

1/35th

February 9, 1968

From your webmaster: The following articles first appeared in the 35th Infantry Regiment Association, Spring 2001, "Cacti" newsletter. Dick Arnold is the editor of this newsletter and a major organizer of the articles written below. Our thanks go to the many Cacti brothers who made contributions. Our hats are off to you all. Some format changes have been made to accommodate posting to the web.

Editor's Note (Dick Arnold): We are taking a bit of a different approach with this narrative. We are using our usual background information from official sources and written/oral interviews; but we are also including in their entirety, requested statements from participants. We are hoping this will give a diverse view as well as highlight the emotions evoked by combat and the difficulty in firmly establishing accurate chains of events.

Background:

The 1968 Tet Offensive impacted the Cacti much as it did nearly all combat arms units in South Vietnam. True to form however, our exploits have generally been overlooked in comparison with the better-reported battles north of Da Nang involving our brethren Marines and 1st Cav.

At the beginning of Tet, the 2nd NVA Division Headquarters and its three subordinate regiments, the 3rd, 1st and 21st, left their normal base areas in the Que Son mountains to participate in attacks both to the south of LZ Baldy and The Hoi An-Da Nang area to the north. Local force VC units also coordinated in these attacks. To help relieve pressure on the Da Nang/Hoi An sphere by both interdicting and spoiling actions, the 1/35 launched operations in this area on February 3, 1968.

Establishing a new LZ, Cacti at BT 059479, the battalion was operating a few miles southwest of Hoi An in an AO originally bounded on the east by Highway 1, on the west by an abandoned railroad, on the south by Road 535 and on the north by the Song Thu Bon river. The terrain was flat and densely to sparsely vegetated and populated. The U.S. Marines had previously frequently operated in the area.

(This section is based on recollections by C, 1/35 commander David R. Collins as expressed in "Anatomy of a Battle" as well as letters from, and phone discussions with, William W. Taylor Jr. who was the 1/35 battalion commander.)

The events leading up to the 9th are too numerous to mention but included many small actions and repeated encounters with evading NVA. Numerous fortified villages were found with expertly concealed bunkers and fighting positions that obviously had been hastily evacuated. Numerous caches of supplies were also uncovered, again underscoring the likelihood that massive artillery and napalm strikes had caused the NVA to disengage and move north across the Song Thu Bon.

Colonel Taylor thus sought an extension of the northern boundary of the AO. A request that had to be coordinated all the way to III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters before it was

finally approved. Colonel Taylor, learning that the Marines had never successfully operated north of the Song Thu Bon and also that reliable intelligence placed the HQ for the 21st NVA Regiment just north of the river, was determined to exercise due caution. He thus directed that the river crossing be carried out under cover of darkness.

This was accomplished shortly before daybreak on Feb 7 with Bravo securing the crossing. One platoon of Bravo had crossed when a sharp firefight broke out with a squad of stay-behind NVA resulting in three enemy dead and no American casualties. Bravo consolidated, moved out, and was quickly followed across by Alpha and Charlie companies. The plan was for all three companies to veer eastward and then north. Once achieving those positions, they were all to jump off due west in rapid movement to gain contact and have enough elements available to maneuver and exploit any contact while still daylight.

Major contact failed to develop on the 7th with the exception of Bravo who experienced intense combat with several NVA sniper teams resulting in several American casualties including five dead. In addition, a medevac supporting B Company took a bullet through the engine and crashed in Bravo's perimeter.

At 0830 on February 8, an armored cavalry platoon of five APCs linked up with Bravo to give the battalion additional fire power. The 8th passed with again no major contact but many encounters with enemy snipers during methodical searches and burning of deserted villages that showed recent enemy activity.

On the night of February 8, Captain Collins recalls meeting with his platoon leaders to survey the maps and plan the next day's activity. Every village in the area but one had been searched. That last one, about 1500 meters to the north, would require movement through a broad field of dry rice paddies and chest-high elephant grass and would be the next day's target. Charlie Company experienced the NVA psyops program shortly after dark when from about 150 meters away, male voices in a non-Vietnamese accent, were heard to repeat, "Americans go back, go back home."

