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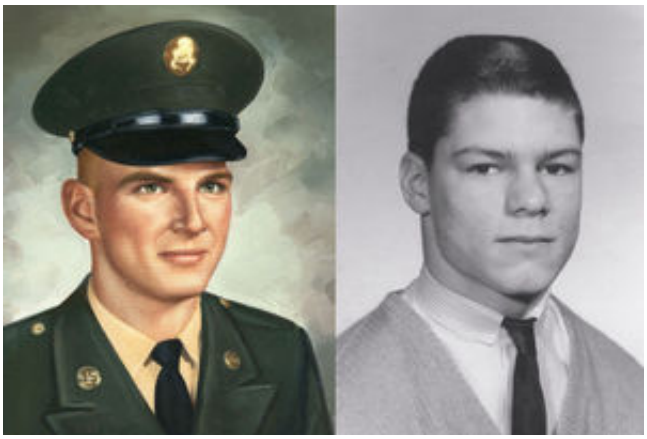
Soldiers remember La Crosse 19-year-old's sacrifice, medic's courage in Vietnam



13 HOURS AGO • RON FISCHER FOR THE LA CROSSE TRIBUNE

Spc. Russell Haas of La Crosse and the rest of Charlie Company were badly outnumbered, and the North Vietnamese were pummeling their position near the village of Thuan Dao with devastating automatic weapons fire the morning of March 2, 1968.

Just 15 minutes earlier Haas' Army platoon had been dropped in by Huey helicopters, but the landing zone was "hot," occupied by a battle-hardened North Vietnamese battalion. No stranger to the peril of combat, Haas had already been awarded a Purple Heart for being wounded in battle. He had been recommended for the Bronze Star for Valor.

So perhaps what happened next wasn't that surprising: Haas charged the hedgerow that was providing cover for his attackers, determined to protect his unit by taking out the enemy with grenades.

But the barrage of bullets was too thick for Haas to reach his objective unscathed. So Bruce Sims, an unarmed medic from Uniontown, Ohio, grabbed his pack, left the relative safety of his cover and raced to help Haas.

In a letter home just three days earlier, on Feb. 29, 1968, Russ had written about the danger: "They've really been keeping us busy. It seems every day we run into Charlie someplace. Not too many guys are getting hurt though. Just about halfway done now. I hope the second half is better than the first."

Haas and Sims' backgrounds were different, their paths to service opposites. Yet Haas the volunteer and Sims the draftee found themselves with each other amid a desperate battle half a world away from their homes. It could hardly have been predicted these 19-year-olds with birthdays just six days apart would find their way to the same corner of Vietnam.

This is their story.

Russell Haas, a son of La Crosse

As he grew up in a house on Losey Boulevard, the odds of Russ Haas fighting on faraway battlefields seemed remote. The elder Russell Haas cared dearly for his wife, Margaret, and their four children, Paula, Russell, Susan and the youngest, Mary Beth. Young Russ's father would be promoted to train engineer by Burlington Northern railroad. His good judgment and the respect of his peers were reflected in his election as a union representative, and he eventually served as general chairman of the union representing Burlington Northern

employees. He could be depended on to speak his mind.

From early childhood, young Russ enjoyed the wildlife and the outdoors. Rick Przywojskiof La Crosse remembers many days fishing with Russ on the nearby Mississippi River. Russ was active in Boy Scouts and went to Camp Decorah near Holmen during his grade school summers. Russ could be a prankster: Przywoski remembers an early summer camp morning between sixth and seventh grades when Russ and others in his troop hoisted their scoutmaster's boxers to the top of the camp's flagpole in place of the colors. They received a scolding while other scoutmasters had tried to hide their amusement.

Russ carried papers for the La Crosse Tribune when he 12 and 13, delivering more than 300 copies of what was then an afternoon newspaper after class was dismissed at St. Thomas More Elementary School on the South Side. He took his responsibilities to his customers and the Tribune seriously, delivering newspapers on time and in good condition, conscientiously securing subscription payments.

He had a spiritual side, too. He constructed a makeshift altar in the basement of his family's home and sometimes said Mass for his neighborhood buddies. His sister Paula often served. Russ announced to his family he wished to study for the priesthood after grade school.

