Chapter 18
6th BATTALION IN VIETNAM
1967-1970

On November 1, 1967, the 31st Infantry Regiment added its sixth successor battalion.\(^1\) The 6th Battalion 31st Infantry, whose lineage is derived from F Company of the old regiment, was activated at Fort Lewis, Washington. Assigned to the Sixth Army (shoulder patch at left) for its formative training, the new battalion was slated to become part of the 23rd Infantry Division, formed only a few months earlier in Vietnam’s coastal highlands.\(^2\) Following a tradition begun by the regiment during the Korean War, the battalion called itself the “Bearcats.”

When the 6th Battalion formed for the first time on the parade ground at Ft Lewis, most of its members were draftees just out of Advanced Individual Training. Others were transferred from a holding detachment where they had been awaiting shipment to various schools. Prospective mechanics, musicians, clerks, intelligence specialists, and cooks became instant infantrymen whether they agreed or not. PFC Bill Singleton was awaiting orders to the Military

\(^1\) At the time, the 1st and 2nd Battalions were serving with the 7th Infantry Division in Korea, the 3rd Battalion was serving with the 63rd Infantry Division in the Army Reserve, the 4th Battalion was serving with the 23rd Infantry Division’s 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, and the 5th Battalion was serving with the 197th Infantry Brigade at Ft Benning.

\(^2\) 4-31st Infantry had been in Vietnam since 1966 with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB). Army force planners intended for the 6-31st Infantry to become the 196th LIB’s fourth maneuver battalion.
Intelligence School and PFC Al Banfield was awaiting shipment to the Military Academy Preparatory School. Recruiters’ promises and soldiers’ test scores meant nothing. The draft generated some unusually well-educated riflemen, for this battalion perhaps more than most. For example, when C Company was formed, one member had a Doctorate, two had Masters Degrees, and about a third had at least a year of college.

The Bearcats’ leaders were a mix of the seasoned and the green. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Schmalhorst, the battalion commander, had never seen combat and had little infantry experience. With a career spent mainly in staff and research and development assignments, he was an able manager, but not a tactician. Amiable humor and steadfast support of his company commanders were his strengths. Schmalhorst had good reason to support his company commanders. All had served a previous tour in Vietnam and were graduates of the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning. His lieutenants, on the other hand, were all fresh out of Officer Candidate School and had little more military experience than the troops they led.

Except for the first sergeants, surprisingly few of the battalion’s NCOs had seen combat. Career NCOs in the line companies were first sergeants, mess sergeants, supply sergeants, and platoon sergeants, many of whom served one rank below the position they filled. While the Army had plenty of combat-seasoned Infantry NCOs, their numbers were dissipated by the competing demands of filling advisory teams in Vietnam, expanding Special Forces, forming three new divisions, and providing cadres for an enlarged training establishment. By 1967, soldiers who fought in World War II and remained in the Army afterward already had 22 or more years of service and could retire. Most infantry NCOs in the US worked 14 to 16-hour days as drill sergeants in an expanding number of basic training centers while others stayed in the field for nearly half of every year with Infantry battalions in Germany, Korea, Panama, or the dwindling number left in the US. Some were thanklessly doing work normally done by officers because there were few experienced officers left in units outside Vietnam. NCOs’ wives and children saw too little of them, causing family strains that drove many good men to retire.

Training in Washington’s cold, wet forests to prepare for combat in tropical jungles bordered on the ridiculous, especially when searching a mock-up Vietnamese village in 16 inches of snow. Bill McMullen, dropped from OCS at Ft Benning, remembers that surreal experience fondly because of the close friendships it fostered. While serving with the opposing force on one of C Company’s field training exercises, McMullen, John “Mugs” Morgan, and Greg Russell captured the company headquarters, earning them the respect of their peers and the ire of their first sergeant. When Lieutenant Colonel Schmalhorst pitched his tent in the field, a luxury forbidden his troops, someone “accidentally” burned the tent down with a flare. That weekend, McMullen and his buddies went to Seattle, got a suite at the Sheraton where they filled the bathtub with ice and canned beer, and partied as hard as they trained. Because McMullen’s mother insisted that he be baptized before shipping out, he, Greg Russell, and Platoon Sergeant

Bob Bellemare, went to the post chapel for his baptism. Years later, he found the baptismal certificate among his Army records with their signatures witnessing the event. Just over a month after reaching Vietnam, two of them were wounded and the other was dead.

The Bearcats’ field training stressed safety because units new to Vietnam were notorious for weapons accidents. Men were cross-trained on crew-served weapons and some were trained to function at least one level up from their assigned positions. In B Company, Captain Phil Eckman had his lieutenants call in simulated air strikes. His NCOs and the most capable privates were required to adjust fire from the company’s 81mm mortars. Soldiers would have to perform those duties in an emergency if their leaders became casualties. Eckman, who had served in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta as an advisor to a Vietnamese Ranger Battalion, was less than a year from promotion to major and his experience and field savvy showed.

After six months of training, the Bearcats were alerted for deployment. The advance party, including Lieutenant Colonel Schmalhorst, all six company commanders, and Command Sergeant Major Bill Russell, departed from McChord Air Force Base on March 31, 1968. Captain John DeVore recalls arriving at Chu Lai, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade’s base camp, expecting it to be the Bearcats’ new home. He arranged to accompany a friend in another battalion on a combat operation to familiarize himself with the environment but his time at Chu Lai was unexpectedly cut short. The advance party was abruptly ordered to pack up and board C-130 cargo planes for Bien Hoa, nearly 400 miles away. The “Americal” Division shoulder patches (left) already sewn on Bearcats’ uniforms would now be out of place. Although they did not know it yet, they would soon be joining the 9th Infantry Division (“The Old Reliabiles”). The 9th (patch at right) needed another battalion because its area of operations had recently been extended from the outskirts of Saigon into the Mekong Delta and from the South China Sea to the Cambodian border.

The Bearcats’ main body arrived at Bien Hoa on April 5. Most traveled aboard commercial airliners but some had to accompany the unit’s light vehicles aboard less comfortable Air Force cargo planes. All arrived with a duffle bag, web gear, and camouflage-covered helmets, looking like infantrymen of the era should. Weapons were quickly retrieved from the planes’ cargo bays, but to everyone’s shock, there was no place on the airfield to draw ammunition.

With the temperature hovering above 100˚, the battalion traveled its next 20 miles in open trucks to the 9th Division’s base camp, coincidentally named Bearcat Base. It seemed insane to be without ammunition in a war zone and to travel in crowded trucks that would have been death traps in an ambush.4 Things did not get better at Bearcat. Men expecting to fight were subjected to seemingly endless orientation briefings and housekeeping chores that seemed out of place in a war zone. At home, Martin Luther King was assassinated the day the main body arrived, stirring racial tensions in the post’s oppressive atmosphere. The Pacific Stars

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4 Photos of assembly at Bien Hoa and truck convoy to Bearcat Base courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).
and Stripes (soldiers’ overseas newspaper) and Armed Forces Radio delivered a steady barrage of unsettling news about race riots aflame in the nation’s largest cities, causing some to worry more about families back home than themselves at war.

Bearcat Base’s setting was striking, with Vietnam’s scenic coastal mountains visible to the northwest, coastal jungles and mangrove swamps to the south, and Saigon’s hazy skyline to the southeast. For nearly three weeks, the 6-31st underwent acclimatization training, patrolling nearby rubber plantations and jungle. The jungle was double and triple canopy—full-grown trees growing under two or three layers of taller trees. Bill Singleton recalls, “In the jungle, you couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of you and couldn’t see the sky—helicopters couldn’t find us, but millions of red ants could and did.” The battalion's first non-battle casualty occurred on April 19 when a soldier from C Company wounded himself with his own weapon. Earlier that day, the company had conducted its first air assault and had its first firefight, an inconclusive encounter with a VC reconnaissance team.

First Losses—April 26, 1968

The 6-31st suffered its first combat losses on a reconnaissance operation near Bearcat Base. After traveling in column through dense jungle for several hours, C Company’s commander, Captain Bill Owen, directed Lieutenant Kerry May’s 1st Platoon to relieve Lieutenant Ron Belloli’s 2nd Platoon as the lead element. Soon after the column started moving again, PFC Donald R. Hanna (21), a machine gunner, stepped across a log and was hit full in the face by blast and fragmentation from a large Claymore-like mine, killing him instantly. Specialist Larry Hathaway recalls: “One large piece of shrapnel flew down the trail and cut my grenade in half. Fortunately, the part with the fragmentation fell off and only the primer and a little C-4 exploded. The blast knocked me down and destroyed three magazines of ammunition I wore in a bandolier around my neck.”

Knowing there were probably casualties, PFC Bill Rauber (19), the platoon’s medic, ran forward with Platoon Sergeant Florentino Rivera-Sanchez, to aid the wounded. Rauber had nearly reached Hanna when a second blast blew him off his feet, killing him instantly. Eight others were wounded. Sergeant Al Olsen, a squad leader just behind the lead platoon, recalls seeing VC running from the area, but people ahead of him were either too dazed by the explosions to fire or were unable to do so without hitting their own people.

The 2nd Platoon sprayed the left side of the trail with automatic weapons fire and moved into the jungle, passing through a clearing where clothes had been left to dry. Ron Belloli recalls thinking “Our first contact with the enemy and all we capture is his underwear.” They also found a “spider hole” and wires leading to more unexploded claymores. Captain Owen wanted to stay at the site to probe it further but a nest of venomous pit vipers agitated by the explosions deterred further searching. After moving the company a safe distance back down the trail, Owen brought

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5 Shorthand unit descriptions are according to Army convention, with platoons and companies followed by a slash and battalions followed by a dash. For example, 1st Platoon, A Company, 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry would be shown as 1/A/6-31st Inf.
6 A Claymore mine is convex to focus its blast effect and propel thousands of small metal pellets in a scythe-like arc like the Scottish broadsword after which it is named. It is detonated remotely. The VC’s crude metal Claymores were many times larger and more powerful than the US plastic version.
7 2LT Kerry S May, SFC Florentino Rivera-Sanchez, SSG George E Schroeder, SP4 Donald I. Chikuma, SP4 Stanley C. Krosky, SP4 Thomas A. Northey, SP4 Gary H. Terrell, and SP4 Lawrence F. Hathaway. SSG Schroeder (25) died of his wounds on May 16.
8 “Spider hole” is GI slang for the narrow foxholes dug by the Viet Cong.
artillery down on the site. C Company had to carry its dead and the most seriously wounded on poncho litters for nearly an hour until they reached a place where casualties could be winched up through the trees to a helicopter. It was near dusk before Lieutenant Dave Wilson, the company executive officer, could organize the evacuation. Before all the wounded and dead could be extracted, the jungle penetrator on the second medevac helicopter had to be jettisoned when it became snagged in the trees. It was getting too dark to attempt another evacuation.

The company carried the remaining wounded and the dead for several more hours until reaching a place they could set up a defensive perimeter for the night. Among the wounded they carried was Specialist Don Chikuma, suffering painfully from a belly wound. Chikuma repeatedly asked for water but Specialist Huie Osborn, C Company’s senior medic, wouldn’t give him any for fear of killing him, so he sat up all night to comfort him. The company’s sense of loss and foreboding, reinforced by grim evidence of jungle warfare’s risks, took a toll on morale. Al Olsen recalls: “The long night that followed the ambush was one of the scariest experiences of the war for me. Thick undergrowth, the event that had just happened, and lots of noises (way too much noise made by our company, as we were moving too fast to be quiet). I remember the column stopping for the night and establishing defensive positions right along the trail where we were. I don't recall much of a perimeter or a clearing. Other than nobody getting any sleep, the night passed without incident.”

The Gathering Storm—April 27-May 6 1968

On April 27, the Bearcats were assigned to the 9th Infantry Division’s 3rd Brigade (“The Go Devils”) and moved to a muddy base camp named Smoke, about 5 kilometers southwest of Saigon. The base was surrounded by rice paddies, scattered clusters of thatched or cinderblock houses, and distant tree lines. Like forts through the ages, Smoke was surrounded by a protective earthen berm with bunkers spaced at intervals atop the berm. Beyond the berm were layers of triple concertina barbed wire and Claymore mines angled to shoot intersecting blasts of steel pellets at intruders. Two 203mm self-propelled howitzers at the base fired harassing and interdictory fires at random times throughout the night, angering the troops and nearby civilians alike. Bill McMullen remembers: “Smoke was a hell-hole. It was always wet, muddy, and noisy. Those howitzers made it really hard to get any sleep and Charlie was always lobbing in a few mortar rounds. Nha Be was wet and muddy too, but we could fix it up. Smoke was unfixable.” Few members of the line companies spent much time there anyway since their daily routine was to patrol, patrol, and patrol in search of an elusive enemy.

Over the next few days, A Company found a 2-ton cache of rice concealed in a hole while B Company ran into some booby traps and found all the parts of a mortar except the tube.

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9 Photo of Fire Base Smoke courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).
On May 2, Captain Robert F. Stephens, Jr., D Company’s commander, was wounded by a booby trap. He was replaced by Captain Grady A. Smith. The next day, D Company found a cache of hand grenades, small arms ammunition, and mortar rounds west of Smoke. Three days later, nine mortar rounds hit the base during the evening meal but no one was injured but later that evening, another eight rounds struck with greater effect. Specialist Arnold L. Stewart (20) of D Company was killed and nine men from B and C Companies were wounded. A Vietnamese barber had been detained earlier because he was seen pacing distances between landmarks around the base. A patrol later found the imprint of a mortar base plate less than 200 meters from Smoke’s perimeter.

Between the rain, rivers, and flooded paddies, troops were always wet and muddy. Fevers of unknown origin were common. Leeches, flies, wasps, and swarms of mosquitoes, nicknamed the “Viet Cong Air Force”, infested the wetlands and paddies. Officers and NCOs had to make sure troops took their boots and socks off whenever possible and took their anti-malaria tablets. Patrolling the rivers and streams south of Saigon was hazardous for more reasons than the ever-present leeches and Viet Cong. On May 4, C Company’s 3d Platoon was crossing a steep-banked stream in upper Long An Province when PFC Richard Campbell (20) slipped unseen beneath the water. Distressed at the mysterious loss of a comrade, Campbell’s platoon searched for him for two hours without success. When ordered by Captain Bill Owen to move his platoon to a pickup zone to be lifted out by helicopter, Lieutenant Charles Gale argued that he would not leave until Campbell was found. Although Owen was as troubled by Campbell’s loss as Gale, he knew the platoon was becoming more vulnerable by lingering at the site. He got stern with Gale, ordering him to abandon the search. The next day, scout dog teams were sent to resume the search, but to no avail. The current had taken Campbell’s body several miles downstream where it was found three days later by another unit.\(^\text{10}\)

During the night of May 5-6, A Company stopped for the night along the Kinh Doi, a canal defining Saigon’s southern boundary. Around 3 AM, someone fired from the canal’s north bank, wounding one man with a dud 40mm round. Minutes later, PFC Bobby R. Childs (20) was killed by a burst of automatic rifle fire from the same area. Captain Channing Greene, A Company’s commander, thought the source might have been trigger-happy RVN troops, but a patrol dispatched to the area at daylight found expended brass from an AK-47. The discovery was troubling because it meant the VC were operating inside Saigon’s southern edge between the Bearcats and the city they were supposed to help protect.

**Murder in the Ranks—May 7, 1968**

On the afternoon of May 7, a D Company soldier from New York City, nicknamed “Monk”\(^\text{11}\) cleaned his rifle and loaded magazines with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. Menacingly pointing his rifle at wary comrades, he spewed a string of profanities and declared himself “ready”, but for what he did not say. After dark, he donned his flak jacket and helmet, picked up his loaded weapon, and walked to a sleeping bunker near Smoke’s perimeter. A soldier he was known to have disliked was just leaving the bunker and, with eyes not yet adjusted to the darkness, asked where the latrine was. Monk silently motioned in the latrine’s direction, an odd response, given his subsequent actions.

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\(^{10}\) Richard’s older brother, Carroll Campbell, who later became a two-term Governor of South Carolina, named a Veteran’s Nursing Home in Anderson, SC after him.

\(^{11}\) Monk is not the soldier’s real name. He remains incarcerated.
Entering the lighted sleeping bunker, Monk shot PFC Thomas W. Myers (21), a visiting soldier from B Company, who was sleeping near the bunker’s entrance. Having spared a man he disliked and shot a man he didn't know, Monk flipped his rifle’s selector switch to automatic and sprayed the room at random, hitting two more soldiers. Specialist Warren M. Kirsch (20) was hit in the shoulder and Sergeant Philip L. Culver (21) was shot through the abdomen. Two others in the bunker were not hit. Two unarmed radar operators who had been sitting atop the bunker jumped to the ground and ran when the shooting started. Monk emerged from the bunker and fired the last two rounds in his magazine at one of them from just a few feet away, but missed. Ducking into an unoccupied perimeter bunker, he slapped a fresh magazine into his rifle.

Myers, hit in the chest, lay choking on his blood. One of the survivors turned Myers’ head to clear his airway before leaving the bunker to find a medic. The radar operator who had nearly been shot ducked behind a cargo trailer, where he was joined by Sergeants Marvin J. Lewis and John T. Moore. When Lewis asked what was happening, the operator said it seemed to be a prank because "he's firing blanks." But Lewis had seen tracers, indicating live ammunition. "They must be blanks," the radar operator argued. "He fired at me up close and didn't hit me." Moore wondered if a sapper had gotten inside the perimeter and the man had gone into the bunker to get him. Unsure, Lewis shouted at the man to come out. Ignoring Lewis, Monk ran back to the sleeping bunker. Culver and Kirsch, both in bad shape, tried to crawl for cover. Monk repeatedly shot both of them in the back. Taking aim at the shooter emerging from the bunker’s doorway, Lewis fired five times, hitting Monk in the legs, arm, and neck. Watching through a starlight scope, Moore saw Monk drop and squirm on the ground. He was mumbling religious verses when the sergeants reached him.

Culver, Kirsch, and Myers were dead on arrival at the 3rd Brigade Aid Station. Monk was rushed into surgery where his life was saved. After recovering sufficiently to stand trial, he was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life at hard labor. At his trial, he said he had no quarrel with the men he shot. All he could remember, he claimed, was hearing a loud bang while on guard duty. It was never established whether an argument, drugs, insanity, or something else motivated the killings. While race may not have been a clear factor since one of Monk’s victims was black and the others white, Monk, a Black Muslim, openly espoused strong racist views before the killings. The Criminal Investigation Division report revealed that he had been under psychiatric care before being drafted. Whatever the reason, three American soldiers had been murdered by one of their own.
In the early hours of May 7, six VC battalions infiltrated the area around Cholon, the Chinese quarter on Saigon’s southeast side. It made no difference that Saigon’s population had not risen against the government three months earlier during the much larger Tet offensive. The communists seemed intent on demonstrating that they could still attack the capitol with impunity. Their surprise attack isolated RVN Marines, Rangers, National Police, and local militia in scattered outposts south of the Kinh Doi, enabling VC units to take over crowded settlements dotting Saigon’s southern approaches. Their attack cut Routes 5 and 15, roads vital to Saigon’s food and fuel supplies.

In response, four battalions of the 9th Infantry Division’s 3rd Brigade were sent to help RVN forces drive the Viet Cong out. Their counterattack, though piecemeal, gave the VC little opportunity to adjust and no room to maneuver. 5-60th and 3-39th Infantry, based in adjacent Long An Province, were the first to arrive. 6-31st and 2-47th Infantry began reinforcing them later that day. 2-47th and 5-60th were mechanized infantry battalions, each with around 800 men and 70 aluminum-hulled, tracked M-113 armored personnel carriers (APCs). Called “tracks” for short, each APC mounted a .50 caliber machinegun and one or more M-60 machineguns, giving mechanized battalions considerably more firepower than their airmobile infantry counterparts. The latter had only foot mobility after exiting the helicopters that delivered them to battle and carried only one M-60 machinegun in each of their 36 rifle squads. Regardless of their mobility or firepower, all four battalions fought the same way—move slowly down streets and alleys, search every building until the enemy reveals his position, then shoot back with overwhelming aerial, indirect, and direct firepower to kill him or drive him out. The fact that thousands of civilians were caught in the cross-fire deterred neither side from using all the firepower they had.

Just after noon, A and B Companies were flown in from Firebase Smoke. They reinforced six rifle companies of the 3-39th and 5-60th Infantry, arrayed in a rough arc around

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1 RVN is the Republic of Vietnam and VC (Viet Cong), is a shortened version of Viet Nam Cong San, the opposing Communist guerilla movement. ARVN is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.
the refugee-swollen settlements of Xom Cau Mat and Xom Ong Doi on Saigon’s southern approaches. C Company’s 2nd Platoon was flown in to reinforce RVN rangers and police at a nearby bridge on Route 5. As helicopters delivering B Company hovered over soggy rice paddies, troops jumped into the muck and moved as quickly as nature would allow. They stayed off paddy dikes to avoid booby traps as they had been trained. They advanced step by laborious step, pulling one foot out of the mud only to get the other stuck. Sergeant Vernon Moore, a stocky man made heavier by his helmet, flak jacket, ammunition, and a two-quart canteen strapped atop his heavy rucksack, bogged down. Knee deep in mud and on the verge of passing out from heat exhaustion, Moore was rescued by a helicopter, holding tight to its landing skid as it plucked him from the mud and lifted him to a nearby paddy dike.

The Bearcats spent the first night watching burning villages from cold, wet paddies. Just after daybreak, B Company, attached to Lieutenant Colonel Joe DeLuca’s 3-39th Infantry, moved to DeLuca’s command post (CP) aboard A/5-60th Infantry’s APCs. Fires raged along the canal road, producing a corridor of heat and smoke through which the tracks sped. Casualties from the night before were awaiting evacuation at the 3-39th’s Aid Station as the APCs reached the command post. Specialist Bill Sirtola would later write; "The sounds of shooting, smoke from the burning buildings, and the sight of wounded being worked on drove home the reality of what we were getting into." A rocket-propelled grenade streaked overhead as Captain Eckman entered the pagoda serving as the 3-39th’s CP.

DeLuca wanted Eckman to reinforce a police post that had been attacked earlier that morning. To reach it, Eckman's company would have to pass under the south end of the Y Bridge (Cau Chu Y), move east along the canal, then turn south down a side street to a settlement on the west bank of the Rach Ong Lon. The police outpost was inside the settlement. DeLuca drew a hasty sketch map because he had no maps detailing the area’s maze of roads, canals, and tributaries. B Company was getting ready to move when the police post reported it was under attack. While helicopter gunships suppressed enemy fire, a utility helicopter landed inside the outpost to resupply its defenders.

Lieutenant Carlton Blacker's 3rd Platoon led the way, accompanied by Captain Eckman’s command group. As the move began, Eckman’s thoughts flashed back to Fort Lewis when Joe Schmalhorst and his company commanders had toured training facilities on the mist-shrouded fingers of Mount Ranier. At the post’s Combat In Cities course, Eckman had commented, "Sir, we fought in grass-hut complexes in Vietnam, but never in cities." The other captains all agreed. They decided not to waste time training on combat in cities, focusing instead on getting ready for the rice-paddy war they knew. Fast forward to Saigon; “We’re under the control of another battalion, we don't have maps, and we're headed for some big-time combat in a big city. Damn!”

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2 The Y Bridge is named for its unique split. After crossing the Kinh Doi, it forms a Y, with its left branch going onto a heavily populated island and the right branch crossing the Tau Hu Canal into central Saigon.
In the early afternoon, B Company linked up with ARVN Rangers at the end of the road leading to the police outpost. Lieutenant Blacker’s platoon, still in the lead, cautiously moved ahead, clearing houses on both sides of the street until they took fire about 100 yards short of the outpost. Eckman tried to direct the action from a rooftop but an RPG streaking past him persuaded him to get back down to the street. Sergeant David B. Leader, a squad leader in the 3rd Platoon, was unexpectedly joined by a diminutive French female reporter on a motor scooter as his squad returned fire and attempted to maneuver. She was deep in harm’s way but stuck to the platoon throughout the fight, although she spoke no English and Leader’s men spoke no French.

Leader’s squad took cover behind a cement building, catching their breath while contemplating their next move. Leader took his helmet off and was sliding down the wall to a squatting position when a bullet struck the wall where his head had just been. One of his team leaders, an engineer named Artie L. Bible, who became an involuntary infantryman when the battalion was formed, began screaming and rolling on the ground with a bullet fragment in his back. Luckily, his wound turned out to be less damaging than his reaction suggested.

Lieutenant Blacker led Leader’s squad down an alley and found the sniper’s lair. Throwing hand grenades and pouring small-arms fire into the house, Leader’s squad ended the sniper’s life. When a second sniper fired from the other end of the alley, Blacker decided to withdraw his men to the main street where cement houses could provide better cover but a third sniper hemmed them in from behind. Tossing a smoke grenade toward the alley’s far end, Blacker directed a fortuitously available Cobra helicopter gunship against the snipers. The Cobra shot up the first house with rockets, followed with the minigun and grenade launcher in its chin turret, then swung around and shot up the building at the other end of the alley, flushing one of the snipers into the open. The VC attempted to flee down a side street but didn’t get far. Leader shot him dead from 20 feet away.

B Company established positions in and around the police post as night fell. Sergeant Kenneth R. Davis’s squad moved into a darkened jail cell. A row of man-sized cement slabs were outlined by troughs into which chained prisoners could relieve themselves. Suddenly, shrapnel from artillery fire tore through the room’s tin roof, injuring one of Davis’s machine gunners. Sergeant Leader and his squad crouched behind 55-gallon drums filled with rubble from half-demolished houses. The barrage continued for over an hour. After each explosion, shrapnel and debris came raining down. One piece hit Leader above the knee as he crouched behind a barrel but struck him with its flat side and left only a bruise. Whether a bruise or worse, Leader learned there is no such thing as friendly fire, particularly if it is coming from several miles away and you have no way to get it stopped. It was not clear who was adjusting the artillery or who called for it but it was not anyone from B Company.