The next morning Charlie waited for Bravo to move a bit closer for mutual support since the APCs were slowing Bravo's progress. Alpha Company was located about 1500 meters south. While waiting, Charlie received mail, C-rations, and ammunition resupply. At 0930, with Bravo making good progress, Charlie Company moved out. Captain Collins, not wanting to cross all the open area to the north, directed the 2nd and 4th platoons to move 500 meters northeast to a tree line. They were to wait there while the rest of the company linked up and then they would all move through the trees and light undergrowth to the objective. The company command group moved behind the 2nd platoon with the lead platoon on the right flank.

As the lead element approached the tree line, sniper rounds cracked from the north into the CP group. Captain Collins ordered the 2nd and 4th platoons into the tree line intending to maneuver them toward the fire while deploying the other two platoons as a fixing force. Captain Collins states the movement was rapid and looked good when a heavy mortar barrage, followed by intense enemy machine gun fire, suddenly hit the left flank. Turning in the direction of that fire, Charlie Company then beheld a strange site according to Captain Collins. About 250 to 300 NVA were standing in rows, covered with grass from the shoulders up. They were about 30 meters away. Some of them waved and yelled "Hello GI!"

Colonel Taylor was at LZ Cacti when the fighting started, in the middle of a visit from 3rd Brigade CO. Colonel George E. Wear. Hearing the radio traffic that indicated Charlie in major contact, Colonel Taylor yelled down to his CP to get him a chopper. However, Colonel Wear

told him to take his and so he did. Later another chopper was obtained and Colonel Taylor alternated using them all day long; switching while the other was being refueled and stopping only long enough for a bio-breaks and something to drink.

By this time Captain Collins had deployed his company in a backward L-shape, which gave each platoon good fields of fire. He recalls his right flank as being in good shape. However, the left flank, with much less natural cover, was suffering the brunt of the enemy assault. Enemy small arms, machine guns, mortars, and 840 rockets were causing numerous casualties. With a platoon leader already dead, two NCOs took charge of the left flank, organizing the defenses and setting-up a central location for the wounded.

Two soldiers, spotting a large enemy group squatting in the grass on their left, ran to the point and killed 16 NVA. Captain Collins states that the actions by some of the NVA were bewildering. Some of the enemy stood straight up and covered their faces with their hands or turned their heads, waiting to be shot. Others began crawling toward the Americans across a dry rice paddy and were killed with very few even firing their AK47s. Some of Co. C's troops were yelling profanities and laughing at the enemy as they fired.

By this time Colonel Taylor was becoming increasingly concerned about C Company's predicament and had started Bravo Company, under Captain Don Reh, toward the beleaguered unit. Colonel Taylor's original idea was to bring Bravo into the village from the right so as to relieve the pressure on C Company. Bravo however soon ran into stiff resistance itself with enemy Recoiless and B40s starting to find the accompanying APCs. Colonel Taylor recalls one poignant radio exchange with Captain Reh when, after hearing of one failed attempt to break through, he simply told him, "Well, you are just going to have to try again." *(And keep trying they did, For an excellent coverage of Bravo's actions, read the attached article by Captain Reh.)*

Meanwhile Captain Collins had been effectively using successive helicopter gunship runs to suppress enemy fire. A new crisis developed when firing broke out in the right rear and the company was now regrouped into an inverted T-shape formation with the right flank re-deployed to cover the rear.

Alpha Company under Captain Charles Chaplinski was now maneuvering from the southeast in an attempt to engage the enemy in Charlie's rear. As an interesting footnote, this fight was the fifth consecutive month that Alpha had major contact on the "9th" Meeting extremely stiff resistance from NVA in bunkers, they were using gunships and mostly artillery to make progress. Captain Chaplinski was very skillfully adjusting the rounds from three 105's; bringing the rounds in "danger close"—sometimes within 25 meters of friendly positions. Following close on the heels of the artillery, Alpha was overrunning many NVA positions and was within 500 meters of C Company when tragedy struck. In addition to the "danger close" situation, Alpha was also directly on the gun target line and at near the maximum range for the 105s—thus, there was scant room for error. After a lull in the firing, Captain Chaplinski again called for a three-round salvo from each artillery piece. One of the guns may have been worn, with this condition perhaps exacerbated after cooling off, because its first round landed behind Alpha, the second round even closer, and the third round directly on part of the ~ Platoon, killing two and wounding several. The need to stop and organize extraction for the numerous wounded effectively blunted Alpha's initiative. The exact cause of the gun malfunction was never reported back down the chain but it was learned that three artillery officers were relieved because they were not observing as required during "danger close" conditions.