Holy Cross Seminary

In September 1962, Russ enrolled with 86 freshman classmates at Holy Cross Seminary on La Crosse's South Side. Each day began at 6 a.m. with Mass, followed by studies in a competitive college preparatory program. Classes were held six days a week, with Wednesday and Saturday afternoons off for recreation. Each day ended with chapel prayers. "Grand silence" was enforced by the dean of discipline, the Rev. John Malik, starting at 9:30 p.m. till after the next morning's Mass. Students who committed infractions, such as whispering during grand silence or violating other communal rules, were assigned to work crew. That meant Wednesday and Saturday afternoons of polishing brass, picking up trash or performing other cleaning tasks in the huge seminary complex.

Russ and his classmates learned to avoid Monsignor John Paul, the seminary's rector. More accurately, they learned to avoid Paul's breviary, the priest's prayer book. A star athlete of the Aquinas High School class of 1935, the future bishop of La Crosse sometimes forcibly applied his breviary to a seminarian's solar plexus if the student's posture or attitude, in Paul's reckoning, needed adjustment. Subjects of the monsignor's attention didn't suffer residual physical injury - just a sudden realization that they shouldn't be overly confident of their status at the seminary. While visiting sisters and mothers of seminarians often commented on Paul's matinee idol good looks, his charges remember the monsignor's resolve to impart discipline and purpose to the seminarians.

Russ measured up to the academic and disciplinary requirements, and he was liked and respected at the seminary. But it became clear to Russ that the priesthood was not for him. Between semesters his sophomore year, he transferred to Aquinas High School, adapting to a much larger school environment. His classmates numbered more than 300. Russ worked part time at the Holiday Inn and continued to spend much time fishing and hunting.

As a junior, he and his friend Bob Lepsch bought a "cabin on the river" — a boat house — at Chut's Landing on the Mississippi River. The next year, Russ and Bob, along with other buddies, bought a larger boat house. It became a club house for good friends who enjoyed

fishing and hunting together. Russ would write home from training at the Army's Fort Polk near Leesville, La., that he was better prepared than his fellow soldiers for tear gas training because he was accustomed to the odors at the boat house.

After high school graduation in 1966, Russ went to work for Vic Zahn's Sheet Metal & Roofing Co. as a roofing carpenter, continuing to hunt and fish with his boat house buddies.

Life seemed good.

But in December 1966, Russ announced to family and friends that he had volunteered for the Army draft. His family was stunned by the news and was concerned about the prospect of his deployment to combat in Vietnam.

Russ might not have shared that concern. He could have selected a branch of service, such as the Coast Guard or Air Force, that would have been less likely to expose him to combat. Had he enlisted in the Army, he could have chosen a non-combat specialty. But it seems Russ instead decided to serve his country without pre-condition - even if that meant serving as a combat infantryman in Vietnam.

Basic training at Fort Polk

Russ arrived at Fort Polk on Jan. 3, 1967. He and his fellow trainees were subjected to a battery of tests. Russ scored so well that he was recruited for Officers' Candidate School. Russ was interested. His selection would depend on his successful completion of basic and advanced training, and the assessment of his drill instructors and a panel of officers.

Russ wrote home Jan. 25 that he marched 15 miles per day in addition to other exercise in the physical training regimen. He came in second in his company's physical training test. He found it easy to disassemble and reassemble an M14 rifle, tasks many of his fellow trainees found challenging. On Jan. 30, he wrote that he had been selected as "post guard," an honor — according to his instructors. Russ wasn't impressed. "It's just another extra duty," he wrote. He also told his family that he had applied for OCS the day before.

The pace of basic training was exhausting. On Jan. 30, Russ wrote his family: "We have a rough week up ahead. Night fire, more bayonet, hand-to-hand combat, (tear) gas chamber, live grenade throwing." From a letter dated Feb. 3: "We've got a bivouac next week. Four days and three nights out in the sticks … They've really been on us lately. We don't have much time for anything. I'm lucky if I get four or five hours sleep."

