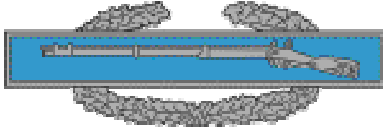


# ON THE RIGHT TRACK

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 50<sup>th</sup> Infantry Association



March 2010

Cover Page

## FROM THE TC HATCH

Jimmy Segars, President

As March approaches, we find that a new season is approaching. As we do spring cleaning and get things in order for a fresh beginning, let us not forget to add to our list to enter into a season to stand up for our country. Many things are happening in America right now. The winds of change are blowing as people are beginning to stand up for what they believe in. We as soldiers do not need to be reminded what our responsibilities continue to be to uphold this country. Sometimes, those responsibilities entail that we go against the grain and let our voices be heard. Thomas Jefferson once said that all it takes for evil to take over is for good men to do nothing. We as citizen soldiers must continue to protect this country that we love so much by standing up for what is right and passing on that integrity to our children and grandchildren. Let us not forget that America was founded as a God-fearing nation and that her problems stem from straying away from that foundation. Let us be courageous and do our part to help America return to what she was meant to be. I ask that all of you think hard and long about what you believe and exercise your right to do so. The 1/50<sup>th</sup> sets a good example for all who know us. Let us continue to lead the way: Follow Me and Play the Game. "Playing" may never have been so important as it is today. Keep on keeping on, men. Let's protect, defend, and honor this great country now more than ever. God bless you.

## MINI-REUNION/GETTYSBURG

Ken Riley

Welcome Home Brothers! Please note: we are booking a mini-reunion in Gettysburg PA starting now. We have 25 rooms available for us and I need to be sure you have called the hotel (The 1863 Inn of Gettysburg at: 866-953-4483) as soon as possible to book your reservations. We will have registration on Thursday, September 30, 2010, and will be staying Thursday, Friday, October 1, and Saturday, October 2, 2010; check out on Sunday, October 3, 2010. For those that wish, the hotel will honor our \$129.00 rate for early birds, who would like to come to Gettysburg a few days early. I will be available to give guided tours or show the hot spots to visit.

The registration form is on page 5 and needs to be returned to me no later than August 15, 2010, so I can pay for buses, dinners, tours, entertainment, etc. More details will be forthcoming in the next newsletter and on our web page, if they ever get that working again! I have a battlefield tour, along with a few surprises planned for those on Friday, so be sure to get there on Thursday! See you there.

Ken Riley (Kenr17331@yahoo.com)

## CHAPLAIN'S

**O** Hello to all the 1/50th family. I pray that everyone is in good health, and that everything is going well. My wife and I have been blessed on February 16 with our fourth granddaughter, Kayla Naomi, our son and his wife's first child-GOD IS GOOD! It is hard to believe that next month is the observance and celebration of one of God's greatest and most significant events and blessings to mankind in the celebration of Easter. That single event in history gives hope to everyone around the world. HAPPY EASTER to each of you and your family members! There are many happenings and things going on in America and around the world, so I know we will all be praying for each other, our President, our military, who continues to do a fantastic job, and our nation. I pray God's continued blessings for each of you and your family members.

Parker Pierce

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## HISTORIAN REPORT

Jim Shepard



Work begun last fall continues on the creation of our Memorial Pages for all our men killed in action.

As you may recall, I spend much of 2008 and 2009 creating a file for each of these men...and filing these files with as much information as possible; remembrances by our members who knew these men...family contact information, etc. Mailing lists were created...and family and friends contacted just a few weeks before our reunion in August of 2009...yet, even with the short notice, 14 family and friends of our men killed in action showed up as documented in our Fall newsletter.