It was now late afternoon and Colonel Taylor was even more dubious regards C Company's ability to disengage without reinforcement. Bravo was still meeting fierce resistance in its drive to come in from the right, so Colonel Taylor made a difficult decision. After ascertaining from Captain Collins that Charlie had adequate cover, he ordered Bravo to turn left and drive straight into C Company's perimeter. The risk in such a maneuver is, of course, the high chance of friendly fire incidents. Colonel Taylor explains his decision thusly, "A move like this is extremely dangerous but I weighed the danger from this move against the danger of not reinforcing C Company and decided to go with it."

Finally, around six in the afternoon, Bravo, behind the blazing .50s of the APCs, was able to reach Charlie's location and deployed completely around the perimeter. C Company then consolidated; ammunition was redistributed; and medevacs organized. In the interim, Captain Collins had been severely wounded. Colonel Taylor recalls a radio conversation with him when he stated he could not see. Colonel Taylor advised him to stick close to a radio and someone who could see and let that individual relay to him what was happening.

Colonel Taylor now provides a touching finale.

"When all this was over on 10 Feb, I tried to get helicopters to extract C Company but was unable to get them. There was nothing to do but walk them all the way back to Cacti in the rain. Hardly a fitting reward for all that they had endured. These magnificent, tired, wet, hungry, but proud men, came through the barbed wire into Cacti with smiles on their faces. The brigade chaplain was there when they come in and, so help me, he was handing out Playboy magazines! He wanted to hold services for the men right away but I told him no—not until they had been fed."

A full recapitulation, including casualties, is at the end of this section. Now however, let us read from our other contributors. First up-to-bat is Don Reh. Old Bravo-Six has graciously reached back into his memory bank and came up with a gem.

RESCUING CHARLIE COMPANY

By Donald C. Reh, Bravo Six, 1/35 1967-8

This is my recollection of events and feelings after some 30+ years. I haven't read accounts written by others of the operation to avoid resetting my memories. Thus, any perceived slights to, or omissions of, anyone's brave actions in this account are not intentional, but only reflect my perspective and recollections faded by time

Bravo Company received its mission, the night before (days just blended together) to move out the next morning and provide a blocking force for a joint operation with Charlie and Alpha Companies. Bravo Company's blocking position, I was told, was along the south side of a wide fordable river and east of suspected small NVA force dug into in a wooded area south of the river. Dry rice paddies wrapped around the wooded location on the east and south sides. Charlie Company was to move up from the south and lead the attack on the NVA position. Alpha would block on the west.

Bravo Company had a platoon of APCs attached to it for this operation, consisting of 4 APCs, including a four-deuce (4.2) mortar APC. All had mounted 50-caliber machine guns, spare barrels and plenty of ammunition. Helicopter gunships would provide overhead support. I think a spotter or observer helicopter, a LOACH, would also be on site. Sounded like a well-planned operation. But both eventually left the scene long before the battle ended— the

gunship, because it ran out of ammunition and fuel and the observation helicopter, because it had no protection or ran out of fuel. No replacements showed up.

My plan, as I recall, was to deploy the APCs, one with each platoon, when we moved into the frontal assault formation, leaving the 4.2 mortar APC back with my 81 mm mortar platoon. Before moving into that formation we had to cross, according to the map, a series of wooded areas interspersed with rice paddies, which were dry at that time of year.

The next morning Bravo was delayed waiting for the APCs to arrive overland. As soon as they arrived, I briefed the APC platoon leader of the plan, got his input, and promptly moved out. It was mid-morning. We moved as planned through a series of wooded areas and dry rice paddies; the kind with the high, hard banks that one could walk on and/ or hide behind, but not thick enough to stop a 50 caliber bullet from penetrating. The paddies were dry. A line of trees bordered the south edge of the river to our right, a typical riparian environment.

As we moved forward we started hearing, then encountering, steadily increasing incoming small arms fire, so we knew we were getting close to the action. Battalion called and told us to move faster into position to make up for the time lost waiting for the APCs to arrive. C Company was encountering heavier than expected fire — typical reliability of the field intelligence usually received— and needed our support sooner.

