5 May 1968: By James E. Fitzgerald

Copyright 2007: James E. Fitzgerald. All rights reserved. (copy permission at bottom)

Introduction: There are several accounts of the Battle of An Bao to be found within these "War Stories" Pages. They are all graphic depictions of one of the most horrific battles in the history of the Vietnam War many years ago. Combat Medic James E. Fitzgerald labored for years to get this story told exactly as he remembers it...and he remembers it every moment of his life!

Dedicated to the Memory of Donald Lowe and Robert Allen

On the morning of 5 May 1968 1st Lieutenant Frank Webb and Platoon Sergeant Wendell Barnes led A Company's first platoon back to LZ Uplift. The platoon had just completed a joint operation with the South Korean Tiger Division. Tired from an all-night ambush, the platoon was looking forward to a stand-down. The men anticipated an opportunity to rest after being awake for more than twenty-four hours. On the way back to LZ Uplift the platoon received a radio message urging the unit to hurry because the battalion had received a report of a large enemy unit nearby. The message said that 1st Platoon was to meet with Lt. Hinton's 2nd Platoon at the LZ. Then the two Platoons and any other elements the battalion could assemble would try to intercept the large enemy movement.

When we arrived at LZ Uplift, Leo Ryan (the head medic) asked Ronald Hillman and me if either of us wanted to join the crew of the company medic track. The crew
was short a .50 caliber machine gunner. Hillman said that he would take the gunner's position. I told Ryan that I would take over as 2nd Platoon's medic. The process of assembling men and armored personnel carriers took time. At one point Sgt. Phil Davis, a man from Georgia, came up to Track 612 and asked me if I would join his crew. I left the track driven by Donald Lowe, who was from Tacoma, Washington. A Company mechanics had just repaired the APC and wanted to give it a test run. They wanted me to take over the right M-60. I agreed. One of the mechanics drove the APC, another manned the .50 caliber machine gun. Sgt. Davis and I had the M-60s. A couple of guys from the rear, who I didn't know, made up the rest of the crew.

Sgt. Dulac, a short-timer, said that he wanted to go out one more time with his men. He climbed on Lt. Webb's command track. The assembly process was hasty and informal with men and machines pulled into the operation as quick as possible. By the time we were ready to leave LZ Uplift we had gathered nine vehicles and fifty-five men. The APCs included five from A Company's first and second platoons, a flame track, the medic track, a command track, and the recently repaired vehicle with two mechanics on board. The men were a mixed group of regular guys assigned to the two platoons, clerks, senior sergeants and mechanics. Some had never been to the field. This was our fighting force.

We left LZ Uplift with the mechanic track in the lead, heading north toward Bong Son. After a few miles we turned left leaving Highway 1. The smaller road passed through a village near the road junction. A VC in black pajamas looked up as we passed. With a scared look on his face he took off running. I took aim at the VC and started to shoot him, but didn't because I decided that I would probably get into trouble for shooting someone in a village. Since I was a medic I would have been in more trouble than the average grunt. After passing through the village we turned right and drove through some very high bushes for a while. Then we came out of the brush into a very big open area. The open area was mostly dried-up rice paddies with elevated dikes. On the left we could see a pair of black pajamas hanging on a bush over a spider hole, a VC version of a foxhole. All nine tracks lined up side-by-side facing a long line of palm trees. On our left the trees stretched toward a line of mountains. You could see valleys running between the mountains. Over the top of the palm trees we could see a Bird Dog observation aircraft flying in low circles above a valley at the base of a mountain. Off to our far right we could see another village, in the direction of Highway 1. We were ordered to fire ahead of us into the thick bushes while artillery prepped the area we were headed toward. Then we were ordered to dismount from the APCs. The drivers and .50 gunners stayed on the tracks moving forward slowly. We walked along like regular infantry, checking for spider holes. First, we walked to the left toward the mountains. Next we turned right, following the line of palm trees that ran between mountains and the village out toward the highway. Our sweep found a long fighting trench with knapsacks lying in the bottom. The APCs were ordered to stop and form a defensive circle with their guns facing outward. The command
The soldiers who found the enemy packs took them to the command track. The officers began searching through the knapsacks looking for things to send to the battalion intelligence section. It was about twelve o'clock by this time, so the leaders decided it would be a good time to break for lunch. It was not a good idea to send a pick-up force of fifty-five men and nine tracks out to look for a large enemy movement. It was a very bad idea to break for lunch when all the signs indicated that the enemy was nearby. But, we were soldiers who were told to break for chow. We left .50 gunners on each APC to stand guard and sent a few guys into the bushes to sit and watch. I asked Sgt. Davis if I could go out into the bushes and sit there during lunch. I suffered from a fever of unknown origin recently and hadn't quite recovered. The fever began a few days before May 5th and I spent a day cooped up inside a track before getting any treatment. This left me kind of weak and took my appetite away for a few days. Spending the previous night downwind of nine bloating enemy bodies didn't help matters. The stench left me feeling sick for hours, and at lunch time I wanted a cool spot to relieve some of the discomfort. Sgt. Davis told me it was OK for me to go sit in the shade. So I went out a short distance and picked a quiet spot among the bushes to sit down. It felt good to be out of the hundred-degree mid-day heat.

