

11-12 March, 1967

Just by pure coincidence, a staff reporter by the name of Robert Pearman was at the Brigade Firebase when the contact began. He asked for and got permission to join us in the field within hours of the battle ending. He interviewed a good number of us while everything was still fresh in our minds and wrote the following article published in the Kansas City Star, Thursday 23 March, 1967. (SGM (Ret) D. F. Butters, then Operations Sergeant, 2/35th)

***"A Pacifist Medic Dies Beside a Soldier"***

***by Robert Pearman***

***(A member of The Star's Staff)***

***Near the Cambodian Border West of Pleiku - About 9 o'clock in the morning Sgt. Joe Towner, Seaside Calif., was pushing the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon of Alpha company through the thick jungle growth about a mile from the Nam Sa Thay river, which at this point separates Cambodia from Vietnam.***

***The company, part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry division, was checking out the area after a B-52 strike.***

***Up ahead on the trail the point man saw an enemy soldier, dressed in the uniform of the North Vietnamese army. He called back the word to Sergeant Towner who sent a squad forward. They killed the enemy soldier, but the point man, moving forward to check the body was shot and dropped.***



**THESE MEN HAVE BEEN cut off in the jungle at night and surrounded by the enemy. They have seen their buddies die, get wounded and had been unable to help them. The strain of combat shows on their faces. - (Kansas City Star photograph by Robert Pearman).**

***Boyd Gardner, the platoon medic, was a conscientious objector and even refused to carry a weapon. His duty, he thought, was to aid the wounded, not to kill people.***

*Like many soldiers he had decorated his helmet cover: "Would you believe I'm a medic?" "Don't follow me I'm lost too," it said in the back. "I don't make house calls." "Vietnam No. 10."*

*When the point man went down Gardner rushed forward to help him. A machine gun bullet split the brim of his helmet, struck him between the eyes and killed him.*

*The fire continued. The first platoon, separated from the rest of the company, was cut off. All that day and that night they, and the rest of the battalion, would fight for their lives with an estimated two North Vietnamese army battalions.*

### **Aid Moves Up**

*Lt. Col Clinton Granger, Killeen, Tex., the battalion commander began to move two other companies through the jungle to the relief of A company. The A company commander was no stranger to combat. Capt. Luis Barcena, a short and volatile naturalized American, had as a Cuban, participated in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion. Later in the American army, he had fought with the paratroopers in the Dominican Republic.*

*All of A company was now under heavy automatic weapons and mortar fire. The blazing sun moved to midday and then into the western sky. Air strikes seared the jungle with napalm and friendly artillery shells burst around the men clinging to a patch of jungle.*

*The second platoon was in trouble, too. In the late afternoon PFC Bobby Day, 20 Canton, Okla., and the men in his squad were pinned down by enemy fire. "The Lieutenant was running up trying to get the men up on line," Day said. "We were yelling at him to get down. Finally he got down on his knees, then I heard him say 'oh,' like that."*



**ARTILLERY POSITIONS** fired 2400 rounds in response to a Communist mortar attack on Plei Djereng.

*"I said, 'Are you hit sir' and he groaned and said 'Yes, here'," The Lieutenant was shot in the chest and he stuck a finger into the bullet hole to stop the bleeding.*

*It was the first time PFC Wendell Meade, another medic, had been under fire. He, too, was a conscientious objector and carried no weapon. He crawled to the Lieutenant's side to try to help him.*

### **He is Wounded**

*The darkness gathered over the jungle. Meade, wounded himself now, was trying to help other men.*

*Day could hear the Lieutenant groaning and asking for water. "I tried to crawl over to him but an AKA (sub machine-gun) sent a string of bullets down between us. I waited and tried it again. The same thing happened. Finally I threw him my canteen."*

*Out of the night a Chinese Communist grenade landed between the medic and the injured Lieutenant. With some last reserve of strength the Lieutenant covered the missile with his steel helmet. The shrapnel from under the helmet struck him in the legs. Shrapnel glanced off the medic's entrenching tool and injured him slightly.*

*Day saw the Lieutenant turning in the darkness. He saw the hunched figure of the medic. Then there was no more movement or sound and he knew the Lieutenant was dead.*

*Not far away, but as a million miles because of the thickness of the jungle, B and C companies were moving toward the trapped men. B Company was hit hard by an enemy force. Seven soldiers died, 21 were hurt. Tied now to the bodies and the wounded men, the company had to stop, dig in, and wait for helicopters to get the injured out.*

### **Officer Looses Glasses**

*Capt. Ron Rykowski, a former enlisted man highly decorated in Korean combat, is a gaunt, tall, hook-nosed soldier, with incongruous scholarly heavy-rimmed eyeglasses. Without his glasses he is handicapped and his glasses were lost somewhere in the combat in the jungle.*