Now, I am moving to the next task...the creation of memorial pages. Each of our men killed in action will have his own page...many with photos and all with a descriptive narrative of the action or event which took their lives. Each day brings new findings...correcting the "records" as to particulars surrounding some of these deaths. I have been, once again, working closely with the men charged with maintaining the Coffelt Database....and my efforts at document collection have finally showed through in that database which lists details on all 58,000+ names on "The Wall". I sent them document CDs and they entered specifics as to major contact and grid location. I will have much more for them soon and plan on sending them our newest document CD containing thousands of pages of documentation from 1970.

Each memorial page contains the basic statistics previously listed on our "In Memoriam" pages...but has been expanded to show Company, Platoon and even Squad where known. I also include a description of the battle or incident in which they were killed, a map of the location where they were killed, photos of gravesites and headstones and a presentation of awards and decorations.

You can view the finished work by visiting those "In Memoriam" pages and clicking on the names which are indicated as being complete by the individual names now being "Links"...or underlined. at this writing I am finishing up the "Cs" going alphabetically, but have quite a few others finished "out of sequence" for various reasons. I you see a particular memorial page lacks some of these things....such as a photo or platoon and/or squad affiliation, please let me know.

My work has rapidly expanded these men's files. Those of you who were at the last reunion and visited our Archives Room saw the large plastic file within which these files were kept. This case was packed to capacity and it became necessary to find something larger to accommodate these files. I had an old army foot locker in mind, but settled on a nice storage trunk...complete with wheels for easy mobility! I inserted a hanging file system and now should have room for all our files and the anticipated expansion of same as my work progresses.

My apologies to those who have submitted private photo collections and war stories for the website over the past few months. The work on these memorial pages has taken most if not all of my time. I plan to visit the National Archives in the coming months and begin more document collection.

One final note. I know many of you attended the last "change of command" ceremony in 2008. I am looking forward to this event again sometime early this summer. Keep in touch with John Topper and Dick Guthrie for details.

## 1-50 al umni articl e

LTC Anthony Benitez

There have been a lot of changes here on Sand Hill since the 1-50 IN Alumni Reunion. After a well-deserved Holiday Block Leave period, where the Battalion was responsible for shipping over 5000 Soldiers home for Christmas, we got right back into the thick of things – we finished the training cycles of 3 more companies and sent over 500 more Infantrymen to the Army. Since that time, we said farewell to Treadwell Barracks, the home for 1-50 IN for over 20 years, and started our move to our new facility. As part of the Base Realignment and Closure program and facility upgrades, Treadwell Barracks was the first in the chute to undergo a complete transformation/renovation. With that being said, 1-50 IN needed a new home and it was determined that we would occupy one of the recently completed barracks that was built in anticipation of the future move of the Armor Center and the establishment of the Maneuver Center of Excellence. It was a labor intensive event for the Cadre to move over 20 years of accumulation, but, as with everything else, they exceeded expectations and have done an exceptional job establishing a new battalion footprint in a short period of time. While the new facility is very nice, we certainly miss the old charm of a building that took care of us for such a long period of time – in the meantime, we'll start making some memories in our new home.

In addition to the change in our scenery, there have been and will be some significant changes in personnel for the battalion. We recently saw CSM Dennis Smith leave the Battalion and take on the awesome responsibility of becoming the Ranger Training Brigade Command Sergeant Major. It was a tremendous ceremony that was attended by Rangers, past and present; while we were certainly sad to lose such a tremendous leader from our ranks, we were extremely happy for him, as he is in a place to influence the future Rangers of our Army. We are still awaiting word on who the next CSM will be – whoever it is will have some very large shoes to fill. CSM Dennis Smith is one of a kind.

As all good things must come to an end, I will be relinquishing command on 15 June. My replacement, LTC Mike Hastings, is currently on the ground – bottom line, the Battalion is in very good hands when he takes the guidon. He is going to be a great addition to the team. Christy and I have truly enjoyed being a small part of such a tremendous organization and we are thankful for all of the tremendous support we have received from the Alumni members. We can only hope that we represented you all in fine fashion and carried on the traditions that you all set before us. This is a great unit and it has been an experience that I will never forget. Play the Game! Fix Bayonets!