I sent the three platoons abreast and spread out just before we emerged from the last woodline into the dry rice paddies surrounding the NVA dug-in position. The growth in the rice paddies and banks was substantial, possibly three feet high and dense in places, clear in other places. It offered reasonably good concealment for foot soldiers, less for the APCs. The 2nd platoon was on the right to make contact with the river and insure that NVA wouldn't escape and come around behind us. The other two platoons were on-line, one in the center and on the left. Each was to maintain contact with the platoon to the right. The platoon on the left was also to look for and make contact with the right front of Charlie Company. I restricted the APCs' 50-caliber firing fans on the left to avoid hitting C Company, and also initially limited them to firing smaller bursts of fire to prevent aimless shooting of rounds and burning out barrels. My command group was to follow the center platoon.

As we broke out of the woodline the four-deuce mortar APC remained just in front of the woodline and down in the rice paddy to get a decent firing position. The other 50-caliber mounted APCs started putting out controlled suppressive fire and moving forward with Infantry on both sides. The mortars were dropping in rounds. The plan, I thought, was working out!

As the platoons and APCs moved forward the incoming small arms fire increased, not unexpectedly, and initially was too high to inflict casualties. Shortly, the incoming rounds got thicker and lower and forced us to duck and run to a dike, crawl over a dike and run to the next dike for cover. As a result the APCs were not able to do the sustained charge forward with Infantrymen and became too exposed and too stationary; then some rocket grenades started coming in looking for hits. The APCs increased their volume of fire from controlled bursts to long runs of suppressive fire. They hung back, 50-calibers blazing away, and as I recall, moved around somewhat to avoid presenting stationary targets. The platoon leader's APC was directly behind me blazing away, creating all kinds of noise that interfered with my hearing radio communications. Several times I told him to control his bursts of fire and that of the APC on the left from firing too far left over Charlie Company.

The acting 2nd platoon leader, the platoon sergeant, radioed back that they had encountered an apparent communications trench outside the tree line near the south bank of the river. They found some comms wire. I told him to send some troops into the trench line, carefully clear it, and prevent any escapees from using it and to maintain visual contact with the river so NVA couldn't escape us along the riverbank. I visualized this trench as being outside of the right side of the treeline that we were approaching to our direct front and possibly extending back into the NVA position. I envisioned a few men entering the trench and clearing it while others in the platoon would continue moving frontally, still on-line; maintain contact with those in the trench; and provide warning of enemy in the trench and fire support if needed. 2nd platoon reported finding more comms wire and radios in the trench and other abandoned equipment as they moved through it. They were coming under increasing enemy fire from the tree line to their front.

Meanwhile the 50-calibers were blazing away, especially the one behind me. The center platoon periodically confirmed that they were maintaining contact with the 2nd platoon (on the right), and the left platoon confirmed that it was maintaining contact with the center platoon. So far so good, I thought. And on we maneuvered, crouching, running, crawling over the dikes and crouching and running through the grass up to the next dike.

The APC 50-caliber behind me was blazing, I mean blazing, away and we could hear its rounds going over our heads. Another reason for keeping low! All I could hear was outgoing, no incoming. I tried calling the APC platoon leader over the radio to hold down the fire but the noise was so great that I couldn't get through or hear a response. I was furious! I couldn't get anyone over the radios, not my platoon leaders, the APC platoon leader or even Battalion operations. I yelled out over the radio hold down the firing, I can't hear anyone" or something stronger but to that effect. That relieved my frustration but not the APC firing.

Well, a few minutes later, the APC had to change its barrel, so we got some quiet minutes. I called and asked the platoon leaders if they could see any NVA in the treeline or woods.

Charlie Company relayed through Battalion that it saw some NVA escaping from the woods and running to the southeast. I called my left platoon to check it out. No one in that platoon had seen anyone running in that direction between Charlie Company and Bravo's left platoon. I guessed there was still a large gap between my left platoon and Charlie Company. It was bigger than I imagined!

