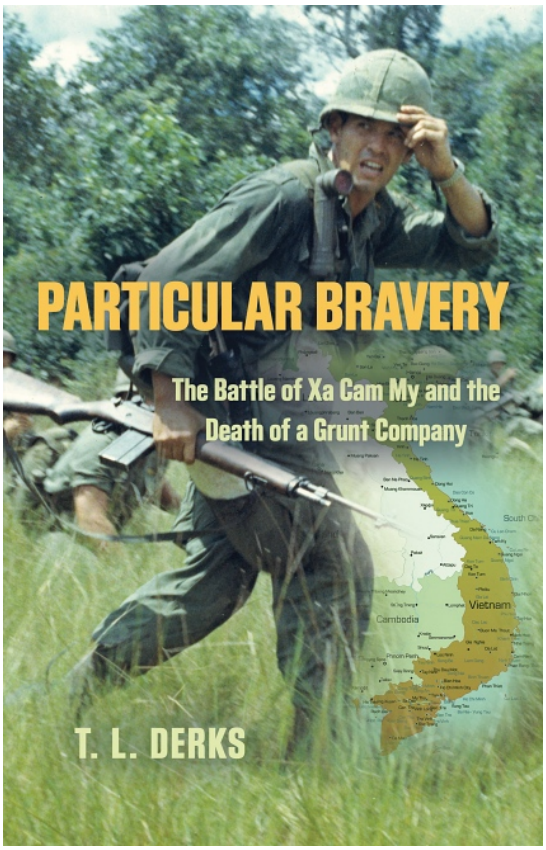

In April of 1966, the soldiers of Company C walked into an ambush and were systematically slaughtered by a VC battalion near the village of Xa Cam My. "Particular Bravery" tells the story of that jungle horror through the eyes of survivors.

PARTICULAR BRAVERY:
The Battle of Xa Cam My and the Death of a Grunt Company
By T.L. Derks

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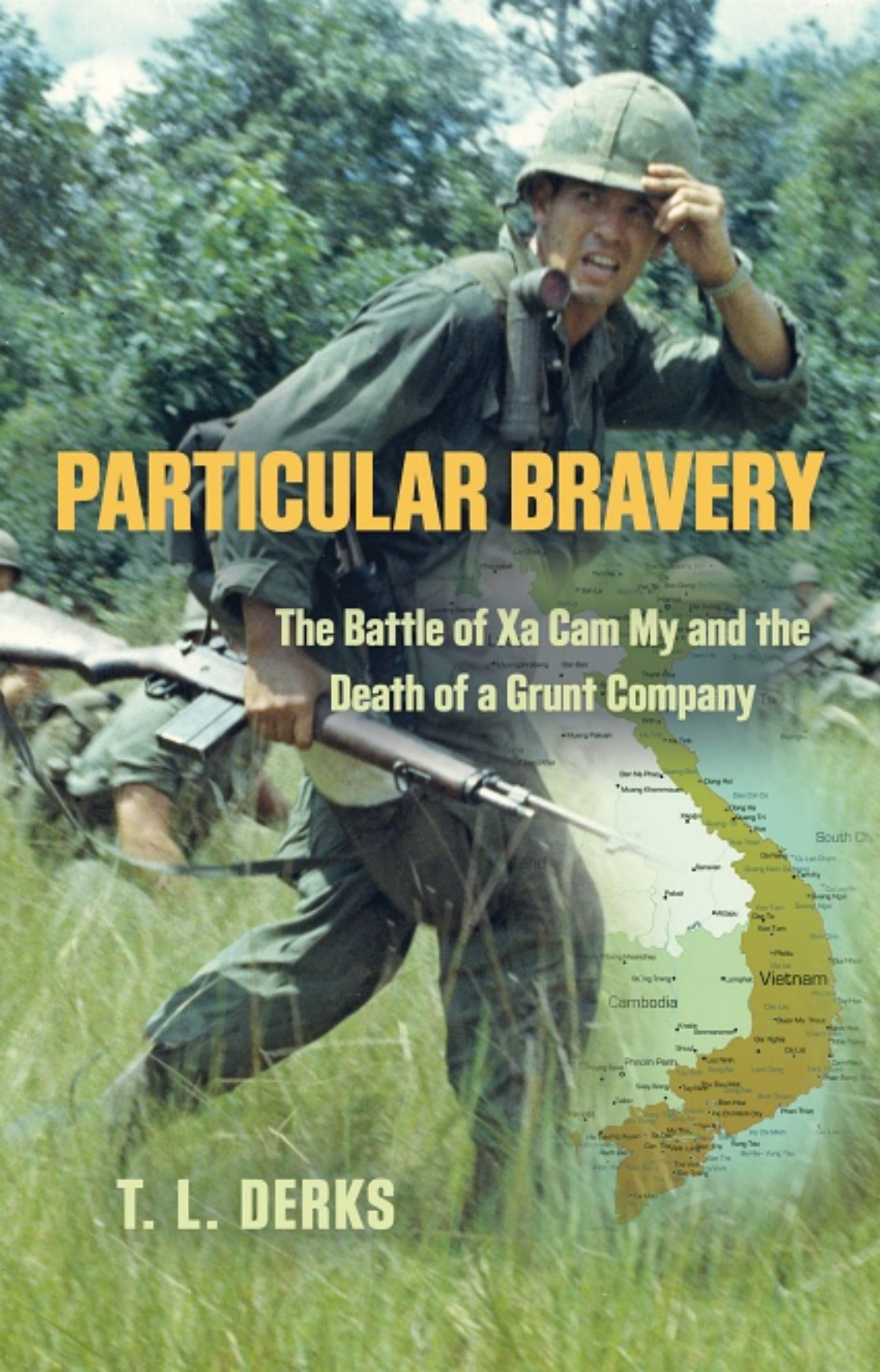
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T. L. DERKS
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Prologue:
The Roar