## How North Vietnam Won The War

Bui Tin Interviewed by Stephen Young

*What did the North Vietnamese leadership think of the American antiwar movement? What was the purpose of the Tet Offensive? How could the U.S. have been more successful in fighting the Vietnam War? Bui Tin, a former colonel in the North Vietnamese army, answers these questions in the following excerpts from an interview conducted by Stephen Young, a Minnesota attorney and human-rights activist [in The Wall Street Journal, 3 August 1995]. Bui Tin, who served on the general staff of North Vietnam's army, received the unconditional surrender of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975. He later became editor of the People's Daily, the official newspaper of Vietnam. He now lives in Paris, where he immigrated after becoming disillusioned with the fruits of Vietnamese communism.*

Question: How did Hanoi intend to defeat the Americans?

Answer: By fighting a long war which would break their will to help South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh said, "We don't need to win military victories, we only need to hit them until they give up and get out."

Q: Was the American antiwar movement important to Hanoi's victory?

A: It was essential to our strategy. Support of the war from our rear was completely secure while the American rear was vulnerable. Every day our leadership would listen to world news over the radio at 9 a.m. to follow the growth of the American antiwar movement. Visits to Hanoi by people like Jane Fonda, and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and ministers gave us confidence that we should hold on in the face of battlefield reverses. We were elated when Jane Fonda, wearing a red Vietnamese dress, said at a press conference that she was ashamed of American actions in the war and that she would struggle along with us.

Q: Did the Politburo pay attention to these visits?

A: Keenly.

Q: Why?

A: Those people represented the conscience of America. The conscience of America was part of its war-making capability, and we were turning that power in our favor. America lost because of its democracy; through dissent and protest it lost the ability to mobilize a will to win.

Q: How could the Americans have won the war?

A: Cut the Ho Chi Minh trail inside Laos. If Johnson had granted [Gen. William] Westmoreland's requests to enter Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh trail, Hanoi could not have won the war.

Q: Anything else?

A: Train South Vietnam's generals. The junior South Vietnamese officers were good, competent and courageous, but the commanding general officers were inept.

Q: Did Hanoi expect that the National Liberation Front would win power in South Vietnam?

A: No. Gen. [Vo Nguyen] Giap [commander of the North Vietnamese army] believed that guerrilla warfare was important but not sufficient for victory. Regular military divisions with artillery and armor would be needed. The Chinese believed in fighting only with guerrillas, but we had a different approach. The Chinese were reluctant to help us. Soviet aid made the war possible. Le Duan [secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party] once told Mao Tse-tung that if you help us, we are sure to win; if you don't, we will still win, but we will have to sacrifice one or two million more soldiers to do so.

Q: Was the National Liberation Front an independent political movement of South Vietnamese?

A: No. It was set up by our Communist Party to implement a decision of the Third Party Congress of September 1960. We always said there was only one party, only one army in the war to liberate the South and unify the nation. At all times there was only one party commissar in command of the South.

Q: Why was the Ho Chi Minh trail so important?

A: It was the only way to bring sufficient military power to bear on the fighting in the South. Building and maintaining the trail was a huge effort, involving tens of thousands of soldiers, drivers, repair teams, medical stations, communication units.

Q: What of American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail?

A: Not very effective. Our operations were never compromised by attacks on the trail. At times, accurate B-52 strikes would cause real damage, but we put so much in at the top of the trail that enough men and weapons to prolong the war always came out the bottom. Bombing by smaller planes rarely hit significant targets.

Q: What of American bombing of North Vietnam?

A: If all the bombing had been concentrated at one time, it would have hurt our efforts. But the bombing was expanded in slow stages under Johnson and it didn't worry us. We had plenty of times to prepare alternative routes and facilities. We always had stockpiles of rice ready to feed the people for months if a harvest were damaged. The Soviets bought rice from Thailand for us.

Q: What was the purpose of the 1968 Tet Offensive?