About ten minutes after I sat down I began to hear noises behind me. I looked around, but I couldn't see a thing. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I was worried, so I snuck back to the track and told Sgt. Davis that I heard noises out in the bushes. He told me not to worry, that it was a deer or an animal or something. He was an infantry sergeant, so I figured that there wasn't much use in arguing with him. He had been in Vietnam longer than me and he had authority. I didn't have authority. I was a medic with about three months in Vietnam. I sat down under the trim vane of the track to try and rest a while longer in the little bit of shade under the front of the APC. Then all hell broke loose.

I can't even come close to telling you how loud the noise of all the incoming fire was roaring when the enemy attacked us. Machine guns, rifles, mortars and RPGs all came toward the perimeter at the same time. I ran to the rear of the track and started to climb in the little door. I wanted to get inside and man the M-60 on the right side like I agreed to do when we were at LZ Uplift, but Sgt. Davis grabbed me and told me to get the hell out of there. I followed him. Neither of us had a weapon. Our rifles were still inside the track. I didn't have my medic bag either. It was in the medic track. That vehicle and the command track were hit and on fire when Sgt. Davis and I looked over that way. There were so many RPGs and mortars coming in that Sgt. Davis and I did the only thing we could do. We got down behind a rice paddy dike and stayed there while rounds kept pouring out of the bushes and from the line of palm trees. I could see lots of black objects flying through the air and exploding all around us when I was hit hard between the
shoulder blades. It knocked the breath out of me. When I could breathe again I told Sgt. Davis that I was hit in the back. He asked me how bad it was, but didn't look at my wound for me. I tried to look, but couldn't see the wound, then turned around to tell him so. When I turned back toward him, he was gone. He left me there, wounded and bewildered. As I was lying there trying to figure out what to do next, I looked up and saw Track 612 moving forward. Donald Lowe was driving the APC toward the trench line on my far left. Another APC was following 612, following some distance behind. Both vehicles were engaging the NVA. Meanwhile a long line of North Vietnamese soldiers with bushes tied to their backs came out of the direction of the mountains and the palm trees. Most of them had the bayonets extended from their AK-47s. The 612 Track and the vehicle from 2nd Platoon were the only aggressive actions I saw during this part of the battle. They probably saved the lives of a few guys by charging at the NVA. I had been in the field with Lowe and Robert Allen (a guy from New Jersey) and they always showed aggressiveness in combat. I thought that was how we were trained in the Army.

In the end Lowe and Allen didn't get very far. I watched as Lowe charged the NVA. The front of the track started smoking, thick gray smoke, then came to a halt. Lowe started rising slowly up from the driver's hatch, with his arms up above his head. His arms moved back and forth. His helmet was on, but his face was hanging down on his chest. There were hundreds of tiny-looking black holes with blood running from them on his chest. He moved in the hatch for about ten seconds, and then slowly slid back into the driver's compartment. I knew Lowe was beyond help and turned to look at the other APC. I watched an RPG hit and the vehicle came to a halt. People rolled out of the armored personnel carrier. I watched them hitting the ground and rolling over. I can still see the fifty gunner crawling slowly out of the vehicle, holding his right arm and slowly taking himself toward the rear of the burning command track and medic track. A minute or two later I heard someone holler for the medic. It was the only sound coming out of that second A Company track.