"True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis... A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe."

Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried.

The roar. The great howling of the enemy's fire, the friendlies' return fire, the mortars, and the artillery careening in from overhead; these sounds engulfed Pfc Dave Burris as he huddled behind the questionable cover of a log that seemed to be the target for all that munitions and noise. Plus, there was the screaming. Sergeant Schoolman. The sergeant was bellowing orders to the other men of the squad, prone behind that log, the line of defense, a downed tree midway down a jungled slope. Burris was amazed that he could hear Schoolman over the wall of noise that gripped the area. In addition to that cacophony of chaos, a .51 caliber Chicom machine gun was throwing slugs against the exposed side of the log, chewing systematically at the wood, and that weapon added its thick snarl to the roar. From the sound of things, Burris was sure the gun was firing from point-blank range.

Burris, a genuine 11bullet stopper*, was alone at the end of the log. The lieutenant was missing; the platoon sergeant was dead. Seasholtz, the fire team leader, was down. Schoolman was close by, there beyond another trooper, but Burris could see, could unbelievably *hear*, the sergeant directing his attention to the squad that stretched out to his right—away from Burris at the end of the log. And the trooper nearest Burris, just an arm's length distance to the right, was focused on Schoolman, leaving Burris alone at the end of the log.

Burris knew that somewhere outside the slim protection of the log lay the safety of the 2nd Brigade's base camp at Bear Cat on Highway 2. A native of Redwood City, California, the Pfc, however, did not know at that moment in which direction that particular mass of mud and barbed wire lay. He did not know that the log and the company, and unfortunately, he, were all forty miles east of Saigon, between the capital city of South Vietnam and the South China Sea. Besides, knowing any of that was not going to help get him through the fight.

It was Burris' lonely Vietnam War of 1966. His war at the end of the log, the end of the line in Phuoc Tuy Province that held the May Tao Secret Zone, an area where until a couple of weeks before this nightmare afternoon, the Vietcong had reigned unchallenged by U.S. military power. The end of the line for Burris and the 3rd platoon of Charlie Company and the "Rangers" of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Regiment, First Infantry Division. Burris crammed another clip into his M16 and prayed that the log would hold since he *was* the end of the line.

Then there was the dirt splattering into the Californian's face. The ground out beyond the deadfall, the exposed earth to the Pfc's left, was belching up dirt clots that were smacking him in the face. Someone was shooting at Burris not only to his front but from out on the left. He jerked his rifle up to his shoulder and drew a bead at the space beyond his left. A Viet Cong was visible about twenty yards off firing at the American. Luckily the VC was firing too low, churning up the ground. Burris retaliated with a burst. The firing from that direction stopped.