That evening, C Company was flown back to Fire Base Smoke from a fruitless night operation in nearby Long An Province. As men lined up for the evening meal, Smoke was mortared. Captain Bill Owen recalls: ”The VC did a super job of breaking up the dinner party. I was amazed that no one killed themselves trying to find something to hide behind or under. The only thing louder than the explosions was the sergeant major screaming at people to get down.”

Arriving just after noon on May 9, A and C Companies landed in rice paddies south of Xom Ong Doi to block possible escape routes. It took nearly two hours for C Company to link up with RVN Marines arrayed along Route 230 on the town’s western edge. Around the same time, Lieutenant Colonel John Tower’s 2-47th Mechanized Infantry was racing in from Bearcat to take
up positions along the town’s northern edge. The VC would soon be boxed in on three sides, with Americans to the north and south and RVN Marines to the west. Escaping to the east would require crossing open ground and the rain-swollen Rach Bang Dong, risking exposure to flanking fire, artillery, and Cobra gunships.

Knowing they faced almost certain death, the VC stayed and fought. RVN Marines had exchanged fire with them most of the morning but made no headway. Earlier, scout helicopters spotted a VC platoon moving into a tadpole-shaped island on Xom Ong Doi’s south side and reported machine-gun and recoilless-rifle teams where Route 232 intersects the canal road at the town’s northwest corner. A spotter plane reported VC on roof tops and in trees, firing on helicopters.

Just after 2 PM, A Company came under fire from the tadpole-shaped island. Troops got off the road and began firing into nipa palm and white stucco buildings across the river. C Company came under fire around the same time. Hundreds of civilians had already streamed past them on the road, carrying children and assorted possessions. Still more were fleeing as C Company rushed down the adjacent embankment into a grassy field to fire across the river. Refugees on the elevated road behind them were hit by the enemy’s return fire. PFC Jeffery J. Quinn of A Company and Staff Sergeant Dennis Meyer of C Company rushed back to the road to drag wounded civilians to safety. For their selfless bravery, both were awarded Army Commendation Medals for Valor.

Lieutenant Eric Belt, C Company’s Artillery Forward Observer, ran toward the river when the shooting started. "The whole company except for me and my radio operator was in tall grass," recalls Belt. He and his radioman lay face down "in clear view of the enemy with bullets hitting all around us." He tried to call in a fire mission but could not radio the artillerymen at Smoke with his radio’s short antenna. "I realized that the long antenna was going to be necessary if I was going to get any fire," he recalled. When he told his radioman they would have to switch antennas, "the kid thought I was nuts, but did just as I asked. He sat up and I knelt beside him, unfolded the long antenna from the canvas utility bag strapped under the radio, and disconnected the short one." Belt then called in a white-phosphorus marking round before adjusting high-explosive fire onto the peninsula. Satisfied that the fire would be on target, Belt called for a “battery four”, meaning four rounds from each of the battery’s six 105mm howitzers. Twenty-four rounds struck in rapid succession along the river bank, sending showers of black mud, a body, and machinegun parts flying into the air. When a second firing battery called to offer its assistance, Belt adjusted its fire onto the target as well. Belt recalls, “I kept the fire coming and the entire company stood up, looked toward me, and cheered. It was one hell of a moment.”

Seeing an opportunity, Captain Owen moved C Company around A Company. Turning right on Route 230, C Company crossed a small bridge to place flanking fire on the VC in southern Xom Ong Doi. Lieutenant Kerry May's platoon rushed toward houses lining a road on
the town’s west side. Coming under heavy fire, they fell back to a drainage ditch knee-deep in weeds and stagnant water. May called in gunships, but it was hard to pinpoint the enemy. Captain Owen sent Lieutenant Bill Gale’s platoon forward to support May, but they too became pinned down. Sergeant Al Olson, one of Gale’s squad leaders, recalls, "I remember rounds cracking over my head and jumping into a drainage ditch with the other guys. One guy stirred up a large snake that crawled directly over my lap and on down the line. The snake really spooked me, so I jumped up to get away from it. When I stood up, bullets went cracking past my head. For a split second, it was snake or bullets. I went back to the ditch and we all kept firing. We were taking a great deal of fire and there was a lot of frustration because I couldn't see any enemy from my position."

When May’s platoon called for more ammunition, several 3rd Platoon members draped themselves with M-16 and M-60 bandoliers and started down the drainage ditch on all fours. PFCs Leslie J. Haar and James W. Petty were wounded along the way, but continued forward with the others. Both were awarded Bronze Star Medals for Valor along with their Purple Hearts. Despite enemy fire, "the guys hauling the ammo went right on to reach the guys that needed it," notes Olson. "I remember the ammo coming forward and being tossed to those in the lead platoon. Fairly quickly, no more than an hour or so---and measuring time when you're under fire is nebulous at best---we were all able to pull back down the ditch. We were terribly hot and thirsty by then. Water was needed almost as much as ammunition. Most of us had drained our canteens fighting the heat and excitement."

As the enemy pulled back, Captain Owen aligned his 1st and 3rd Platoons along Route 230. Troops took up positions behind fences and the corners of buildings. Machine-gun teams got on roof tops while A Company continued firing into the tadpole-shaped island from the south. Once in position, C Company began firing. Howitzer shells, meanwhile, continued to pound the island. Pounded and surrounded, the VC began to pull out. As they appeared, marksmen picked them off. PFC Robert Magdaleno, atop a building with his squad’s machinegun, noticed one of C Company’s snipers "sitting crossed-legged in the grass between the houses and the river, firing his M-14 with great accuracy at targets of opportunity." The shooting was not all one way. With bullets slapping into a wall behind him, Magdaleno ducked behind an earthen jar filled with rainwater only to get soaked when a burst of gunfire shattered the jar.

Captain Owen moved along the line with his command group, passing behind and through buildings as he checked his men’s positions and direction of fire. This fight was unlike any of Owen’s previous combat experience. Typically, a unit that took fire would return fire in the direction it came from but wouldn't know whether they hit anything or not. In this fight the VC, surrounded and hammered by artillery and gunships, had to expose themselves to move. C Company killed at least 15 as they darted between houses.

Two major battles were fought simultaneously that afternoon. Around the time the Bearcats’ action began, 2-47th Infantry, moving west on the canal road after crossing the Kinh Doi on Highway 15, encountered a dug-in enemy force armed with recoilless rifles and
heavy machineguns around the junction of Route 230 and the canal road. The resulting battle on Xom Ong Doi’s northern edge was the most costly engagement fought by any US unit during the Battle for Saigon.

Meanwhile, B Company, still under 3-39th Infantry’s control, was moving east from the Xom Cau Mot police post, going as fast as they could across soggy rice paddies toward a nearby settlement. They had begun an unsuccessful attempt to relieve pressure on A/3-39th, which was pinned down and unable to evacuate its casualties. Gunships were rolling in through criss-crossing tracers and smoke-trailing RPGs. A Cobra gunship pulling out of a strafing run took a hit by an RPG and tumbled in the air, making a complete revolution and righting itself just before splashing into a water-filled paddy on its skids. As the canopy flew open, the two-man crew hurriedly abandoned the aircraft. One man suddenly doubled back, apparently to ignite a thermite grenade, because the Cobra started burning as he left.

Entering a shabby refugee settlement,3 B Company’s lead platoon came under intense fire. Sergeant Richard D. "Rick" Koszar and PFC Jose Louis Vieras, both 20-year-old draftees, were killed and nine others were wounded, some by AK-47 fire and others by shrapnel from RPGs. Alarmed at the rate his men were dropping, Captain Eckman ordered a withdrawal. Sergeant Koszar’s lifeless body was carried out in an improvised poncho litter and Jose Vieras’ body was carried on a window louver ripped from its hinges by his comrades. Though most civilians had left, a lone woman was discovered in one of the houses. Sergeant Vernon Moore and another soldier scooped the old woman up and carried her to safety. When they put the woman down to help carry Vieras, she ran back into harm’s way. Moore would later learn why but for now he was preoccupied with bullets snapping past his head. Exchanges of fire continued throughout the morning as B Company tried to find a less costly way out.

When B Company reached safer ground, an APC from 5-60th Infantry came to drop off supplies and take away the bodies of Koszar and Vieras. A free-lance photographer with a foreign accent tried to snap pictures of the dead before they were loaded into the track. As the man pulled back a poncho draped over the dead, Captain Eckman began yelling. He didn't want his men’s families to see their pictures in a newspaper. He got between the photographer and the bodies and started backing the photographer away. Eckman confiscated his film and sent him under guard to the battalion command post to be ejected from the area.

Eckman returned to the police post that evening with two platoons, leaving his forward observer, Lieutenant Frederick G. Kaiser, with the 3rd Platoon in an abandoned school. The school was a two-story building wrapped around an open courtyard. It was one of the few structures left standing in a neighborhood that had been reduced to rubble. As night fell, troops tore concrete slabs from classroom floors to build bunkers at the school’s gated entrance. When finished, their bunker walls and roofs were two feet thick, more than enough to withstand a direct hit from a mortar or RPG. As daylight neared, Lieutenant Blacker and Sergeant Leader were watching from the school’s second-floor windows when approximately fifty VC appeared, headed in their direction. Blacker alerted Lieutenant Kaiser, who quickly got on the line to his firing battery.

Directing fire from an exposed position, Kaiser was wounded either by the enemy's return fire, which included several RPGs, or shrapnel from one of the dozens of 105mm howitzer shells he brought in “danger close”. He was subsequently awarded the Silver Star and a Purple

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3 Photo taken after the battle near where B Company fought courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).
Heart. Blacker was later informed that the enemy unit turned back by Kaiser’s artillery barrage had intended to overrun his platoon, but became disoriented enroute to the objective. When the VC moved forward, their commander found the buildings he planned to use as rallying points had been leveled and the alleyways down which he had planned to attack were blocked with rubble. In the morning, Sergeant Moore found the old woman he had tried to rescue the day before. She had scrambled back into the town and now lay dead beside a man who was probably her husband.

To B Company’s east, A and C Companies were concluding the fight for Xom Ong Doi. Before nightfall, a resupply of ammunition was flown in and the last of the wounded were evacuated. The night passed quietly. In the morning, the Bearcats conducted a house-to-house sweep, moving west to east, across the tadpole-shaped island on Xom Ong Doi’s south side. Helicopter gunships covered potential escape routes. On reaching the town’s center, A Company found 36 dead civilians in a housing complex inhabited by the families of RVN Marines. It was unclear whether they had been murdered by the VC or killed by artillery, helicopter gunships, or air strikes used to drive the VC out. Grieving RVN Marines who had fought all day to re-enter the town after being sent north to defend the Y Bridge the morning before, now had to bury their families. Only 16 dead VC were found in the town’s wreckage, but the fact that they had been forced to abandon some of their dead and their weapons, spoke to the punishment they suffered.

Earlier that morning (May 10), A/5-60th Infantry was ambushed on National Route 5A while moving through the village of Xom Tan Liem. Their company commander had been killed and most of the American dead still lay alongside the road. A and C Companies of the 6-31st were picked up on Route 230 and flown in to help. They were greeted by a morale-killing scene. Burned out APCs still smoldered and soldiers’ bodies covered with ponchos lay in clusters all along the road. If the VC could do that much damage to a heavily armed mechanized unit, what chance would the lightly armed Bearcats have? Time would soon tell. A sense of foreboding set in as the two rifle companies fanned out to the south and west. C Company picked up a wounded VC and carried him along.

Finding no enemy, A Company established a blocking position two kilometers west of Xom Tan Liem as dusk approached. C Company continued through town to
reinforce a Popular Forces\textsuperscript{4} outpost that had been attacked early that morning. While one platoon set up an ambush outside the compound, the rest of C Company entered the cramped mud fort. American GIs joined militiamen on the perimeter berm. While Americans were armed to the teeth with grenades, claymores, automatic rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers, plus radios to call in artillery, helicopters, and air power if needed, the militiamen had only World War II-era carbines and semi-automatic rifles. Toward evening, the Vietnamese gathered around large metal pots cooking smelly fish and rice for their evening meal while Americans ate C-rations from cans. After dinner, a joint watch rotation was established, allowing both Vietnamese and Americans to get some sleep between guard shifts.

Captain Owen's command group set up in a cramped little bunker, sharing what space there was with the VC who had been captured on the way in. As a precaution, the company's senior medic sedated the prisoner after checking his wounds as he lay on a wooden table. Everyone in the bunker except one man on radio watch was asleep when mortar shells began bracketing the compound around 4 AM. The prisoner rose at the first sound of incoming and dove off the table. Thinking he was going for a weapon, Owen and one of his radiomen grabbed their rifles and flipped the safeties off. The medic urgently called them off, realizing the man was just taking cover under the heavy table. He was so badly injured and heavily sedated that Owen couldn't believe he was even capable of moving.

A mortar round hit the command bunker, which shuddered and filled with dust, but, remarkably, didn't collapse. Several more rounds struck in quick succession in and around the crowded fort. Remarkably, neither the mortar fire nor a brief flurry of small-arms fire snapping overhead inflicted any casualties. A tree-lined village named Da Phuoc was the source of the enemy's fire. The attack lasted only minutes but counter-fire from the weapons platoon, helicopter gunship runs, and artillery responded for at least half an hour. The VC had fired from a village, knowing the Americans would respond with overwhelming firepower. In a war for "hearts and minds", civilian casualties and property destruction would give the VC a propaganda victory, even if they lost the battle. The communist Viet Minh had used the same tactic against the French a decade before but few Americans knew much about France's nine-year struggle to keep what had once been French Indochina.\textsuperscript{5}

The militia commander thought the brief attack was a diversion to cover the movement of a larger enemy unit out of the area. Captain Owen agreed, and leaning over a map with the Vietnamese lieutenant, who knew the area intimately, traced the most likely route the guerrillas would follow, then contacted battalion to suggest a pursuit. Before the move could begin, Captain Owen had to get his prisoner out on a helicopter and conduct a search of the ambush site

\textsuperscript{4} Popular Forces were militiamen from the local community who reported to a district chief. They were equipped with World War II-era weapons and usually manned static outposts protecting their towns. Regional Forces were organized into companies and sometimes battalions. Their armament was the same but they reported to a province chief and could be called on to fight anywhere in the province. Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units were organized in regiments and divisions. They reported to the four corps commanders and were assigned areas of responsibility from which they seldom moved. The ARVN Airborne and Marine Divisions constituted a national reaction force. They reported to the Chief of the Joint General Staff and could be employed anywhere in the country.

\textsuperscript{5} Viet Minh is a shortened form of \textit{Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi}, the liberation movement that wrested North Vietnam from French control in 1954. French Indochina had included Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the latter sub-divided into Tonkin (capital at Hanoi), Annam (capital at Hue), and Cochin-China (capital at Saigon). When France was defeated, Laos and Cambodia became independent, the Viet Minh were left in control of Vietnam above the 17\textsuperscript{th} parallel, and the government of the Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, was given control of southern Vietnam.
in Xom Tan Liem. The search was carried out in tense silence by troops spooked by the poncho-covered bodies of GIs still lying beside the road. They found an AK-47, an RPG launcher, web gear, hand grenades, rocket-propelled grenades, a Chinese-made radio, and three dead VC. "These were the first enemy dead we had seen up close," notes Al Olson. "We were told to stay clear of the bodies as they had not as yet been cleared for booby traps. One corpse held a grenade in a clenched fist. The other had a loaded RPG on the ground next to him." Documents identified the VC with the grenade as being "14 years old, but already a hero—decorated for killing many Americans." A Company, guided by a scout helicopter, searched the creek leading from the area the night attack had originated. They found two beached sampans strewn with ammunition and web gear and the body of another slain guerrilla.

Colonel Benson and Lieutenant Colonel Schmalhorst landed for a quick conference. Benson presumably expressed satisfaction with Schmalhorst's scheme for the pursuit. The village of Da Phuoc had been identified as an enemy rallying point by the prisoner evacuated that morning. The captured guerrilla, identifying himself as "chief" of a four-man team from the 3rd Company, 2nd Long An Battalion, informed his interrogators that his unit’s dead and wounded from the ambush of A/5-60th Infantry had been taken to a nearby waterway where they were loaded into sampans and transported to Da Phuoc.
Da Phuoc (11-12 May 1968)

With the search complete, Colonel Schmalhorst had A Company lifted out and D Company lifted in from Fire Base Smoke. C Company proceeded down Highway 5A, leaving the road south of Xom Tan Liem to cautiously cross open paddies to reach what was left of Da Phuoc. Stomachs tightened and fingers rested lightly on triggers. Someone accidentally discharged an M-79 grenade launcher, sending a round spiraling harmlessly into the ground and invoking a string of angry curses from the man’s stressed-out comrades.

Da Phuoc was deserted and demolished. The surrounding paddies were pocked with water-filled craters and the houses were reduced to foundations and crumbling walls. Lieutenant Gale, whose 3rd Platoon was in the lead, reported finding green plastic wrappings the enemy used to waterproof mortar rounds and rocket-propelled grenades. Owen moved up to Gale's position, and examining the wrappings, saw that the insides still retained an oily residue, a fact that set his nerves tingling. Such wrappings quickly dried under the blistering delta sun. They were not from the night before. That they were still oily meant the enemy had been breaking out ammunition and preparing for battle within the hour.

A trail angled northeast to the Rach Giu, a west to east-flowing stream. A row of partially-standing brick and concrete structures stood about twenty meters from the near bank. More damaged buildings were visible across the stream behind a curtain of dense, 15 to 20-foot tall nipa palm. Owen instructed Gale to send out flank security, move the 3rd Platoon across the stream, and secure the far buildings. The rest of the company would follow, and if the area proved as quiet as the rest of Da Phuoc, they would then plan the next increment of their pursuit.

Lieutenant Gale, whose slight build and thick glasses disguised his follow-me leadership style, led the way with Staff Sergeant William Patterson, who had the lead squad, and Specialist Gregory A. Russell, Gale's radio operator. Just after 3 P.M., May 11, Gale, Patterson, and Russell were 10 or 15 feet behind the lead squad which was just entering the stream when the Viet Cong began firing from unseen bunkers among the nipa palm. Soon the entire far bank erupted with the barking of AK-47 and RPD fire and smoke-trailing RPGs. Russell stumbled as several rounds punched through the radio on his back. Lieutenant Gale pulled him to a little sandbar overgrown with grass and brush in the middle of the river. Reaching the island, Gale, Patterson, and Russell went prone at its edge, and began returning fire over the top of the low-lying hump with their M-16s. Men from the lead squad who had also entered the water were pinned against the near bank, unable to raise their heads or their weapons. The rest of the 3rd Platoon was similarly immobilized, pinned down for the moment as the entire area was raked with fire. Compounding the problem, an enemy mortar crew started lobbing in rounds from somewhere across the paddies to the east.

Sergeant Al Olson was in the open between the stream and the demolished buildings when the ambush began. It was like a sudden electrical storm, he later thought, one crash of lightning and then a downpour. Hitting the dirt, he scrambled for a log not much bigger in diameter than a telephone pole that had once been part of a fence or wall. Three other men also ducked behind the log, their only available cover, scant though it was. All hugged the ground trying to crawl into their helmets as bullets cracked all around them. When one of the men managed to slip out of his rucksack and throw it over the log in an effort to create more cover, three or four rounds thumped into the pack. As an M-60 machinegun open up from the right flank, the enemy shifted their fire from the log to deal with the machine gun. Olson gripped his rifle, bracing himself to join the fight. The machinegun team on the right had been positioned to
cover the river crossing. PFC Robert York, manning the gun, was one of the first to get his head back up to return fire. His gun got the enemy's attention, but York, unfazed by slugs slapping into the log and cracking past his helmet, kept up a steady stream of fire.

Lieutenant Gale told Russell to find an operable radio so he could coordinate with the platoon sergeant to deploy the men on line, suppress the enemy’s fire, and, if possible, cross the river. Captain Owen always preached that the only way out of an ambush is to gain fire superiority and attack into the enemy, and Gale intended to do just that. With Gale and Patterson covering him by fire, Greg Russell splashed away, found a working radio, and fearlessly splashed back to the island, somehow passing unscathed through a fusilade of bullets drawing invisible lines all around him. As Gale was issuing instructions to his platoon sergeant, the radio went into constant static. Like the first, the second radio had also taken hits while strapped to Russell's back. Staff Sergeant Patterson swam to the far bank, discovering along the way that the current was dangerously swift. He tossed grenades into the nipa palm, trying in vain to knock out hidden bunkers. He was struggling in the current when Gale extended his rifle to pull him ashore.

Moments later, Greg Russell (20) was shot through the head as he lay between Gale and Patterson at the edge of the island, firing his M-16. A bright young man of 20, he was one of Gale's best soldiers. He had endured much teasing about marrying a girl he met during pre-deployment leave and for displaying the California state flag he always carried in his rucksack. He died bravely, earning the Distinguished Service Cross for the final acts of his short life. An extract of his citation reads: “Specialist Four Russell distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on 11 May 1968 during a reconnaissance-in-force mission near the village of Da Phuoc. He was in the point squad when his company began to cross a stream. Just as he entered the water, his squad came under extremely heavy enemy fire, which wounded him and threw him into the river. Finding his radio inoperative, he ignored the pain of his injury and swam ashore to find another radio. Completely exposed to the continuing enemy fire, Specialist Russell provided desperately needed communications until he received a mortal wound from a sniper’s bullet.”

It was time to back off because there was no way to get the platoon across the fast-flowing stream under fire. Gale and Patterson, who had been grazed across the face by a bullet, kept up their fire long enough for the men pinned against the river bank behind them to scramble to safety. They then leapt to their feet, and having no choice but to leave Russell, splashed across the river and sprinted across open ground to the remnants of a destroyed house. Bob York fired continuously to cover them. Al Olson peered over the log sheltering his group and saw Lieutenant Gale, Staff Sergeant Patterson, and Pete Murdock from the lead squad, dashing up from the river, each turning briefly to fire as he ran. They were headed for a destroyed building about fifty feet to the right of the log. Olson and the others behind the log opened up with everything they had to cover them. Gale, Patterson, Murdock, and several others made it to the house, but as they jumped behind a shell-blasted wall, Olson realized that his friend Greg Russell wasn't with the lieutenant. His heart sank because he knew what that meant. No officer would be without his radioman unless the radioman was dead.

After hurling the wall and dropping flat, Lieutenant Gale shouted at a nearby machinegun team to link ten ammo belts. He got behind the gun himself and began delivering long, uninterrupted bursts into the nipa palm where he had seen movement and muzzle flashes. In return, several RPGs came spiralling across the stream. One exploded just behind Gale, peppering his back with fragments and knocking the wind out of him. He shrugged off his

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injuries, pain barely registering through the adrenaline, and resumed firing the M-60. The men behind the log, having drawn the enemy's attention, again hugged the ground as rounds smacked into the log and cracked just inches above them. They faced a dilemma. To rise up would surely mean getting shot, so they took turns blindly firing their M-16s on automatic over the log. It was better than nothing.

A white phosphorus marking round burst over the enemy side of the river, followed by the first of many howitzer salvos. Helicopter gunships arrived not long after. At some point, Captain Owen and Lieutenant Belt, his Artillery Forward Observer, had moved into position with their radio operators behind the only remaining wall of a bombed-out pagoda behind Gale and Patterson. "That was as up front as it gets," writes Olson, describing how Owen, his helmet and eyes in view as he took in the scene, was "pointing, calmly giving orders, talking on different radios, trying to get us better organized, and directing supporting fires all at the same time."

Emboldened, men began popping up long enough to place aimed rifle shots across the stream. Lieutenant Gale scrambled from group to group, making sure his men had ammo, seeing who was wounded, and getting men into the best positions from which to return fire. The 3rd Platoon did not move back an inch, but poured an increasing volume of M-16, M-60, and M-79 fire at places they thought might shelter enemy troops. All the while, artillery continued pounding the enemy and helicopter gunships rolled in repeatedly from outside the gun-target line. The enemy clung tenaciously to their positions, returning fire after each volley of artillery. Their mortars, which told Owen he was up against at least a company, rarely stopped thumping out rounds, even though they had been spotted from above and were being attacked by gunships. Mortar rounds crashed all around Owens' command group and the lead platoon, inflicting a dozen casualties. The damage would have been worse had not at least half the rounds failed to explode. The enemy's ammunition either included a lot of duds, or an overly-stressed crewman was forgetting to pull out the safety wires before dropping rounds down the tube.

As the slugging match continued, Sergeant Olson realized that he and his buddies needed to start conserving ammo. They had gone through a lot of magazines. So much carbon had accumulated in the chambers of their rifles that they were starting to jam. To Olson's right, Gale, Patterson, Murdock, and York were still firing steadily. Two machine guns, the second now manned by PFC Tim Hannigan, were steadily belching torrents of lead. The barrel of Hannigan's machine gun glowed as he consumed ammo in an uninterrupted stream. Someone shouted that his barrel was going to burn out. Because no replacement barrel was available, Hannigan slowed to short bursts. Hannigan and York were soon down to a belt or two of ammo, and Sergeant Olson and his three buddies, each of whom had started the battle with thirty magazines, were down to six or seven apiece. Worse, their M-16s were now jamming every few rounds. Out of gun oil, Olson's group used squeeze-bottles of oily insect repellent to keep the carboned-up chambers lubricated, a trick learned in training. "We talked about the need to spread out," recalls Olson, "as we were too tightly clumped together in one relatively exposed position behind that log. We knew better but nobody was moving. It seemed like any movement increased the amount of incoming fire."