I got up and made a wide circle back to the rear of the track. It sat there with its little rear door wide open. Behind it a soldier sat on the ground holding his bloody right leg. When I bent over to help him, he told me to help Allen instead. I stood up and walked over to the little rear door. Then bullets started hitting the back part of the door and more bullets hit the road wheels. Along the side of the track there were many little puffs of white smoke. It made me think that a machine gun was hitting the APC. I jumped up into the back of the track and found Allen lying on his back with his arms stretched out. He was wearing a commo helmet with the microphone in front of his mouth. He had been shot between his eyes and a long stream of blood was shooting about two feet from his forehead. I checked his pulse, even though I knew he was dead. Then I looked around for other guys inside the track and didn't see anyone. I saw Allen's rifle beside his body and picked it up. I checked the magazine for rounds, and pulled back the lever to see if there was a round in the chamber. The M-16 was loaded. I jumped out of the
track with the rifle, looked around and saw that I was alone. The wounded man had taken off while I was in the track with Allen. I started thinking about what to do next, wondering if I should surrender to the NVA or fight for my life. I decided that I would fight until they killed me and take as many of them with me as I could before I died. I heard loud shouting to the rear and when I looked that way I saw a long line of NVA with bushes tied to their backs. Their backs were to me as they followed two soldiers who were helping Sgt. Dulac. The two GIs had the sergeant between them with his arms around their necks. His clothes were burned off except for his under shorts, which were green. I knew that I was cut off from the rear where most of the men had escaped and that I couldn't go toward the mountains with all the NVA there. I decided to go back the way I had come to the second track. When I got to the track that I rode into the field that day I found a path that headed off to the right. I could see that the path led back the way we came in from Highway 1. I started down the path very slowly, watching to the left and the right and checking the rear. Then I came upon a wounded soldier, one of the drivers. He was badly wounded. He had burns all over his body and his face and could not see out of his right eye. I picked him up and put him on my left side with his arm hanging on to me. We walked very slowly. I had Allen's M-16 slung over my shoulder and held on to it by the hand guard.

We started down the trail slowly and then I heard a sharp crack in front of us. I saw a VC in black pajamas with his back to me aiming at people in front of him. I laid the wounded man down and laid down beside him. I waited a minute to wipe the sweat from my eyes and wonder what to do next. I was worn out and tired. The VC shot again and it made me angry. He was sniping at our men. I aimed at the center mass of his back and fired, hitting him. He threw up his right arm and tossed his SKS into the bushes to his right. Then he turned to face me. I shot him again, in the stomach. He sank to his knees, holding his belly with both hands. I took careful aim, and shot him a third time, right between the eyes. The bullet blew out the back of his head. Then I picked up the wounded soldier again. We came to a small clearing and saw a VC holding a Chi-com grenade. I didn't see any other weapon. I let the soldier down to the ground and he started crawling away. I sat down in a sitting position and took aim. Then I saw another GI running. He was a brand new guy and he had a rifle. He was the only other guy with a rifle that day, or at least the only one that I saw with a rifle. As he ran past me the VC saw him and threw the grenade at him. The soldier ran too fast for the grenade to get him and the VC turned and started running for the safety of the high bushes. I aimed over the crawling soldier and fired a shot very close to him. He cried out: "You crazy SOB, you're trying to kill me." I was confused by what he said and wanted to tell him that I was trying to shoot the VC, but just took aim and shot. The VC started zigzagging, so I waited for my second shot, aimed and fired. This one hit him, knocking him over sideways. Then I got up and caught up with the wounded soldier. I put him under my left arm and we walked slowly onwards. We hoped to catch up with some of the other soldiers who were still alive. A little ways down the trail I turned to my right, looking for the other men.
who came out with us that morning. I walked around a bend in the trail and saw an NVA soldier about ten yards ahead of us. He was facing away from us and had an AK-47 in his hands. I hoped he was a Korean; that they had come to save us, but he was a VC. I knew for sure when I saw other people out in front of him in the rice paddies. About twenty NVA with bushes tied to their backs were guarding several of our soldiers in the middle of the rice paddies. Our soldiers had their hands tied behind their backs. The wounded soldier said: "Shoot him Doc, Shoot him." Then the NVA turned toward me and I could see that he was putting a thirty-round clip in his AK-47. We looked each other in the eyes. I was surprised at how tall he was. I am 5'9" tall and the NVA was at least six feet tall. I pointed the M-16 toward his chest and shot him. As he turned and fell, the wounded soldier and I went back to the trail we had been following. I still hoped to find some of our soldiers further down the path.

Several hundred yards down the trail the path made a swing to the right and we came out of the bushes into some rice paddies. Two A Company mechanics were sitting there. Both were wounded. A lieutenant, the forward observer, was further out in the rice paddies. I walked up to him, took his arm and said: "Sir, I just can't go no further." His eyes were wide open. He was very scared. He took my hand from his arm and continued walking toward the middle of the open area. I looked past him and saw some wounded survivors lying next to a rice dike. I followed the lieutenant to where the survivors were and lay down at the far right side of the group. I was lying there for a while when snipers opened up on the survivors behind the dike. I was on the end closer to the mountains and could hear the bullets whack into their bodies with a loud thud. The NVA fire was coming from the direction of Highway 1. I crawled up to several of them to comfort them. It was all that I could do. I didn't have my medic bag or anything else to use for first aid. I don't remember their faces, but I remember some of them were wearing flak jackets. These soldiers were lying on their stomachs trying to get as low and as small as they could behind the dike. A couple of sniper rounds hit near my head and I moved away from the soldiers. I was drawing fire as I moved among those guys trying to offer a little help.

