



Pro Patria Press

#27

August 2002

Newsletter of the 31st Infantry Regiment Association

4th Battalion Returns From Afghanistan

On Monday, April 15, 2002, Secretary of the Army Thomas White and Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric Shinseki honored the 4th Battalion 31st Infantry on its return to Ft Drum. *“I know I speak for every single American when I say to Task Force 4-31, God bless you and thank you for what you have done for all of us. Welcome home,”* said White to thundering applause. Some 300 members of the battalion were awarded the Combat Infantry Badge for taking part in Operation Anaconda and subsequent operations in Afghanistan’s Shaikot Valley. SSG **Del Rodriguez** was decorated with the Bronze Star for Valor. MAJ **Darryl Tumbleson**, CPT **Glenn Kozelka**, 1LT **Charles DiLeonardo**, 2LT **Thomas Hettich**, and 1SG **Charles Spencer** were awarded the Bronze Star for Meritorious Achievement, and LT **Andrew Exum**, SFC **Michael Montgomery**, SSG **Steven Booth**, SSG **George Grady**, SSG **Michael Sommerhauser**, SGT **James Blair**, SGT **Scott Buroker**, SGT **Jeremy Ray**, and SPC **Carl McCauley** were awarded the Army Commendation Medal for Valor.

The last element of the battalion to return home was a platoon from B Company that had been protecting war-related facilities in Oman. Sadly, the 4th Battalion’s Commander, LTC **Steve Townsend**, departs for the Army War College on 6 June. His successor, LTC **John Spiszer**, is serving with the regiment for his second time. John previously served with B Company 1st Battalion in Korea as a lieutenant from 1985 to 1987. Command Sergeant Major **Dan Wood** is leaving Ft Drum in July for a new CSM position at Ft Bragg. Steve and Dan have been great friends of the association and we wish them all the best in their new assignments.

More Polar Bears in Afghanistan

In addition to members of the 4th Battalion, at least two other Polar Bears served in Afghanistan. After just completing a hectic tour of duty at Peshawar, Pakistan in May 2001, **Colonel Pete McIlwain** (A Co and HHC 1st Bn 1972-73) deployed to Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan with the 5th Special Forces Group on 1 October 2001 and subsequently led the US relief force, including a platoon from C Co 4th Bn 31st Inf, into Mazar-e-Sharif and Bagram, Afghanistan. He came home in December, but deployed in January 2002 with the 1st Special Forces Group to pursue Al Qaeda in the Philippines. After an adventure-filled career of 32 years, Pete retired on 30 May 2002 at Ft Myer, VA. **Brian Remmy** (HHC 1st Bn, Korea, 1983) is still in Afghanistan. He is Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Worldwide Language Resources, providing interpreters and translators to US forces and other government agencies.

Looking Back

This is the eighth in our series on the regiment’s Bataan-era history. Our February issue described the regiment’s counterattack and withdrawal from the Layac line. As we pick up the story, the regiment is about to enter its longest and toughest fight of the war.

After two days of fighting at Layac, eight days of hard physical labor building defensive positions near Pandan on half rations, and a 20-kilometer forced march from Balanga at night without rest, men simply dropped to the ground and slept, oblivious to their surroundings. Around noon on January 16, the weary regiment was alerted to move again. The Philippine Army’s 51st Division had disintegrated and the 31st was ordered to restore a huge gap in the main defense line. Fifteen

minutes later, the regiment was back on the road with the 2d Battalion leading. Marching 16 kilometers with only two 10-minute rest stops, the 31st reached its jump-off position around 7 PM. Filipino troops of the 51st Division were still straggling to the rear, shouting "Japs coming." Behind them, they left their division command post surrounded by the enemy. By 1 AM on January 17, the 31st Infantry's lead elements had advanced to within 700 yards of Abucay Hacienda, a settlement marked by its prominent Spanish-built church.

Because the terrain in the 2d Battalion's zone was overgrown with dense vegetation and segmented by ravines and ridges, soldiers easily became separated from their comrades in the dark. In one such incident, Privates Michael J. Campbell, Albert L. Taylor, and George L. Bullock of G Company found themselves isolated when their platoon fell back under heavy enemy mortar, machinegun, and rifle fire. Joining a five-man patrol from an adjacent company, the three advanced deeper into enemy territory, only to be stopped by a torrent of fire that wounded five members of the patrol. Japanese troops advanced on their exposed position, advancing in short rushes preceded by grenade attacks. Tenaciously clinging to their position for two hours, Private Campbell and his comrades picked off at least twelve of the enemy trying to overrun them. Campbell withdrew only after the wounded reached safety and after receiving a direct order to withdraw from his commanding officer. For his tenacity in the face of overwhelming odds, Private Campbell was awarded the Silver Star.