A: To relieve the pressure Gen. Westmoreland was putting on us in late 1966 and 1967 and to weaken American resolve during a presidential election year.

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

### Bui Tin Interviewed by Stephen Young

Q: What about Gen. Westmoreland's strategy and tactics caused you concern?

A: Our senior commander in the South, Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, knew that we were losing base areas, control of the rural population and that his main forces were being pushed out to the borders of South Vietnam. He also worried that Westmoreland might receive permission to enter Laos and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In January 1967, after discussions with Le Duan, Thanh proposed the Tet Offensive. Thanh was the senior member of the Politburo in South Vietnam. He supervised the entire war effort. Thanh's struggle philosophy was that "America is wealthy but not resolute," and "squeeze tight to the American chest and attack." He was invited up to Hanoi for further discussions. He went on commercial flights with a false passport from Cambodia to Hong Kong and then to Hanoi. Only in July was his plan adopted by the leadership. Then Johnson had rejected Westmoreland's request for 200,000 more troops. We realized that America had made its maximum military commitment to the war. Vietnam was not sufficiently important for the United States to call up its reserves. We had stretched American power to a breaking point. When more frustration set in, all the Americans could do would be to withdraw; they had no more troops to send over. Tet was designed to influence American public opinion. We would attack poorly defended parts of South Vietnam cities during a holiday and a truce when few South Vietnamese troops would be on duty. Before the main attack, we would entice American units to advance close to the borders, away from the cities. By attacking all South Vietnam's major cities, we would spread out our forces and neutralize the impact of American firepower. Attacking on a broad front, we would lose some battles but win others. We used local forces nearby each target to frustrate discovery of our plans. Small teams, like the one which attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, would be sufficient. It was a guerrilla strategy of hit-and-run raids. [looks like a re-writing of history with the benefit of hindsight]

Q: What about the results?

A: Our losses were staggering and a complete surprise. Giap later told me that Tet had been a military defeat, though we had gained the planned political advantages when Johnson agreed to negotiate and did not run for re-election. The second and third waves in May and September were, in retrospect, mistakes. Our forces in the South were nearly wiped out by all the fighting in 1968. It took us until 1971 to re-establish our presence, but we had to use North Vietnamese troops as local guerrillas. If the American forces had not begun to withdraw under Nixon in 1969, they could have punished us severely. We suffered badly in 1969 and 1970 as it was.

Q: What of Nixon?

A: Well, when Nixon stepped down because of Watergate we knew we would win. Pham Van Dong [prime minister of North Vietnam] said of Gerald Ford, the new president, "he's the weakest president in U.S. history; the people didn't elect him; even if you gave him candy, he doesn't dare to intervene in Vietnam again." We tested Ford's resolve by attacking Phuoc Long in January 1975. When Ford kept American B-52's in their hangers, our leadership decided on a big offensive against South Vietnam.

Q: What else?

A: We had the impression that American commanders had their hands tied by political factors. Your generals could never deploy a maximum force for greatest military effect.

## My Return Trip to Vietnam

Wilber Breseman

It's May 3, 1968 and my plane is on the tarmac in Vietnam, waiting to take off, returning me and about 200 other servicemen back to the good old USA. As I set in that airplane I reflect on my Vietnam tour of duty. I'm an infantry platoon sergeant and I've been shot at more times than I can remember, along with mortar shells exploding all around me. I've seen huge snakes that can crush a man to death and tiny viper snakes whose bite can kill in minutes. I and the men under me have gotten very good at killing. The weather is always too hot and my back pack is always too heavy. I'm lucky if I get three hours of sleep a night. I'm scared far too often, also too often are the screams of wounded men. I've seen too many times terrible atrocities that the enemy soldiers have done. Too many times I've done terrible things that I should be ashamed of, but I'm not.