Fort McClellan

After basic training, Russ was assigned to advanced individual training at Fort McClellan, Ala. He underwent further combat instruction. His ease and aptitude with weapons was evident. He wrote in a letter home March 9 that he was commended by his company commander for his top-of-the-company performance during a land navigation exercise, finding his course with a map and compass over difficult, swampy terrain at night.

After further consideration, Russ decided he did not want to serve as an officer; he attempted to withdraw his OCS application. Ordinarily, OCS applicants were routinely allowed to withdraw, but officers had see Russ's leadership potential. He had to lobby his superiors. He wrote home on April 3: "I had to talk to everyone from a sergeant to a full colonel about canceling OCS. It seems the higher rank those guys get, the nicer they get." After the officers were unable to dissuade Russ, he was allowed to withdraw his application.

Russ's probable combat deployment to Vietnam weighed heavily on his family — and he was aware of it. In his letter home May 8, 1967, he wrote: "Dad better stop having bad dreams about me."

Russ's final training station was Fort Hood, Texas, where he was introduced to mechanized infantry and armored personnel carriers. He was housed comfortably and had a less hectic schedule. He thought often of home, as when he wrote appreciatively July 20 about a package he had received from his mom: "I got the cookies Monday … I finished the last of them off about an hour ago. Everyone on the whole floor says 'thanks.' You'd think it was their mother that sent them cookies the way they gobbled them up."

But Vietnam loomed large. Russ wrote his family July 26, 1967: "A lot of guys are getting shipped to Vietnam the last few days. I suppose my day is coming soon."

If he didn't ship out, he would visit home: "I'm going to try to get a leave sometime in October. So I can get in a little duck hunting. Can't live without that."

Russ was assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry — the 1/50.

Deployment

By 1967, Vietnam had evolved into a war of attrition. The North Vietnamese had identified the Central Highlands and contiguous Central Coastal Plains as their most promising target. Their principal line of communication and supply, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, fed directly into this area. The North Vietnamese Army attempted to accomplish in 1967 and 1968 what it later succeeded at in 1975; namely, it tried to drive through II Corps area and cut South Vietnam in half.Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, recognized the strategy and adopted a defensive remedy: He assigned one of the most storied units in America's arsenal, the 1st Air Cavalry Division, to defend this area. The 1st Air Cavalry already had proven itself in Vietnam, dating to its fierce combat in 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley.

The 1st Air Cavalry didn't have the overland mobility of Russ's battalion. The 1/50 could deploy into action on tracked vehicles and had considerable punch. Each of its armored personnel carriers was armed with a .50-caliber machine gun and two M60 machine guns. Each carrier could fire up to 2,100 rounds of machine gun fire per minute. The Army assigned the 1/50 to the 1st Air Cavalry in the Central Highlands. In addition to its capacity for air assault, the 1st Air Cavalry would have overland mobility. Russ and his fellow troopers of the 1/50 would wear the vaunted 1st Air Cavalry shoulder patch.

On Sept. 1, 1967, the soldiers of the 1/50, about 900, boarded the USNS Gen. John Pope at San Francisco and sailed toward the Republic of Vietnam. Walter Podraza, now of Punta Gorda, Fla., met Russ at Fort Hood and would fight alongside Russ through many firefights and battles. Some 47 years later, Walter remembers Russ vividly.

While aboard the John Pope, Podraza recalls, some Charlie Company troopers had friendly contests field stripping and reassembling M60 machine guns and M16 automatic rifles in the dark. Russ most often won. Russ was "a natural," Podraza says, and he exuded a quiet self-confidence.

The 1/50 arrived in Vietnam on Sept. 22. Russ wrote that the temperature was already over 100 degrees at 9 a.m. The sea voyage on the USNS Gen. John Pope had been a bonding experience for the troopers, who would go down in 1/50 lore as "the boat people."

Landing Zone Uplift

For most of Russ's service in Vietnam, he and the 1/50 were based at Landing Zone Uplift. He arrived at LZ Uplift, in the Central Coastal Plains south of Bong Son, on Oct. 9, 1967. Michael P. Kelley, author of "Where We Were In Vietnam," described LZ Uplift as "very primitive" and a "dreary sprawling firebase." The base camp was a sprawl of mud, soggy sandbags and tents. In a letter home, Russ described the camp as measuring about a half-mile square, the surrounding terrain "all mountains and rice paddies."