Having knocked off the VC Burris was not comforted. He was surveying the ground beyond the left of the log, and out there on the left, on that gently sloping ground, moments before – minutes before, who could tell in a firefight – a squad from 4th Platoon had protected 3rd Platoon's left flank. But when Burris scanned that ground in the moments after firing at the VC, the Pfc saw nothing in that direction but great gouges in the earth, clipped branches, and dead bodies. 4th Platoon had pulled out, had been forced out, or wiped out. Burris was the flank.

It was then that Burris added his cry to the roar of combat. "Our left flank is exposed. I'm getting fire." He howled at Sergeant Schoolman. Schoolman registered the new situation.

"Pull back. Get up the hill. Form a perimeter up the hill!"

Anywhere uphill, up that slight incline, was exposed ground. Burris saw that immediately. He was afraid to move, but he knew he could not stay behind that log; to remain in his position meant death. He and the other members of the squad started a frantic crawl up the slope.

Flat against the ground, flat against the churned-up dirt, shattered earth slick with blood. A trooper further up the slope than Burris—a trooper between Burris and safety. Slow, painfully slow. "Come on, move, move." Crack. Fire from the left. Crack. From the right. "Move!" "I can't, I'm hit." No time to help the guy. Scrambled over him. Left him. Burris flopped behind a tree. The roar followed.

Burris swung his M16 around and provided covering fire. The wounded trooper managed to crawl behind another upright tree about three yards to Burris' right. Another grunt, John "Ollie" Lang, reached Burris' perch. Lang went prone behind the tree. The trees were five or six feet in diameter. Awful small for hiding two bodies. Behind the other tree, the tree that protected the wounded soldier; a cluster of busted-up GIs. The Californian watched as these men squirmed for position, pressed in to avoid the sheet of bullets pouring in on the squad. Bark flew off the tree, the air between the trees whirring with lead, and the ground on both sides of the tree flayed with machine gun fire. A mortar round exploded nearby. Lang was hit with shrapnel.

"You got room over there?" shouted an exposed soldier from behind the tree where the wounded troopers crowded together. "No, no." Burris wailed back, but Lang waved the man over. Somehow Richard Garner made it through the hail of bullets to land between Lang and Burris.

"They're in the trees," someone called. Burris looked up, thought he saw flashes and threw some rounds into the trees.

He was satisfied that he saw no more flashes from those particular trees.

Off to the right and the rear of Burris' position, Sergeant Schoolman screamed, "I'm hit." Farther off to the right, the racket told Burris that third Platoon's other squads were being kicked apart. The perimeter had cracked; now, the men simply huddled behind trees and waited to die. Burris stared up at the canopy of broken branches and hanging limbs. There was tear gas caught in the branches, adding to the shadows of the coming darkness.

"God, I've got to piss," Burris said aloud. In combat, under fire, and with no room to maneuver, the Californian needed to void his bladder.

Garner, always one to crack a joke: "Well, stand up then." For a moment, the roar was replaced with laughter, but only for a moment. Then Burris was slammed by a bullet. The impact hurled the Pfc from behind the tree. Immediately the air around him thickened with aimed fire. Burris scrambled back behind the tree.

Garner was groaning. Burris could see that Garner had been hit near the base of the spine, and the bullet had exited Garner and continued toward Burris, where it bashed into an ammunition pouch on Burris' right hip. Garner's body had provided a margin of cushion that bled the bullet of its force before it reached Burris. The bullet had not penetrated the skin. Still, the impact had thrown Burris from behind cover and supplied some desperate moments as he hustled back to the tree.

Then the roar thinned. Thinned, broke. Less firing from the front, fewer moans, and wails from the right—from behind the tree where so many wounded sought refuge. Not quiet, but a softening of the din.

With darkness closing in, a new and terrifying horror crept onto the battlefield. The incoming fire had diminished. The

gunfire was replaced by a woeful sound, a maddening sound ripping at Burris' psyche—the tormented calls of the wounded outside the perimeter.