My command group had slowly crept forward towards the enemy's tree line hoping to make contact with the platoon supposed to be in front of us. We indeed got close, and heard bullets coming towards us and whizzing overhead. Still my platoons had not really encountered a lot of incoming small arms fire. Something was strange! Meanwhile, I determined from company radio talk that most, if not all of the 2nd platoon, was in the trench, and the center platoon had slid right to maintain contact with it and the left platoon had slid right to maintain contact with the center platoon.

With the three of us in my command group crouching behind a paddy dike covered with 2-3 foot high vegetation and close to the NVA tree line, I asked my RIO, Tex, if he could see anyone of the platoon in front of us. He slowly raised his helmeted head above the rice paddy dike, paused, and almost instantaneously jerked it back down. Very quietly he said, "Charlie [NVA] is right in front of us, no more than 20-30 feet away, with rifles pointed in our general direction. There aren't any friendlies between us and Charlie!!" Incredulously, I asked, "You mean there is no one from the center platoon in front of us? Between us and Charlie?"

"NO!" he said quietly, "Charlies are less than 30 feet away. I saw one in a tree and some on the ground. They can hear us. We need to get out of here." I moved to look up. "Don't," he said, "They'll see you and shoot."

My mind raced trying to understand this situation: what the hell was going on - where were the center and left platoons? The two RTOs, Tex and Plummer, thought that they probably all moved into the trench. I called the center and left platoon leaders to find out where the hell they were. They were all in the trench! S.. of a b...! Not only that but the trench was running east and west along the treeline next to the river, not along the tree line in front of us. Everyone was to our right! Well that left us and the APCs pretty well exposed and unprotected.

I had to reorganize us and get over to Charlie Company, which was pinned and couldn't move. It was about mid-afternoon. Then I heard from either the gunships or from Battalion Operations that the gunships were out of ammunition and needed to depart the station. I asked them to hang on a little while longer because we needed overhead observation and location information. They agreed. They radioed that they could see several NVA fording the river and heading north in a rush carrying equipment. A few minutes later when the gunship leader heard that no replacement gunships were enroute, he called us saying that they were leaving station. The LOACH also flew off. Now we were without any overhead observer information of friendly and NVA movements.

The 2nd platoon radio operator called and said that the platoon sergeant, who was in the trench, had been shot in the head but was all right. A bullet just grazed the top of his head. It entered his helmet above and between the eyes, passed through the space between his head and helmet liner and exited the rear of helmet in a straight line! A bullet with a lot of energy. (I imagine today he still thanks the heavenly spirits for that life-saving event.) Bravo had taken few, if any, casualties up to that point.

By this time the incoming and outgoing fire had slacked a little—we could finally hear people communicating again on the radios.

Then a couple of NVA rocket grenades found the four-deuce mortar APC and killed two soldiers. One, in the commander's hatch, and the other either the driver or a crewmember. One rocket struck the ammunition storage area creating a loud explosion. The remaining rounds started cooking fast. Too fast to safely go in to take out the dead soldier in the commander's hatch.

2nd platoon had moved up the trench, cleared it into the treeline, and stopped. It was now on point and had no flank security. I ordered the three platoons out of the trench; to move to an assembly area in the wood line 75 meters behind us and away from the stricken four-deuce mortar APC, and to remove all the enemy equipment that they could safely carry back.

With a squad of the 2nd platoon securing the trench line, Bravo Company regrouped inside the tree line and then quickly fanned out across the dry rice paddies, moving with the APCs towards Charlie Company. By this time as I recall, C Company was still pinned down; had several casualties and was running very low on ammunition. A short time later, in late afternoon, under reduced incoming fire, we made contact with the right perimeter of Charlie Company, entered its perimeter and deployed completely around the entire perimeter, mainly rice paddy dikes, and secured it. With the perimeter secure and a lot more firepower available, Charlie Company then reconsolidated itself into a smaller sector of the perimeter, while B Company moved and occupied the remaining three fourths of the perimeter. Ammunition was

redistributed and fields of fire assigned. Charlie Company had been decimated, its CO seriously wounded, along with several others, and needed a medivac.