Another Charlie Company veteran, Dick Vanderloop of Kaukauna, Wis., says the perimeter was ringed by three rolls of concertina wire stacked in pyramid form. Inside the perimeter were foxholes from which troopers could repel attackers. Outside the perimeter wire were more foxholes for troopers to use as listening posts and give warning in the event of enemy attack. Every night the perimeter defenses were manned by troopers who were between missions in the field.

Stationery was often a rare commodity. In October 1967, Russ wrote three letters home on ammunition box wrapping. On Nov. 19, 1967, he asked about Aquinas High School's athletic teams: "How is Aquinas doing this year anyway?" In the same letter, he complained of difficulty in receiving packages sent him from home. Postal difficulties occurred in both directions: Russ's family didn't receive some of the packages he sent home.

Russ wrote that he and his Charlie Company stayed at LZ Uplift between missions. It was a place to get a hot meal, shower and re-provision. Three factors determined the base camp's strategic value: location, location and location. The base camp was in the middle of enemy territory. It was sometimes under enemy mortar attack. It was always at risk of direct assault. Vanderloop says the base camp's artillery batteries on Duster Hill bombarded nearby enemy positions at night. Asked how he could sleep through the din of high-caliber out-going barrages, or "red splashes," he said he remembers the noise as "comforting."

The risk to troopers at LZ Uplift wasn't limited to enemy forces from outside the wire. According to 1st Lt. Chuck McAleer of San Antonio, Texas, the 1/50's medical operations officer, civilian Vietnamese workers at the base camp also represented potential danger. Troopers receiving hair cuts from Vietnamese barbers were watched over by fellow G.I.s in order to protect against an errant razor or scissors.

Oppressive heat and incessant rain during monsoon season plagued the troopers. Entrenchments were transformed into muddy pits; sandbag structures became ineffectual. "It seems to never stop raining," Russ wrote on Oct. 9, 1967. Recognizing the importance of the 1/50's mission and the strength of its enemy, the Army supplied additional heavy automatic weapons and grenade launchers.

Upon deployment to LZ Uplift, the troopers were immediately dispatched on search-and-destroy missions in the surrounding countryside. On Oct. 17, Russ wrote that he and his fellow Charlie Company troopers had just returned to base camp after eight days in the field. They and accompanying South Vietnamese troops had cornered enemy troops in a bunker. Called on to surrender, the enemy instead left the bunker throwing grenades. According to Russ, two officers and nine South Vietnamese troops "got messed up."

'What a way to start off Halloween'

On Oct. 31, 1967, Charlie Company came under heavy assault at 1:30 a.m. on Tiger Mountain, according to the account of Charlie Company veteran and unit historian Jim

Sheppard. Russ was wounded and wrote home afterward that his good friends Scott Thiry of Milwaukee and Roger Hubbard of Wynne, Ark., were killed by the same grenade blast that wounded him.

“That really makes me mad when my good buddies get zapped,” he wrote. “That’s war, I guess.” After describing his wounds, he added “… don’t worry yourself. It’s really nothing.”

Russ was evacuated to a military hospital at Camp Zama, near Tokyo. He wrote that he was bored and wanted to return to his unit, but he was also homesick. At the end of his letter of Nov. 9 he wrote, “Sorry about spilling my troubles on you, but a guy’s gotta blow some steam sometimes.” And on Nov. 15, he assured his family, “Don’t get shook. My wounds are very minor.” Russ then requested and was granted an early hospital release so he could return to his unit.

In a Dec. 4, letter, Russ informed his family that he had been recommended for a Bronze Star for Valor and that he had been promoted to team leader of a four-man section. He continued to write of life in the field with oblique references to combat. On Dec. 13, he wrote: “I don’t like my life hanging on a string 24 hours a day.” Two days before Christmas, he wrote that he and his fellow troopers had been in the field for almost a month and had just recently returned to base camp: “They finally decided to give us a break.”