Randall "Peanuts" Prinz lay somewhere in the no-man's-land in front of 3rd Platoon, and from that horrid landscape, he called out for his friend Richard Garner. For the three soldiers pinned behind the tree, the thought of Prinz hurt and beyond reach was maddening. "Garner, I'm hit," Prinz would call out. Lang hollered back, "Hold on, Peanuts, I'm coming," though the bullets and his wounds kept him from moving. Garner and Burris offered shouts of encouragement, but they were unable to help their friend. Finally, the cries for help dwindled to nothing.

Full dark. Lang and Garner determined to pull back; find the CP. "Don't leave me here," Burris said to Lang and Garner, but they were already gone. Burris was alone again. He noticed that his legs were wet. "Am I hit?" He asked himself. He felt down around his legs. He had pissed on himself.

A new roar flared up inside Burris' head. "God damn it, I'm not going to let these guys walk over me," he told himself, referring to the enemy. He knew he was dead, there was too much death all around him to doubt that, but he was going to do something about the manner of his death.

The soldier's determination was short-circuited by another trooper's sudden appearance behind the adjacent tree—the tree where only dead lay moments before. This newcomer was carrying an M79 grenade launcher, a bloop gun. He called over to Burris, "How's it going?" Burris thought the question asinine, especially from a soldier he did not know, "How do you think it's going?" The grenadier ignored the response and fired his weapon. The grenade hit a vine about three yards in front of the tree (an M79 shell needs a few revolutions before it is armed) and bounced *back* between the two trees. The grenadier

attempted to bat the threat away with the M79, swatting at the grenade with the weapon's barrel. The grenade exploded. The grenadier took shrapnel in the back, a chunk of shrapnel embedded in Burris' elbow.

Burris drifted. Passed out. Darkness was a friend.

It was the darkness that roared then. Out of the night, Burris was shaken awake when he heard a bullhorn blast Vietnamese gibberish over the battlefield. "This is it," the Pfc told himself, "the gooks must be getting ready for a final charge." Burris studied the ground around him. He was alone. He readied his weapon. There were only the voices of the enemy, some female, some laughing. He heard them moving through the brush. Then he caught American voices, weak, strained, out where the perimeter had been before the VC pushed the GIs back. The American voices said, "please, don't." He heard shots.

Soon Burris made out the sound of exploration closer to hand. The movement sounded like someone crawling through the bush. A Vietcong was slithering toward him. Burris prairie-dogged his head from behind the tree for a moment—he needed to know what was approaching him. There was a human form crawling on hands and knees toward the tree.

"Who is it?" Burris hissed.

"Perez."

Burris did not know Perez. Perez must have been from another squad. But Perez was a friendly. Perez meant Burris was not alone.

"Come on." Burris urged as he reached out from behind the tree with his left hand. Burris snatched at the collar on the other man's shirt. Burris had him.

Hollywood timing. Precise, as if staged, but real. Just as Burris gripped the man's clothing in preparation to pull him to safety, three VCs rose out of the mist behind Perez. Just stood up out of the mist and began shooting. The bullets tore into

Perez's back. Perez flopped down as Burris released him. Burris was engulfed in the roar of his M16 as he emptied the weapon at the advancing enemy.

---

* "11 bullet catcher," –11B is the military occupational specialties (MOS) for an Army infantryman. Bullet catcher was one of the many derogatory terms growing from that.

Chapter One:
Easter

"There was discussion among the officers that we had to change our positions before night because the Vietcong that got away would be reporting to Battalion D-800. We could expect mortars or even an attack. This operation was becoming as intense as predicted."

"It sure made things exciting."

Roger Harris, Pfc, 1st Platoon, Charlie Company.

2nd Platoon's new medic, Bob Fisher, was happy to get the rest. The medic had been in the field since he joined the company; ten days of sweat-soaked, bug-infested, vine-wrestling, heat-enduring slogging through an operation called ABILENE. Now the company had settled in along the tree line of a large clearing. The standard listening posts were laid out, but for the most part, the company was relaxing along the clearing's elephant-grass edge while waiting for the resupply helicopters—the "slicks" or "choppers"—to fly in food and ammo. Besides the supplies, one of the slicks was bringing a chaplain to deliver a late afternoon sermon on that particular day, Easter Sunday, 1966. The sermon would be Fisher's time to rest.