Captain Owen kept peering around the wall sheltering his command group or raising up to look through the half-window in the half-demolished brick wall, and his concerned radiomen kept pulling him back down. Every time the company commander's face came into view, there was a flurry of automatic-weapons fire from across the stream. The forward side of the wall absorbed the bursts. Taking another quick look through the window, Captain Owen, on his knees, was ducking back down when a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into the wall, knocking
him to a sitting position with ringing ears and shrapnel in his upper chest. Owen's injuries, like those of his two radiomen, Specialists Doug Lindner and Bill McMullen, were superficial because the main part of the blast passed over their heads. McMullen was hit again seconds after the explosion by a chunk of shrapnel that had apparently gone straight up, then straight down, landing on him as he sat against the wall.

As McMullen brushed the white-hot shrapnel away, Captain Owen, seeing the burn, said, "There's your Purple Heart." "No way, sir," McMullen answered, thinking the injury too slight to rate a medal. "My mother would die when she got the telegram!" Lieutenant Belt was calling in artillery from the doorway of the bombed-out pagoda. The men were on the gun-target line, meaning they could hear each salvo as it flew overhead, a whoosh-rumble caused by the spinning of the shells. A shell exploded nearby in an old crater that absorbed most of the blast. One man had a finger sliced off by shrapnel, invoking Lieutenant Gale's wrath. He bellowed: "Belt, I'll shoot you if you kill any of my men!"

Moments later, another rocket-propelled grenade whooshed across the stream, hitting the second step below the doorway and detonating in front of Belt with a brilliant flash. Knocked unconscious, the lieutenant came to "with my radio operator pulling me upside down in a crater twenty feet from the wall. The kid deserved a medal for dragging me out of the heaviest fire and into the crater." Shaking off the blast's effects, Belt, covered with brick particles, superficially wounded by brick and shrapnel, his ears ringing so loudly that he couldn't hear, kept the artillery coming, using a pencil to jot coordinates and adjustments on his map for his radioman to relay to the howitzer battery at Fire Base Smoke. Lieutenant May and the 1st Platoon were still firing from positions near the pagoda.

When Gale reported he was running low on ammo, Owen contacted Lieutenant Ron Belloli, whose 2nd Platoon was in reserve. In response, Belloli's platoon sergeant, an exceptionally distinguished-looking SFC named George Segrest, brought up a team of men draped with bandoliers of M-16 ammunition and belts of M-60 ammunition. Segrest had to crawl the last part of the way because he had been shot in the knee as he advanced, a permanently disabling wound that ended his pre-war career with the 3rd Infantry Regiment. "Segrest came out of the Old Guard that marches at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier," recalls Owen, "and the only thing he was looking forward to was getting back to the Old Guard. His wound ended those plans. He never marched again."

Joe Schmalhorst, flying above the fray in his command ship, instructed D Company, at Owen's request, to assume blocking positions north of the enemy, trapping them against the stream. Owen was frustrated at his counterpart's slow progress, but eventually Captain Grady Smith's D Company, moving with two platoons up and one back, neared a tree line several hundred meters west of the contact area. The tree line faced the right-front
platoon. Lieutenant Paul Fish had the left-front platoon. D Company had not yet been in a firefight. Being new and gung-ho, Fish was disappointed that the other platoon would be going into the trees where the enemy was most likely to be, while his own platoon was supposed to sweep past the tree line to provide flank security. There were indeed guerrillas dug in amid the brush and nipa, and they waited until D Company, sloshing across a flooded paddy, was in the open between two dikes before unleashing a storm of AK-47 fire.

Lieutenant Fish's radioman was shot in the leg during the opening exchange, but Fish pulled him to his feet and helped him to a dike where most of the platoon, minus the lead squad, took shelter from the firestorm. As mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades began plopping into the mud around them, Fish's men stubbornly but blindly returned fire. When Fish's weapon jammed, he grabbed his radioman's rifle, which was full of water and also jammed. Furious that they had been issued such unreliable weapons, Fish picked up a third M-16. Sergeant John T. Moore (21), a fire team leader down the dike to Fish's left, suddenly stood up. Whatever his intentions, he had no chance to act on them because he was immediately shot through the neck and slumped back to the ground, dying. It took less than half an hour for a medevac helicopter to arrive but Moore was already dead.

Cobra gunships had also been diverted to the scene, and Fish, on the line with Captain Smith, tried explaining that he had a squad pinned down along the berm in front of the smoke he popped to mark his position. Fish's warning must have gotten lost in translation because the lead gunship fired too soon on its initial pass. A line of minigun-generated waterspouts rippled through the lead squad and on into the tree line. Fortunately, there were no friendly casualties. After the gunships were reoriented, the GIs settled against the dikes and watched the Cobras take turns working the tree line with mini-guns and salvos of rockets. Spectators now to their own battle, one squad leader began filming the show with a home-movie camera. D Company had gone as far as it was going that day.

As dusk came, one of Al Olson's buddies behind the log took off to find more ammo. Olson crawled over to Lieutenant Gale behind the crumbled wall. Gale was shouting orders and shooting steadily. Near him, Bob York, who had also been wounded, was still firing his M-60. Gale confirmed that Russell was dead, pointing to the island. Olson decided to retrieve his friend's body and the radio. It wasn't a rational decision, but Olson was both angry and guilt-ridden. Olson had been the lieutenant's original radioman at Ft Lewis. Had he not been reassigned as a team leader and then as a squad leader, he might be out there on the island and Russell might still be alive. He rose to run to the island, but an explosion knocked him flat. He struggled to catch his breath, but was unable to move. He was numb all over, his ears ringing and head throbbing. Tasting blood, he spit out a mouthful, unsure of what had happened. When the roaring in his ears subsided, he yelled for a medic. The one who appeared secured a bandage around his throat. Someone helped him back past men who were rushing forward with ammunition that had just been unloaded from a resupply chopper.

Bill Owen was angry that D Company had not yet moved into a position where it could relieve some of the

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2 Picture courtesy of 9th Infantry Division PIO 1968.
pressure. Frustrated, he decided to risk bringing in resupply ships. 2nd Platoon secured a landing zone, a wet paddy back down the trail, but the enemy had not yet been defeated. Incoming helicopters took small-arms fire even though they were landing several hundred meters from the stream. Lieutenant Dave Wilson, the company executive officer, flew in from Smoke aboard one of the resupply ships. "The pilot was told to come in low and from the southeast," writes Wilson. "As we came upon the company, they threw smoke, and immediately the shooting picked up a little. When the chopper landed, I jumped out to help unload. I didn't think much of it at the time, but later, one of the other lieutenants asked me, 'Hey, did you notice after you jumped out, Charlie put a bullet in the wall right behind where your head was?' No, I hadn't noticed."

The last helicopter into the landing zone was a medevac. Several seriously wounded men were helped into the cargo bay, including Olson and the 1st Platoon's Tiger Scout. Lieutenant Gale was furious when not-so-seriously wounded PFC climbed aboard, apparently under the impression that a cut finger rated a medevac. The Huey had just lifted off, nose down as the pilot picked up initial forward speed, when somebody started yelling about an RPG. Captain Owen saw the whole thing. The rocket-propelled grenade, sizzling toward the Huey from across the stream, had gone in one side of the cargo bay, somehow missing everyone and everything inside, and sailed out the other. "I could not believe my eyes," recalls Owen. "We stood there in absolute awe." Owen could hear Belloli on the radio asking the pilot if he realized an RPG had just passed through his helicopter. "He couldn't believe it, either. If the rocket had hit anything, we would have lost the chopper and all the wounded. Miracles do happen!"

Lieutenant Belt was informed that his direct-support battery was going to cease firing and a battery of 155mm howitzers would continue the mission. "They changed guns in mid-mission," notes Owen, "because we'd had the 105s firing so long that they had to cool the tubes down." As the heavy battery fired its first round, Lieutenant Belt was informed when the round was due to "splash," its time in flight having been calculated to within seconds. On his knees, Belt peered over the wall to watch for the explosion so he could adjust fire from that spot. The count-down on the radio ended, but there was no explosion. The shell could be heard tearing through the sky on its way in, but the pitch was all wrong. As happens all too often when blind ordnance flies into a close fight, the round fell short, striking 30 or 40 meters to the left of the command group. "The firing battery probably heard me scream for a cease-fire all the way back at Firebase Smoke," recalls Owen. The blast was deafening, earth-shaking, and several men had been injured, including Owen, who'd caught several steel splinters in his thigh and groin. No one was killed or even seriously wounded, notes Owen, "because the shell landed in a wet, soggy area, and most of the blast was absorbed by the mud. We were really lucky." The 155s were adjusted and the firing continued.

The wet terrain protected the enemy as well. Some VC crouched in muddy spider holes were undoubtedly killed, but most survived the gunships, artillery, and even the high-drag bombs delivered by the jet fighters. The battle continued after sundown, red tracers slicing one way over the river, lime-green tracers the other, gunships rolling in on targets that glowed white in a sea of black thanks to the illumination rounds slowly floating down on the north side of the stream. As enemy fire finally began to taper off, Captain Owen consolidated his positions in the dark, setting up for the night among clumps of palm trees and behind the walls of once-substantial houses.

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3 SP4 Gregory A. Russell was killed in the action and 2LT Charles W. Gale, SSG William R. Patterson, SGT Ralph A. Olson, SP4 Douglas A. Kasper, PFC Andrew A. Redente, PFC Ronald K. Sebacious, PFC Leonard J. Webb, PFC Robert L. York, CPT William J. Owen (CO), SP4 Douglas W. Lindner (radio operator), SFC George Segrest (2d Plt Sgt), and Tiger Scout Nguyen Van Duc (1st Plt) were wounded.
Lieutenant Belloli used a strobe light to bring in a resupply slick\textsuperscript{4} loaded with ammunition for the mortar platoon. It was almost midnight when a final air strike went in across the river. Owen, after having the artillery register defensive concentrations around his perimeter, began placing fire from the 105s and 155s and his own 81mm mortars along the likely avenues of enemy withdrawal. "We knew they were going to sneak out on us," says Owen, "especially with D Company out of position to block anything." High above in the night sky, Spooky (a cargo plane converted to a gunship) droned in lazy circles overhead, jettisoning flares. A small patrol, meanwhile, slipped into the river and reached the island in the middle without drawing fire. They soon returned with Greg Russell's body, his rifle, and his radio. Gale had wanted to accompany the patrol, but Owen had instructed the wounded lieutenant to stay with his platoon, explaining that "sometimes you need to let the sergeants do their work." Around three in the morning the enemy fired a last RPG across the stream at C Company. Helicopters equipped with night-vision scopes orbited the battlefield, trying to spot the enemy as they slipped away. It was nearly dawn when one of them spotted fifteen VC moving across the rice paddies several hundred meters east of C Company. Artillery was shifted onto the area.

Triage of the wounded was being conducted on the landing zone. "Some guys were taken first, and some waited," writes Al Olson. "In time, I was pulled into a tent and was on the table." The surgeon removed an inch-and-a-half long fragment and some bits of brick from Olson's neck, then cleaned up other shrapnel wounds in his shoulder, chest, and side. The surgeon informed Olson that he had a concussion, but that nothing vital had been hit. Olson agreed. "Seventeen stitches, ten of them in my neck, my head hurt like hell, and I had a big bandage on my neck, but I was okay." Directed to another tent to spend the night, Olson instead hitched a ride to the company rear, where the first sergeant questioned him about the battle, then started talking about work details first thing in the morning. Olson wandered over to the supply tent to get fresh fatigues from the supply sergeant then "fell asleep in the back of the tent. I woke up soaked in my own vomit early the next morning. I don't remember getting sick. I just woke up laying in my own vomit." Drawing another set of fatigues, Olson spent the morning trying to avoid the first sergeant, but bandages, stitches, and three days of light-duty or not, he was informed that he was to draw shovels and get a work detail organized. Olson decided he'd rather be back in the field with his buddies than filling sandbags in the rear. "I went back to the supply tent where the supply sergeant told me I could help load the chopper taking gear to the company. After we loaded the chopper, I climbed aboard."

As dawn broke on May 11, Captain Owen was eager to cross the river to see what damage had been done, but Schmalhorst, up again in his command ship, denied him permission to do so, concerned that the enemy had rigged the area with booby traps before withdrawing. Instead, resupply was carried out, then C Company conducted an airmobile assault south of Da Phuoc and D Company west of Xom Tan Liem in the ongoing hunt for the enemy. For Owen, it was a disappointing and anti-climactic end to the battle. C Company returned to Da Phuoc two days later to survey the battle's results. Small-arms ammunition, mortar rounds, and bloody bandages accompanied three dead guerrillas who, left behind during the enemy's dark-of-night retreat, lay putrefying in the smashed nipa palm.

Joe Schmalhorst wrote his wife after the battle that "Captain Owen and his boys did a wonderful job. I've recommended Bill for a Silver Star. He was a real cool customer. The men are outstanding. Even the wounded talk to Doc [the battalion surgeon] of wanting to go back to their unit. It's amazing!" The preacher visits all of them at the hospital and the aid station. He

\textsuperscript{4} Slick is slang used to describe UH-1B "Huey" assault transport helicopters, which were armed with only machineguns mounted on a pintle beside each cargo door.
worries me. He takes off in a jeep to the hospitals and our roads are anything but secure but he does it anyway." For their actions at Da Phuoc, Captain Owen, Lieutenant Gale, Staff Sergeant Patterson, and machine gunner Bob York received the Silver Star. Lieutenant Belt and Platoon Sergeant Segrest were awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. All were accompanied by a Purple Heart.

Lieutenant Wilson, hearing about Gale's actions, asked his friend what made him so brave. "I'm not brave," Gale answered. "I'm just so scared that my guys will think I'm chicken that I take the riskiest jobs myself." Wilson would later write that "the true sign of a hero is one who admits they are scared, but still performs bravely. Bill Gale meets this requirement from both sides of the equation. I think he is one of the bravest men I have known."

C Company, still a bit green when it went into Da Phuoc, emerged proud and sure of itself. "We may have had more wounded and killed than the other companies in the battalion," writes Wilson, "but I'll bet we also got more VC than they did. The difference between the units was we had more pride in our commander and company." The bond between Bill Owen and his troops, already strong, became unbreakable after Da Phuoc. "I was amazed at how Owen kept his head up and studied the scene during firefights," writes Robert Magdaleno. "My most vivid impression of Captain Owen is of him standing in the field with helmet, rucksack, ammo, grenades, and weapon, and thinking how it seemed only proper that the company commander and us grunts were all dressed and equipped the same." Al Olson concurs. "If you wanted to find Owen, you only had to look toward the loudest part of the engagement," he writes. "It didn't matter who you were or where you were, if you were under fire, Owen was just over your shoulder. He was always very calm when everything else was going crazy. In many ways, he was our courage. For the guys in the platoons, Captain Owen was our faith and our trust. He never let us down."
The Battle for Saigon Ends (May 11-14 1968)

On the morning of May 11, 3-39th Infantry began converging on two areas where the VC seemed most likely to be. One was an abandoned militia outpost southeast of Xom Cau Mot and the other was a settlement just south of the Y Bridge. B/3-39th approached the militia outpost from the north, sparking the first contact of the day, while B/6-31st approached east-to-west. B Company soon made contact, killing two VC before moving on. Captain Eckman's command group moved down a wide boulevard while his 1st Platoon searched shattered houses along the way. No doubt recognizing the cluster of radio antennas around Captain Eckman and Lieutenant Procaccini as a command group, a VC fired an RPG at them from a block away. Procaccini's radioman, PFC David E. Gray, saw the projectile coming, spinning like a football and trailing a ribbon of white smoke. There was no time to react before it exploded in the middle of the street. Gray, who had been superficially wounded the day before, remained standing, too stunned to realize that he'd been hit again until someone pushed him down and pointed to the blood on his left trouser leg. A medic treated the slice on Gray's inner thigh with iodine and a band-aid, leaving the radioman to write home, incorrectly, that the two dings were "not even good enough for a Purple Heart."

Lieutenant Procaccini led an attack against the rocket team. Procaccini was viewed skeptically by some, having accidentally shot one of his own men, but Gray, who knew him best, respected the lieutenant. "I thought he did a good job. He was a brave guy. At times, he was more gung-ho than I liked. When we were fighting between those buildings, he would run out, guns blazing, and shout, follow me, Dave! That was a little bit more than I had in mind!" PFC Michael Nicholin was shot as he moved down an alley. Seeing him spin around and fall to the ground, his comrades thought they were recovering a dead man. Nicholin was very much alive, however, and pushed his would-be rescuers away before they themselves got shot. He was unharmed because the round had been stopped by a magazine draped in a bandolier over his heart. Even the three rounds that had cooked off inside the magazine had done no damage.

Sergeant Vernon Moore, a forward observer from the mortar platoon, ended up inside a house with several riflemen from the 3rd Platoon. There were two-inch square ventilation holes in the walls about two feet from the floor. Enemy fire began thumping into the house, some of the rounds blasting through the holes on that side. "Pieces of clay would fly all over the room," recounts Moore. "It was unnerving." The grunts peered through the ventilation holes during lulls in the shooting, and Moore "spotted the sniper---the only live one I had seen during the battle---about a hundred feet away on the other side of a canal. He was in a hole under a trash pile. He had a piece of tin over his position. He'd raise that piece of tin and shoot his AK-47. He'd been wounded because I could see a bandage around his head." It was impossible to zero in on the sniper from inside the room, the ventilation holes being too small and the sights on their rifles too high.
PFC Larry J. Marchal, a slow-talking farm boy whose father could not read or write, one of those salt-of-the-earth guys who made natural soldiers, entered the room with a grenade launcher, and listened impassively as the situation with the sniper was described. "Well, I can get him," Marchal said. "You all just stick your rifles through them holes and shoot at him, keep him down while I get a bead on him." With that, Marchal slipped out the back door and took up a position behind a large clay jug positioned against the house to catch rainwater, exposing just enough of himself to sight in on the sniper's position. "When we quit shooting," recounts Moore, "that piece of tin flew up and the sniper popped up to fire another burst but Marchal fired first, blowing the top of the sniper's head off. Marchal was like that. He'd just do whatever had to be done. I had the highest respect for him."

By late afternoon, B/6-31st reached a large rice paddy just east of the abandoned militia outpost. Lieutenant Blacker's platoon advanced on the outpost, leaving the concealment of thatch-and-stucco houses where the rest of the company positioned itself to provide covering fire. Trotting single-file along one of the east-west dikes cutting across the flooded paddy, the platoon ran into a wall of fire. Taking cover in the mud behind an intersecting north-south dike, the troops returned fire against houses inside the compound. Eckman requested gunships. A pair soon arrived, and smoke grenades were thrown to mark the site. Sergeant Leader, in radio contact with the flight leader, got a confirmation on the color of his smoke: "I see the enemy... I see your smoke... We're comin' in hot..." Leader rolled onto his back behind the dike to watch the lead gunship begin its run, coming in low from behind his platoon. The target was obscured, however, because the smoke had blown back over the platoon. The Cobra's gunner pressed the trigger a moment too soon. Leader grabbed his handset as the Cobra's minigun began spewing 4000 rounds a minute. A spray of water kicked up by the bullets was headed directly for his squad. He was shouting "cease fire, cease fire, cease fire" as the burst crossed the dike, hitting a soldier as it passed. As the gunship stopped firing, Leader turned his attention to the wounded man. A minigun round had struck the pistol-grip of the M-16 rifle he was holding, removing two fingers and the heel of his hand. Leader was amazed that no one else had been hit and thankful the gunship had not been firing rockets.

Leader informed his wife in a tape he mailed home after the battle that "We thought they were in the buildings, so we leveled about a whole city block of cement houses between air strikes and helicopter gunships and M-72 LAWs we were carrying. We leveled every house within sight right to the ground, and we started to get up, thinking we had it made--and we started gettin' just as much fire as we did the first time." The 3rd Platoon again took cover behind the dike. "We couldn't move either way," Leader's account continued. "They had us pinned down and we couldn't tell where those shots were coming from. All we could hear was the cracking of the AK-47s over our head." As the exchange continued, Sergeant Leader saw one of the guerrillas pop up to fire. My God, there they are, Leader thought, shocked, for the enemy soldier was not back among the buildings into which the platoon was firing, but was dug into the berm at the end of the paddy not more than fifty meters away.

Captain Eckman ordered the 3rd Platoon to pull back so that more supporting arms could be brought to bear against the berm. The only way out was atop the dikes. A man could sink to his armpits in the paddies, but to rush straight back on the east-west dike along which the platoon had advanced would only get a lot of guys shot in the back. Better to get out from under the muzzles of the enemy's guns by moving north along an intersecting dike behind which the platoon was sheltered, then dart rearward atop the next east-west dike in the field. Blacker told Leader to move to the elbow where the two dikes met and lay down a base of fire to cover the withdrawal. Leader called to Larry Marchal to follow him with the machine gun he was now
carrying. The two crawled along the north-south dike while the rest of the platoon kept up its fire. On reaching the elbow, Marchal fired from atop the dike. Marchal lay behind the M-60 with Leader kneeling to his left, feeding ammo belts into the machine gun with one hand and firing his M-16 with the other.

Leader shouted at his men to move, but no one could hear him over the din. He then used hand signals, waving the men his way. The first few reluctantly got up and sprinted down the dike toward him, then raced down the dike to the thatch-and-stucco houses. Firing continuously, Marchal had gone through eight or nine ammo belts when his gun jammed. After Leader helped him replace the burned-out barrel, Marchal continued firing until the last member of the platoon reached safety. With that, Leader shouted at Marchal to move out. Leader ran behind him, moving as fast as he could while continuing to blast away with his M-16. "I guess that's why they're going to give me a medal of some kind," said Leader on the tape he sent home, explaining that he had been recommended for a valor award for providing cover fire during the retreat. He didn't think he deserved a medal. "I mean, I can't see it because there was no other way to get off the dike."

Captain Eckman plastered the compound with artillery, more gunships, and more jet-fighters which delivered both napalm and high-drag bombs. He then resumed the attack with two platoons. The enemy might have been hurt by all that firepower, but there were still enough of them holding out in water-filled bunkers to again stop B Company in its tracks. They later found that the enemy had aiming stakes in the bunkers, positioned so that when an AK-47 was slipped into place, the weapon was trained on the dike in front of the berm. "They were already pre-tested and pre-sighted," noted Leader. "They waited until the two platoons got on the dike in the impact area, and then they fired. They had their weapons zeroed right on the top of the dike . . . Anytime we'd raise up, they'd just pull the trigger and the rounds would hit right along the top of the dike." The two assault platoons took ten casualties. "Some of 'em were fingers shot off, some of 'em were in the stomach, chest, legs," said Leader.

The worst of the casualties was PFC Fred G. Losel (21), radioman for B Company’s artillery forward observer. Though quickly evacuated, Losel died in the hospital and was posthumously awarded the Silver Star to go with his Purple Heart. He had not only been instrumental in coordinating supporting fires during the battle, but had acted as a rifleman to cover the withdrawal from the rice paddy. Vernon Moore understood that Losel had been very close to Lieutenant Kaiser, the forward observer wounded that morning, and was upset at losing his boss. "He more or less went crazy that day, started doin' crazy things. There were a lot of grass houses there. Hell, bullets would just come right through 'em, but he was standing up behind one of 'em, sticking his rifle around the side of it and shootin'. Somebody told me he grabbed a machine gun, too, and run out through there, firing it from the hip at the enemy. He was takin' too many chances. He was doin' some crazy stuff. He was doin' John Wayne stuff, and I remember us talkin' about it at the time: 'There ain't no live John Waynes over here.'"

B Company was getting reorganized when a track arrived with their resupply. The crewmen were visibly nervous. After unloading a stack of ammo crates as quickly as possible, they departed at top speed, anxious to make it back to the battalion command post before nightfall. B Company needed the ammo but needed water blivets, too. For the second day in a row none were delivered. No rations had been delivered either, but that didn't matter much because no one had an appetite. Most hadn't even eaten the C-rations they'd had stuffed in their pockets several days before. Throats were parched now, tongues swelled. "We were doing so much running around in the heat, popping salt pills to keep from passing out, that we desperately
needed water," notes Leader, "but with so much of the town destroyed, there wasn't any water to be had."

Vietnamese place large (around 35 gallon capacity) earthenware crocks under down spouts at the corners of their houses to collect rainwater. When the houses were destroyed, so were the crocks. Several men luckily found an intact vat beside a partially demolished house. It was big—about four feet high and three feet in diameter, with a cloth across the top to keep dirt out. "When we took the cover off," says Leader, "we could see that the water was full of mosquito larvae. I mean, they were swimming all over in there, and I can remember just plunging my head down in that jug of water and drinking, wigglers and all. I didn't care."

The heaviest contact of May 12 was made when B/6-31st again attempted, along with C/3-39th, to dislodge the enemy from the militia outpost. Sergeant Leader caught the mood when he described in the tape he sent home how after the way had been paved with artillery, "we moved on to the objective itself, this time determined to take it." There was a feeling of resolve among the men. There were other emotions, too, as David Gray noted in a letter he wrote to his parents before moving out that morning: "I'm really scared."

The shooting started almost immediately. Lieutenant Procaccini's platoon was in the lead when the point squad, led by Sergeant Davis, came under fire while moving down the street that led to the militia outpost. When several rounds snapped over Davis's head, he sensed the direction and managed to spot the sniper, or at least the silhouette of his upper body. The sniper was darting from one end to the other of a waist-high porch, laying down AK-47 bursts almost in cadence. Instructing his men to hold their fire lest they chase the sniper away, Davis crawled among the debris to get closer to the porch. Taking up a concealed position behind the concrete base of a utility pole, Davis waited for the sniper to reappear. His silhouette stopped in the middle of the porch, apparently looking for a target, and Davis, seeing his chance, "pulled the safety off a LAW, gauged the distance, set the sight, and shot him chest high. He could not have survived." The backblast knocked over the wall behind Davis, burying his radioman, who came cursing and kicking out from under the bricks.