On Jan. 26, 1968, Russ sent two letters to his family, apologizing for not having written for a while. He had been in the field, on armored personnel carriers, for 16 hours a day. When he came in from missions, he explained, he was “beat.” He and Charlie Company had gone on a mission the day before to rescue Alpha Company but had themselves come under attack: “I went a little wild with the mounted machine gun,” he wrote. “I wasn’t going to take my finger off that trigger for nobody.”

Charlie Company lost two armored personnel carriers in the battle and “had some guys wounded.”

Russ wrote of a fellow trooper who corresponded with his platoon after being wounded and removed from combat. His former comrade had sent a recent photo. According to Russ: “He had all his bandages off. He didn’t have a right eye. Missing half his nose. Lost most of his teeth and looked like his face was all pushed over to one side. But at least he’s going home. That’s the way everybody feels. Don’t care how they go home. Just get home.”

He was going back in the field that day: “That’s why my handwriting’s shaky.”

Lt. Harry Wilson assumed command of Russ’s platoon in early January. Wilson, of St. Louis, describes Russ as a “great trooper,” brave and aggressive. Wilson describes the circumstances in January 1968: The North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong had built up forces and supplies in the area in preparation for the Tet offensive, which would occur soon, beginning Jan. 30. Charlie Company aggressively patrolled in the field. Enemy contact occurred every other day or so. Sustained fire fights broke out about once a week. Wilson spent a lot of time in the field with Russ’s squad, an excellent one that was often the point of the spear.

Bruce Sims, a son of Uniontown, Ohio

E. Bruce Sims was raised on Mayfair Road in Uniontown, Ohio. His dad, Harry, worked for Goodyear Corp. Bruce’s cousin Jeannie Kries, who now lives in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., says Bruce’s mom, Audrey — everyone called her “Maggie” — was a kind woman, beautiful and

vivacious. Harry and Maggie oversaw a busy household: Bruce was one of five sons vying for attention. Todd was the oldest, then came Bruce, Mark, David and Rusty.

The Sims family's roots were in eastern Tennessee. Bruce's maternal grandmother, Edith Langley, lived on the Langley family homestead in Wartburg, about 45 miles east of Knoxville.

Bruce's cousin Jeannie lived with and was raised by Grandma Edith. She remembers eagerly anticipating each summer when Uncle Harry, Aunt Maggie and their boys would visit her and Grandma Edith. Grandma put them up in the "bunkhouse" - the guest house behind the main family home. Jeannie felt close to her cousins and thought of them as brothers. She remembers Bruce as friendly but low key and quiet as a boy.

Maggie was struck by a car and killed in 1962. Bruce was 13, and his mother's death profoundly affected the family. Now a single parent, Harry tried to care for five sons. Grandma Edith stepped in to help. Todd lived with her during his last two years in high school; Bruce and his other three brothers stayed with Harry in their family home on Mayfair Road.

Bruce attended Green High School in Uniontown and played varsity football. Nancy Eddy was raised in the same neighborhood and remembers him from the neighborhood and their school bus rides together. Boarding the bus, Bruce often avoided eye contact with others. He was not unfriendly, she said, but he seemed quiet and shy.

Drafted

Bruce was drafted into the Army in March 1967. As a conscientious objector, he asked to serve as a combat medic but without weapons. He was ordered to basic training at the Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, "the home of military medicine." His six weeks of basic training differed from Russ's in that Bruce, as a conscientious objector, received no training in combat arms. He received military orientation, drill instruction, physical training and an introduction to combat medicine. Ten weeks of advanced individual training followed, again at Fort Sam Houston.

In the 10 weeks of AIT, Bruce learned of the pride and tradition of the Army Medical Corps. He learned that he would be deployed to Vietnam, where his job in combat would be to stabilize wounds and evacuate casualties. He was taught how to establish airways, control bleeding and maintain circulation. Bruce was given a crash course in responding to an array of situations that a typical medical professional in a state-side emergency room would not see in a lifetime. Russ Roth, a retired firefighter from Vancouver, Wash., and a former combat medic with the 1/50 at LZ Uplift, also received his medic training at Fort Sam Houston. He pegs the medic training he and Bruce received at the intermediate, or EMT 2, level. Roth added, however, that the skills acquired at Fort Sam Houston were significantly augmented by "on-the-job training" in Vietnam.