Fisher figured he needed the break after enduring the early look at what his war would consist of for the next year. First, he had been a heartbeat away from getting hit by friendly fire his first day in Vietnam—it was back at the repple depple (90th replacement battalion) near Bien Hoa, not even out in the field, and Fisher was leaning forward on his bunk, carrying on a conversation with a tired GI due to return to "the World," America. The GI accidentally discharged his pistol, sending a .45 slug into Fisher's new fatigues and popping a hole through his dog tags. Fatefully, Fisher had been leaning forward, and the bullet caught the bloused-out shirt and the hanging tags and not his flesh. It was going to be a long war. Then, a few days later, Fisher's first serious act as a medic was to stick his hand in some muck that moments before had been a soldier's brains; a sniper had just shot the trooper. Because it was Fisher's first soldier killed in action (KIA), the medic's adrenaline was flooding his system, preventing him from leaving the body when the medivac helicopters came roaring in. Fisher had spent a frantic chopper ride working on the guy's chest even as his hand remained mired in the exposed brain. Fisher's first KIA.

Next came the lost patrol. A squad from the 2nd Platoon wandered off one morning without a radio, stomping around the rain forest all day and in danger of spending a night isolated in the jungle. Luckily, someone in the squad had remembered that they were carrying orange signal panels, which they laid out in a clearing so a helicopter could retrieve the troops just as death at dusk was becoming a real threat. The patrolling and booby traps and gripes of a grunt company in the field compounded the misery.

Operation ABILENE was proving to be a rough breaking-in period for the medic. Fisher had heard that ABILENE was a hunt for a main force Vietcong battalion haunting the jungles east of Saigon. He was less concerned with the why of the company's mission in the field than with his exhaustion and disorientation. Fisher figured he deserved a rest.[4]

The visiting chaplain stood just inside the tree line, facing out toward the clearing with the worshippers in the clearing and facing him. Although Fisher was Catholic and the service was Protestant, he felt the need to "…get close to my priest." He was not exactly listening to the chaplain as much as gathering comfort from proximity as he took note of the other men who were not attending the service, men writing letters and cleaning their weapons. It seemed a good sign to the inexperienced Fisher that the men were so relaxed.

Dave Marchetti of Company C, 1st Medical Battalion, a medic who usually worked an aid station but who had been dragooned into the operation at the last minute, noted that the men were lulling around but quiet, not shooting the shit as he had expected. The men were anticipating a tough time in their future. Still, the day itself was surprisingly mild, even beautiful. A breeze was blowing, and the chow was hot, which was a real change for an operation. A nice day for Easter.

Pfc Roger Harris was the radio-telephone operator—RTO—for 1st Platoon's Sergeant Hugh Sutterfield. Harris was also paying attention to the Easter service but from a distance. The eighteen-year-old had never witnessed a chaplain sent into the field to minister to the troops, so he thought the exercise worthy of his attention. "…I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about God. This was an unusual event, though, and I watched out of curiosity." Besides, Harris had "…never seen soldiers in the boonies grouped so close together out in the open."[5]

What happened next was witnessed by Fisher, Marchetti, Harris, and many other Charlie Company troops, though Fisher's story was significantly different from the other two soldiers' versions. Fisher, writing five years after the fact, recalled that a listening post radioed in to report three Vietnamese armed with rifles were heading across the far side of the clearing.* Then the company commander, Captain William R. Nolen, radioed headquarters to check if any friendly units were in the area. The answer over the radio was "[n]egative, Charlie 6, they must be VC reconnaissance. Don't let them get away. We don't want your position given away." Fisher watched as the company was ordered on line parallel to the trees. Then the troopers waited for the enemy to draw closer.[6]

Harris's account was more straightforward; the Chaplain finished his service, looked out toward the clearing, pointed, and then yelled. Out there were three Vietnamese—Vietcong, Victor Charles, Mr. Charles, Charlie, Chucky—walking unawares toward the company's perimeter. The GIs sprang into action. "Within seconds several rifles were being fired."[7] No orders, no radio calls to HQ, no troopers drawn up onto a firing line. Just a turkey shoot.