We needed to secure an LZ for the medivac. An invisible sniper or two were periodically taking shots at people inside the perimeter. That forced us to keep separate, minimize movement and return suppressive fire towards directions of the firing. I sent a patrol out to find the snipers and assess the woodline and area in front of us where the NVA had fought. They found that the retreating NVA had left dead soldiers and equipment. The invisible snipers were still hidden and firing at us. Someone determined that at least some sniper fire was coming from the solitary tree to the left front of our perimeter. We raked it and the tree line to the front with small arms and 50-caliber machine gun fire. This stopped the occasional sniper firing and we could then move around inside the perimeter without receiving incoming fire. I called in the medivacs.

As the first one approached, we again raked the solitary tree and also the tree line in front of us with suppressive fire. The medivac landed, loaded and took off with no incoming rounds.

As dusk settled in we knew that any gun fire from a sniper would reveal his position. I believe the night passed with no sniper fire and all of us on high alert and nicotine deprived.

The next morning a patrol located one sniper tied to branches in the solitary tree, and one or two more tied to branch forks in the treeline to our front. Charlie Company was airlifted out the next morning back to base camp, along with all the loose equipment from the NVA that we recovered. Early in the morning the four deuce mortar APC finally exploded. One entire side of heavy, welded aluminum armor was ripped off leaving jagged edges. Bravo Company recovered the dead soldier in the hatch and placed him a body bag. We rigged explosives and detonated the remaining rounds and fuses. I believe that the remainder of the day was spent collecting enemy equipment, doing body counts and airlifting equipment out of the area. As I recall, when we left, the shell of the APC was still there. We learned that we had encountered and routed an NVA regimental headquarters.

The most frustrating pieces for me of this action were the overpowering, loud, overhead sound of the uncontrolled firing of the 50-calibers, which prevented hearing any radio communications, and the crazy movement of the center and left platoon over to the trench on the right side.

This action continues to remind me that effective communications are so important to a successful outcome. The events of that day clearly illustrate how communications, thought to be clear from both the senders and receivers perspective, can be misleading and misunderstood and foul up an operation.

AND NOW WE HAVE LYLE T SHARGENT, C 1/35

Lyle was an RTO on the 9th

My next letter is from the 11th of Feb 1968 and it starts with a recap of the 9th. We knew we had run into at least a regiment of NVA either the 1St or the 21St Regiment. Anyway we had 15 killed and 45 wounded. At that day we had only 69 of us left. That was with reinforcements on the 10th and the 11th. My letter from the 8th states that we had 140 men so I remember only 55 of us walking in on the 10th. I wrote that we had captured 22 AK47's, 6 SKS's, 5 B-40 rocket launchers, 1 60mm mortar with ammo (which we later carried with us at all times) lots of ammo and grenades and 6 .30 cal light machine guns. So far the enemy body count was at

236. We killed 84 at one time when they tried to overrun us with a human wave. A Co., which was 800 meters away at the start of the day never was able to break through. B Co., which now had the APC's and were 1000 meter away finally linked up with us at approximately 6pm. They were down to 4 APC's and 85 men. As an after-the-fact the S-2 believes the divisional CP was with the people who hit us. I got a copy of A Distant Challenge to reread some of the article by Capt. Collins. and on a piece of paper I had inserted "243 killed NVA and 15 killed 70 wounded for us." 85 and 55 would equal 140 so I don't know exactly what to make of it. I do know that I loaded most of the people on helicopters and it was many, too many. When I had to load Sharpless (who took my place in the 1St. platoon on the radio) I knew how he had died. It was more than I could handle.

A sense of utter futility and hopelessness of the situation had the biggest impact on me of my whole experience. I was, literally, screaming at some Americal gunship pilots on the 9th. They looked to be specs in the sky and we needed help NOW!. Only to be told "roger that Charlie Mike, but be advised we're taking 2 rounds for every round we're putting out." I really expected we would all die that day—there was no doubt in my mind. But strangely I was at peace with that thought. There's more to that day and the days leading up to it. Part of the reason I have such good notes and totals is that I carried the SOI and had to encode all the names—both kia and wia and their serial numbers— so it was a very time consuming job that night. I think I finished somewhere around 10 or 11 and started rounding everyone up right after B Co. came and rescued us since we didn't have a CP as Capt. Collins and the 1st Sgt. were among those wounded. I fell asleep to sleep the sleep of the dead until the next morning. I totally did not even hear when a squad of NVA walked into one point of our perimeter and each side challenged the other. Finally one of our 60 gunners cut loose with a burst and that's how we ended up with the 60 mortar. That's what they were carrying. Apparently they had been cut off or were ordered to try to slip through our lines in making their escape.