Now the plane is about to take off and all of us are hoping that mortars don't start falling, killing everyone. Finally the plane takes off, getting airborne the wheels come up. Everyone claps and yells with happiness, it the happiest I've ever been in my life. Fifteen hours later we land in Seattle, WA. I'm feeling great, my uniform looks good, I have a chest full of medals, I'm proud of my conduct in Vietnam 'cause I completed all my missions and I am proud of the USA. But all that changes as we deplane. There are several hundred protesters nearby, calling us baby killers, spitting on us and degrading us any way they can. Several hours later I finally get home. One of the first things my mother tells me is to take my uniform off; it's too offensive to too many people.

So now I return to civilian life and I work 16-18 hours a day, it helps to keep busy so I don't think of what I went through in Vietnam. Twenty-nine years later, in 1996, I see an advertisement from a group called Vets with a Mission. It seems this group of veterans (like a men's Christian group) was asking for volunteers to return to Vietnam to either build a medical mission or to go on a sightseeing tour of Vietnam for three weeks. As I kept thinking about it, something kept tugging at me to go. I finally called the mission director and started asking questions. Right from the start I was informed that I would need my pastor to fill out a form confirming that I was indeed a Christian. Until they received this form I would not even be considered to join their group. I was told there would be 15-20 veterans returning to Vietnam for the sightseeing tour. In all my time in combat I always knew that my men had my back covered, just as I covered theirs; we all trusted each other with our lives. As I thought about going back, I kept wondering if these vets were cooks, clerks or bus drivers. Had they ever been shot at in Vietnam? I felt I needed someone to cover my back. So I called my pastor Den Slatory and asked if he wanted to go back to Vietnam. Den's first reaction was, "Wilber, I cannot afford to go." I replied, "I didn't ask if you could afford to go, I asked if you wanted to go." Like me Den was an infantry rifleman during the Vietnam War and I knew we could trust each other. The next day Den called and nervously told me he wanted to go.

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**1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 50<sup>th</sup> Infantry Alumni Reunion**  
September 30<sup>th</sup>, October 1<sup>st</sup>, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010  
Gettysburg, PA 17325  
**Registration Form**

Member Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_ Guest Name \_\_\_\_\_

Arrival Date \_\_\_\_\_ Departure Date \_\_\_\_\_

***Host Hotel is the: The 1863 Inn of Gettysburg (Breakfast included). Call 866-953-4483 for reservations. YOU MUST make your hotel reservations DIRECT with the hotel. Submitting this registration form does NOT cover your hotel reservations.***  
**Ask for 1/50<sup>th</sup> Infantry rate of \$129.00 per night for single/double occupancy. Cutoff for this rate is August 15, 2010.**  
**Gentlemen: THERE ARE ONLY 25 ROOMS AVAILABLE TO US. All I can say is first come, first serve. If you delay too much, you may miss out on a great experience.**

**Registration Procedure:      Registration Cutoff Dates: August 15, 2010      Registration Costs:**  
(Per Person)  
Early Registration: (Before August 15, 2010): ..... **\$125.00 per person**  
After August 15, 2010: ..... **\$150.00 per person**

**Mail this form along with check to:**  
Kenneth G Riley  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 50<sup>th</sup> Infantry Alumni Reunion  
200 Georgetown Court  
Hanover PA 17331

**Please make check payable to: Kenneth G Riley**

**Registration Fee Includes:** **30 September** – Registration starts at Noon, Gift Bags, Hospitality Room  
1 October - Box Lunch, Tours, Guide, Pre-show, Bus, Wine Tasting  
2 October - Dinner, Entertainment at Night, Bus

## FROM THE VP

Ron Leraas

*NOTE: In a previous edition of the Newsletter, Jim Sheppard submitted his recollections about the action where the Battalion suffered its first casualty. I thought it appropriate that the bookends should be completed by writing about the last action, which left Sgt Gary Cokely KIA and SP4 JR Dacus, PFC Jim Vonesh, and I as WIA. This story is from my perspective as the Platoon Leader, as I remember it; if there are errors, they are errors of omission, which can only be corrected by retrieving the memories of other key players.*