"It was all an impulse thing," Pfc Phil Hall of 2nd Platoon would relate years later. "The guys had enough common sense

to come on line, but there were no orders." Men were spraying the clearing with M16 rounds, pumping M79 grenades toward the Vietcong. Hall himself grabbed a "pig" (M60 machine gun) as his platoon charged across that clearing to blast away at the Vietnamese who were still a good four or five hundred meters away. Even a soldier from First Platoon left his position on the perimeter to pump a few rounds at the VC scouts.

One guerilla went down while another staggered amid the hail of bullets and explosions. Surprisingly, the third man darted toward the far trees without signs of being hit. The second VC, the staggering guerilla, toppled to the ground as more bullets chewed into him. The third man disappeared into the trees. One of the downed men made it to his feet again, only to crumple to the ground as the Americans continued to fire at him. For the charging 2nd Platoon, which provided the bulk of the fusillade, there was no covering fire or tactical advance. Instead, there was a pell-mell dash that more closely resembled a foot race at a Fourth of July picnic, replete with fireworks, than a military advance. 2nd Platoon members reached the enemy before any other soldiers.

Energized by the action, the 2nd Platoon's lieutenant, John W. Libs, was one of the first men to reach the VC bodies. The lieutenant found one of the men already dead. The other guerilla had one leg torn away below the knee, along with several bullet holes in his torso. Yet, Libs found that the second VC was not yet dead.

"Hey, Doc!" Libs called back to the medic, Fisher, who had not moved from the perimeter. "Come on up here; maybe we can use you."

Libs looked down into the dying man's face. "Where's D-800?" the excited lieutenant asked. D800 was the VC main force battalion known to be operating in the area.

Though mangled and dying, the enemy soldier managed to spit on Libs. He retaliated by seizing the dying soldier's testicles and squeezing them until the man blurted out something in Vietnamese. Libs looked to his interpreter, a member of the South Vietnamese National Police attached to the company, for an explanation.

"He's from an independent unit and was out on patrol," the interpreter answered.[8]

Fisher reached the scene of the carnage. By that time, both enemy soldiers were dead. The ghastly wounds on the bodies caused Fisher to retch. Before the new medic thought about what he was saying, measured his words, Fisher asked Sergeant Lawson Passmore why the company had not waited for the three men to walk into the unit's perimeter so the GIs could capture them instead of killing them. Perhaps it was because Fisher was the platoon's medic, responsible for keeping the wounded alive, and so a good man to be kind to, or maybe it was because Fisher was new and so not indoctrinated in the ways of war, but Passmore patiently answered the medic.

"First of all, Doc," Passmore responded in his Georgia growl, "if they had gotten close enough for us to attempt a capture they would also have been close enough to try and kill us. Would you like someone to explain to your girlfriend or your parents why you died here when it could easily have been prevented? Besides that, if we had captured them we would have no more information than we have now. The papers that they are carrying tell us all we need to know."

The Georgian finished his rationale by explaining, "[l]ast and most important, if they did survive, they would stand a good chance of defecting to our side, if only long enough to get back to their unit. One thing's for sure, Doc, the VC that I get in my sights today will not be the one who shoots me from a treetop next month."[9]

1st Platoon leader 2nd Lieutenant Smith DeVoe recalled seeing documents identifying the dead as belonging to D800, but Libs saw no incriminating papers on the dead Vietcong. However, the interpreter's explanation for where the three guerillas had come from rang false to Libs.[±] Libs was skeptical after a soldier who spoke a bit of Vietnamese approached the Lieutenant with a claim that the dying enemy had been more specific about what unit he was attached to than the interpreter had let on.

