunition, water, and other needed supplies. They have a major role in evacuating wounded and flying out the bodies of dead soldiers. Like medics, helicopter pilots have the greatest respect and appreciation of infantry soldiers and we them.

While waiting on the log bird, one of my men does a quick crater analysis of the round that wounded me. Gold colored metal fragments reveal it was a 40 mm M-79 round, an American weapon. The crater shows the round had come in at an angle of 45 degrees. From my wounds it is easy to see it exploded on my left side. The round has a lethal radius of 5 m from the point of impact if it drops straight down. I was only a meter or so away from where it exploded. It wasn't my time.

We hear the log bird well before we see him. The enemy can hear him too. The dark olive-drab helicopter body blends with the shadows as he comes in low and fast, skimming the treetops. We expect he will take fire coming in, but he doesn't. The Huey's noise is always deafening as it hovers just inches off the ground. Another soldier, PFC Ron Kohler, and I are put on the floor of the empty helicopter. Kohler has also been wounded by shrapnel from the other M-79 round. He is alert and sitting up.

With his two passengers on board, the pilot revs his engines for lift off. They whine with the weight of the aircraft. The roar of the engines and rotors drown out all conversation. The pilot looks back, gives a quick thumbs up, lifts off and pitches the helicopter nose down and accelerates forward. My immediate thought is nearby enemy soldiers are holding their fire until we lift off. I'm expecting we will be hit. Hopefully we won't crash. Again, nothing happens.

I take a last look in the direction of my platoon. A few unrecognizable green-clad soldiers blend in with the shrubs and increasing darkness. Not soon enough, we are at a thousand feet and climbing enroute to Chu Lai and the 312th Evacuation Hospital. I'm glad to be alive. My thoughts briefly turn back to my guys. I'm leaving them in a tough spot. Knowing I was going out, I turned my platoon over to SGT Jim Littleton. I lay my head back on the floor of the helicopter. There is nothing I can do to help them now. SGT Littleton has the platoon. He is still my best combat leader.

Back at LZ Professional, CPT Roy receives word of the brief enemy attack. He has lost two more from his already undermanned company, PFC Kohler and his last officer platoon leader. It doesn't change his resolve to rejoin his company. His combat experience and leadership skills are needed now more than ever. Delta Company will conduct its combat assault on Hill 376 tomorrow as planned.

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Casualties and Awards

As the 1-501st enters combat on Hill 376, its casualties in the first 26 days of combat at Tam Ky are shown in Casualty Table 9.

Casualty Table 9: 1-501st Casualties as of 2 June 1969 (Before Hill 376)

Casualties	HHC	A Co	B Co	C Co	D Co	Recon	Total
KIA	4	2	6	6	8	3	29
WIA	5	3	36	20	23	12	99
MIA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	9	5	42	26	31	15	128

2-17th Soldiers Killed in Action, 2 June 1969

Aero-Rifle Platoon, Bravo Troop, 2-17th Cavalry—3

2 June: SP5 Richard Brech, age 21, born 10 February 1946 from Cottonwood, SD
2 June: SSG Jimmie Reed, age 25, born 3 January 1944 from Tacoma, WA
2 June: SSG Emmanuel Saunders, age 22, born 25 August 1946 from Washington, DC

Headquarters Company, 2-17th Cavalry—1

2 June: SP4 Joseph Guy LaPointe Jr. (medic) age 20, born 2 July 1948 from Dayton, OH

1-501st Units—0

2-17th Soldier Awards, 2 June 1969 (other awards may have been made that were not mentioned in after action reports)

Medal of Honor—1

Headquarters Company: 2 June, SP4 Joseph Guy LaPointe Jr. (medic)

Purple Heart—awarded to all soldiers KIA or WIA