At BN034295, 30 km NE of PHAN THIET in THIEN GIAO Dist, Tm 33/C/75 Rgr obs 40 – 60 en 100m to S. Frd set up amb and requested arty. Frd amb 2 en w/SA fire heading N. 1815 hrs 2/C/1-50 (M) who were inserted rec SA fire fr 3 en. Frd ret SA fire and en W/D in unk dir. Arty & GS spt. Break 1910. Results: Frd – 1 US MIA, 3 US WIA (D/O) En – 1 KIA

So reads the official entry in the IFFV Duty Officer's Staff Journal for 2 November -- the Battalion's last combat action. Here's how it came to pass.

I had been the Charley Company XO for about two weeks, having been pulled from the field in anticipation of the stand-down process which was expected to begin soon. This evening was to be my second stint as the Green Line Duty Officer, so I had left the company area around 1500 to go to my hooch to get my combat gear and get a little rest before the guard mount scheduled for around 1700. At about 1530, someone from the Company came to my hooch with the message to get down to the company area immediately because the Battalion had to provide a platoon as a reaction force for a unit in contact and I had been selected as its leader.

When I arrived in the Company area, the remnants of my old platoon had been formed up, along with a Battalion Assistant Operations Officer (can't remember his name), who was there to brief us on the situation. He told us a LRRP team had called in helicopter gunship fire on a one hundred man VC unit that passed in front of them, and had requested an extraction (NOTE: the log entry states 40 – 60, but my memory is quite clear that we were told 100 VC). I also clearly remember being told that we would be outside of artillery coverage, so was not given any coordination info. In fact, we would be so far out that comms would have to be accomplished through the relay station situated on top of Whiskey Mountain. The Battalion Commander had directed that, rather than an extraction, a reaction force would be sent in to follow up on the contact. We were to wait in the Company area until we received the word to move to the flight line; when the choppers arrived, we would CA into the strike area, meet up with the LRRP team, and pursue the crippled enemy unit. Operations had to scramble to find a map for this area, as Charlie Company had not worked in this specific area since July and we didn't even have a map; we just knew it was at the northern edge of the Le Hong Fong. But, what seemed to be of most importance to Operations was that everyone on the reaction force had to wear a helmet. Since I had spent my tour in the bush without the encumbrance of a helmet, I didn't have one with me, nor was there time to go back to my hooch to get mine, so someone found one in the Company area and loaned it to me (I doubt if he ever got it back – it's probably still laying out in the jungle where I threw it off during the firefight).

A couple of words about the Le Hong Fong -- I don't know how to truly describe it, other than to spit out the words like you would a wad of phlegm; there is nothing in my life experience that I can use as a comparative reference. The Le Hong Fong is an area northeast of Phan Thiet that is an amalgam of a coastal plain, jungle undergrowth, and desert. It is totally covered with a very dense, interlocking thicket that is only about eight feet high; this is not normal brush that you can just walk through with a few scratches – it is so dense that the point man has to take a run of a few steps, throw himself into the thicket to make a little indentation, then back up for another run and another leap of desperation. Your progress is measured in meters per hour, with a point man achieving exhaustion in about five minutes. The brush is not high enough to give any shade, there is no wind blowing, the sun is glaring off of the salty sand, and there is not enough water in the world to keep you from dehydrating.

This area had long been a safe haven for the anti-Japanese guerrillas, then the Viet Minh, then the VC and NVA. There were bunker complexes deep in this brush that you would literally fall into (if you got that far, because they could hear you from a mile away), interconnected with tunnels through the undergrowth. It was totally impossible to see anyone from the air or from ten feet away; on the other hand, the bad guys had cleared fields of fire under the brush so they (in their bunkers) could see you well enough to really mess you up, and you couldn't get to them.