After a while another line of NVA came out of the bushes and trees and started toward us. Their line was between us and the highway. I took aim at the closest enemy and slowly started pulling the trigger when the 2nd Platoon's RTO, a guy named Wells, jumped on my back. He said: "Doc, You got to save me." He had a scalp wound on the left top of his head that was bleeding fast, but wasn't a life threatening wound. I shoved him away and said: "I have to shoot the gook." I turned to shoot; he grabbed me again. Then, I heard whistles and then a trumpet call. The NVA turned around and went back into the bushes. After that the remainder of the battle got fuzzy in my mind. I remember a long line of NVA running to my right. I took a bead on the second one in line and shot him. I was lining up on the lead NVA when a shot rang out next to my ear, making me cry out in pain. The new guy fired about six inches away from my ear, busting my
The NVA laid down after we shot at them and a helicopter gunship came in to make a firing pass. The Gunship was shooting M-79 rounds or rockets at the NVA when it was hit by enemy fire and there was a big fire ball as the gunship fell to the ground, hard.

Later two jets came and dropped bombs. I heard some of our guys saying: "Look at the gooks flying in the air." I saw some black objects flying through the air. In a little while, a sniper was shooting at me and I could see bullets hitting close to my head. I looked to my rear to see if I could locate him. I saw a head sticking up above the dike. It looked like someone was waving his arms beckoning me to come to him. I thought it was a wounded soldier, so I got up and ran toward him. A bullet hit the heel of my right boot, knocking my leg out from under me. I fell hard. I got up again and another bullet shot my dog tags off, but I kept running toward the soldier. When I was near I leaped. Instead of diving down next to the soldier, I kept going and slid into a watering hole. I hit bottom of the two-foot deep hole. When I stood up the soldier tried to take the M-16 from me. I butt stroked him in the head, knocking him away from me. Then when I looked carefully, I saw that he was Leo Ryan, the A Company head medic. He said: "Let's take our boots off, so we can run faster." I'll never forget the scared look on his face.

Some time passed after that, and then I saw an NVA sniper run from the cover of the high bushes over toward the mountains and take a position among the dikes. He went past where Ryan and I were and laid down in a place where he could aim his rifle at the soldiers who were behind us. I aimed at the NVA and missed with the first shot. It hit the dirt below his face. He turned my way. I blocked out the sight picture, aimed higher and shot again. This time I hit him. He never moved again and his body was still there when C Company came in to rescue us.

By this time I had given up hope. There were so many North Vietnamese and VC in the bushes and in the trees. They were in the mountains and between us and Highway I. Then it got quiet and the NVA and VC stopped sniping at us. Off to our right, toward the mountains, a line of APCs came into view. A lot of soldiers were walking and a lot more were riding on top of the vehicles. It was like they didn't know that the area was a battlefield. They didn't see Ryan and me lying in the watering hole and went right by us. They headed right toward the NVA sniper I had just shot. The relief force was heading to the left of the soldiers lying behind the dike like no enemy soldiers were in the area. I started shouting and threw my helmet at the lead APC and the soldiers walking beside it. Then the NVA opened up and men started dropping like flies. The guys on top of the APCs went out of sight and little clouds of smoke were flying off the fifty and sixty gun shields. I saw one huge black soldier get shot in the leg and go down. I crawled out of the hole and over to him. He was too heavy to carry, so I put his arm over me and we crawled back to the hole. The lead APC pulled over to the hole and asked me where the gooks were. A tank pulled up on the other side of the hole. I told them that we
were surrounded and that they could shoot wherever they wanted to shoot. The
crew started shooting at the NVA. I fired my M-16 on automatic for a little while,
but it jammed. The dive into the watering hole pushed mud into the weapon. I
asked the men in the APC for an M-60 and some ammo. They handed me a spare
machine gun. I tried to pull the lever back to chamber a round, but it wouldn’t
move. I stood up and put my foot on the lever, but it still wouldn't budge. They
had given me a broken weapon. Between the tank and the APC an RTO wearing
glasses bent over trying to talk on the radio. I told him to get down. He kept
talking and not paying attention to what was going on near him. I motioned for
him to get down and yelled at him some more. He didn't get down. He stayed in
sight, bent over until he was shot. Then we got orders to leave. We were
supposed to load all the wounded and leave the dead. It looked like C Company
had more casualties than A Company. There were so many wounded that we had
to lay them on top of each other inside the armored personnel carriers. The .50
caliber gunners and the M-60 gunners on each track tried to give us lots of
covering fire, but the hot empty shell casings fell down into the APCs burning the
wounded lying inside. They were crying out in pain. We moved forward to the
dike to get more wounded and picked them up. Then I remembered the two A
Company mechanics who were lying in the bushes about two hundred yards away
from the circle of tanks and APCs. I knew that if I didn't go get them they would
be left behind. I was the only one who knew where they were hiding. I left the
circle and began running toward where I last saw the A Company mechanics.
Someone yelled for me to come back. It was time to go. I stopped running and
told them that I can't come back, because I had two more wounded men to get. I
wished that I would get a little hit myself, so I could leave the hell that was going
on all around me. I had just had that thought when a bullet went through my
lower right arm taking a hunk of meat, before striking my ribs. The bullet
continued along my ribs, stopping just past my nipple. If the round hadn't hit my
arm first, it probably would have done a lot more damage to my chest and ribs.
That one wish for a little hit made me believe in God. He let the bullet hurt me
just enough to get me out of the field for one month.