Nearing the militia outpost, Sergeant Davis's squad took fire from a thatched hut which, except for a dead dog laying on the dirt floor, was empty. Davis was convinced that the clay bunker inside the house concealed a tunnel entrance. He could think of no other way that the sniper who had been there just moments before could have disappeared. Having fought in the area for six days, the enemy would have had plenty of time to prepare such positions. Davis and his team leaders were starting back to rejoin the squad when another round snapped through the house.

Captain Eckman called for 3rd Platoon to clear a line of thatch houses that formed a straight line to the rice paddy flanking the militia outpost. Behind the houses was a berm holding back a rancid accumulation of garbage, human waste, and stagnant water. The approach to the houses crossed open ground covered by unseen VC. As enemy fire peppered areas between houses, Sergeant Davis and most of his squad scrambled through what had once been a front door to take shelter inside a semi-demolished house. Staff Sergeant Rex Humes, who led the platoon's weapons squad, took up a covering position with PFC Percy Horton, who was soon returning fire with his M-60.

With the machine gun covering him, Davis grabbed his two team leaders and crept out the back door to a low brick wall running parallel to the berm. Davis peered around the edge of
the wall, watching for shots, and was startled when they came not from some relatively distant location, but from a spiderhole dug into the berm about ten feet away. The hole was camouflaged with palm fronds, so all Davis could see was smoke wisps from an AK-47. He wanted to put a high-explosive round into the spiderhole with a grenade launcher. The weapon was passed to Davis, who, yet to be spotted, shouldered the grenade launcher, squeezed the trigger, and was surprised to see the VC blown up out of his spider hole by the impact of hundreds of tiny flechettes. The weapon had been loaded with "beehive", rather than a high explosive round. The dead VC slowly slid down the retaining berm and back into his hole. The position was active again in minutes. Davis didn't know if there had been a second guerrilla in the spider hole, but suspected a subterranean complex existed under or behind the berm.

An AK round hit the top of Percy Horton’s machine gun, sending a piece of the sight flying into his cheekbone. Disregarding the injury, Horton stayed on his gun, covering Davis’ squad as it pulled back after being outflanked. Staff Sergeant Humes, Percy Horton, and his two ammo bearers came out last. Horton was a black draftee in his early twenties. Davis recalls, "Percy had the spirit of an older, wiser man, and knew how to encourage the men working with him. He also had enthusiasm, a winner's attitude, and a desire to live to go home. He wasn't about to become a statistic without a fight."

Davis’ squad again came under fire from a house his squad could not reach. Unable to move forward or back, Davis requested an air strike on the house, placed an orange marker panel across his back, and low-crawled to a place of cover in front of his squad. After acknowledging the location, the aircraft made a second pass and released its bomb. Drag fins popping out to retard its descent as it wobbled towards the target, the bomb passed close enough for Davis to read--USE NO HOOKS--on its underside. Davis saw the bomb enter the ground and burrow deep under the porch. As he ducked, the ground convulsed and the house disintegrated in a pillar of dust and falling debris.

Most felt that the air strike had ended the battle because the area suddenly became quiet. The word was passed during the lull for everyone that C/3-39th was moving into the area. David Gray, who carried the platoon radio, recalls ambling down a dirt road, joking with his buddies about a soldier from C/3-39th sinking to his knees in a nearby paddy. Gray and his buddies pulled the man free. He was Specialist Jaime A. Rivera-Lopez of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, C/3-39th's lone KIA during the fight for Saigon. "As soon as we pulled the guy up onto the road," recalls Gray, "the enemy opened up again and shot him through the head."

Gray was also hit and knocked backward onto his radio. Spotting the VC’s muzzle flash, he rolled over, and began returning fire. Another burst hit him and he rolled again, trying to get out of the shooter's sights, but was hit by a third burst. Gray was hit thirteen times in all, as he would later learn. He had a graze across one hand, a round in his spine, and eleven through his legs. His left ankle was shattered, his left kneecap cracked, and chunks of muscle were missing from his upper right thigh. Bone was visible, tendons ripped, and arteries were gushing blood. Gray felt no pain, only a strange and almost peaceful numbness as his mind detached itself from his shattered body. He knew he was dying. Hands grabbed his wrists and web gear to pull him to safety as automatic-weapons fire laced the air around him and his rescuers. Staff Sergeant Terry Dotson, a squad leader on his second tour, was among those who rushed out to rescue Gray. Gray was a southern white boy, who Dotson, a black Regular Army NCO, had ridden so hard during training at Ft Lewis that they had almost come to blows. Their mutual dislike evaporated in the heat of the fight.
Gray also recognized Mark Mudd and a draftee team leader named Sam Flores. He would never forget those three men pulling him to safety at the risk of their own lives. Flores was a particularly handsome, good-hearted guy who refused promotion on the grounds that he might get somebody killed if he was given more responsibility. He nevertheless seemed to always take charge, do the right things, and get the job done when the bullets flew. Dotson, Mudd, and Flores laid Gray on a door knocked from its hinges and hustled him back to where Lieutenant Blacker's platoon secured a landing zone for the medevac. A medic administered morphine, and tied tourniquets high up on Gray's thighs but couldn't stop the bleeding. Gray's only chance was getting to a medical facility quickly but the dust-off refused to come in with so much fire. Captain Eckman screamed at the pilot to “Get your ass down here!” The pilot landed under fire and Gray was hurriedly loaded aboard on the door serving as his stretcher.

In minutes, the medevac chopper reached the 3rd Field Hospital, the former American dependent high school in Saigon. There, medics prepared Gray for surgery by washing away the mud, blood, and grime with a hose. Cold water lashing his wounds caused him to shriek in pain. He must have asked what condition he was in because one of the doctors told him that they might have to amputate his left leg. "Please, please, whatever you do," Gray begged, "Don't do it! Please don't take my leg off!" "We don't know if we'll be able to save it." Gray was told to open his mouth and a tube was slipped down his throat. He was soon unconscious and emergency surgery began. Hours later, Gray woke up in a recovery ward, relieved to find that his leg was still in place. Later, as he lay naked atop a bedpan being washed, a medical corps colonel presented him a certificate for the Purple Heart with oak leaf cluster and an empty box which should have contained the medal. "Sorry," the colonel said, "We ran out of Purple Hearts today."

As the firing continued, Sergeant Davis crawled past the building that had been knocked out by the air strike and on to a galvanized structure whose size and shape reminded him of a smoke house back home. Looking in, Davis saw only rice bags strewn across the floor. Leaving his men outside, Davis ducked inside and crawled over the bags, headed for a doorway that faced the enemy on the opposite side. A small white building was visible through the open door. Noticing a figure move past the doorway, Davis pulled the pins on two grenades, and crawled the last few feet to the opening, intent on lobbing both grenades at the Viet Cong. Then everything went wrong. Davis noticed that a hole had been dug in the earthen floor and the rice bags had been arranged to conceal the entrance to a bunker.

Before Davis could react, someone fired at him through the doorway and something exploded beneath him. Jolted by the explosion, he let go of his fragmentation grenades. Davis realized he had only seconds to react before his grenades exploded. Still dazed, he spotted one of the grenades, grabbed it with his right hand, and threw it into the hole in the floor. He found the other grenade with his left hand, scooped it up, and frantically lobbed it toward the doorway. It exploded just feet away. He survived with wounds in his shoulder and chest. Partially flash blinded and unsure how badly he was injured, Davis called on the Lord. If the Lord answered, it was in the guise of PFC Lyle W. Hansen (20), his radio operator.

Seeing his squad leader wounded, Hansen jumped from cover and sprinted across a patch of open ground, firing his M-16 from the hip. He made it to the structure where Davis lay and crawled inside to drag him to safety. Scrambling over the bags of rice, Hansen crouched over Davis and asked, "Sarge, are you okay?" Davis started to answer but Hansen never heard him because he was shot twice in the head and collapsed heavily across Davis. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star. Working his way out from under the body of his dead radioman, Davis crawled back through the opening to rejoin his squad.
The men in the lead platoon were in drainage ditches or tucked behind houses and berms and palm trees, some of them heads-down for the duration, others holding their weapons above them, exposing only their hands, and firing blindly across the muddy paddy that separated their positions from the houses and nipa palm that shielded the Viet Cong. Behind them, Captain Eckman was in a multi-story building that afforded him an overview of the battlefield. Sergeant Leader's squad was sent forward to reinforce Lieutenant Procaccini’s battered platoon. Specialist Dennis K. Jones (20), attached to Sergeant Leader’s squad from the battalion mortar platoon the day before, darted repeatedly through enemy fire to better coordinate artillery and gunships. As he moved from position to position to get a better view of the enemy, he killed any VC he encountered along the way. He ran straight at a VC in a spider hole and killed him at close range with a burst from his M-16 as the frightened man tried to duck below the rim. Continuing his mad charge, Jones stopped to kill more VC with grenades and rifle fire as they shot at him from nearby buildings. After stopping to catch his breath and change magazines behind the cement wall of a porch, Jones was shot in the head as he rose to fire again. Leader dragged him into the house but he was beyond help. For his bravery, Jones was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Instructed to fall back and secure a landing zone, Leader helped carry Jones out on a door that had been torn from its hinges to serve as a stretcher. The litter team made it to a clearing where a medevac chopper was inbound. The pilot’s first attempt to land was met with automatic weapons fire, causing him to pull up and swing away from the clearing. Leader fanned his troops out but they didn't spot the sniper. Another attempted landing was aborted under fire. On the third attempt, Leader, intently scanning the area, noticed movement behind a large palm about fifty meters across an open paddy. All he could see of the sniper kneeling behind the tree was a sneaker he was wearing. The front of the tennis shoe stuck out in plain view. Leader put his rifle to his shoulder as the medevac flared to land, hurriedly sighted, and squeezed off a single shot before the sniper swung his own weapon around the side of the tree to fire again. The sniper jerked his foot back, obviously injured. Leader hoped the shock of getting a hole blown in his foot would keep the sniper preoccupied long enough to get the casualties evacuated. He was right.

Running out of daylight, Captain Eckman ordered Lieutenant Procaccini to rush the enemy positions and knock out the spider holes and bunkers with fragmentation grenades. Procaccini thought the idea unwise. "We can't see anyone. They're close, but we don't know exactly where they are," he told Eckman on the radio, trying to explain that an assault would turn them into targets in someone else's shooting gallery. "I've got a bunch of chicken-wire in front of me," he continued, "and then a rice paddy. I don't think I can get my people through the chicken-wire and across the open paddy without getting everybody wiped out in the process."

According to Procaccini, Eckman snapped impatiently to get on with it. Procaccini moved over to Staff Sergeant Dotson, his most experienced squad leader and shouted to him over the gunfire, "We gotta get the men on line! We're making an assault!" "You're crazy," Dotson shouted back. "There's no way we can get across there and do anything effective." "It's a direct order from the captain." "No!" Dotson said firmly. He wasn't going and he wasn't ordering his squad to go. The young lieutenant wasn't sure what to do next. Remembering that doing something is always better than doing nothing he cradled his rifle in his arms, slipped under the chicken-wire, and low-crawled through the muck until he was up against his berm. Procaccini started screaming for the others to join him, but before anybody could move, the lieutenant's radioman hollered back that Captain Eckman wanted everyone to pull back. An air strike was
coming in. Desperate to rejoin his platoon, Procaccini lobbed several grenades into the nipa palm, then slid back into the paddy on his belly to inch his way back while Staff Sergeant Dotson laid down a continuous stream of machinegun fire. Procaccini got back safely.

Phil Eckman had been directing artillery to cover the withdrawal. Informed that Procaccini’s platoon had pulled back, Eckman turned off the artillery and began bringing in bombs and napalm. Amid the din, Procaccini reported that Hansen was missing but added that he believed he was dead. "Confirm it," Eckman snapped angrily. "Is he dead or alive?" After a pause, Procaccini told Eckman that Hansen had definitely been killed. "Well, if he's dead we can get him in the morning. There's no use getting anybody else killed trying to recover him now."

In the morning, Lieutenant Procaccini’s platoon secured the wrecked militia outpost, recovering Lyle Hansen’s body from the ruins. The enemy had turned the place into a fort laced with spider holes and bunkers covered with palm logs and thick mud. It became apparent that the battle for Cholon was over when civilians began reappearing in adjacent villages. The VC’s second attempt to take Saigon had failed. When morning came on May 14, the surviving VC had fled into the surrounding countryside. In their wake were smoldering ruins and the putrid smell of the dead they left behind, including many civilians.1 In eight days of fighting, 876 enemy soldiers had paid for Ho Chi Minh's miscalculation with their lives, as did 43 Americans. For at least one company, the price was staggering. When Captain John DeVore took command of B Company on the afternoon of May 16, less than a full-strength platoon remained.2 For its part in the battle, the 6th Battalion 31st Infantry earned its first Valorous Unit Award and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm. Sixteen Bearcats had earned medals for valor in the battalion’s first major battle.

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1 Picture of Xom Cau Mot after the battle courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).
2 Phil Eckman, DeVore’s predecessor, was promoted to major and became S-3 of the 3-60th Infantry.
Valorous Unit Award

Presented to:

- HHC 3d Brigade 9th Infantry Division
- 6th Battalion 31st Infantry
- 3d Battalion 39th Infantry
- 2d Battalion 47th Infantry
- 5th Battalion 60th Infantry
- 2d Battalion 4th Field Artillery
- D Troop 3d Squadron 5th Cavalry

The 3d Brigade 9th Infantry Division and its assigned and attached units distinguished themselves by extraordinary heroism while engaged in military operations during the period 6 to 12 May 1968, in and around the city of Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. Sensing an attempt to invade Saigon was quite near, unit personnel established defensive positions along the south side of the Kinh Doi Canal, a main waterway entering the capital. At 0345 hours, 7 May 1968, the men of the brigade were subjected to a massive assault launched by elements of a multi-battalion size enemy force operating in the area. Heavy and bitter fighting continued throughout the day, but by dusk the courageous infantrymen had succeeded in driving off their determined adversary. Again the following morning and repeatedly over the ensuing five days, the enemy made fierce assaults on Saigon in an attempt to take control of the South Vietnamese capital city, but each time brigade members gallantly repulsed the foe. The men of the 3d Brigade 9th Infantry Division displayed extraordinary...
After Tet, the battalion was sent to guard the Nha Be Shell Tank farm where it replaced its losses. Bill McMullen recalls: “We ran small sweeps and had some eagle flights out of Nha Be for a while but there was not much action. Nha Be was really nice. The tankers would come in and unload their load of fuel in the tank farm. While the tankers were in, some of us would get acquainted with the men on the tankers and get invited aboard for a hot shower and an occasional good meal. We also had Boston Whalers with 85 HP motors on them. I took a sampan apart and used the boards to make a pair of skis. I used inner tubes to make a place for my feet. And there I was, water skiing on the Saigon River behind a Boston Whaler.”

In late May and throughout June the Bearcats moved constantly, operating south of Saigon in Gia Dinh and Long An Provinces in search of the remnants of VC units that had escaped from the fighting around Cholon. On June 11, the battalion was detached to II Field Force, operating out of Firebase Smoke again. On June 23, B Company moved west to guard the Binh Dien Bridge on National Route 4. The next morning, the rest of the battalion joined Vietnamese Regional Force units in search operations near Tan An, Long An Province’s capital.

On June 28, C Company engaged an entrenched enemy force southwest of Tan An. The ensuing battle resulted in losses to all three of C Company’s rifle platoons. Struggling across a broad, muddy wash, Lieutenant Ron Belloli and his Vietnamese Tiger Scout, Nguyen Van Phi, were tracking footprints and had gotten a short distance ahead of the rest of the company when the shooting began. Belloli’s helmet was shot off and Phi and Specialist John H. Baker (21) were killed in the opening exchange. Specialist John Jablonski, one of the C Company’s bravest soldiers, killed the VC who shot Baker. As the other platoons maneuvered forward to assist, more men were hit. Specialist Kenneth Seidel (20), a new replacement, was killed instantly and Lieutenant Bill Gale and Specialists Harold Frailey and Larry Hathaway each earned their second Purple Heart in as many months. Hit in the neck, Specialist Michael Lutz was having a hard time breathing and looked like he would die, but to the disbelief of all, he pulled through.

1 Picture of Nha Be tank farm courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).
2 B Company remained at the Binh Dien Bridge.
3 SFC Robert Bellemare (1st Plt), SP4 Michael Lutz (1st Plt), PFC Harold C Frailey (1st Plt), 2LT Charles W. Gale (3d Plt), SGT William Theisfeldt-Collazo (3d Plt), and SP4 Lawrence F. Hathaway (3d Plt) were wounded and PFC John H. Baker and Tiger Scout Nguyen Van Phi, both of 2d Plt, were killed. Gale and Hathaway earned their second Purple Hearts in as many months.
Lieutenant Kerry May froze after seeing his platoon sergeant and two others cut down. He was promptly replaced by C Company’s Executive Officer, Lieutenant David Wilson, who maneuvered the 1st Platoon forward under heavy fire. Ron Belloli recalls: “After my guys got up to me and I was able to clear my weapon and find my helmet, I needed a camouflage band because the bullet that took my helmet off cut the band. I picked up Phi's helmet and took his band. The liner of his helmet was loose and when it separated there was a bullet between the liner and the steel pot. Later in the firefight, Specialist Hathaway, who had a severe head wound, was being treated by medics. I overheard them trying to determine if the bullet that hit Hathaway was in his brain since there was an entry hole in the helmet but no exit hole. I walked over, picked up his helmet, pulled out the liner (due to my earlier experience with Phi's helmet). The bullet was lodged between the liner and pot. I showed the bullet to the medics and left. When I got back to our base camp, the bullets I had pulled from their helmets were still in my pocket.”

For years after leaving the Army, Ron Belloli kept the bullets in an ammunition can in his basement, reminders of two brave soldiers. After seeing Larry Hathaway’s entry on the 31st Infantry Regiment Association’s web site, Belloli contacted friends, including Bill Owen, and asked for advice. He was hesitant to reopen memories that might be painful to Hathaway. The unanimous advice was “Call him!” When Belloli contacted Hathaway and told him the story, they quickly found a bond between old soldiers that transcends rank, time, and distance. Learning that they both live in Michigan, they arranged a reunion at which Belloli passed the bullet back to its “owner.”

In July the “Bearcats” patrolled the rice paddies and villages lining QL 4 between the Binh Dien and Ben Luc Bridges. On July 8, a mortar attack wounded 14 members of the battalion near the Binh Dien Bridge. During most of July, C Company remained at Nha Be. South of Nha Be was the Rung Sat Special Zone, where the VC and their Viet Minh predecessors had operated with impunity since the war against France. Keeping the VC from coming out of the watery Rung Sat at night to shell Nha Be was C Company’s nearly impossible mission. On July 9, four rounds of 75mm recoilless rifle fire hit the fuel tank complex, setting one of the huge oil tanks ablaze, but there were no casualties and no other damage. On July 18, four 122mm rockets hit the base, but again there were no casualties.
Operations along the many winding rivers south of Saigon were conducted aboard ships of the Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force. Vietnamese Marines, transported by the Vietnamese Navy’s River Assault Group (RAG) often participated. Like other battalions of the 9th Division that had been operating in and around the Rung Sat for over a year, C Company occasionally enjoyed Navy food and clean sheets aboard the boats, but there was also a less pleasant side to life with the "River Rats". Immersion foot, mysterious jungle fevers, booby traps, and leeches were constant companions in the watery jungle. Compounding the men’s misery, the VC conducted frequent hit and run ambushes against noisy American and South Vietnamese patrol boats that had to move slowly through the labyrinth of narrow jungle streams feeding the main rivers.

East Can Giuoc District—August 1968

August 7 and 8, 1968 were among the bloodiest days of the war for the Bearcats. C Company’s highly respected commander, Captain Bill Owen, had just departed for a new assignment as the Battalion Intelligence Officer (S-2) the week before. His successor, Captain Ralph Howard, took the company on a reconnaissance in force operation into a watery area northeast of Can Giuoc. As the company entered the horseshoe bend of a stream densely lined with Nipa palm, trouble came quickly. The stream was the perimeter of a VC battalion base camp. Men in the lead element immediately sensed trouble, seeing numerous wet footprints and human excrement on paddy dikes. PFC Terry McFadon, a mortarman with the weapons platoon, remembers a sudden, mind-jarring crescendo of noise as the firefight broke out. McFadon and his fellow mortarmen jumped into a bomb crater about 20 yards from the tree line as nearby riflemen surged forward. The situation was confused at best with initial contact occurring simultaneously at two locations about 500 meters apart. The 1st Platoon established a hasty blocking position along a paddy dike while the 2nd and 3rd became heavily engaged in what came to be called the

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4 Picture of riverine operation courtesy of SP4 John Millaire, 9th Inf Div PIO.
football field. Men dropped everywhere as they encountered well-concealed bunkers and “spider holes” along the stream. Bill Singleton was among the first men hit, but lived to tell of it. Many others did not. Medics dragged the wounded back to the safety of bomb craters and paddy dikes, administered first aid, and crawled back to retrieve others.

A Company was inserted into a blocking position to the east and three companies of the 3-39th Infantry were brought in to complete the cordon. Lieutenant Colonel Jack Logan, who had just replaced Joe Schmalhorst as the Bearcats’ Battalion Commander, was on the ground throughout the first day and night. He and Captain Howard later received the Silver Star for bravery during the action, but members of C Company regarded the officers’ awards as undeserved “face-savers”. Artillery fire was brought in to try to drive the VC out, but 105mm howitzers had practically no effect on the thick earthen bunkers lining the stream. A psychological operations aircraft broadcast Chieu Hoi (“rally to the government”) messages to the VC and gave them a 15-minute ceasefire to come out in safety. When there was no response, the artillery resumed firing, to almost no effect. Finally, when CS gas was used, the enemy came pouring out, but not to surrender. They fired blindly as they emerged to escape the eye-stinging, nostril-burning tear gas. About 50 were cut down. For the next day and a half, the battle raged across an increasingly pulverized plot of ground. By the time the fight was over, US casualties, including those of the 3-39th Infantry, totaled 13 dead and 27 wounded. The majority were members of the Bearcats’ C Company.

Specialist Bill McMullen recalls the events that followed: “We set up a night defensive perimeter and waited till morning to find out what would happen next. This was really hard, knowing what had already happened. We were all just wishing the enemy would steal away in the night. On the morning of August 8, we started to advance through the nipa palm. This stuff was really thick and you couldn’t see more than 10 feet ahead of us. We had to clear each bunker as we came to it. Several men were wounded, and others were killed as we went through this process. One of those killed was a man from my squad, Private Paul Savacool (20). He just wandered too far out in front on our right flank and was picked off. I remember shoving my pistol in the hole where the fire came from and emptying a magazine in the bunker. I was hurt and angry that we were doing this clearing, bunker to bunker when we should have backed up about a kilometer and called in heavier firepower. These were really thick bunkers and clearing each one, one at a time, was a total waste of men who were my friends.”

Around noon the company emerged from the nipa palm into a wide, muddy paddy offering no cover. Captain Howard ordered Lieutenant Ron Belloli to get his men to the other side to search the next tree line. Belloli stood up and said, “Let’s go”. Ron remembers that as the proudest moment he can remember. Slogging through the mud was hard and slow. Bill McMullen recalls, “The next thing I remember was Don Swears on my right, just a little ahead of me. I heard gunfire and saw Don get hit. I thought he was killed. He spun around facing me and the look on his face was the same expression the actors had during the death scene in the movie Bonnie and Clyde. I killed the Viet Cong that shot Don and kept going. I don’t know how long I

5 SP4 James E Turner of A Company was killed, as were the following members of C Company: PFC William E McDavid (1st Plt), SP4 John A Jablonski (2d Plt), SP4 Leslie Tegtmeier (2d Plt), PFC Paul R Savacool, Jr (2d Plt), SGT William Theisfeldt (3d Plt), SP4 Timothy Hannigan (3d Plt), SP4 Ben Stephens (3d Plt), PFC Allen J Pretnar (3d Plt), PFC Herbert E Ilsenfritz, Jr. (Wpns Plt), and PFC Zachary P New (Wpns Plt). Among the wounded were the following members of C Company: SP4 Joseph W DeAngelis (1st Plt), SP4 James R Snowden (1st Plt), 2LT Ronald R Belloli (2d Plt), PFC Bill E Singleton (2d Plt), PFC Donald J Swears (2d Plt), PFC Curtis Whited (2d Plt), SSG Dennis Meyer (3d Plt), SP4 Louis T Dominguez (Wpns Plt), and PFC Willie Fields, Jr (Wpns Plt). PFC Fields subsequently died of his wounds.
kept going. My mind has drawn a blank as far as time goes. I just know that a while later, I was sitting on top of a bunker, facing the hole, with my M-16 under my left arm, a grenade in my left hand, and pulling the pin with my right. An AK-47 stuck out of the hole and aimed straight for my head. I dropped the grenade and rolled off the bunker into the water. I swam back 60 yards or so and got out of the water shaking like a leaf. I’ve never been so scared in my entire life. The guy in the bunker got off one shot. The shot went through every layer of the rolled up sleeve of my shirt but never even scratched me. When I got back with my platoon, I found out that Don had been evacuated and was going to be fine. I also found out that Dennis Meyer was wounded and would be fine. My friends Leslie Tegtmeier, John Jablonski, and replacements Herbert Ilgenfritz, Zachary New, and Allan Pretnar had all been killed.”