*Colonel Granger says that all of his company commanders are different. Rykowski is the hell for leather leader. Now he led his company through the dark jungle toward the trapped men of A company.*

*On the ground surrounded by North Vietnamese, Day did not know if he would survive the night. He heard someone coming, but he didn't know who. Then a few feet away an AKA fired a long burst and he heard Capt. Rykowski's voice. "Shoot at me again, you S.O.B.," he said. "I want to see where you are." The AKA sounded again. The captain killed his antagonist with a burst from his own sub-machine gun. All this occurred within 20 feet.*

*The dead soldier's name was Nguyen Van He. He himself was a platoon leader. He kept a personal diary, a careful notebook of the men in his platoon, and family pictures. There was one of him, in dress uniform, apparently graduating from military school in North Vietnam. There was one of a little boy and one of a little girl both carried on folded paper with a gaily colored rooster. There was a picture of the Lieutenant on his bicycle and two pictures of his wife and family.*

### **Move to Clearing**

*C company buried him and seven others and began to move toward the clearing where Colonel Granger with a handful of men had established a helicopter landing zone and command post. On another enemy soldier they found Gardner's bible intact except for one torn page.*

*About 9 o'clock in the morning the captain came out of the tree line and into the clearing. He brought with him his company, the beleaguered platoon of company A, the enemy weapons and documents.*

**"Morning' Sir," he said to the colonel. "It's been a long night." "It was a long night here too," the colonel said.**

**Captain Rykowski recounted what had happened to Charlie company. "We moved along with no contact through the area of the B52 strike. Then we encountered two on the ground and killed them, and two in the trees and killed those, the last three were about 500 yards to the west, then there is the one who shot a me, that makes eight. He made me mad when he shot at me. He almost didn't miss."**



**ABOUT 9 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, C Company, 2nd battalion, 35th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, made its way out of the jungle to the battalion command post. They brought their dead and wounded with them.**

### ***Bullet Creases Belt***

***The captain's belt had been creased by the bullet. One by one the companies came in. The men were haggard and somber. Perhaps a little surprised to be alive. They passed from company to company, platoon to platoon, finding out who was dead, who was wounded and how.***

***In his pack PFC Jerry Judd, Plano, III, found a small camera with a bullet in it. "It must have been yesterday afternoon," he said. "I thought I felt something hit back there."***

***William Hernandez, Specialist 4<sup>th</sup> class, took a machine gun away from an enemy soldier and killed him with it.***

***Back at the fire base, James R. Truesdell, 20, Moberly, Mo., worked in the fire direction center of the battalion mortar platoon which was firing almost continuously.***

***Waiting on the hilltop for a helicopter to carry him back to his company was PFC William Howard, 20, of 3231 Mersington Avenue, Kansas City, who just returned from NCO School and was away when his company was first committed to the fight.***

***The company commanders agreed that the enemy force was regular North Vietnamese army. The dead enemy soldiers had new uniforms, new equipment, their weapons were new and un battered.***

## **Sift into Area**

*From all appearances the unit, presumed to be the North Vietnamese Le Loi division, had recently infiltrated. Four high speed trails, cut four yards wide, with vines tied tree to tree to facilitate night movement, cut through the area toward the border. There was no doubt that the division operated out of Cambodia.*

*In a way it's a strange and different war that the 25<sup>th</sup> Division brigade and the two brigades of the Fourth Infantry Division fight along the frontier.*

*This is a wild, unpopulated, mountain jungle. There are no people here, no Viet Cong guerrillas, only North Vietnamese army. Since the first of the year the division has been operating from a series of fire support bases - artillery and supply centers scraped on hilltops. Around these the infantry patrols. The men are lean and tired. Often they go days without contact, but when it erupts, the action with the North Vietnamese army is often sharp and bloody.*

*In the encounter described here 14 American soldiers died, 39 were wounded. It is reasonably sure they killed 63 enemy soldiers. Many more may have been killed by air strikes and artillery*

*Two more battalions were brought in along the river, but somehow the enemy eluded a trap. It is the dry season, the winding ribbon of the Nam Sa Thay is fordable on foot. Unseen, the enemy crossed over into Cambodia. They will return, at the time of their choosing, to resume the strange war the army wages through these jungled hills.*



**CAPT. LOUIS BARCENA (with hat), whose company was the first hit and cut off, talks over the situation with Capt. Ron Rykowski, a combat veteran of Korea. Rykowski is C company commander; Barcena is A company commander. The strain of command, the ordeal, and the rugged existence shows on their faces.**

**(webmaster note: Cpt RICK (Not RON) Rykowski is in the hat and Cpt Barcena is the other officer.)**