Deployment

Bruce arrived at LZ Uplift on Jan. 22, 1968. He met the battalion's medical operations officer, 1st Lt. Chuck McAleer, and battalion surgeon Capt. Ray Cave. Cave was in charge of the battalion aid station, performed emergency procedures on casualties and attended to other maladies encountered by the troopers. McAleer oversaw the medics. Each of the three rifle platoons in the battalion's four rifle companies was assigned a medic. Additionally, medics worked at LZ Uplift's aid station. "Ambulances" were converted armored personnel

carriers distinguished by a red cross emblazoned on the side and fitted with racks to carry litters in the troop compartment. When Sims came to LZ Uplift, McAleer, as was customary, assigned him to the battalion aid station during his first two weeks in country, to orient him before he went into the field.

It did not take long for Bruce to be introduced to the hectic nature of life in a combat zone. On the day after his arrival, the aid station was flooded with four dead and 21 wounded troopers after an action at a nearby village, Truang Thuan, when the battalion went to the rescue of a South Vietnamese force that had been ambushed.

Bruce was assigned to Lt. Harry Wilson's 3rd Platoon. Wilson remembers Bruce as quiet but intent on doing his job well. Sims was welcomed by the platoon. An inventory of a typical medic pack suggests why: suture kit, hemostats to close off ruptured arteries, cravats, or triangular shaped bandages, ace bandages, morphine ampules to deaden pain and prevent shock, powder to disinfect wounds, and gauze packs - all items calculated to enhance a wounded soldier's chance of survival.

Medics performed, often heroically, under extreme conditions. The 1/50 medics distinguished themselves by their bravery and their performance in seemingly impossible situations. Troopers recognized that medics substantially increased the prospect of returning home alive.

In addition to caring for battlefield casualties, Bruce stayed on guard against malaria and dengue fever. He pestered soldiers to take their quinine tablets and avoid unpotable water. Rashes, boils and leeches were common.

At a reunion of the 1/50 just 3 1/2 weeks ago at Fort Benning, Ga., several 1/50 medics who served in 1967 and 1968 talked about being presented with horrifically wounded troopers for whom there was little hope. The medics did their best to treat the wounded and alleviate their suffering. And those memories linger, sometimes haunt, the medics.

The Battle of Thuan Dao

On the morning of March 2, 1968, Charlie Company embarked on what Wilson describes as a "hammer-and-anvil" search-and-destroy operation directed at North Vietnamese Army forces near the town of Thuan Dao, west of LZ Uplift. The 3rd Platoon was to be the hammer, airlifted to a landing zone west of the town; mechanized remnants of Charlie Company were to be the anvil, driving from the east and converging on the North Vietnamese.

Wilson and 3rd Platoon were airlifted to their landing zone earlier than planned. Wilson was in the same helicopter with Russ and other members of 1st Squad. The troopers landed under fire, and the helicopters left. The North Vietnamese fire lessened, and Wilson started with 3rd Platoon toward Thuan Dao.

Third Platoon would later learn it had been dropped atop a headquarters company of an NVA battalion.

The North Vietnamese fire increased in intensity. Wilson radioed Charlie Company commander Capt. Jay Copley his position and circumstance. He also called air support -- not just any air support, but the 1st Air Cavalry's aerial rocket artillery, helicopters armed with 48 lethal 2.75-inch rockets. Wilson directed his men to retreat to their landing zone for evacuation.

The North Vietnamese converged in force. The platoon took a prone defensive position in a dry rice paddy, protected only by a 12-inch earthen perimeter dike. As Wilson remembers, the berm was just high enough to “cover (his) head and (his) butt.” Enemy fire became even more intense, especially that coming from a hedgerow some 25 yards away.

Ammunition was running low. The reserve ammunition was on the armored personnel carriers coming in from the east. There also was no sign

of air support. The hedgerow was impervious to direct fire. The platoon’s M16 rifle fire was deflected by the hedgerow’s trees, foliage and earthen bulwark. Even M79 grenade launchers could not punch through. North Vietnamese soldiers lying inside the depression immediately behind the hedgerow appeared safe.