One of those killed, Specialist John A. Jablonski, a well-liked college man in the 2nd Platoon, earned the Distinguished Service Cross. Sadly, his award, like all others in the battalion before him, was posthumous. An extract reads: “Specialist Jablonski distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on 8 August 1968 during a reconnaissance in force mission near Can Giuoc. His Company came under intensive fire and was pinned down by a company of Viet Cong in well-fortified positions. Observing that his platoon’s point man, Specialist Leslie Tegtmeier, had been wounded, Specialist Jablonski ran through the enemy fusillade to provide covering fire for a medic who was trying to reach the injured soldier. Discovering that the man had been fatally wounded, Specialist Jablonski assaulted a bunker and destroyed it with a hand grenade. Returning to the platoon with the body of his fallen comrade, Specialist Jablonski voluntarily assumed the point position. Remaining calm and alert, he detected four more Viet Cong bunkers and before the enemy had time to react, his platoon engaged and destroyed the emplacements. After serving in the precarious position for two hours, Specialist Jablonski was ordered to the rear by his platoon leader. Ten minutes later, his platoon again came under intense enemy fire, sustaining two more casualties. Without hesitation, Specialist Jablonski rushed through the enemy fire and destroyed a second Viet Cong bunker. Maneuvering to one of the casualties, he carried the wounded man to safety through a hail of fire. Returning immediately to the front, he provided covering fire for other members of his platoon who were maneuvering to destroy the remaining bunkers. As his element moved forward, Specialist Jablonski again assumed the point position. A short time later, he spotted two Viet Cong trying to escape. He ran forward to engage the fleeing enemy, firing his weapon and throwing hand grenades as he moved. He had killed one of the Viet Cong when fire from an unseen bunker mortally wounded him. His dedication and indomitable spirit prevented many casualties and served as an inspiration to the men of his company.”

As Lieutenant Belloli and Specialists Mike Butler and Louis Dominguez came abreast of where Swears and McMullen were pinned down, Dominguez was...

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shot and sprawled in the mud. Mike Butler and Lieutenant Bill Gale from the 3rd Platoon later got Dominguez and several others out on a chopper. The bodies of John Jablonski (25) and Leslie Tegtmeier (24), killed far out in front of the others, could not be reached. Belatedly, Captain Howard decided to call in artillery. Disgusted at Howard’s indifference to his men, Belloli shouted angrily, “No way! Not with our guys laying out there.”

Sergeant Joe DeAngelis was still lying in the open, badly wounded. The VC put another round in him every time he moved. Furious at what was happening, Specialist Larry D. Nelson (21) went out and rescued him. An extract of his Distinguished Service Cross citation reads: “While his platoon was receiving fire from a Viet Cong bunker system, Specialist Nelson spotted an approaching enemy soldier armed with a grenade. With complete disregard for his safety, he charged the advancing foe and wrested the grenade from him. Specialist Nelson retrieved the deadly explosive and threw it away from the platoon so that it detonated harmlessly. As a squad began to assault the bunkers, one of the men fell seriously wounded. Specialist Nelson unhesitatingly crawled through the intense hostile fire to the injured man (Sergeant DeAngelis) and returned him to safety. While his platoon continued its effort to destroy the fortified enemy bunker complex, he began to move toward a bunker, which was the source of heavy fire. Exposing himself to a hail of bullets, he stood to hurl a grenade into the emplacement and was mortally wounded.” Joe DeAngelis was evacuated to the 3rd Field Hospital at Tan Son Nhut. He woke up the next morning to find Larry Nelson in the bed next to his. DeAngelis thanked him profusely for saving his life but Nelson’s time was almost up. He died of his wounds nine days later.

On the morning of August 9, the two battalions picked up their equipment and their dead and moved to a pickup zone for extraction to their respective base camps at Nha Be and Rach Kien. Specialist Jeffery Overton from C Company’s 3d Platoon made an 8mm movie of his company’s somber withdrawal, with the survivors carrying the dead out. Bill McMullen recalls: “Of our 35-man platoon from Nha Be, only a squad was left. We did a few ambush missions over the next month, but there was no one around that I felt that I could trust to back me up. Everybody was suddenly gone.”

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7 General Order 5003, Headquarters US Army, Vietnam, 29 October 1968
Dong Tam and Cai Lay—September-November 1968

When action around Saigon finally slackened, the Bearcats moved to Dong Tam Base (above) in Dinh Thuong Province on September 11, 1968. Dong Tam had been built for the 9th Division’s 2nd Brigade in 1967 on 600 Acres of land dredged from the adjacent My Tho River. It became the 9th Division’s main operating base when Bearcat Base was turned over to the Royal Thai Army’s Cobra Division.

There was no significant contact with the enemy until September 25, when A Company encountered the enemy in western Kien Hoa Province. Soon after landing, A Company began taking fire from an enemy force of undetermined strength as it searched a nipa palm-line streamline. Specialist David T. Seaton (19) was shot through the neck and died instantly. Sergeant Ronald L. Summers (21) and four others were wounded in the ensuing firefight. Sergeant Summers died of his wounds on October 8.

Reacting to intelligence that a VC battalion base camp was located near the village of My Phouc Tay in adjacent Kien Tuong Province, Lieutenant Colonel Logan planned for B and D Companies to conduct a series of platoon-size airmobile assaults on the morning of September 26, inserting them into areas capable of concealing an enemy force. The tactic, known as “jitterbugging”, entailed landing rifle platoons near areas that looked suitable for hiding an enemy force and having them search for the enemy. If the enemy was not there, the platoon would be lifted out to its next objective. If a platoon made contact with the enemy, it would be expected to determine the enemy’s strength and hold it in place through aggressive fire and maneuver. If the enemy’s strength exceeded the platoon’s, additional units would be “piled on” to isolate the area while artillery, helicopter gunships, and tactical air power pounded the trapped enemy. The technique had its problems since helicopters could be seen and heard from a considerable distance, alerting the enemy to take cover and prepare for action. Further, since all operations had to be coordinated with local Vietnamese units and district chiefs to avoid fratricide, there was always the risk that objectives would be compromised, enabling the VC to spring a trap of their own. That seems to have happened to D Company’s 3rd Platoon that day.
While platoons from B and D Companies were being lifted into the area by helicopter, A and C Companies were to move by truck to Fire Base Moore at Cai Lay, constituting a quick reaction force if B and D Company elements found trouble. That part of the plan was delayed for over an hour when the trucks were held up at Dong Tam’s gate. The road to Cai Lay had not been cleared that morning and the VC routinely mined it. A second hitch in the plan arose when the helicopters intended for B and D Companies appeared in two groups of four, rather than the accustomed three flights of five each. Given the thin air density, each helicopter could safely carry only six fully loaded combat troops, causing each rifle platoon to leave some men on the ground to await a second lift. That did not bode well for extractions from the field. While it was acceptable to leave twelve men waiting for a second lift near a secure fire base, it was unacceptable to leave so few on contested ground to await extraction.

B Company was the first to go in. Its initial lift landed just after 8 AM on September 26. It found signs of the enemy but initially made no contact. Two men were wounded while attempting to blow up a squad-size enemy bunker. Around 11 AM, the first lift of D Company’s 3rd Platoon took fire from a distant woodline as it landed between two widely-separated canals. The platoon, led by Lieutenant Carl Woody, promptly began moving into a line formation, facing north, to develop the situation by fire and maneuver. Before the line could form, the VC sprang a U-shaped ambush, hitting the platoon from both flanks and the front. Eight men were hit in the opening volley. On the left flank, closest to the enemy, Sergeant Fred Borczynski (left) yelled for a medic when his friend and platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Barry Trotter (right), was hit by a burst of machinegun fire. No one could help him. Trotter (21) was already dead. Seconds later, Borczynski (21) was killed while trying to reach Trotter. Both men were within a few days of the end of their tours in Vietnam. Sergeant Darwin Betzer, a replacement, remembered Trotter telling him not to worry because he would watch out for him. Just ahead, Specialist Robert V. Bollman and Sergeant Gerald H. Forgue (20) were also cut down. Bollmann (left), a
24 year-old father of four, died instantly but Forgau was still alive and was later evacuated to Dong Tam. He lingered for over a month before succumbing to his wounds on October 30. The din of battle came from nearly every direction. It was as though the VC knew where the company would land and they had waited until just the right moment to catch them in the open.

On the right flank, machinegunner Specialist Richard O. Osbourn, and his assistant gunner, PFC David Orris were hit by the same volley that killed their team leader, Sergeant James Pruett (right). Osbourn was paralyzed but would live, as would Orris. Here and there, others were also shot down, some before they had a chance to shoot back. Staff Sergeant Otis Williams, Specialist Daniel Hikkonen, and PFCs Anthony Paolini and Earnest Knight were wounded but would live. PFC Stephen Rance (18), a medic from Headquarters Company, was killed while trying to reach the wounded. Seeing his comrades lying wounded under continuing enemy fire, Sergeant Danny Hayes (left) rushed forward, firing his M-16 rifle in a wide arc, and began dragging men back behind a paddy dike where other members of the platoon had begun to reassemble. His feat was all the more remarkable because he was among the first wounded in the initial outburst of fire. Lieutenant Woody called for supporting fires and a medevac for the wounded as the second lift of his platoon landed. As Hayes (24) dragged a wounded comrade across the dike to safety, he stood erect and fired at a group of VC maneuvering toward the platoon. A burst of automatic weapons fire knocked him over backwards. For repeated selfless acts of courage that morning, Sergeant Hayes was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.1

Nearly two hours after the fight began, an air strike struck the tree line from which the initial enemy fire had come. Shortly afterward, A Company was directed land south of the main canal in hopes of flushing the enemy toward B Company. All four helicopters delivering A Company’s lead platoon were hit enroute to the objective. The initial lift was ambushed on arrival and quickly took cover behind a low paddy dike. It took more than three hours to get all of A Company into the field in lifts of four aircraft each. Arriving piecemeal against a superior enemy force precluded the company’s intended attack. Under heavy fire from the moment they landed, each arriving platoon was able to do no more than reinforce their comrades pinned along the dike. Nine men were wounded as the afternoon dragged on. With dusk approaching, A Company’s wounded were extracted and Lieutenant Colonel Logan and his Operations Officer joined the company in the field.

Soon afterward, a medevac helicopter evacuating D Company’s wounded was shot down and rolled onto its back.2 A squad from the 3rd Platoon rushed out under heavy fire to help their comrades and the helicopter’s crew to safety. B Company also made contact, reporting ten VC killed, at a cost of eight Americans wounded. One of them, Specialist John R. Klotz, died of his

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1 A memorial to Danny Hayes was erected at Dobson, Ohio in 2002. It stands near the former Windsor High School, his 1961 alma mater. The adjacent stretch of Ohio Highway 217 was renamed the Sergeant Danny C. Hayes Memorial Highway.

2 Picture of helicopter downed Sep 26, 1968 from 6-31st Infantry website (Polar Bear Forum).
wounds two days later. After D Company’s wounded were evacuated to the 3rd Surgical Hospital at Dong Tam, the “dust off” returned to evacuate the 3rd Platoon’s dead but a flight of Cobra gunships firing over the platoon prevented the evacuation. The dead would have to remain in place until morning. During the night, two more helicopters were shot down. A Cobra gunship crashed and the battalion’s command and control ship was forced down behind D Company after sustaining disabling damage. Sporadic outbursts of automatic weapons fire continued throughout the night but the enemy was probably just as exhausted as the Bearcats and did not press the attack. An AC-47 “Spooky” gunship kept the battlefield illuminated and helped keep the VC pinned down.

The following morning, the 1-16th Infantry “Rangers” landed just after daybreak. B and D Company elements still in place were attached to the 1-16th as A Company was lifted out to Fire Base Moore. The “Rangers” got into a firefight soon after landing and sustained two wounded near where A Company had been. The remainder of B Company was lifted into the battle area around 2 PM and suffered three more wounded. D Company’s dead were still in the field. They and B Company’s most recent casualties were not extracted until almost midnight. Sometime during the early morning of September 28, the surviving enemy slipped away. No pursuit was attempted. In two days, the fight had cost the Bearcats seven dead and twenty-six wounded. It was one of the battalion’s roughest fights but worse would follow in the months ahead.

On October 1, the Bearcats moved back to My Phuoc Tay in search of the VC base camp. Two days later, a forward air controller was fired on by a group of about 15 VC while directing an air strike against a line of camouflaged sampans along the Muoi Hai Canal. When D Troop 3-5th Cavalry was called in to assist, one of its aerial rockets set off a large secondary explosion. Not far away, A Company found five sampans loaded with mines and grenades. Believing the area contained a large weapons cache, the 3rd Brigade’s Commander, Colonel John Hemphill, moved A Company into a blocking position south of the objective while he brought in 1-16th Infantry to sweep the area. They found 2940 rocket-propelled grenades, 11 Chinese hand grenades, 86 mines, 50 lbs of rice, and two boxes of spare parts for Briggs and Stratton engines the Vietnamese used to power sampans.

The next morning, 1-16th Infantry was inserted into a hot landing zone (LZ), losing two helicopters to heavy automatic weapons fire. The enemy was dug in along a tree line bordering a canal and dealt the 1-16th a severe blow as it landed in the open. Air strikes, attack helicopters, and artillery were called in as the 3rd Brigade brought in six additional companies to seal the area north of the canal. A battalion of the ARVN 7th Division moved into blocking positions south of the canal and near nightfall the 6-31st Infantry landed north of the canal. At daybreak on October 5, both US battalions searched the battered tree line, finding 33 dead VC and numerous blood trails leading to the canal. The VC left 89 AK-47 assault rifles, 12 RPD light machineguns, two 82mm mortars, 62 rocket propelled grenade launchers, two .51 caliber anti-aircraft machineguns, 58 Russian gas masks, 91 sets of web gear, and assorted medical supplies. The number of bodies and weapons abandoned indicated much heavier losses since the VC rarely left anything behind.

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3 1-16th Infantry had been traded by the 1st Infantry Division for the 5-60th Infantry, a mechanized battalion, to give the 9th Infantry Division a unit more usable in the soggy Mekong Delta. Both battalions were later redesignated, restoring the 16th and 60th Infantry to the divisions with which they were historically associated.

4 Colonel Hemphill commanded I Company 31st Infantry as a First Lieutenant during the Korean War, earning the Distinguished Service Cross in 1953.
unless there were too few survivors to carry off the dead and their weapons. US casualties totaled 1 killed and 25 wounded, most of them in the 1-16th Infantry.

On October 6, B Company found another enemy cache containing 58 cases of grenades, 12 cases of TNT, and 70 rounds of 75mm recoilless rifle ammunition. Four days later, the Bearcats returned to Dong Tam for a short rest before returning to the field at Cai Be on October 13. Five days later, the battalion was again in heavy contact, killing 11 enemy and capturing 5 AK-47 assault rifles and a 75mm recoilless rifle.

On October 18, PFC Lee W. Ewing of B Company, was walking point for his platoon during a reconnaissance patrol near the hamlet of My Quoi. When B Company’s main body came under fire from a dense line of nipa palm, Ewing charged into the dense tropical growth to block the enemy’s most likely escape route. Almost immediately after getting into position, Ewing spotted two sampans coming his way. When the sampans were so close their crews had no time to react, Ewing opened fire, killing all eight VC aboard the vessels. For his daring, he was awarded the Bronze Star for Valor.

After months of constantly walking and sleeping in watery terrain, immersion foot began to take a toll. The Mekong Delta, particularly where it meets the Plain of Reeds, is a vast, muddy wetland laced with leech-infested streams and canals. Snakes ranging from 20-foot boas to deadly cobras, vipers, and kraits abound there. A week in the area is enough to bring on immersion foot and a fungal infection that looks like ring worm, but is harder to cure. Some veterans remain plagued with it more than 35 years later. After two weeks in the field, the Bearcats were ready for the comforts of a base camp with showers, bunks, warm meals, and cold beer.

On November 10, the battalion moved to Fire Base Moore, a desolate road junction where Provincial Route 29 crosses QL4 near Cai Lay. The junction's significance is that it links Moc Hoa, a provincial
capital near the Cambodian border, with QL4, the "national rice road". If the VC took Cai Lay, they would sever Saigon's primary food supply, isolate Moc Hoa, and gain control of a vast stretch of land jutting into the Delta between Saigon and the Mekong River. Of all battalion base camps in the 9th Division's area of operations, Fire Base Moore was the most dangerous. Rocket and mortar attacks were frequent, and the enemy never ceased trying to isolate the area, booby-trapping anyplace Americans might appear.

The Bearcats gained a reputation for stubborn determination at Cai Lay. They routinely sent out airmobile "eagle flights" of platoon size to make contact with the VC. Whenever the enemy took the bait, he paid. When a contact was made, the battalion would pile on several companies, along with supporting artillery, helicopter gunships, and Navy and Air Force tactical air support. The tactic, although risky, kept the VC and their North Vietnamese reinforcements off balance around Cai Lay and kept QL4 and LTL 29 open. During one such operation on November 23, 51 enemy were killed and numerous weapons and munitions were captured without a single loss to the Bearcats.
On Friday, January 10, 1969, all four rifle companies of the 6-31st were sent to the Cai Nua area of Kien Thuong Province. Their mission was to find an enemy base camp reported by intelligence to be the source of intensifying enemy activity along Highway 4. While all four companies would see action in the campaign, dubbed BEARCAT I, the 1st and 2nd Platoons of D Company would bear the brunt of the action. The 9th Infantry Division’s accustomed mode of operation in response to intelligence was for a company to patrol the area until it came into contact with the enemy. If the enemy force was larger than a platoon, artillery, helicopter gunships, and air power would be brought in to pin the enemy down while more companies deployed by helicopter or river boat to try to prevent the enemy’s escape. The Viet Cong’s usual reaction was to fight it out by day and slip away along a canal or river at night, staying just below the waterline as they passed American outposts.

D Company’s 3rd Platoon was attached to a mechanized battalion near Saigon, leaving the company short-handed. With Captain Gary Corbitt on emergency leave, Lieutenant Jeffrey Nelson was in command. Short a platoon, Nelson formed three mini-platoons of 2 squads and a command element each. The ad hoc reconfiguration included the 1st Platoon, less one squad, with 27 men; the 2nd Platoon, less one squad, with 25 men; and D Company’s Headquarters with an understrength squad each from the 1st and 2nd Platoons, totaling 17 men. Because the 2nd Platoon had no medic, Specialist Brian Swanhart, the 1st Platoon’s medic, insisted that every man in the other two elements carry an extra battle dressing. They would need it.

A and B Companies made contact with the enemy soon after reaching the area. Both spotted and engaged small groups of VC. A Company’s 1st Platoon detained two men near Highway 4 who appeared to be a VC reconnaissance team. The two sides were aware of each others’ presence but it was the Americans who were most visible. While Americans patrolled, the VC stayed hidden along nipa-line streams and canals and used civilians to warn them of approaching patrols. They were rarely found unless they wanted to be but signs of their presence were harder to conceal. Hastily abandoned sites littered with items of food, cooking utensils, and occasionally clothing, bore silent witness to a lurking enemy presence. Men who had fought the VC before recognized other signs as they patrolled deserted roads and waterways. Civilians were not going about their normal routines. There were no farmers in the fields, no fishermen on the rivers and canals, and no market traffic.
Early on January 11, sampans loaded with civilians began departing the area, a sure sign that something bad was about to happen. Around noon, an element of A Company engaged six VC but without results. The exodus of civilians continued throughout the day, leaving the area eerily quiet. The 2nd Platoon warily reconnoitered nipa palm-lined canals and streams lacing the area, expecting trouble. Among its members was 21 year-old Specialist James P. Barrios (left), a member of the Tachi Yokut Indian Tribe from Lemoore, California. He had arrived in Vietnam six months earlier as one of D Company’s early replacements but was now one of the “old hands”, a natural at the gritty business of soldiering. With an M-60 machinegun suspended across his middle on a long sling and a distinctive belt of ammunition slung around his neck, he seemed to belong there. Barrios was unconsciously part of a timeless and unspoken brotherhood that becomes an unofficial chain of command when the shooting starts—a man others instinctively rally to in a fight. Neither he nor his buddies suspected he would play that role to the extreme in just a few hours.

D Company reported its night positions to battalion headquarters as darkness approached. With about 20 more minutes of twilight remaining, the company could easily have been observed moving into its night positions. Soon afterward, Lieutenant Daniel L. Webber (1st Platoon Leader) Staff Sergeant Herschel Jones (1st Platoon Sergeant), PFC Gary W. Spears (Radio Operator), and Nguyen Van Hai (Tiger Scout) went out on a short reconnaissance. They had not gone far when they spotted three armed men clad in black moving toward them. In the ensuing firefight, two of the VC were killed, one of whom was an officer. Hai, a former VC himself, knew the man and warned that they were up against the 261st VC Main Force Battalion. Pleased with the results of the skirmish, Webber dismissed Hai’s warning.

Hai was worried. The 261st was well-equipped, disciplined, and had a reputation for tenacity. On his return to the night laager, Hai informed Sergeant James MacMaster of his concern, urging that the platoon move quickly to another position. Knowing Hai was not easily spooked, MacMaster discussed the situation with Lieutenant Webber. They had surely been spotted moving into their positions. Webber worried that moving would attract more attention and risk an ambush or possible fratricide with another D Company element since darkness was setting in. He instead placed the platoon on 50% alert, meaning one man in each position would remain awake at all times. MacMaster feared the lieutenant was making a bad call. Webber was still green, commissioned through ROTC from the University of Montana the summer before. After post-commission schooling and leave, he joined D Company in early December and had seen no action until the skirmish a few minutes earlier.

The 1st Platoon formed an arc-shaped perimeter around a village abandoned earlier that day. Behind it was a deep canal, the Kinh Hai Moui Tam. No one dug in, some men left their positions to relieve themselves, probably all wore mosquito repellent, and more than a few smoked. Poor light and noise discipline opened the door to disaster. In the dark, a lit cigarette can be seen from 75 yards or more and the distinctive smells of cigarette smoke and insect repellent drift revealingly on the wind. No leaders checked the line, a sure recipe for trouble. Moving in the shadows, the VC completed their approach undetected. Before attacking, they

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5 6-31st Inf Daily Log 11 Jan 69, Item 6: “A56 (1st Plt) element engaged 6 VC moving SE about 300 m, they were moving to tree line SW coord 095463, neg results.”
6 Picture of James P Barrios taken a few days before the action at Cai Nua courtesy of Ray Heltzel (D Company).
7 6-31st Inf Daily Log 11 Jan 69, Item 8: 1920 hrs. D Co night locations: 56 (1st Plt) – XS088473; 66 (Co HQ) – XS082468; 36 (2nd Plt) XS093460
8 6-31st Inf Daily Log 11 Jan 69, Item 9 2000 hours: D Co engaged two VC coord. XS088473, resulted in 2 VC KIA
probably watched, sniffed, and listened for awhile, identifying American positions almost as clearly as in daylight.

Around 2 AM, Specialist Brian Swanhart awoke to the sound of an ear-shattering explosion, followed by the steady chatter of AK-47s spewing green tracers overhead. Men were already calling for help and at least one was already dead, killed in the attack’s opening moments. He was Private Edwin F. Tubbs (19), who had joined the company only a few days before. One after another, more men were hit by automatic weapons and RPG fire. Patterns of red (US) and green (VC) tracers criss-crossed the area, providing a picture of what was happening. The scene looked bad from every angle.

Sergeant Jim MacMaster, the squad leader responsible for the left side of the perimeter, recognized immediately that his platoon was in trouble. Explosions and automatic weapons fire could also be heard erupting to the southeast from the 2nd Platoon’s direction. MacMaster reasoned that they were probably up against part of the battalion Hai had reported earlier. Although wounded in the left knee when the shooting began, MacMaster crawled across a ditch to check his side of the perimeter.

At the center of the platoon arc, Lieutenant Webber and Staff Sergeant Jones were in a house conferring with Sergeant John B. Rolle, the right flank squad leader, when the attack began. There they could look at a map, illuminated by a red-lensed flashlight, and talk softly without exposing their position, but the house was not as safe as they thought. All three were hit soon after the attack began. Rolle was hit in several places and would soon die, Jones was bleeding profusely and would ultimately lose his leg, and Webber, although injured only in the forearm, was dazed and became unable to function. On radio watch at the left end of MacMaster’s squad when the attack began, PFC Lawton A. Keener (20, right), was shot in the chest around the same time and died soon afterward.

A second radio operator, PFC Gary Spears, was asleep when the shooting began but kept his head amid the chaos and went to find his radio, which Keener had borrowed. Spears found his radio badly damaged, and inoperable. An exploding RPG peppered his back with shrapnel as he kneeled over the useless radio in a vain attempt to make it work. Hurt and unsure of what to do, Spears crawled down a ditch and by coincidence found Sergeant MacMaster, who told him to see if there was still a functioning radio at the platoon command post. Spears crawled off, dutifully and painfully complying with MacMaster’s instructions. At the CP, Spears encountered the company’s senior medic, Brian Swanhart, who directed him to apply a tourniquet to Sergeant Rolle’s leg. Swanhart too had been hit but, oblivious to his own injuries, was busily trying to prevent Staff Sergeant Jones from bleeding to death. The radio Spears was sent to find could receive but lacked sufficient power to transmit with a short antenna, so Spears crawled back to his own radio to get a whip antenna.