"I know for sure, sir, that he [the GI pointed at the dead guerilla] said he was from D800 and was sent out to find us."[10] In fact, according to the 5th Vietcong Division's official history as related in the book *Grab Their Belts to Fight them* by Warren Wilkins, two battalions from the 274th Vietcong Regiment were in the vicinity.[11]

Men from other platoons reached the scene. RTO Roger Harris had grabbed his radio and headed out to the bodies. "Before we got there Sgt. [Jimmy] Robinson had already cut off the [the corpses'] ears." Robinson explained to his platoon sergeant "…that the ears were confirmed body count and would affect the morale of the VC."[12] Others complained about Robinson's behavior, yet the trophy-taking was in keeping with Robinson's actions in the bush. Robinson was a former Marine who had joined the company in October of '65 after volunteering for a line unit because his security duty in Saigon was too tame. When he joined C, he had told the company commander, "I'm going to win the Medal of Honor." In camp, Robinson would prove to be mild-mannered, a quiet man who read and kept his carousing under control. However, in the field, the sergeant was always gung-ho, always running, and always eager to fight or claim a trophy.[**]

Harris also noticed that the officers were having a serious discussion concerning their present positions. Harris heard the

officers discuss the possibility that the company's position was compromised because one of the VC had escaped. "It sure made things exciting," Harris recalled. "There was talk that we might have an attack on our positions that night."

The company Executive Officer (XO), Lieutenant Kenneth Alderson, felt that 2nd Platoon's actions had been unprofessional. He felt that those troopers had reacted so recklessly, bolting up and charging at the mere sight of the three Vietcong, that the company had flubbed an opportunity to capture the enemy soldiers. To Alderson's way of thinking, the one escaped guerilla had undoubtedly estimated the company's size and position and reported that information to an enemy commander. The helter-skelter charge had been shoddy work that would force the Americans to change positions.

Lieutenant Libs added a warning to the conversation, revealing what the 2nd Platoon rifleman had told him regarding the enemy unit's identity. For the company's safety, Libs urged Captain Nolen to move the unit to the far side of the clearing while also setting out an ambush for any enemy sent to retrieve the bodies.[13]

Nolan listened to Libs. The captain was a profoundly religious man who, in the short time he had been with the company, had made it clear he was more interested in God than glory. Nolan was cautious, overly cautious, choosing his every word gingerly, making decisions carefully yet projecting no conviction behind those decisions. Some company officers felt that Nolan was simply in over his head. The officers instinctively measured Nolan against the company's past commanders—the likable and professional Captain Canady and the gung-ho Captain Padilla—and the judgments did not come out in Nolan's favor. He inspired a certain respect for his religiosity, but he scored low on the combat-savvy scale. Even the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel William S.

Hathaway, had felt the necessity of instructing Nolan to pay special heed to Alderson's and Libs' suggestions since the officers had been in-country for so long. Libs had seen more combat than the other platoon leaders.‡ Libs projected the air of a combat-tested officer, so much so that he came off as cocky. Libs was self-professed cocky. After nine months in Vietnam, Libs still projected that picture of a warrior, but the responsibility of keeping men alive weighed on him. He geared his reactions toward protecting his men's lives. At that point, Libs told Nolen to get the men moving because it would save lives, and the captain was reacting to do precisely that.[14]

Sergeant Pete Faberski, the NCO in charge of 1st Platoon's weapons squad, noticed tension growing in the men as the company shifted to the clearing's far side. Faberski did not share their jitters. The company's non-commissioned officers—non-coms, NCOs—were used to warnings to be careful when in the bush; officers often told the sergeants that they were going up against some hardcore unit or other. Faberski's platoon sergeant, Hugh Sutterfield, instructed the men to dig prone positions—scratch out a little place for yourself in the dirt, just in case—but Sutterfield's mood matched his weapons squad sergeant's mood; he was not worried.

Other troopers in the company were not so sanguine. In-country less than two weeks, Pfc Daniel Kirby remembers some of the GIs firing off rounds at shadows. Medic Dave Marchetti could not get over the gloom that settled over the men. Only Pfc Thomas Steele's presence buoyed Dave Marchetti's spirits. Steele was a fellow Pennsylvanian (a Philadelphia native)—in combat even that shaky connection, that thread was important. Steele simply would not let Marchetti share in the gloom. He joked with Marchetti and talked about Philadelphia as if it were down the block from Marchetti's hometown of Pittsburg.