After receiving this briefing, I looked around at the reaction force. There were a few familiar veteran faces: squad leaders Sgt Gary Cokley and Sgt Benjamin (Benji) Alvarado, JR Dacus -- the radioman, a couple of Grunts and the platoon medic. The rest were FNGs – I don't think that they were even assigned to Charley Company, as I had never seen them before. As a side note, since the Battalion was scheduled to go home in six weeks, I wonder why we were even receiving replacements. Benji and Gary had already divided up the force and created two squads of about ten men each; then they spent the rest of the free time working with their new charges to try to teach them the basics of how we conducted ourselves (hand and arm signals, normal procedures upon contact, etc.). The irony of the fact that I'm taking twenty green guys into an area where one hundred totally pissed off VC were hanging around because they wanted to get some sort of revenge against the reaction force that they expected would probably come was not lost on me.

So we waited – for what seemed like forever. I'm getting more nervous with every passing minute, because the amount of daylight time is finite and we were running out of it. Finally we got the order to move to the flight line, where we divided up into chinks and waited for the Slicks to come in. After another inordinate waiting period, our taxis arrived and we mounted up and headed northeast. The ride seemed like it took forever; each passing minute in the air was one we didn't have on the ground, and darkness was to be soon upon us. In hindsight I have looked at a map and estimate that the ride probably was only about fifteen minutes – not the eternity it seemed.

The Slicks came on approach and flared for landing. There was no signaling smoke, so I fully expected to encounter a hot LZ or sniper fire; almost disappointedly, there was none. The troops got off of their Slicks in good order, with Gary and Benji taking charge and forming a defensive perimeter around the LZ. The area was forested, but fairly flat with sandy ground and open at ground level. The tall trees were spaced close together such that you still had to actively search for an opening big enough to become a LZ if you needed to bring in a Slick. We didn't spend too much time organizing on the ground – just enough for the Slicks to leave and for our hearing to return; we were quickly in a formation of two columns abreast and moving to the northeast.

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 6  
Ron Leraas

We soon met up with the LRRP team that had started this mess. They were still on the ambush site awaiting our arrival, and were pretty happy to see us -- although they would rather to have been extracted instead of having to stay. Before I could get to talk to their leader, their Kit Carson scout came running up to me and dragged me over to the body of the VC they had killed in ambush. I've never seen a person so proud of something -- it was either his first kill or the VC was one of his in-laws. The LRRP team leader explained what had happened and showed me the trail and drag marks left behind by the VC unit -- the trail would be easy to follow because of the soft sand, as long as there was daylight. I told him to have his group fall in behind us and brought Gary and Benji up to the trail so we could get oriented; then we formed up and began to follow the trail.

The pucker factor is getting pretty intense at this point. We weren't making any noise, everyone is alert and doing their job, but I'm aware of how it is beginning to get dark and how we really didn't want to walk into the remainder of this VC unit while they were in defensive positions and we couldn't see anything. We had traveled about one klick when I decided that there was just not enough light to continue on. I halted the column and called in the NCOs so we could get a NDP in order while we could still see to set one up. This was especially critical to me because of all the inexperienced guys we had with us.

As Benji, Gary and I were talking, we heard a noise over to the left. We initially thought that one of our guys had made the noise, but then we heard it again. This time we realized it sounded like a moan of someone in pain; it was so close to our column that if I had not halted the column at that exact time, we would have walked into the source of the noise within fifteen seconds. When we identified the sound, my thought was that this was someone from the VC unit that was hurt bad and had been left behind -- I didn't consider it a lure into an ambush, because the VC could have sprung an ambush without going through those theatrics. I turned to Benji and told him to get his people on line so we could sweep the area for the source of those moans. I told Gary to set up his squad in a half-perimeter on his side of the trail, and when Benji's group finished the sweep we would complete the perimeter.