To the south, things also went badly for the 2nd Platoon. Earlier, as darkness descended on January 11, the platoon had been running late getting to its assigned position. Because there was a large swamp between the platoon and its objective, Lieutenant Peter Barrett, the platoon leader, arrayed his men facing east and south along the nearest dry ground available—a wide paddy dike. He divided the platoon into three segments. The four-man center segment, led by Specialist Al Vargas, was a connector between two larger elements. Seven men on the north were led by Sergeant James Ward and nine men on the south were led by Lieutenant Barrett. Barrett was unsure of where the 1st Platoon or Company Headquarters were but assumed both were probably a mile or two from his platoon.
Around 2:30 AM, green tracers from a pair of AK-47s began snapping over the heads of men in the northern and center positions. A third AK-47 was firing northward, possibly at the 1st Platoon. Sergeant Steed alerted those near him that two VC were coming across the paddy. Specialist “Tak” Yabiku (left) and Lieutenant Barrett fired (Barrett’s rifle jammed after firing only one round) but too little, too late. An RPG exploded in front of Yabiku (22), killing him and wounding Barrett. Hurt but still functioning, Barrett threw two grenades and ordered Specialist Jose DeLaCampa to fire the Claymores but there was no longer anything at the end of the electrical mine’s firing wire. The VC had probably crept in and taken it before the fight began. DeLaCampa threw another grenade while Barrett fired a hand-held flare, illuminating a pair of VC with an RPG. DeLaCampa and Barrios saw more VC in front of them.

Barrett called for illumination from the battalion heavy mortar platoon to give his men clearer targets. To his chagrin, the response illuminated the place his platoon was supposed to be, not where it was. Meanwhile, Specialist Barrios’ steadily chattering machine gun was keeping the enemy from getting across the paddy but it drew too much attention for Barrios to safely remain in one place. A second RPG landed short and did no damage but Barrios ignored it and continued firing. He was joined by Specialist Calvin Robinson (20), both men covering the platoon’s consolidation to protect the wounded. While Lieutenant Barrett was calling for a second illumination round, a bullet struck Sergeant Steed’s helmet, knocking it off his head and dazing him. PFC Ronald Ayers’ and Specialist Douglas Green’s weapons both jammed just when the action was hottest. Specialists Vargas and DeLaCampa fired M79 grenade launchers as fast as they could load but identifying targets was tougher. As the second illumination round popped overhead, Specialist Barrios called for more ammunition. In response, Sergeant Peter West bravely crawled out into the paddy to retrieve a belt of machinegun ammunition dropped earlier.

Lieutenant Barrett requested high explosive fire from the mortar section but it was denied. The battalion operations officer explained that mortars could not fire into a populated area. Barrett argued that the only “population” around were the VC shooting at him, but the major was unyielding. A third RPG exploded nearby, killing Specialists Barrios and Robinson and wounding Lieutenant Barrett a second time. Sergeants West and Gasco; Specialist DeLaCampa and PFC Ayers were also wounded. At this point, every man on the southern position had been hit. Because no aid man accompanied the 2nd Platoon that night, men had to do what they could for themselves and each other. Ayers and DeLaCampa, the least seriously wounded, carried Sergeant Gasco to the center position where he would have more protection. Specialists Green and Taylor covered Ayers as he approached and then followed him back to the southern position to help pull out the wounded. Gunships arrived and fired several rockets at the enemy but the results were unseen. It was odd that the battalion headquarters would call in helicopter gunships to pulverize the village from which 2nd Platoon was taking fire but it would not permit its own mortars to do so. With nearly half of his platoon dead or wounded, Lieutenant Barrett informed Lieutenant Nelson that he was withdrawing to safer ground to get the wounded evacuated.9 Sergeants Gasco and West, the most seriously wounded, were evacuated about an hour after they were wounded.10 The bodies of Yabiku, Barrios, and Robinson were evacuated.

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9 6-31st Inf Daily Log 12 Jan 69, Item 4: 0310 hrs: D66 element (2nd Plt) is breaking contact, D-56 element (1st Plt) still in contact.
10 6-31st Inf Daily Log 12 Jan 69, Item 5, 0345 hours: Dustoff for D Co 66 element has 2 urgent (US).
around daybreak. For their actions that night, Barrios and Robinson were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. PFC Ayers received the Silver Star. Lieutenant Barrett and Specialists Taylor, Green and DeLaCampa were awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. Sergeant Steed won an Army Commendation Medal for Valor. All earned Purple Hearts.

For the 1st Platoon, withdrawal was infeasible. There were still VC in front of them and a deep canal behind them. For these men, the night’s ordeal continued. Brian Swanhart recalls: “I was convinced we were going to be wiped out. The VC almost broke our perimeter twice and I was spending as much time as a rifleman as a medic. I worried that I would run out of ammo although I started with nine magazines (180 rounds). This was the only time I ever fired my rifle in a firefight. The real heroes of this engagement were Sergeant James MacMaster and a machinegunner, whose name I can’t remember.”

Sergeant MacMaster had become the platoon’s defacto leader. Brian Swanhart informed him that the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and several others were wounded and at least two men were dead. After rendering his report, Swanhart crawled away to help someone else. Gary Spears soon returned with a working radio, enabling MacMaster to inform Lieutenant Nelson of the situation. MacMaster recalls: “I told the XO about the platoon leader and platoon sergeant, that I had taken charge, and that we were almost overrun. Next, I asked about the possibility of assistance from the other platoons. Third, I told him we needed artillery. I don’t remember his exact response, but he felt that I was overestimating the size of the enemy force and said we would not be getting ground assistance until daylight and would get no artillery because we were too close to a village.” Spears, who was with MacMaster at the time, recalls; “It wasn’t a very good talk. It didn’t seem he was going to give us any help.”

Whatever the reality that night, neither platoon got artillery or mortar support. Since the villages were empty of civilians, the risk of collateral casualties was nil, so withholding indirect fire was senseless. No attempt was made to reinforce the 1st Platoon with Lieutenant Nelson’s element. Under the circumstances, such a move would have been foolhardy since Nelson’s element would have had to cross several hundred meters of open ground and fight its way through a VC force of undetermined size to reach the 1st Platoon. The result would likely have been an even greater loss of D Company soldiers that night.

After sliding into the canal for better cover, MacMaster was wounded again, this time by an RPG, which ripped away a hunk of his right thigh, immobilizing him. Spears was wounded again by the same blast, momentarily knocking him out. Like an angel of mercy, Brian Swanhart soon came to tend to their wounds. Later awarded the Silver Star for his actions, Swanhart was among the platoon’s saviors. Another hero that night was PFC Randy L. Whitaker, a machinegunner who seemed to be everywhere. Wherever the fighting was most intense, Whitaker would show up. Although wounded several times, Whitaker let nothing stop him. Swanhart recalls; “I couldn’t believe he actually survived, considering the enemy was doing everything possible to knock out his gun. I believe he actually silenced one or two of their machine guns while exchanging fire with them.” Like Brian Swanhart, Randy Whitaker was awarded the Silver Star for his exemplary courage in that battle.

Gary Spears and Jim MacMaster would receive only a Purple Heart. Sergeant MacMaster relates; “PFC Spears stayed with me. I’m not sure if he was as scared as I was and I think we were both glad we had someone else with us. We were so busy we didn’t have much time to be scared. I hadn’t had much of a chance to work with him, because he just joined us a couple of months before, but he did everything I asked of him. After talking to the (acting) company commander, I realized we were on our own. We attempted to contact other units—
battalion, brigade and division, and a couple of others. We finally got ‘one of the big guys’ who was in his chopper nearby. We were able to fill him in and received his promise of assistance. Soon, we heard ‘Hunter-Delta-Five-Four, this is Boomerang Three-Niner, over.' Keying off MacMaster’s directions, the initial flight of Cobra gunships brought its rockets and miniguns to bear. Flights of gunships rotated in a steady cycle, leaving the VC no option but to break contact before daylight made leaving impossible.

While the 1st Platoon was still under fire, B Company spotted and sunk a sampan trying to move out of the contact area. It may have been the same sampan spotted earlier in the evening by D Company’s 2nd Platoon. As the enemy’s fire slackened, MacMaster called for helicopters to extract the platoon’s wounded. The number he reported stunned higher headquarters. There were more men killed (6) and wounded (18) than would be left on the ground (only 3). The wounded would just have to stay in place awhile longer. Before dawn, the “Boomerangs” (191st Aviation Company) were relieved by the “Crusaders” (187th Aviation Company) to maintain continuous Cobra support for the battered 1st Platoon. With daylight approaching, the VC slipped away along the area’s waterways. The battle was over.

As the wounded were being brought into the 36th Evacuation Hospital at Dong Tam, D Company’s First Sergeant, Godfrey F. Hidalgo, stood waiting outside the emergency ward to see what had happened to his men. The tough old veteran of two wars stood ramrod straight as his men arrived. Tears streaked down his weathered face as he watched man after man being rolled into emergency surgery. The old soldier had a heart. A few days later, actor Jimmy Stewart and his wife Gloria visited those transferred to hospitals at Long Binh in preparation for the long journey to the US via a 30-day stabilization stop at an Army hospital in Japan. Stewart had flown B-24’s over Europe in World War II and had seen his share of combat and suffering. He didn’t have to take risks in another war zone to prove anything, nor did Gloria. They came because they cared.

Several days later, D Company’s action was reported in the Vietnam edition of the Stars and Stripes. It read; “January 12, elements of the 6-31st Infantry engaged in a night action. US casualties reported as light.” If 9 killed and 23 wounded out of 52 men engaged (60%) constitutes

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11 Boomerang is the radio call sign of the 191st Aviation Company, an attack helicopter unit stationed at Dong Tam.
12 6-31st Inf Daily Log 12 Jan 69, Item 6, 0345 hours: B Co spotted sampan moving down river, took under fire with M-79, sunk sampan, contents unknown at this time.
13 6-31st Inf Daily Log 12 Jan 69, Item 7, 0400 hours: D56 element has 20 casualties at this time.
14 The 1st Platoon’s dead included PFC Larry Bradley (Knoxville, TN), PFC Dennis B. Farris (Cheyenne, WY), PFC Lawton A. Keener (Highlands, NC), PFC Gabriel Zoldi (Parma Heights, OH), Sergeant John B. Rolle (Fort Myers, FL), and Private Edwin F Tubbs (Coudersport, PA). The 2nd Platoon’s dead included Specialist James P. Barrios (Lemoore, CA), Specialist Takeshi Yakubi (Los Angeles, CA), and Specialist Calvin Robinson (Johnstown, SC).
15 The author’s father-in-law, Staff Sergeant John H Robinson, Sr., was an engineer and waist gunner on a B-24 in Stewart’s squadron.
“light” casualties, what percentage would constitute “heavy” casualties? About half of the wounded were ultimately evacuated to the US to recover. Some would never be whole again, losing limbs or suffering chronic disabling pain for the rest of their lives. Over the next few weeks, the less severely wounded would return to duty, finding few men they recognized in their old platoons. Some would be wounded again in subsequent battles.
On March 24, B Company spotted a company-size NVA unit in the open near a wooded fringe of the Plain of Reeds. Battalion ordered A Company to get ready to be lifted into the contact area to establish a blocking position inside the treeline. A Company was inserted into the area around 5 PM, but had to cross a small canal to enter the treeline on the opposite bank. Just after crossing the canal, they were taken under fire by a larger enemy force inside the treeline in thick earthen bunkers. The area was a major NVA supply depot to equip units entering that part of Vietnam across the Plain of Reeds from Cambodia. While most men quickly dropped behind the sheltering bank of the canal, PFC Larry E. Bailey (20) charged forward, firing his M-79 grenade launcher once as he entered the woods. According to Sergeant Bob Grant, who was wounded in the action, Bailey never had a chance. He was thrown backwards by simultaneous bursts of enemy fire from several directions and was probably dead before he hit the ground. Soon after Bailey’s death, two other A Company men, Sergeant David S. Harris (21) and PFC Johnny Young (18), were killed. The enemy slipped away unhindered along the canal.

Near dusk on April 10, Lieutenant Harry Whitmore of B Company, took seven-man squad out of Vinh Kiem patrol base (left) to conduct a night ambush in a nearby tree line. Since they would be near their base and would occupy a well-protected site (at upper right in the picture), the squad’s small size did not cause anyone concern. The enemy had the same idea, waiting along the canal just a few hundred yard’s from Vinh Kiem’s edge. Without warning, they showered the squad with hand grenades and then unleashed a long burst of AK-47 fire. Three men, Specialists John L. Morgan, Jr. (20), Edwin H. Pumphrey (21), and Jackie L. Ratcliff (20) were cut down in quick succession. The squad’s medic, Specialist Kenneth D. Brown (21), moved from one to the other, exposing himself continuously to enemy fire to pull his comrades to a place of greater safety and administer first aid. His exertions were in vain. All three were dead. Later that night at Vinh Kiem, Brown, exhausted and dispirited, asked Lieutenant Whitmore if he could use his bunk to get some sleep. Whitmore, who would not be sleeping anyway, agreed and moved out to the perimeter. After midnight, a mortar round landed near the bunk where Brown lay, killing him instantly. Also killed by the mortar attack was Sergeant Edward V. Eiden, Jr. (21), just days before he was to finish his tour in Vietnam.
In the Mekong Delta, soldiers often died in small numbers at places no one remembers but their comrades will never forget how they died. Lesley Steven Reiter was an instant NCO, a squad leader in C Company's 1st Platoon. Staff Sergeant Steve Cox, his platoon sergeant, recalls the circumstances of his death and that of his comrades. “We were on a squad sized sweep through an area known to be heavily booby trapped, and were supposed to set up an ambush along a river bank that night. A couple of days earlier, a Chieu Hoi came into our company’s field location and said that he and another VC had set out 50 new booby traps made with American hand grenades that morning. A squad from one of the other platoons was sent out to dismantle them. I think they were on the second or third one when a VC opened up with an AK-47 and killed the Chieu Hoi and Specialist Santana S. “Mouse” Fernandez (19, left). I was ordered to send Reiter’s squad through the same area. Reiter was walking point and came to a mortar aiming stake along the path. He pulled it out of the ground. I was next in line behind him and heard him say "I don't believe it." An American grenade was strapped to the bottom of the stake. As I turned and dove away, it went off. There was at least a second or two delay before it exploded. Reiter instantly went into shock with lots of wounds. I called in the dust-off. Besides Reiter, Johnny Gibbs, who must have been at least 30 yards away, caught one big piece in his left humorous, breaking it. I had wounds mostly in my left leg, one of which was the million dollar wound.” Sergeant Lesley Steven Reiter (21) died of his wounds in a field hospital the next day, April 27, 1969.

On August 1, after being lifted into the paddies, A Company was doing a sweep back to Dong Tam from Vinh Kiem. Three officers and a radio operator from another brigade went along as observers. Captain Al Nicolini (right), one of the best company commanders in the division, warned the group to stay off the trails since they were usually booby-trapped. The group disregarded his warning and soon tripped a booby-trap. Although all were wounded, they would survive. Their evacuation to Dong Tam resulted in still another casualty when Nicolini tried to mark the landing zone with a small pencil flare he had never used before. In trying to make it work, he shot the flare into his hand. His men remember him making a joke of it, saying: “This is a helluva way to make a living.” He refused evacuation. Just another day in the boonies.

During the spring and summer of 1969, the Bearcats conducted almost daily “eagle flights” and riverine operations from Dong Tam. Because the Bearcats were the last battalion of the 9th Division to arrive in Vietnam, they were assigned the task of securing Dong Tam while the division’s 1st and 2nd Brigades "stood down" in preparation for redeployment to the United States. From August to November 1969, the 6-31st formed the nucleus of Task Force Carlson, named after the Bearcats’ battalion's commander, LTC Gerald Carlson (left). The battalion conducted constant daylight patrols, "eagle flights", and night ambush patrols around the "rocket belt" surrounding Dong Tam to keep the enemy at bay while most of the division packed up to go home.

Task Force Carlson maintained the hard fighting reputation the Bearcats had gained at Cai Lay. On October 4, they came to the aid of B/5-60th Infantry fighting an enemy battalion west of My Phuoc Tay. The Bearcats uncovered a large enemy force entrenched in bunkers, killing 138 of the enemy in two days of hard fighting. Uncharacteristically, the enemy left 160 weapons on the battlefield, along with their dead, indicating again that they had too few men
remaining to carry off their casualties and weapons. In contrast, 1 American was killed and 25 were wounded, most of them in the 5-60th Infantry. On October 18, the Bearcats encountered another enemy battalion west of Cai Lay, resulting in another 59 enemy dead over the next two days. For their aggressiveness, the Bearcats received their second Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm.

After the main body of the 9th Infantry Division departed for the United States, Dong Tam Base was to have been turned over to the RVN 7th Division. The Vietnamese refused to accept the base because it was too large to defend. Vietnamese divisions were much smaller than their American counterparts and tended to be dispersed in battalion-size garrisons among the population that fed them. Dong Tam was quickly looted by Vietnamese civilians and soldiers, leaving only the skeletons of buildings behind.

**Can Giuoc—November 1969-March 1970**

After its lonely vigil at Dong Tam, the Bearcats joined the 9th Division's 3rd Brigade in November 1969, occupying a new base camp at Can Giuoc to guard Saigon's southern approaches.\(^1\) Again, the battalion operated along Route 5, a road frequently mined and never fully under government control. Soon after moving to Can Giuoc, the Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon was dispatched to the Plain of Reeds in response to an intelligence tip. Delivered by air cushion vehicles (ACVs) of the 39th Cavalry Platoon, they discovered a cache of several tons of weapons and ammunition. Leaving a stay-behind squad nearby, the platoon moved off along a stream where they established ambush positions just after dark. They did not have to wait long. A pair of sampans appeared just after midnight. The two oarsmen stroked silently along the stream using poles to propel their boats. A lantern was held by a third man at the front of the first boat to aid navigation through the thick reeds. When the unsuspecting foe poled their shallow draft boats into the kill zone, they were met by a blizzard of 5.56mm ball and tracer, accompanied by a 7.62mm machinegun, a 40mm grenade launcher, and at least three claymore mines. When the ambush squad moved forward to sweep the kill zone, they found all three men dead. The boats contained 48 B-40 rockets and 20 containers of antitank grenades.

On the night of January 11, 1970, D Company was in garrison at Can Giuoc, drying out from another watery operation and expecting a restful day at “home”. Specialist James W. Bishop (20), the 1st Platoon’s highly respected, perennial point man, was having a beer with his buddies, but was not saying much. Before turning in for the night, he dropped in to talk to his platoon leader, Lieutenant Walt Rutherford. Bishop confided “Sir, I’ve got a real bad feeling about

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\(^1\) Picture of Can Giuoc base camp courtesy of Mike Kirby (A Company).
tomorrow. I feel like I won’t be seeing home again.” Thinking it was just the beer talking, Rutherford dismissed the comment and sent Bishop back to his squad bay to sleep it off. After all, D Company was on a three-day stand-down and no operation was planned for the next day.

Morning proved Rutherford wrong. Captain Dennis Keaton was unexpectedly ordered to assemble D Company on an adjacent road to prepare for pick-up. Helicopters were already on the way. With a field strength of around 70 men, D Company was soon in the air, repeating a pattern familiar to every infantryman in Vietnam. Lush green fields unwound beneath them, segmented by the silvery glint of canals and streams and the random spatter of impromptu ponds gouged out of the Delta mud by air strikes and artillery. Clusters of drab, bamboo-thatched houses and ornate pagodas lined muddy roads and waterways—some alive with subsistence rice farming and fishing while others, blasted by war, lay deserted. Propeller blades slapping the hot morning air broke the landscape’s serenity. While seemingly tranquil enroute, the journey would not end well.

On the landing zone, northwest of the district town of Binh Phuoc, a firefight broke out as D Company hit the ground. By noon, all four of the battalion’s rifle companies were committed. For the next two days, the Bearcats would be in a toe-to-toe engagement, killing 40 of the VC 506th Main Force Battalion while suffering one of its own killed and 9 wounded. The dead man was Specialist Bishop. After the initial engagement, Bishop’s platoon backed away from a hotly contested bunker line to have it blasted by helicopter gunships and artillery while the troops took shelter behind a paddy dike. When the smoke and dust cleared, it seemed that overwhelming firepower had done the job. Captain Keaton and Lieutenant Rutherford dashed across the field to check the result. Both had a reputation for reckless bravery that made them popular with their men. Bishop, the instinctive point man, did not like the idea of officers going out ahead alone. He jumped up and ran forward to catch up with them. As the trio neared the shattered bunker line, a lone VC thrust his AK-47 backward over the top of one of the bunkers. Without raising his head to see where he was shooting, he fired a short burst in the blind. Bishop was hit in the forehead and died instantly. He had seen death coming and there was no way to stop it.

At Can Giuoc, the 6th Battalion's living conditions were primitive at best. The base was built among foul smelling abandoned rice paddies. Widened dikes connected islands of shabby single-story wooden and sandbag barracks. The paddies remained filled with water throughout the battalion’s five-month stay, covered with bacteria-laden pond scum. Troops cynically called the base “Venice by the outhouse”. The troops' morale reflected their situation. Although the Bearcats had a superb reputation as fighters, their morale and discipline was poor. Soon after arriving in January 1970, Captain Karl Lowe, temporarily substituting for the battalion executive officer, made a daylight inspection of the base perimeter. In the first bunker he encountered four glassy-eyed soldiers smoking marijuana, oblivious to their responsibilities. All were so stoned they could barely walk straight when Lowe had an NCO escort them back to the company for disciplinary action. Most

2 Picture of Can Giuoc base courtesy of Mary Doyon, sister of John P. Mikolaycik (A Company).
bunkers were littered with trash and reeked of urine. Worse, mattresses lay across the tactical wire to let whores in at night. Only one.50 caliber machinegun on the entire perimeter had a headspace and timing gauge and few men knew how to use it. Claymore mines emplaced haphazardly in the tactical wire and many had their backs removed and stood empty and useless. Troops had removed the C-4 explosive to heat coffee, rations, or dope. Officers and NCOs seemingly never inspected the perimeter.

Few men, including junior officers, wore rank insignia or complete American uniforms. Some wore a mix of T-shirts, khaki cut-offs, colorful headbands, various colors of berets, and an assortment of camouflage Vietnamese Ranger and Marine uniform parts. The weapons they carried were equally individualistic, including World War II-era Thompson submachineguns, M-2 carbines, Soviet AK-47s, Chinese SKS rifles, Swedish Ks, some M-16s, and an assortment of pistols, bayonets, and hunting knives. How a platoon sergeant could redistribute ammunition in a firefight was beyond comprehension. Unfortunately, many units in Vietnam suffered the same malaise at that stage of the war. The President had announced that America was pulling out and no one wanted to be the last to die for a cause his country was abandoning. The phrase of the day was, “It don’t mean nothin’”.

Despite the Army’s decaying morale and discipline, most of its members were decent people fresh out of the nation’s high schools and colleges who obediently went to do their government’s bidding, either as draftees or volunteers. The overwhelming majority served honorably and bravely and went home pretty much as they came in, although more mature. They were let down by Army personnel policies and a fatally flawed strategy. As in any war, soldiers expected leadership and discipline and responded well when it was given. When it was not, some of society’s worst ills found ready expression in an environment in which constant danger, fear, loneliness, alcohol, drugs, and weapons created a volatile mix. Officers usually remained in command for only six months before being rotated to staff jobs at a relatively secure fire base. In contrast, enlisted men usually stayed in the field for their entire 12-month tours. The disparity created resentment that undercut authority in ways the Army’s distant personnel managers never saw. Companies usually had only one or two long-term NCOs. Most experienced NCOs were assigned to training centers or recruiting offices or served in advisory roles with the reserve components or ARVN. As always, personnel managers managed numbers, not people. They did not experience the impact of their policies and failed to ask or hear those who did. The same thing had happened in the Philippines at the onset of World War II and the Army’s Chief of Staff had experienced it personally. Unfortunately, those running his personnel management system never heard that American units at Bataan were practically crippled by a massive transfer of their best junior officers and NCOs to the Philippine Army. Perhaps that experience was buried too deep in dusty historical archives.

In rifle companies, most platoon sergeants and squad leaders had only six weeks of NCO Candidate School (NCOS) to differentiate them from the peers in age that they led. As a result, a specialist fourth class with several months in combat had considerably more “field savvy” than a brand new NCOS honor graduate who arrived with a fresh set of staff sergeant’s stripes and only six months of military service—all at a stateside training center. Many junior enlisted men were unwilling to risk their necks for sergeants and lieutenants right out of the “warrior mill” at Ft Benning who felt compelled to act like they knew what they were doing, rather than suffer the humiliation of seeking advice from those they were supposed to lead. The atmosphere was not

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3 Those policies originated during the term of General Harold K. Johnson, who retired as the Army’s Chief of Staff in July 1968 and had served as a battalion commander and S-3 of the 57th Infantry Regiment at Bataan in 1942.
conducive to mutual respect between leaders and led. First tour company commanders, right out of assignments in the US or Germany were unprepared for what they found and unless guided by seasoned battalion commanders, some became part of the problem. Battalion commanders, rotating through on six-month tours, scarcely had time to become familiar with their area of operations or their subordinates before it was time to leave. There was little time to train subordinates when commanders were out almost every day directing eagle flights to chase the elusive enemy.

Operations from Can Giuoc ran the gamut from foot patrols to airmobile raids and riverine operations with the US and RVN navies. Wherever they went, Bearcats were certain to get wet. Flooded rice paddies, nipa palm-lined streams, canals, watery marshes, mangrove swamps, and tidal rivers with steep, slippery banks dominated the landscape. VC were particularly adept at digging air pockets (upside down trenches) under canal banks where they could slip away or hide after an engagement.

Booby traps took a steady toll as companies of Bearcats hopped from one suspected VC lair to another in search of survivors of the recent battle near Binh Phuoc. Captain Steve Francia of B Company and six of his men were wounded near dusk on January 18 while searching a thick patch of scrub brush around a lone dead tree. A single fragmentation grenade, trip wired at boot-top level, reminded them why they shouldn’t bunch up. Captain Francia reported one man critically wounded and in need of immediate evacuation. Because “Arctic Charlie”, the brigade aid station at Tan An, was only minutes away, Captain Lowe, the acting battalion executive officer, brought in the battalion’s command and control helicopter to evacuate the wounded. Barely conscious and in danger of bleeding out from multiple fragmentation wounds, PFC David Barnas remembered only the face and rank insignia of the captain lifting him aboard the helicopter. Barnas would not see his rescuer for another 27 years. They met at a 31st Infantry Regiment Association reunion in 1997. Dazed and bleeding from a wound in his forearm, Captain Francia also clambered aboard. Appalled at himself for leaving his troops in the field, Francia rejoined his company the next day.