The morning of the 10th, 3rd Brigade CO. Col. Wear and the Brigade Sgt. Major and others came out and the two of them and myself walked the battlefield. I explained what had happened and together we searched the dead NVA for documents. Now that I think about it that must have been a funny looking sight. A Sgt Major, a full Bird Colonel and some dumb grunt outside the perimeter counting the dead and policing up the battlefield. It's probably a good thing I never had time to think about it beforehand or I doubt if I'd have done it.

THE FINALE IS FROM VICTOR J. DEMITCHELL, C 1/35

It is a stark, compelling, and oddly eloquent grunt's-eye view of the battle

Events that happened 33 years ago are hard to remember. They are even harder since my conscious mind has blocked them out and allows me to glimpse them only in my nightmares. I remember bits and pieces of the Feb 9th fire fight and the days leading-up to it. In retrospect, I think I knew we were in a bad place but didn't, or wouldn't, believe it. This will be very difficult for me to write. My doctor and my best and closest friend recommended I do it in memory of those that lost their lives. Here is what I remember.

My earliest recollection was probably on Feb 5th. We had entered a village and uncovered many supplies, ammunition and food and I think some medical supplies. I did not see them. I remember thinking as I looked at the medical stuff how they could use it on a human after being buried in the dirt as it was. The smell of that place was horrible, everything was burned, a mixture of sulfur and dying trees. I was RTO for 3rd platoon and was able to listen to the banter of Battalion and the company Ca, Capt. David Collins, as the info was relayed back and forth and a request was made for a chopper to remove these items.

I think both A and B Co's had been taking sniper fire that day as were we. All of us were thinking, where the hell are they? Why won't they fight? Tom Wickware who always seemed to be in back of me was nervous as hell. He kept saying, "I wish we would leave this area, I'm getting bad vibes." I think his fright was eating into me. I believe we had 1 wounded that day.

My next memory might have been on the 6th or 7th. It was dusk, we had dug in for the night. All was quiet till about 11pm. We had set out a LP. A buddy (Bill Anderson ?) was part of the group. We were on a small hill looking down into a ravine. A small village was visible. Movement was detected in the village and an E-6 with a M-1 4 fired into a hut. The round was a tracer and it set the hut smoldering. Then all hell broke loose from the area of the LP. M60 fire, claymores and M16 rounds were heard. The LP came running back into the perimeter. Then we had incoming mortars and the next thing I remember was someone shouting, "We have gooks in the wire." I remember being called on the radio for a casualty report. Joe Lewellyn, 3rd Plt's Lt, could not get the info to the CO. That was a very panicky moment. I remember hearing him over the radio screaming to get the info to him. We had flares dropped all that night but the gooks never returned. I think we had 2 or 3 MIA's that night. The next morning, right as we moved out, I remember passing a small cave covered with brush. Someone yelled that a gook was hiding inside and an officer, (Lt. Jerry Novakovich ?), fired a burst inside. The cave was checked and I remember seeing a dead gook, dressed in camo-fatigues (I was amazed, not black PJ's). His intestines were spilling out. He might have been hit the night before and was hiding. This sight has never left my mind.

Much of my recollection now has to do, for sure, with the 8th/9th. I remember crossing a river, being low on water and having to use those damn tablets in my canteen. We had taken sporadic sniper fire all that day. Were we walking into a trap? My wife was due with my first child and I was scared because of the shit that had been happening. I remember telling myself, "Take it one day at a time." We had settled in for the night. No re-supply was received. That meant we had no mortar or 50 cal and to boot we were in a graveyard! This was very unsettling. Lp's were set out. After dusk I remember we heard voices outside the perimeter; they were telling us to go home. I remember hearing bells/gongs and wanting to just get up and run. But where? We were ordered not to fire. Artillery was dropped around us and the noises stopped. My night guard duty was early but I did not sleep at all that night The night passed with no real action.

The next morning we left, starting out really late for some reason. It must have been about 9. We did get re-supplied. I remember getting a letter and ammo that made me feel better.