After bringing its companies into alignment, the 2d Battalion's advance resumed around 3 AM with I Company on the left, K in the center, and L on the right. Shortly afterward, I Company began taking small arms and mortar fire and was halted to enable the 1st Battalion to come abreast on the left. Because of the regiment's unfamiliarity with the area, it was decided to halt the attack until daylight. The men had not eaten since 4 AM on January 16, intensifying the weakening effect of half rations.

At 8 AM on January 17, the 1st and 2d Battalions advanced in parallel columns. To overcome its disgrace at Layac, Colonel Steel gave B Company the honor of leading the 1st Battalion's advance. The men had shown little faith in Lieutenant Murphy, their previous commander, but regarded Captain Jim Thompson, his successor, as a professional worthy of their confidence. The advance went well despite sporadic outbursts of small arms fire. Most Japanese fire came from snipers in trees overlooking the trails. Corporal Charles Ball moved to the head of B Company's column, stitching the treetops with his BAR to shoot snipers out of their perches. The 51st Division's isolated command post was soon rescued. Just beyond, the 1st Battalion ran into stiff resistance as it emerged from an acacia grove. Machinegun fire was so heavy it cut a nearby cane field about knee high. Fortunately, the ground sloped away to the rear, causing the Japanese to fire high. On the skyline across the cane field stood the church spire of Abucay Hacienda, the 1st Battalion's objective.



For what seemed an eternity, B Company lay pinned down by machinegun fire, but eventually there arose problems greater than the Japanese. Corporal Paul Kerchum had lain amid a colony of red ants. When they bit him in unmentionable places, he jumped up as if shocked by a cattle prod, hollering "let's get the hell out of here," dashing blindly toward the Japanese. His comrades followed, charging across the field, shouting and firing wildly. The startled Japanese jumped up and fled, retreating in disorder down a steep slope. Chasing the Japanese, the weapons platoon drifted steadily to the left, stopping on a steep slope overlooking the Balantay River. The rest of the company eventually formed around it, but it didn't take long for the Japanese to begin probing the position they had just lost. Private Ronald T. Wangberg spotted a squad-size patrol moving across an open glade in the valley below. He picked them off one by one as they ran back and forth trying to find cover.

B Company was now in an exposed position, awaiting the arrival of other companies to take up positions on its flank. Captain Thompson decided he would need help to hold the position if the Japanese realized how vulnerable his company was. Communications between units relied entirely on messengers, there was no artillery in range, and II Corps denied a request for tank support due to concerns about Japanese aerial observation. That left only mortars. With all 30 rounds of their 81mm ammunition exhausted, D Company gunners fired World War I-era 75mm Stokes mortar ammunition from their 81mm tubes, causing them to wobble erratically in flight. Perhaps 3 rounds of every 10 detonated. Several detonated in the dry cane field, setting it afire. The wind blew the flames and acrid smoke back in B Company's direction. Captain Thompson yelled "cease fire, cease fire", but it was too late. Several 75mm rounds landed among his men, catching them in the open as they tried to escape.

After withdrawing, B Company established new positions farther to the rear, but the Japanese were not far behind. Repeated attacks failed to break B Company's new line, but snipers managed to infiltrate behind them. Corporal Paul Kerchum was checking the line after a spate of firing when he tapped the helmet of Private Jim Broadrick who was standing in a narrow foxhole, seemingly asleep. Kerchum hadn't gone much farther when, someone yelled, "Get down, they just shot Broadrick." The day's fight had been bloody, costing B Company 5 dead and 7 wounded, one of whom died of his wounds. B Company's dead were CPL Rex R. Annas (Granite Falls, NC), PVT Herman E. Fornass (Santa Clara, CA), PFC Vernon J. Kelly (home town unknown), PVT James J Broadrick (home town unknown), and CPL Floyd R. Rogers (home town unknown-died of wounds). The company had regained its pride, but at a high cost.