Two days later, on a foot patrol west of Can Giuoc, a booby trap downed another company commander. Approaching a wooded area just off a frequently-mined dirt road, D Company’s point man halted and refused to go further. He had operated in the area many times before and knew it to be a rat’s nest of booby traps. Heated words were exchanged but the man was unyielding. Widely respected for his personal bravery, Captain Everett D. Keaton (29, left) angrily took the point in classic “follow me” style. He didn’t get far. As he stepped around a tree, blast and fragmentation from an exploding wire-rigged grenade bowled him over. His Artillery Forward Observer, Lieutenant Byron Dixon, recalls the horror he felt at seeing Keaton thrown lifeless to the ground. In one firefight after another, Dennis Keaton (left) seemed indestructible. He had won three Silver Stars for bravery and now lay limp on the ground, beyond saving despite the valiant
efforts of a determined medic. Thoroughly demoralized, D Company returned to Can Giuoc carrying Keaton’s body wrapped in a poncho slung between the ends of a bamboo pole.

That evening, Lieutenant Colonel Carlson sent Karl Lowe, originally scheduled to replace Captain Steve Honzo as C Company Commander, to replace the fallen Dennis Keaton. Taking the place of a fallen hero is never easy and D Company’s reputation for hell-raising heightened the challenge. Calling a meeting of his officers and First Sergeant to issue the order for the next day’s riverine operation, Lowe directed that NCOs inspect their squads before going to the field. Everyone was to wear his Army-issued field uniform, flak vest, and helmet with camouflage cover. Most regarded the order as “chicken shit” but grudgingly complied. Similarly unpopular was Lowe’s order that everyone carry their assigned weapon and a full two-quart “blivet” of water. There would be no more gang-like assortments of weapons or “make up your own” assortments of field uniforms. Several of the platoon leaders protested, arguing that flak vests and helmets were heat traps that could bring a man down in the Delta. Lowe was unmoved, having been wounded four times just a few miles from Can Giuoc on a previous tour in 1967. His order that officers and NCOs wear rank insignia on their helmets and collars drew similar protests. Didn’t he know snipers sought out leaders? Yes, and he knew too that a leader was easily recognizable at several hundred meters by his proximity to a radio operator carrying a bulky PRC-25 radio with a spiral black umbilical cord leading to a handset in the hands of an officer or NCO. His orders stood.

As the orders group was departing, an angry and very stoned soldier came to the doorway of D Company’s command bunker. The quivering man had a grenade in his hand with the pin pulled. He was soaked with sweat, his eyes stared vacantly, and the veins in his neck and forehead bulged from the effects of a narcotic. He had just returned from a hospital in Saigon an hour before and screamed that he was going to kill Captain Keaton for breaking his promise to send him home. First Sergeant Emil Simonsen blocked the man’s way, grabbed the hand holding the grenade to keep the arming handle depressed, and wrestled him to the street. Once he was down, another soldier snatched the grenade out of the man’s hand and tossed it into an adjacent paddy where it exploded harmlessly in the thick, slimy mud. After spending the night tied to a metal bunk, the man was sent right back to the mental ward in Saigon under armed guard.

As D Company assembled for the short march to Can Giuoc’s pier the next morning, another challenge arose as NCOs inspected their squads. The son of a retired Sergeant Major decided he was not going to the field. He said he had seen enough fighting. Lowe (right) ordered First Sergeant Simonsen to disarm the man and take him to Command Sergeant Major Figueroa for confinement under guard pending court martial charges. Stunned and suddenly ashamed, the soldier meekly handed over his rifle and was marched away. While few men liked having to wear helmets and flak vests or risk their lives in the field, most realized they had a better chance of surviving in a disciplined unit.

Indiscipline came in many forms, particularly drug use. Soldiers who dutifully went to the field and took their chances resented those who didn’t pull their share of the load. The problem was exacerbated by the battalion commander’s policy of not accepting battalion-level Article 15s or referring men for courts martial unless they committed a life-threatening felony. He reasoned that soldiers in an infantry battalion in Vietnam deserved some slack because they were better men than those who fled the country, evaded the draft at home, or sought refuge in the
reserves. His policy left company commanders few options. The maximum punishment they could levy was a one-grade reduction for E-4s and below and forfeiture of all pay and allowances for up to 30 days.

For some who declined to function as soldiers, such a “slap on the wrist” was merely shrugged off. A man in A Company simply refused all orders and simply did whatever he pleased. After receiving a company-level Article 15, he hopped a civilian bus to Saigon, staying for several months before being arrested by MPs who brought him back in hand cuff. Back in his unit, he again ignored all orders. A few weeks later, he tired of the game and left again, never to return. Such men were known to congregate in a crime-ridden part of Saigon. When the city was about to fall to the communists in 1975, some of those haggard, drug-addicted deserters came out of hiding, declaring their American citizenship and demanding a flight home. History does not record their fate.

Problems sometimes came from home, as in the case of a sergeant in A Company. He was a big man, tough as they come, but a little crazy. He drank from filthy rice paddies with a mocking smile and everyone wanted him at his side in a fight. His wife, after taking up with another man, concocted an official-looking paper that reported him killed in action and sent it to his parents. His grief-stricken family contacted the Red Cross in search of further details. When word reached A Company, the sergeant was sent to the MARS radio station at brigade headquarters to tell his family he was alive. Afterward, he became despondent. After getting off radio watch, Specialist Robert Stewart, the artillery forward observer’s radio operator, found the sergeant sitting on his locker with a rifle in hand, looking dazed. Stewart roused a friend who took the rifle and escorted the sergeant back to his platoon. The next morning, the MP's arrested him. He had been at the cooks’ quarters in Headquarters Company that night and cut up a cook with a broken bottle. In an unrelated incident several months later, another cook became so high on dope that he pulled the pin on a grenade, held it to his face, shouting, “I see the sun!”! Seconds later, the blast that decapitated him was the last light he saw.

On February 19, a swirling two-day fight was set in motion when B and D Companies encountered an enemy battalion northwest of Tan Tru and drove it into the 2-60th Infantry. The enemy left behind 50 dead and fled during the night of February 20. The 6-31st suffered no casualties. The fight was LTC Cornelius Gearin’s first as the Bearcat battalion’s new commander. Gearin would remain with the battalion until its departure from Vietnam in October 1970.

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4 While the Reserve Components became integral to the Army and Air Force after Vietnam and fully met the challenge in Central America, Sinai, Bosnia, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq, few reserve component units were mobilized for Vietnam. The token mobilization of Army National Guard units in 1968 (two infantry brigades and assorted separate battalions and companies) targeted mostly small states to punish the President’s principal Congressional opponents. No Air National Guard units were called up for Vietnam, nor were Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Reserve units. The Reserves were seen as a hedge against total war with the Soviets, not a gap-filler for the Regular Army.
In March 1970, the Bearcats moved again, this time to establish a new base camp at Ben Luc, near Highway 4. Troops had to tear down their old base camp at Can Giuoc to salvage materials needed to build the new base from scratch. They did so while keeping one company operating with the Navy from a River Patrol Base at Tra Cu, another patrolling the Plain of Reeds from Fire Base Gettysburg near Cambodia’s “parrot’s beak” ¹, a third conducting "eagle flights” throughout Long An Province, and a fourth securing the old and new fire bases until the move was completed. Although Vietnam was teeming with engineer battalions and civilian engineering firms on contract to the Army, infantrymen had to build their own bases by taking work details out of each rifle company to build barracks, administrative buildings, shower points, and latrines, as well as a wired-in perimeter, complete with an earthen berm, fougasse, registered minefields, and sandbag bunkers. On April 14, the new base was finished. It was named Camp Everett D. Keaton, in honor of D Company’s fallen commander.

In late April, with the coming of the dry season, the 6-31st came under operational control of the 3rd Brigade 25th Infantry Division and moved its Headquarters and one rifle company to Fire Base Chamberlain in Hau Nghia Province, west of Saigon. Its other rifle companies remained scattered from Ben Luc to the Navy River Patrol Base at Tra Cu on the Vam Co Dong and Fire Base Gettysburg in the Plain of Reeds. While contact with the enemy was rare, casualties were not. The cause was almost always a booby trap. VC were adept at hiding hand grenades in the tall grass and stringing trip wires across likely places of travel.

Soldiers’ reaction to their first contact with the enemy is hard to predict. In April 1970, most members of Sergeant Clifford Macomber’s squad of D Company’s 2nd Platoon had arrived within the past six months and none had ever seen the enemy. That changed when the squad was lifted out from Fire Base Gettysburg to a night ambush site about 10 miles away in the Plain of Reeds. Landing on the raised dirt foundation of a house that was never built, the squad was suddenly engaged from all sides by a North Vietnamese platoon that had apparently infiltrated from Cambodia earlier that day and was probably planning to use the raised pad to get dry during the night. Most men in Macomber’s squad hit the dirt and returned fire as the helicopter that delivered them hovered overhead to provide whatever support it could. Because helicopter door guns are not very accurate, firing into the mass below would have been dangerous because friend and foe were only 20 to 30 feet apart.

Unwilling to become victims, two men, PFC Arthur Osborne III (20), an African-American preacher’s son from Savannah, Georgia, and Private Dan Wood (18), a brash Irish-American kid from Elizabeth, New Jersey, charged right at the enemy, yelling at the top of their lungs and spraying the area in front of them with their M-16s. Several other members of the squad, unsure of what was happening, rose and joined the assault, firing rifles, grenade launchers, and their squad’s machinegun at close range. The stunned enemy platoon scattered in all directions.

¹ The Parrot’s Beak connotes the shape of a wedge of Cambodian territory jutting into the Plain of Reeds, about 40 miles west of Saigon.
directions, hiding among the reeds as a pair of Cobra gunships arrived to help. After making a few minigun passes at the fleeing enemy, the Cobras departed because it was getting too dark to sort out friend from foe.

With darkness setting in, Macomber’s men returned to the raised pad to establish a perimeter but did not venture out to emplace Claymores, knowing the enemy had not gone far. Throughout the night they heard movement in the grass and repeatedly fired at the sound but never saw anyone. When morning came, a search revealed nine dead enemy soldiers, including an officer who was probably the unit’s commander. Their clean, dark green uniforms, pith helmets, and papers found on the officer indicated they were North Vietnamese Regulars, as unfamiliar with that part of Vietnam as the Americans. The assault by Osborne and Wood had no doubt killed the officer in the opening minutes of the fight, leaving the enemy leaderless. The sounds they heard during the night were probably the survivors, trying to find their commander. Osborne and Wood were awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. The only man injured in the fight was Osborne, who took a grenade fragment in the abdomen but recovered quickly and soon returned to duty.

The battalion's area of operations shifted in April to take over areas that had previously been the 25th Infantry Division’s responsibility. One company operated out of an abandoned sugar mill at Luong Hoa on the east bank of the Vam Co Dong and another moved to Fire Base Jackson near the juncture of Hau Nghia and Tay Ninh Provinces. The Bearcats were entering unfamiliar territory. Near the end of the month, A and D Companies moved to the Cambodian border while ARVN III Corps units attacked into Cambodia from Go Dau Ha and Duc Hue with tanks and armored personnel carriers, marking a dramatic turn in the war.
For years, the enemy had operated a major logistics and staging base at Ba Thu, Cambodia, only 11 kilometers west of Fire Base Gettysburg. Enemy troops and supplies arrived weekly in truck convoys with headlights on, knowing Americans were not permitted to enter or fire into Cambodia. At night, enemy infiltration groups moved on foot and by sampan along the boundary between the ARVN III and IV Corps Tactical Zones, taking advantage of a gap rarely covered by anyone.

Events leading to the invasion had been building for several months. On March 18, 1970, Lieutenant General Lon Nol, Cambodia’s Defense Minister, deposed King Norodom Sihanouk and appointed himself chief of state. He demanded that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong leave Cambodia. Soon afterward, Cambodian civilians, seeking to reverse economic and military encroachment that Sihanouk had long tolerated, began slaughtering ethnic Vietnamese, throwing their headless and disemboweled bodies into the Mekong to float into Vietnam. Included were families of Vietnamese communists fighting in South Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese merchants aiding the resupply of North Vietnamese troops transiting Cambodia. The Vietnamese communists were provoked to action. When fighting broke out between North Vietnamese regulars and the outgunned Cambodians, it appeared that Lon Nol’s inexperienced Army and National Police would collapse.

Refugees streamed into Vietnam, fleeing genocidal attacks by angry Cambodians. Because of their suspected ties to the Viet Cong, they were no more welcome in Vietnam than in Cambodia. Worried that North Vietnamese troops might take over Cambodia and appoint a puppet government, President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered ARVN troops to attack communist base areas in eastern Cambodia. Operation Toan Thang 42 began on April 29, sending 8700 men in an armored thrust to the Mekong River. The next day, President Nixon announced that US troops would join their RVN allies in eliminating North Vietnamese sanctuaries. On May 2, elements of the US 1st Cavalry and 25th Infantry Divisions, attacking from staging areas at An Loc and Tay Ninh, reached the Cambodian towns of Snuol, Mimot, and Krek. Their mission was to find the headquarters of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which orchestrated enemy operations in South Vietnam. Enemy troops fought a stiff rearguard action, covering COSVN’s withdrawal while trying to prevent the loss of huge stockpiles of war materiel. Those supplies had been carried with great difficulty down the Ho Chi Minh trail over many years and would be hard to replace. Three of the US 9th Infantry Division’s four remaining infantry battalions were attached to brigades of the 1st Cavalry and 25th Infantry Divisions that entered Cambodia north

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of Tay Ninh. Initially, only the 6-31st stayed behind, protecting a string of fire support bases in Long An and Hau Nghia Provinces.

On May 7, the 6-31st joined the fray. With C/2-4th Field Artillery in support from Fire Base Gettysburg, the battalion conducted what became known as the "Seminole Raid". Initially, only the Battalion Tactical Command Post, A and D Companies, and the Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon, supported by half of C Battery 2-4th Field Artillery, went into Cambodia. C Company remained in Vietnam to guard Fire Bases Jackson, Chamberlain, and Jarrett and B Company remained at Fire Base Gettysburg as the battalion’s reserve.

Led by D Company’s 3rd Platoon, the "Bearcats" crossed the border by helicopter early on the morning of May 7. Soon afterward, the Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon and D Company’s 2nd Platoon secured the Ba Thu base area, landing just behind a light observation helicopter bringing Lieutenant Colonels Cornelius Gearin and “Skip” Foreman, commanders of the 6-31st Infantry and 2-4th Field Artillery on a leader’s reconnaissance. Ba Thu had been

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2 They included the 2-47th Infantry (Mechanized) and 5-60th Infantry attached to the 1st Cavalry Division and the 2-60th Infantry attached to the 25th Infantry Division. All of the division’s other infantry battalions had left Vietnam in November 1969.
overrun by ARVN armored units the week before so the enemy was gone, but had left tunnel entrances booby-trapped throughout the area.
**Initial Battles (7-8 May 1970)**

D Company’s Command Group and 3rd Platoon, landing near the hamlet of Kaoh Kban, encountered hundreds of refugees heading for Vietnam along a dusty road ending at the Cambodian border. The refugees were headed east along a familiar infiltration route straddling the Tay Ninh-Hau Nghia Province boundary. Their route was curious because they were entering a known enemy base area where there were no roads or settlements and no bridges across the Vam Co Dong. The only inhabited place west of the river was the Duc Hue Special Forces Camp. The streaming mass of young and old would not only have to cross the parched Plain of Reeds but would also have to cross an unfordable river to find food and shelter.

Seeing that most men among the refugees were of military age and wore close-cropped hair like soldiers, D Company’s commander, Captain Karl Lowe, a Vietnamese-speaking veteran of a previous tour with the ARVN 25th Division, ordered the column halted. Some of the male “refugees” bore obvious battle scars and appeared to be civilian-clad soldiers seeking safe passage among the pitiful stream of old people, women, and children. Lowe ordered all military-age males separated from the column and held at an abandoned Cambodian border fort nearby. Cambodia’s flag still drooped from a crude wooden pole over the mud-walled fort, giving testimony to the speed of an earlier ARVN advance through the area. A squad of Lieutenant Morgan Weed’s 3rd Platoon quickly took six prisoners, bound them, and held them at the fort while Weed’s troops inspected hand carts and took more men out of the column. One exceptionally full hand cart proved that the column was a cover for enemy soldiers. Documents, weapons parts, North Vietnamese web gear, and uniform parts were discovered amid a jumble of pots and pans, rice bags, and civilian clothing.

The number of prisoners soon doubled. Trouble began with number 13 when Lowe ordered an older man out of the column. The man protested politely but relented when several 3rd Platoon rifles were raised in his direction. Although he appeared to be in his 50s, the man aroused suspicion because younger men in the column seemed to glance nervously in his direction as though awaiting instructions from him. Several weeks later, D Company would learn from 3rd Brigade’s intelligence section that the “old man” they had captured was the VC colonel who had commanded the Ba Thu base area.

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1 Typically a rifle company command group included the company commander, artillery forward observer, and three radio operators, one with a radio on the battalion net, another on the fire support net, and a third on the company’s internal net.

2 Picture of the first prisoner taken by D Company courtesy of Gary Weckworth. LT Weed is at left with his helmet off. CPT Lowe is third from the right.
As soon as the old man was taken from the column, panic coursed down the line. Orders rippled back through the column, prompting civilians to abandon their hand carts and begin running across a field to Kaoh Kban. Young men farther back in the column could be seen pulling weapons and ammunition from beneath people’s possessions on some of the larger carts and running back toward the village among the civilians. Panicked civilians shielded their movements, making it impossible to stop anyone before they reached the tree line defining the hamlet’s edge. Lowe ordered his men back to the border fort to prepare for action. So far there had been no shooting but it would soon begin. A group of armed men could be seen running north along the treeline to try outflanking the fort while others began firing automatic rifles and RPGs to keep the 3rd Platoon pinned down. One RPG exploded harmlessly against the fort’s thick earthen wall while another hit the flag pole, cutting it neatly in half. Though the noise, splinters, shrapnel, and dust were unnerving, no one was hit.

The fight began in earnest as more enemy troops from farther back reinforced the fixing force that had begun firing on D Company from the village, and the flanking force that could still be seen moving north along a tree-lined road. The flanking element had become strung out and would soon have to cross an open field, subjecting it to fire from thirty or so M-16 rifles and three M-60 machineguns arrayed behind the fort’s protective berm. One VC in the fixing force was cut nearly in half by a burst of machinegun fire as he knelt to fire an RPG. Another was knocked backward with both feet off the ground, as though struck in the face with a sledgehammer. Unable to cross the open field, the flanking maneuver shifted further north, ducking behind a slightly elevated roadbed, only to be met by a pair of attack helicopters arriving from Cu Chi. Pass after pass raked the roadside and adjacent tree line with 2.75-inch rockets and 7.62mm miniguns. The flanking maneuver collapsed but more enemy activity was stirring in the village. Because of the civilians there, the helicopters did not fire on it.

From his new forward CP at Fire Base Seminole, Lieutenant Colonel Gearin ordered Lowe to get his men ready for pickup. Helicopters had been called to evacuate both the prisoners and D Company. Around the same time, a mortar’s distinctive “thump” sounded from somewhere behind Kaoh Kban. Several more followed in quick succession. The earth trembled and spewed a rain of dust and clods of earth into the air as an enemy forward observer tried in vain to adjust the mortar’s fire onto the fort. Clods of dirt showered troops crouched along the fort’s wall and rattled onto the corrugated tin roof of the post’s lone building but not a single round struck inside. The Cobras left to refuel and because the 6-31st’s supporting artillery was still deploying to Ba Thu, D Company was temporarily on its own. Lowe knew a battery of howitzers was located at Duc Hue Special Forces camp within easy range but they were inexplicably not responding to his forward observer’s calls. Unnerved, a soldier who had been detailed to guard the prisoners in a well-protected earthen dugout crawled up to Lowe during the

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3 Picture of Cambodian border fort courtesy of Robert Stewart (2-4th FA attached to A Company). The fort is not the same one that D Company took cover in but is identically configured with a low mud wall and a single building.
bombardment and asked; “Sir, What about the prisoners? I got a couple of frags (grenades). Want me to do ‘em a job?” Lowe’s angry response came loud enough for all to hear. “Dammit, if they get don’t get out of here alive, neither will you, now get back to your post!” Lowe’s unaccustomed outburst of anger had its intended effect. The prisoners remained safe.

Between mortar bursts, Lieutenant Weed concentrated the fire of his six M-203 40mm grenade launchers, firing them in ripples into trees along the village’s edge. Their small high explosive rounds with thousands of coiled steel fragments burst in branches just above enemy troops sheltered there. Their effects, coupled with the 3rd Platoon’s three 7.62mm machineguns, bought the company enough time for another flight of Cobras to arrive. Right behind the Cobras came a flight of six “slicks” to take the troops and their prisoners out. As suddenly as it had begun, the fight at Kaoh Kban was over as D Company and its prisoners ascended to Ba Thu.

Around mid-morning, Captain George Lavezzi’s A Company Command Group and his 1st and 3rd Platoons landed near the Cambodian village of Trapeang. They found supplies hidden in holes and haystacks, which they burned, but encountered no enemy after an hour of searching.⁴

In the early afternoon, A pair of Cobra helicopter gunships from D/3-4th Cavalry were fired on near the village of Kouk Tek. For the next hour and a half, attack helicopters and air strikes pummeled the area. Captain Joe Calhoun’s B Company Command Group and his 1st and 2nd Platoons were lifted in from Fire Base Gettysburg to search the village. They found the bodies of 14 enemy soldiers who had been killed by the air attacks. Two others were spotted running out of the village and were killed in a brief exchange of fire. One had an AK-47 and the other carried a pistol, indicating he was probably an officer. During the morning’s strikes, attack helicopters had taken fire from the larger village of Chantrea, setting into motion plans to search the town the following day. Before dusk, B Company was lifted back to Fire Base Gettysburg, while A and D Company and the Reconnaissance Platoon guarded Fire Base Seminole.

⁴ Picture courtesy of Robert Stewart.
On the morning of May 8, D Company was again split into platoon packets. Its 1st Platoon was to secure the artillery, the 2nd Platoon was held at Seminole for a possible airmobile insertion later in the morning, and the 3rd Platoon was dispatched on foot to Samraong to reinforce a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) from Duc Hue. The CIDG had engaged an enemy unit of unknown size headed for Ba Thu early that morning. Expecting action, Captain Lowe accompanied the 3rd Platoon. Because the 2nd Platoon was led by a newly-arrived second lieutenant, Harvey Mize, Captain Lowe sent his executive officer, First Lieutenant Randy Sprinkles, the 2nd Platoon’s former leader, along on the eagle flight. Because his friends in the 2nd Platoon might need artillery support, PFC John Lonsdale, the Artillery Forward Observer’s radio operator, persuaded Lieutenant John Bayer, his boss, to let him accompany the 2nd Platoon.

Meanwhile, B Company’s 1st and 2nd Platoons and the Company Command Group were flown back to Kouk Tek, landing just south of the hamlet while A Company’s 2nd and 3rd Platoons were lifted into a blocking position to the north. B Company again swept through the hamlet but found nothing new. During A Company’s airlift from Seminole, however, helicopter crews spotted movement in the hamlet of Senta which was thought to be uninhabited. A Company’s 1st Platoon was lifted in to investigate, apprehending four Vietnamese men, believed to be Viet Cong. Several helicopters took fire from one or more heavy machineguns firing from Chantrea during the insertion at Senta.

In response, B Company was lifted from Kouk Tek to the southern edge of Chantrea, entering its southeastern and southwestern corners with a platoon each. They were soon joined by A Company’s 2nd Platoon, landing at the town’s northeast corner. PFC Robert Stewart, the artillery forward observer’s radio operator, recalls “We took fire coming in. I’ll never forget the sound of bullets going through the chopper’s sides and felt a lot safer when we reached the ground.” But the ground was no safer. The VC had built bunkers all along the perimeter road, concealed in the shadows of trees and houses built on stilts. Chantrea looked like a park, a 1500 x 300 meter green surrounded by an arrow-straight perimeter road where houses and businesses sat amid a lush stand of tall, stately trees and flowering hibiscus. Chantrea’s park-like setting did not change the fact that a bloody battle would rage there for the next three days.

Captain Lavezzi’s men quickly shot their way into the town but were forced to withdraw after two men were wounded by rifle and machinegun fire from a network of well-camouflaged bunkers near a large pagoda dominating the town’s northern approaches. Lavezzi tried using air strikes to blast his way in. When that failed, he called Gearin for help. He wanted his other two rifle platoons and would soon get them. When his 3rd Platoon arrived, Lavezzi decided to have another run at the town. This time he was met by machinegun fire and forced to back off again after killing one enemy soldier and wounding another and taking him prisoner. Throughout the fight, Lavezzi was everywhere, calmly encouraging his men with amiable banter. He was due to

1 CIDG were locally-recruited irregulars led by US Special Forces personnel. At Duc Hue, they were Khmer (Cambodian).
leave Vietnam in only two weeks. Someone joked that the time he spent in Cambodia wouldn’t count toward his tour of duty which was 12 months in Vietnam. Lieutenant Jerry Holderness, A Company’s artillery forward observer, decided he would put the enemy machinegun out of action. He perched himself atop a paddy dike in plain sight of the enemy and called in artillery.⁡ A series of explosions rippled along the town’s edge, sending the machinegun and its crew to oblivion. A large secondary explosion indicated a hit on a probable mortar position.