I remember seeing a tree line ahead, and then all hell broke loose; incoming sniper fire and mortars. Lt. Lewellyn was hit as were 3-4 others, one being a medic. I remember trying to help Joe with a gauze bandage, giving him some water and distinctly remember giving him his 45 pistol. Another I helped had a very bad leg wound. I did what I could for him and then realized that if I didn't start firing back I would be dead. Many mortar rounds were falling, B40 rockets were exploding and I was terrified. I was in a line with 6-8 others and remember looking over a berm and seeing 40-50 enemy soldiers running in full view in front of me. It's like they were asking to be shot—they were not ducking or anything. I also saw Lt. Jerry Novakovich standing up and trying to direct 2nd platoon and, as he was giving orders, he was shot and killed. This is a very vivid memory. He was a brave man. I think the group I was in was on the left side (don't know which direction, N-E-S or W) and was cut off from the rest of the company. Why I think this I don't know, but there were very few of us together. After about 10 minutes of firing, I was low on ammo and crawled out to try and find some. I remember finding a buddy (KIA), Sp4 Mark Kay from California. I retrieved some 16 rounds and a LAW and crawled back. There was a drainage ditch in front of us and about 200 yards straight ahead

was a small bridge running over this ditch. A few gooks were hiding there; it seemed to be a crossing point for them. A sergeant caught one of them with his 14, sending him down. It's as if this happened yesterday it's so clear. I remember gun ships arriving and on my radio speaking to, I believe, someone from battalion in a chopper.

From here on I remember little except a loud explosion. When I came to, a medic was bending over me, putting dressings on me. I now know that a mortar round exploded in the middle of us, killing Sal Banaga, Steve?, Tom Backy and Bob Sharpless?. I remember my buddy Bob Fritsche (later KIA at Mile High) talking to me, telling me everything was gonna be OK. I was lying in a line with other wounded.

No medevacs were available that day, and I remember spending a cold night. Co B had joined us and it was the morning of the 10th that I was taken to the NSA hospital in DaNang.

I write this in memory of Bob, Paul, Tom and Sal. You guys were the best. May God keep you in his arms till I get there and we'll listen to the Stones and have some beers.

SUMMARY

First, special thanks to our contributors: William Taylor, Don Reh, Lyle Shargent, and Victor DeMitchell. We really appreciate it guys!

The February 9, 1968 battle was against elements of the 21st Regiment, 2nd NVA Division. Colonel William Taylor, without being able to divulge the exact intelligence source, states without a shadow of a doubt there was a regimental CP located in the village.

The published enemy body count varies from source to source. The most reasonable seems to be over 300 credited to the 1/35 with C Company accounting for about 200 of those.

The 1/14 was also engaged on February 8-9 a bit farther west around LZ Hardcore. They were credited with an additional 200 enemy killed.

For the Cacti, February 1968 would prove the costliest month of the war. The two battalions combined suffered 42 killed and 150 wounded. The 1/14 also suffered 39 killed and 121 wounded.

Following are the known 1/35 dead for the February 9, 1968 fight and the days immediately leading up to it. Please contact the Editor for comments, corrections, or additions. Dick Arnold

C 1/35	B 1/35	A 1/35
2/9/68	2/7/68	2/9/68
Pfc William Anderson	1Lt Richard Burbach	Sp4 James Brennan
Pfc Thomas Backy	Sp4 Greg Belew	Pfc Michael Kindred
Pfc Salvador Banaga	Sp4 Richard Johnson	2/9/68
Pfc Steven Clark	Pfc Joseph Mandarino	HQ 1/35
Pfc William Goldberg	Pfc Richard Vasko	Sp4 William Wyant

Sp4 Mark Kay	2/8/68	
Sgt Russell Krille	2Lt Spencer Powers Jr.	
Sgt Lonnie LeBombard	2/9/68	
2Lt Jerry Novakovich	Pfc Richard Perez	
Sp4 David Reid	Pfc Stanley Jamrock	(DOW 2/15/68)
Pfc Ronald Rohrkaste	Pfc Lucien Robinson	(DOW 2/21/68)
Pfc Robert Sharpless	2/10/68	
Pfc Harold Stokes	Sp4 Michael Anderson	

William was a medic, so technically listed in HQ. In reality, he was near certain to have been assigned to one of the rifle companies. Please contact the Editor if you can clarify.