Enemy fire intensified again. The U.S. troopers returned fire while hugging the dirt inside the paddy.

Russ Haas lay near Wilson, alongside Sgt. Norm Poage. No one knows what they said to one another. Poage died at 65 in 2010. Suddenly, Haas sprang into action. Troopers attempted to give him covering fire as he raced toward the hedgerow, grenades in hand. It looked as though he was going to reach cover at the base of

the hedgerow, from where he could more effectively lob the explosives at the enemy that had pinned down his unit.

Haas covered most of the 25 yards to the hedgerow before he was cut down by enemy fire. Within seconds, the unarmed medic, Bruce Sims, was running to Haas. Every other man in the platoon concentrated his fire on the hedgerow. Sims reached Haas and began to drag him back toward cover when he, too, was shot down.

Haas and Sims both lay in no-man’s land.

Wilson radioed the mechanized Charlie Company platoons for help. Dick Vanderloop, who was driving one of the armored personnel carriers among the mechanized platoons, remembers everyone redoubling efforts to reach Wilson’s beleaguered platoon. They left their planned route and cut across fields and rice paddies in a desperate rescue attempt, advancing against a much larger

North Vietnamese force. They needed to reach Wilson’s platoon before it was wiped out. Drivers coaxed every RPM out of the personnel carriers’ 318-cubic-inch diesel engines, negotiating what under ordinary circumstances would have been considered impossible terrain. Troopers desperately hung onto the carriers.

Aerial Rocketry Artillery Hueys swooped in suddenly and began to light up the NVA positions with artillery fire and flame. The North Vietnamese desperately tried to quit the field but paid a terrible cost.

Aftermath

The rescue came too late for Haas and Sims. As soon as the hedgerow was silenced, troopers recovered their bodies and placed them on Medevac helicopters. Papers on a North Vietnamese Army corpse behind the hedgerow identified the dead man as a top provincial commander. The mechanized contingent reached the battlefield and together with

the 2nd and 3rd platoons began a sweep of the area that lasted two days.

The 1/50 held a religious memorial service for the battalion's fallen on March 6, 1968. Each trooper felt the losses deeply. Russ Haas and Bruce Sims had given their lives for Charlie Company. Both men were posthumously honored for their courage and sacrifice. Haas received the Bronze Star for Valor, Sims the Silver Star.

Russ Haas was the ninth son La Crosse lost to the Vietnam War. Fifteen more would follow before the war's end in 1975. Of the 35 troopers in Russ's platoon, seven were killed in action and 14 were wounded. Chuck McAleer would lose two more medics, Bruce Tabor on May 5, 1968, and Lionel Gouch on May 11, 1968.

Russ Haas' remains were returned home and are at rest in La Crosse Catholic Cemetery on Losey Boulevard, not far from the home in which he was raised. His dad's remains and those of his youngest sister, Mary Beth, rest nearby. Russ's mom, Margaret, is 93. She remains in La Crosse and enjoys the love and support of her daughters, Paula (Jim) Bantle of Onalaska and Sue (Steve) Anderson of New Glarus, Wis., and their families.

Bruce Sims is at rest in Hillside Memorial Park in Akron, Ohio.

In 2005, the 1/50 dedicated a memorial monument at Fort Benning. During the recent three-day reunion, on April 30, the 1/50 dedicated a memorial plaza addition in specific honor of its Vietnam War fallen. More than 100 Vietnam War-era veterans joined current 1/50 soldiers in attendance.

Walter Podraza remembers helping carry Russ's body to the helicopter. To avoid sorrowful memories, he does not attend reunions and has not visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

About the author

As we observe Memorial Day 2015, Ron Fischer of McMurray, Pa., a high school classmate of Spc. Russell Haas, offers this tribute to two decorated soldiers who gave their lives in 1968 for their brethren in Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry Regiment in Vietnam. Fischer was raised outside Marshfield, Wis., and graduated from Holy Cross Seminary in La Crosse in 1966, St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., in 1970, and the University of Minnesota School of Law in 1973. He is retired from the steel industry and lives with his wife, Jun, near Pittsburgh.