Our ten-man skirmish line started edging toward the location where we had heard the sounds. The moans stopped when we got closer but I attributed that to the thought that the person making the moans must have known we were there and coming for him. So here we are -- about ten Grunts moving in a skirmish line, with me and my radioman in the center and slightly to the rear -- when the sky becomes lit up with a solid line of green tracers emanating from a spot about ten meters in front of us. We all returned fire and hit the ground, not really knowing what we are firing at other than to try to put our rounds at the origin of those green tracers. After the initial fusillade, there was a period of quiet; I think that all of us were fine at that point, except that I did not realize that the some on the left of the line had hit the ground immediately, but some of us had moved on a little further before becoming intimate with the dirt and sand. That served to create a "bunching" of about five of us, rather than just a single depth skirmish line.

There was another exchange of gunfire and at least two grenade detonations -- I don't know if they were ours or theirs. At this moment, I was on the ground (with only my shirt buttons keeping me from getting any lower); I didn't have a tree or other obstacle in front of me, so I started crawling forward to try to get the line moving and to try to find a tree to absorb those damn green tracers that seemed to be coming only at me. Up to now things were essentially under control; then it got strange.

As I had crawled just to the right of Benji's feet (who has the benefit of being behind a tree), the little patch of air that existed just an inch over my head turned a bright lime green, the sonic boom cracking of the bullets going by my ear became deafening, and I was kicked in the shoulder just as if someone was running by and tripped over me. My reflexive reaction was to softly mutter an expletive and raise myself up off the ground, as if I'm in defiance of the bullets still looking for me. During the second while this was happening, I was remembering a briefing I had in one of my officer charm schools, about how Charlie always shoots high when it's dark -- guess this Charlie had missed that briefing.

I somehow realized that my radioman was hit (maybe his cursing gave that away), as well as one of the new guys, PFC Jim Vonesh; they had been part of the unintentional bunching when we hit the dirt. I got on the horn and called the Whiskey Mountain relay station to tell them that we're in contact and three of us are wounded. Meanwhile Doc had come up to us and started working on me, putting a pressure dressing on my upper back and yelling at someone to "hold it there", while he went about working on JR's leg and Jim Vonesh's chest.

The dustoff was a bit interesting, as it involved shooting a star cluster so he could vector in on us, setting out pocket strobe lights so he could identify a hover location, using a jungle penetrator to haul up the wounded, all the while he is telling me to hurry up because he's running short on fuel.

So ended the Battalion's last combat action; however, this story is far from complete. Somewhere, somehow, during one of the exchanges, SGT Gary Cokley was killed. I did not know it at the time, and didn't even consider the possibility, because he was supposed to have been across the perimeter and away from the action. He had apparently inserted himself into the right of the line, and was possibly caught in the first burst of fire. Just a guess, as I haven't talked to anyone who knows. Regardless, I'll continue remembering Gary as a brave soldier who believed in being at the front of the action. Anything else would be disrespectful.

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Three months later, seventeen of us met in California to return together to Vietnam. We were each handed Bibles to hide in our luggage and told we could get in trouble if they were found in Vietnam. Luckily we had no problems. Arriving in Vietnam I was extremely nervous, I kept looking for snipers; for ambushes or at least people throwing rocks at us for abandoning them. Every day I relaxed a little more. After a few days I started to have a great time. The local people treated us great, the food was good and the land was beautiful. What a difference when people aren't shooting at you. For three weeks, Den and I traveled from Saigon to the DMZ, both of us seeing the areas we fought in. All our experiences were good ones. Both of us agreed the return trip helped us mentally and we both made lots of new friends. For almost thirty years, Den and I both had terrible, dark, negative thoughts of Vietnam. This trip changed both of us on how we think of Vietnam now. We thanked the Christian group for taking us along. In the last forty years I married, had three wonderful children, farmed 800 acres, was a politician for six years, a school board member for six years and have been very active in our local VFW. For the last five years, I've been going on medical missions. I've vaccinated children in Africa and India for polio in eleven different trips. Now I travel with a group called Alliance for Smiles. We travel all over the world operating on children with cleft lips and palates, free of charge. I'm the sterilizer for the group. Life is good and getting better every day.

I wrote this for my church newsletter, when asked about something that had changed my life.