Meanwhile, B Company was making slow but steady progress on the town’s south side, advancing about 150 meters before taking fire from concealed bunkers. Captain Calhoun backed his men off to allow the area to be worked over by attack helicopters. D Company’s 2nd Platoon was flown from Seminole to the northwest corner of Chantrea, astride the road leading to Tnaot.

The 6-31st was being used like it was a brigade, with platoons executing what should have been company missions. Company commanders chafed at having their platoons spread all over creation, particularly since a major battle seemed to be brewing. With Lieutenant Colonel Gearin in the air near Chantrea, confusion reigned in the battalion’s Forward Command Post at Seminole. Captain Lavezzi was not told that B Company was on Chantrea’s south side and neither he nor Captain Calhoun were told that helicopters had earlier taken .51 caliber machinegun fire from the town.

Captain Lowe and his 3rd Platoon had just linked up with the CIDG at Samraong when a faint radio call from Lieutenant Sprinkles reported one man killed and another seriously wounded. Specialist Rick Mickels, Lowe’s senior radio operator, scanned his roster to see whose roster numbers Lieutenant Sprinkles had reported. He discovered that the dead man was John Lonsdale. Both Lowe and Lieutenant Bayer suddenly regretted their decision to allow Lonsdale to accompany the 2nd Platoon that morning.

What had happened was even more regrettable. John Lonsdale’s kinship with the 2nd Platoon led him to try to be a rifleman, rather than the artillery coordinator he was. As the 2nd Platoon’s point element entered Chantrea’s wooded northwest corner, it came under fire from a series of concealed bunkers around a road junction. Walking point, Nguyen Van Hong (left), the platoon’s Vietnamese Tiger Scout, was hit in the right shoulder and neck and dropped onto the dirt road like a rock. Specialist Dennis Walker rushed forward and grabbed Hong by the collar, dragging him to safety while simultaneously firing at Hong’s tormenter and diving into a ditch nearest the bunker from which he had taken fire.³ Walker’s quick thinking saved the lives of Hong and several others behind him but he could not save John Lonsdale.

Lonsdale had been just behind the point team when the shooting began. Handing his radio to another man, he unwisely dashed across the road and dove into a ditch on the far side to

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³ Picture taken elsewhere strongly resembles the scene inside Tnaot.
cover Walker and Hong. As he raised above the rim of the ditch to fire, a single Kalashnikov round struck his rifle and deflected into the fleshy area between his neck and left shoulder, ripping downward through his lung and diaphragm. Specialist Thomas “Doc” Miller dashed across the fire-swept road to try to save his friend. Oblivious to the automatic rifle fire slapping against nearby trees, his equipment, and the ground around him, Miller took a kneeling position over Lonsdale and tried to give him artificial respiration. It was no use, Lonsdale was dead. Staff Sergeant Charles Tapp, the lead squad leader, raced across the road to help Miller but was told by a dejected Miller, “It’s no use, he’s gone.” Tapp’s canteen and other bits of his equipment were hit, but he miraculously emerged unhurt. Walker and Miller both earned the Silver Star for their exceptionally selfless actions that day.

With enemy fire intensifying from three directions against the road junction, Lieutenant Sprinkles ordered his men to pull back. Covered by Tapp and Walker, “Doc” Miller had in the meantime darted back across the intersection to help Hong who was still alive and in intense pain. As the lead squad prepared to pull out, the intense enemy fire prevented even the bravest of them from getting Lonsdale’s body out. Every soldier in the squad wanted to recover his body, even though they all knew he was dead. Lieutenant Sprinkles knew he was giving the right order but hated its most obvious consequence. Fighting as it withdrew, the 2nd Platoon pulled back far enough from the town to get a medevac helicopter in to evacuate Hong. Standing no more than 5’4”, Hong was especially popular with his platoon and fellow Tiger Scouts. He managed to smile even in the worst of times and he now smiled broadly through the pain as the medevac landed to take him to a safer place.

At Samraong, Captain Lowe insisted that he and the 3rd Platoon be lifted in to reinforce the 2nd Platoon. Lieutenant Colonel Gearin agreed and soon a flight of helicopters was inbound. At Chantrea, the helicopters took heavy automatic weapons fire and had to drop off Lowe’s men in flight rather than risk a landing. Most had to jump six feet or more onto the hard earth from helicopters that slowed but never stopped moving. Miraculously the worst consequences were scraped knees and elbows, a few sprained ankles, and lots of cuts and bruises where weapons and helmets came into sharp contact with exposed skin. Knowing the 3rd Platoon had been dropped on the wrong side of town, Captain Lowe ordered Lieutenant Weed to move his platoon around the town’s north end along paddy dikes to link up with Sprinkles. Fighting through the town was impossible because the enemy had more troops and firepower than D Company could muster, even if all of its platoons had been present.

What happened next amazed everyone. Gearin ordered Lowe to prepare the 3rd Platoon for pickup where they had landed. They would be lifted to the west side to reinforce the 2nd Platoon. Lowe protested angrily but Gearin was unrelenting. Knowing there would be little time and that the extraction would take place under automatic weapons fire from less than 300 meters away, Lowe had his men crawl into the field behind them to form parallel lines with a marker panel at the north end and enough room for helicopters to land between them. Only a paddy dike shielded them from the enemy’s fire. Amazingly, the improvised tactic worked. As “Hueys” hovered just above the dry paddy, troops climbed aboard. Swirling dust, whining engines, rotor blades slapping hot air, officers and NCOs shouting orders, and bullets slapping into the choppers’ thin aluminum skins rivaled a scene out of Dante’s Inferno. Miraculously, no one was hit and in what seemed like seconds, the 3rd Platoon was flown around the south end of town and landed near the 2nd Platoon on Chantrea’s northwest side. Troops marveled at how lucky they had been and that their remarkable helicopters could take so much punishment and still keep flying.
At this point, the Bearcats had five platoons arrayed around Chantrea’s north side, two from D Company on the northwest and three from A Company on the northeast but there was still no one on the east or the west where the town’s inhabitants could be seen clustered with their farm animals under a Cambodian flag. They knew there was going to be a big fight in Chantrea and they were not going to be its victims. B Company was moving back into the town as enemy positions were being worked over by attack helicopters. One helicopter was hit and streamed smoke or oil as it limped back to Ba Thu. B Company’s 2nd Platoon was hit by a flurry of small arms fire and 3 mortar rounds, seriously wounding one man. It’s 1st Platoon, attacking up the town’s western axis, killed two enemy soldiers in a bunker. Joe Calhoun again pulled his men back. The move would prove fateful.

B Company’s 2nd Platoon arrayed itself in a rough semicircle around the pickup zone for a medical evacuation helicopter to take out their wounded man. Disregarding notification that the landing zone was hot (under fire), the medevac helicopter braved heavy caliber machinegun fire to evacuate B Company’s casualty, a heroic act characteristic of Army medevac pilots. If someone was hurt on the ground, they were going to do all they could to get the wounded out to safety, even if it meant risking their own lives and the lives of their equally brave crewmen. As the medevac departed, seven mortar rounds struck in quick succession among the 2nd Platoon, killing four men and wounding five others. The scene was chaotic. Terrified men screamed for medics while officers and NCOs tried to shout instructions over the hell’s chorus of automatic weapons fire and exploding mortar and RPG rounds.

Captain Joe Calhoun, an armor officer, had just recently replaced Captain Steve Francia in B Company and this was his first fight. He managed to get the company aligned along a string of paddy dikes but they were now out of action and would stay that way. Six air strikes, artillery, and a continuing series of attack helicopter sorties were hurled against the southern half of Chantrea while another medevac approached to take out B Company’s wounded. Despite the US firepower, the enemy drove off the first medevac attempt with automatic weapons and mortar fire. Fortunately, this time all of B Company’s men were dispersed in ditches or behind paddy dikes. A second medevac attempt was successful, although it too had to brave automatic weapons fire. Knowing the enemy mortar had his men in range, Joe Calhoun backed his company off another 200 meters. His withdrawal was accomplished under fire, a difficult feat accomplished without further losses.

On Chantrea’s opposite corner, A and D Companies again attempted to fight their way into the town. A Company’s 2nd Platoon suffered two men wounded and backed off, taking shelter behind nearby paddy dikes. Captain Lowe of D Company wanted to retrieve John Lonsdale’s body and try to unravel the enemy’s defenses by breaking their line and rolling up their long axis. While his 2nd Platoon provided covering fire, the 3rd Platoon rushed forward, firing on the run and spanning the distance between two paddy dikes in seconds. Enemy troops could be seen rushing toward the edge of town to meet the attack. Some fired brazenly at the

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4 Picture take elsewhere shows a medical evacuation in progress.
5 The dead were SP4 David A. Butcher (Marion, OH), SGT James M. Davis (Flagstaff, AZ), PFC Michael L. McPherson (Roseville, MI), and PFC Phillip J. Smith (Toledo, OH).
oncoming Americans from a standing position. The two sides exchanged fire at a distance of 75 yards or less. The 3rd Platoon took cover behind the near dike and blazed away, hitting at least two of the enemy who stood exposed at the town’s edge. Another, probably a leader, was hit several times as he dashed from one position to another shouting at those around him. Although it was clear he had been hit by the way his body lurched, he struggled on, continuing to shout instructions until several American rifles cut him down. It was a pity to see such a brave man fall. Captain Lowe remarked to Lieutenant Bayer that he wished he had some way of letting the enemy soldier’s family know how bravely he had died.

Unable to advance against an enemy force of superior size, D Company’s 3rd Platoon was in a jam. Immediately to its left was a copse of tall trees and shrubs protruding beyond Chantrea’s northwest corner. If the enemy occupied it, they could fire on 3rd Platoon’s exposed flank. About 150 meters to the right was a large farm house in an isolated copse of smaller trees and hibiscus shrubs. If the enemy occupied that place, the platoon could be cut off. To take it, the platoon would have to cross an open field, moving parallel to the enemy’s main line along Chantrea’s western edge. That clearly wouldn’t work. To reach the copse of trees on the left, they could move along the paddy dike they lay behind, affording them protection from the enemy force in Chantrea. The drawback to that option is that it was where the 2nd Platoon had been ambushed and the enemy probably hadn’t left.

Just after dark, Captain Lowe, Lieutenant Weed, and radio operators Gary Weckwerth and John Mihalek crawled to the edge of the copse of trees to see if they could find a way into the town. Less than 50 meters away, they saw enemy troops emerge from the town, moving quickly on the road in an attempt to sneak out between the 2nd and 3rd Platoons. Lowe alerted his 2nd Platoon that trouble was headed their way and ordered the men with him to open fire on his command, keeping their fire at boot-top level. Lowe initiated the ambush, firing a burst of tracers to mark the target. To his shock, the short-barreled 5.56mm carbine he was carrying for the first time spewed tracers in all directions, making it impossible to mark a target. He slapped in a fresh magazine without tracers and shifted to single shot mode. Weed’s opening burst brought down one of the enemy soldiers and at least one other was hit and fell as his comrades scrambled back to the shelter of the town. The enemy returned fire from the tree line, but fortunately their aim was high, doing no harm.

Lowe directed Lieutenant Weed to move his platoon back on line with the 2nd Platoon. The enemy was skillful with mortars and knew where the 3rd Platoon had been for the past several hours. If the VC were trying to escape to the northwest, they would likely cover the movement of their main body by mortaring anyone astride their planned escape route. The unit Lowe’s patrol had just encountered was probably a reconnaissance element so the main body could not be far behind. Weed quickly alerted his squad leaders and personally took each squad to its new position abreast of the 2nd Platoon while Lowe stayed in place with the last squad. As predicted, mortar rounds soon came crashing in where the 3rd Platoon had been.

Finding that the captain hadn’t returned with the last squad to its new position, Lieutenant Weed crawled back to his former line and found Lowe laying along the dike. Believing he was dead, Weed grabbed Lowe’s flack jacket to drag him back. When the startled captain asked what he was doing, Weed replied, “Are you coming with us, sir?” Exhausted after three days with little sleep, Lowe had dozed off while Weed was moving his squads into their new positions. Just then another mortar round struck, showering the two men with dirt. It didn’t take them long to reach the 3rd Platoon’s new line. They would laugh about it in the morning but neither would sleep any more that night.
Lieutenant Bayer called for artillery to hit the woodline while Captain Lowe called for helicopter gunships. Unfortunately, there was still no artillery available and all helicopter gunships at Cu Chi were tied up supporting a brigade of the 25th Division farther north. Bayer cursed at the sorry state of their fire support. Periodically, fire barked from the town’s edge to try to identify American positions, but the troops had been ordered not to return fire. Captains Lowe, Lavezzi, and Calhoun kept each other informed of their units’ dispositions so there would be no risk of fratricide in the dark. Lowe and Lavezzi were tied in on the north but both worried about the huge gap between them and Joe Calhoun on the south. B Company had not moved since dusk and was totally isolated about 400 meters south of town. Just before nightfall, its battered 2nd Platoon had been flown back to Gettysburg and was replaced by the 3rd Platoon. Around 10 PM, an Air Force C-123 “Shadow” gunship dropping flares over the town took .51 caliber fire but by midnight, the town had grown strangely quiet.

With the fighting in the Parrot’s Beak becoming more intense, C/2-60th Infantry was sent back from Cambodia by truck to replace C/6-31st Infantry at fire bases in Vietnam. Before their relief even arrived, C/6-31st, under Captain William L. “Mack” Lusk, was flown to Samraong to reinforce the CIDG, which had again come under attack. Concurrently, E Company 75th Rangers arrived from Tan An.

At dawn on May 9, all companies around Chantrea were instructed to hold their positions while the town was bombarded with artillery, fighter-bombers, and attack helicopters. It was apparent by the lack of any response that the VC had probably found the gap between B Company and its neighbors and escaped during the night. The night of May 9 passed without incident. The following morning, A and D Companies were ordered to sweep through Chantrea on parallel axes while B Company stayed in place—an intended, but pointless, hammer and anvil. Enemy soldiers’ blackened, bloating bodies lay all around the town like torn rag dolls. The foul stench of death was overpowering. Most were found with their weapons, indicating their unit lacked the time or manpower to collect them. The sweep revealed 59 VC had been killed. Much of Chantrea was destroyed and five "Bearcats’ had paid for the town with their lives. John Lonsdale was found where he died, covered with leaves that had been shot from tree branches above him. Unlike the enemy soldiers who died near him, his body had not begun to decompose and he had barely bled, indicating he died very quickly. Only a small hole next to his clavicle indicated he had even been hurt. The difference in diet between American and Vietnamese soldiers may have accounted for his sleep-like appearance but it was no consolation to comrades who grimly carried his body out of town on a poncho to a waiting helicopter.

After the town had been cleared, Lieutenant Colonel Gearin, Colonel Walworth F. Williams, the brigade commander, and their operations officers landed to plot the next move. The operations order was issued verbally on the spot. A Company was to stay in Chantrea as the battalion reserve, B Company would be lifted out to Seminole, C Company would conduct an airmobile assault to Chek, D Company would conduct a ground reconnaissance to Tnaot, and the Rangers and Recon Platoon would reconnoiter and secure a prospective new CP and artillery position near Baray. Although not mentioned in the operations order, D Company and the Rangers would be operating beyond artillery range.
Concluding Battles (10-12 May 1970)

Moving on foot on the afternoon of May 10, D Company would soon make contact with another dug-in enemy force, most likely the survivors of the fight at Chantrea. Enroute, D Company found signs of a hasty retreat. Bloody bandages, a khaki shirt with blood spattered across the shoulders, a bloody pith helmet with a hole through it, and two dead VC hastily stuffed into bunkers near the road. They were probably the victims of the impromptu ambush two nights before. As the company neared Tnaot, a lone bicyclist approached from the opposite direction but turned around in panic when he saw Americans approaching. Several Tiger Scouts recognized the man as Vietnamese and wanted to shoot him but were told to hold their fire in order to minimize the time the enemy would have to prepare themselves in the town ahead. It would take the cyclist longer to reach the town than the sound of gunfire.

It was time to quicken the pace. Lieutenant Morgan Weed’s 3rd Platoon soon reached the edge of Tnaot, arraying itself in assault formation along a north-south road. An on-line assault would have been foolish. Instead, Captain Lowe directed the 3rd Platoon to hold in place and cover the 2nd Platoon as it entered the town in parallel files from the southeast. If the 2nd Platoon ran into more trouble than it could handle, it would need a safe way out and the 3rd Platoon was positioned to provide it. Only the chattering of birds broke the stillness of a hot afternoon as 2nd Platoon entered the town. Ominously, there was no other sign of life, not even a stray dog. Everyone knew another fight was coming.

The 2nd Platoon’s lead squad, led by Sergeant Roland Alvarado, moved cautiously toward a pagoda dominating the town’s center, searching houses and hedges as they advanced. Suddenly an AK-47 opened up from their left, sending the squad diving for cover in an adjacent ditch. Fortunately, no one was hit. As Alvarado’s men raised their heads to return fire, they came under fire from behind as well. They had walked into an ambush and it would take the rest of the afternoon to get them out. The enemy was probably caught off guard by the direction of 2nd Platoon’s approach because it took a few minutes for their fire to build to its full fury. Sergeant Clifford Macomber’s squad moved along a hedge on the right side of the road, positioning themselves to engage a line of bunkers that were engaging Alvarado’s men from the base of a large berm. Staff Sergeant Charles Tapp’s squad swung wide to the left through a wooded part of town to take out the bunker that had initiated the ambush. Tapp’s men moved quickly but fire from several directions stopped them short of the pagoda. A mortar thumped from somewhere near the town square, exploding among the 2nd Platoon’s trail squad. The mortar must have fired its maximum elevation to get that close. The lone casualty was PFC John P. Janovik, wounded in the forearm by a sliver of shrapnel. The 3rd Platoon was now also at risk.

As Sergeant Macomber’s men came abreast of the company command group, Captain Lowe sprinted across the road to direct their actions. Lowe fired tracers at each bunker aperture in sight, ordering Macomber’s squad to place continuous aimed machinegun and rifle fire into them while Specialist Dennis “Wiley” Walker and PFC Danny Wood moved to the flank to take them out with grenades. Disregarding bullets peppering the ground around him, Wood rolled into the open to get a better shot at a bunker blocking his path. He succeeded, giving Walker enough
time to cross the open space untouched with an already armed grenade in his hand. Throwing himself atop the bunker, Walker slammed the grenade into the bunker aperture just before it went off. Those inside never had a chance. With a second grenade, he repeated the feat with Wood following in the open to draw fire and make sure no one got the chance to shoot his buddy. Wood was just 18 years old. The saga continued until Walker ran out of grenades. Returning to his squad to get more, Walker picked up a grenade launcher and joined those firing into identifiable bunker apertures. Wood covered him as he withdrew and then joined Walker, Macomber, and Lowe in firing into two other bunkers, both of which quickly fell silent. Walker and Wood would receive the Distinguished Service Cross for their actions that day.

Although enemy fire had nearly ceased, more trouble was on the way. Summoned back to his radio to answer a call from Lieutenant Colonel Gearin, Lowe ran back across the road, intending to move up to get Alvarado’s men out of the ditch while the 2nd Platoon still had the upper hand. He told his radio operator, Specialist Gary Moran, to call the 3rd Platoon to send up some light antitank weapons and hand grenades. On his other radio, Lowe returned Gearin’s fateful call. Gearin ordered him to get the company out of town. A flight of fighter-bombers and a flight of attack helicopters were inbound and Gearin intended to blow up as much of the town as he could. The dilemma was Alvarado’s squad. Their radio was not working and they were not coming out of that ditch willingly. There was still sporadic shooting around them, but not enough to pin them down. Lowe urged Gearin to send the aircraft elsewhere because D Company was making good progress and could not leave town until Alvarado’s men were extricated. Unrelenting, Gearin ordered a marker panel placed on the road to identify friendly positions.

Lieutenant Weed suddenly appeared with a poncho liner full of grenades and LAWs. Specialist Rick Mickels and Gary Moran put out the marker panel while Lowe established contact with the forward air controller and the inbound helicopters. Across the road, Weed joined Macomber, Walker, and Wood in placing 40mm, LAW, and rifle fire on every source of fire they could spot. Lowe yelled at Weed to get back to his platoon but it was too late. He probably never heard the order among all the noise. Above, the lead Cobra identified D Company’s marker panel and was getting instructions on friendly troop dispositions when it began taking .51 caliber fire from somewhere on Tnaot’s northwest side. The lead pilot decided to make his gun run from a different direction, using tall trees to mask his approach. Lowe started back across the road toward Alvarado’s position just as the gunship fired a spread of four folding fin aerial rockets. Three struck around the enemy mortar and heavy machinegun positions but the fourth fell short, striking directly between Alvarado’s and Macomber’s squads. Lowe was knocked off his feet by the blast and was dazed but otherwise unhurt. Cliff Macomber was not so fortunate. A fragment penetrated his flak vest and entered his chest. “Doc” Miller dragged Macomber across the road and, unable to find the wound, tried in vain to give him artificial respiration. He was already dead. As Miller stared at his friend’s dead face in disbelief, more casualties were being dragged across the road for treatment and evacuation. The enemy was no longer shooting.

Alvarado’s men came out of the ditch, some with serious wounds. Specialist Vance “Spooky” Godfrey, led the withdrawal, firing as he ran. Alvarado was helping Specialist Fred Robinson who had most of the flesh torn off part of his backside and leg. Specialist Nick Phillips was shell-shocked, unable to hear and barely able to function. More seriously wounded was Lieutenant Weed, a man who wasn’t even supposed to be in the fight. He had been struck in the back of the head by fragmentation and although conscious, was slurring his words, saying “I’m all right, tend to the others”. He was not all right. Evacuated to the 24th Evacuation Hospital at
Long Binh with six others, he died of his wounds early the next morning. It was Mother’s Day. At home in Decatur, Alabama, his wife would give birth to their daughter a week later.

While D Company was fighting at Tnaot, The Rangers and Recon Platoon ran into another hornet’s nest at Baray. In a series of fights throughout the afternoon, they and their supporting aviation killed eight and captured five VC. C Company was lifted west of Baray before dusk to support them and immediately spotted more enemy troops trying to flee, killing four of them. A Company’s 1st Platoon ambushed six VC near Chantrea. They wounded and captured two of them who were armed with Chinese SKS rifles.

On May 11, D company swept back through Tnaot, finding nine enemy dead in the bunkers they had fought from. They also found weapons (including a destroyed mortar and the tripod of a .51 caliber machinegun), bloody bandages and uniform parts, and an assortment of abandoned ammunition. Some of the enemy dead had been hastily booby-trapped, a vain attempt at vengeance. A Company was lifted north to Tuol Spean, where the enemy was thought to have gone after being driven out of Tnaot. They found nothing there. C Company completed its sweep west of Baray without incident. The Recon Platoon moved north from Baray and the Rangers moved east. About 350 meters north of Baray, the Recon Platoon’s point man spotted four VC in a box-shaped cluster of trees. As the platoon’s lead squad rushed forward to engage them, they were met by a fusillade of fire from several directions, killing Specialist Willard D. O’Brien and wounding another man. By strange coincidence, O’Brien, like John Lonsdale, was a Forward Observer’s radio operator acting as a riflemen when he died. C Company rushed north to help, forming a line behind which the Recon Platoon could withdraw under the protective fire of Air Force and Army aerial attacks. The aerial bombardment was credited with killing eight more of the enemy.

The next morning A Company spotted and engaged ten or more enemy, who returned fire. One American was wounded in the exchange and was evacuated after the fight. When the contact ended, A Company swept the area, finding three enemy dead and two weapons. Blood trails led to a nearby cluster of refugees. It would be the battalion’s last fight in Cambodia.

On May 12, President Nixon ordered American forces to advance no further than 21.6 miles inside Cambodia. Few understood the logic. The enemy was on the run, Cambodia was asking for the US-RVN assault to drive the communists out of the country, and there was no longer any serious fighting in Vietnam. Why stop when your opponent is on the ropes? That day, the “Seminole Raid” came to an end. Before the "Bearcats" returned to bases in Vietnam, they destroyed 28 tons of enemy munitions, uniforms, and a variety of miscellaneous supplies at Ba Thu alone. All participating elements left Cambodia before dark. The announcement in the Far East edition of the Stars and Stripes, the Armed Forces’ newspaper, made it appear to be a major withdrawal, announcing that the 4th and 9th Infantry Divisions were leaving Cambodia. In reality, all the 9th Infantry Division had in the Parrot’s Beak at the time was the 6-31st Infantry, E/75th Rangers, and half of C/2-4th Artillery. The 6-31st earned its second Valorous Unit Award (left) and its third Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm (right).

After returning to Vietnam, the 6th Battalion operated in Hau Nghia Province under the 3rd Brigade 25th Infantry Division until its colors were returned to Ft Lewis, Washington for inactivation on October 13, 1970. After 2 1/2 years in Vietnam, the "Bearcats" had earned the right to stand proudly as successors to a gallant regiment that had fought in Siberia, the Philippines, and Korea and whose 4th Battalion continued to serve in Vietnam’s coastal highlands.
until 1971. Between the time the 6th Battalion's colors were unfurled at Ft Lewis in 1967 and furled in 1970, the "Bearcats" had earned eight unit awards.

The 6th Battalion 31st Infantry was reactivated at Fort Ord, California on November 21, 1975 as part of the 7th Infantry Division. It remained there until August 6, 1980 when it was inactivated. Its colors did not stay furled for long. On June 1, 1981, the battalion was reactivated at Fort Irwin, California as the infantry component of the National Training Center's opposing forces brigade. Its soldiers fought nearly every maneuver battalion in the continental US, rarely losing a battle. Inactivated on January 16, 1988, the 6th Battalion had marked its last years by teaching lessons that would later serve thousands of leaders well, probably saving countless American lives in combat in Grenada, Panama, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Few units have done more for their country.