The C Company APC followed me into the bushes. The crew picked up the two
mechanics and me and took us away from the battle. After leaving the place
where we fought the NVA and VC that afternoon, the armored personnel carriers
and tanks set up a perimeter to evacuate the wounded. I went to LZ Uplift on a
Huey. A Chinook took some of us to the 85th Evac Hospital in Qui Nhon. I needed
more treatment than the 85th could provide at that time so I was airlifted to
Hawaii. I stayed at Tripler General Hospital on Oahu for about a month. When my
wounds had healed I was told that I was going to be reassigned to a rear area
hospital in Saigon. This was a common procedure for Army medics who had been
wounded and evacuated from Vietnam for further treatment. I asked it the
procedure could be waived and volunteered to return to my old unit. The Army
allowed it. I went back to A Company, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry. I needed to
know who lived through the battle and who died. After I returned to LZ Uplift I
went to the A Company orderly room and asked the clerk to tell me about the status of the May 5th casualties. He gave me some answers, but told me that Allen and Lowe were listed as missing. I informed the clerk and others that Lowe and Allen both died while fighting the NVA. I also told them that while the survivors were lying behind the rice dikes we heard explosions in the area where the ambush occurred. The NVA probably threw satchel charges inside the APCs destroying the vehicles. The ammunition, fuel and explosives inside the tracks would have blown up leaving little to find.

Captain Cave, the Battalion Surgeon, interviewed me after I left the A Company office. I told him my story, explaining what I did that day. He said that he was going to put me in for a decoration for valor. He said it would be a Silver Star, or maybe a higher award. I thought about it for a while and told him not to give me a medal. Donald Lowe and Robert Allen were heroes on May 5th. They attacked the NVA. These men met the enemy face-to-face. Their brave actions allowed other men to survive. I saw other people run away on May 5th. I begged Dr. Cave not to put me in for a medal. He agreed, but said if I ever changed my mind, he would put me in for a Silver Star.

For many years I never regretted my decision about accepting the Silver Star for my actions. Then my son joined the Marines. I told him the story of May 5th. He encouraged me to try and get the medal. He said that I deserved it. I know that I could have a Silver Star on my military record, but I'm not concerned with medals.

May 5, 1968 was the worst experience that I had in Vietnam. A Company took casualties in March and April and these were bad enough to teach a soldier about war and what it can do to a man. On May 5th it was much worse. I was alone behind the enemy lines for so long with a wounded soldier beside me. I'm just thankful that I survived the events on May 5, 1968 and that I acted like a soldier during the battle.
Written by James E Fitzgerald, Combat Medic, 1st Battalion (Mechanized) 50th Infantry. Credit for Editing by Rick Rajner, 1/50th SRAP Veteran, and to the brother of Donald Lowe, Bill, for his support in this endeavor. Top Graphic from the 173rd Airborne Brigade "Sky Soldier" magazine, July, 1968 edition.

Copyright 2007 James E. Fitzgerald,
Contact via e-mail: jeffitzgerald@firstva.com

Upon Written Copy permission from the author, you may link to your web site or reprint this