At dusk, the company's tactical communications chief, Sergeant Charles Weyant, overheard Captain Nolen on the radio with Battalion Headquarters (HQ). From the sound of Nolen's responses, Weyant determined that Major General William DePuy, 1st Infantry Division commander, was heading to the unit. Nolan ordered someone to mark the landing zone with green smoke. When DePuy's helicopter dropped from the sky, Weyant was nearby to hear the fierce commander reemphasize to Charlie Company officers the need for caution. The dead scout seemed to verify that a large number of VC were in the vicinity. Weyant heard DePuy speak with Lieutenant Frank Fox, the artillery forward observer, about artillery support. The general finished his visit by reminding the officers that the downed VC confirmed other intelligence that D800, a main force enemy battalion, was nearby. That bit of news meant Charlie Company could expect to have their perimeter probed that night. Since Operation ABILENE's goal was to locate and eradicate the enemy, D800's proximity was a good thing.

In late March 1966, two of the First Infantry Division's three brigades had been committed to Operation ABILENE. The Big Red One—the Division was nicknamed for the distinctive red number "1" stitched on its shoulder patch—was the instrument chosen by General William Westmoreland to carry out the operation. Westmoreland, commander of American forces in Vietnam, had targeted two regiments of the PLAF (People's Liberation Armed Force–the Vietcong) operating in Phuoc Tuy Province. An Australian Army officer studying the depth of communist domination of the province pronounced that Phuoc Tuy "was an area which had gone bad…The VC were pretty much in control of it."[15] Westmoreland believed that the enemy would use Phuoc Tuy Province as a jumping-off point for a summer offensive against

Saigon. Operation ABILENE was Westmoreland's way of beating the Vietcong to the punch.[16] Fifty "Huey" helicopters were employed in the operation, shuttling from point to point in the province, and dropping soldiers into landing zones for search and destroy operations. Racing against the enemy's buildup of supplies and personnel in Phuoc Tuy and Long Thanh Provinces, Westmoreland's forces would knock the enemy off-balance, and onto the defensive, preempting the offensives. That at least was the scheme for the operation.[17]

Furthermore, Operation ABILENE was newly minted Major General William DePuy's opportunity to prove his pet theory that American bombs and American shells could bury the Vietcong's best. The general, fresh off Westmoreland's staff and elevated to command of the Big Red One, recognized in those VC main force units—the type of formations journalist Neil Sheehan had characterized as sledgehammer battalions, filled with motivated soldiers trained in ambush and lightning strikes—precisely the kind of targets that, if successfully smashed, would prove the general's theory.[18] If the soldiers of the Bloody Red One (as some of the troops derisively labeled it) could defeat the enemy's best forces, then charismatic, opinionated, aggressive General DePuy would have a professional as well as a tactical victory.

Certainly, Westmoreland expected as much from DePuy, whom Westmoreland considered both brilliant and, from their time working together in the Pentagon during the 1950s, a hard-charger, possessing "boundless energy,"[19] attributes that coincided with Westmoreland's expectations that the next phase of warfare (Westmoreland was finished playing defense, he now expected to push the war to the borders of Vietnam, away from populated areas) in Vietnam required "bold and skillful commanders."[20]

DePuy was a believer in the type of operations necessary to take the war to the enemy—search and destroy missions. He was the primary advocate of search-and-destroy tactics meant to pin the guerrillas so that American firepower could blast them.[21] DePuy believed that American military munitions could bury the enemy. "The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm..." the general had recently stated. "Until the other side cracks and gives up."[22]

To dump those loads of fiery death where they would produce the prerequisite amount of annihilation, DePuy believed in finding the enemy and piling on. While still chief of operations at MACV, he had put it more succinctly, "We are going to stomp them to death."[23] However, finding an enemy to stomp was proving to be problematic. The Vietcong were decidedly uncooperative in allowing the U.S. favored division or brigade-sized sweeps to scoop them up. Repeatedly, in early 1966, the big operations were coming up empty. The enemy was dictating the rate of contact. The guerrillas melted away when the big American units came lumbering their way. The VC waited to strike until they believed they had the advantage which was when they outnumbered the Americans or when an American unit was out of position.[24]

U.S. field officers had noticed this tendency to pick off the odd isolated unit. To take advantage of the enemy's tactic, American commanders began dangling bait for the enemy to snap at as part of the Americans' attempt to initiate contact. The Americans "broke down their units into platoon and company-size patrols to lure them [the Vietcong] into attacking. The risks were justified if the Communists took the bait because reinforcing units could then pile on."[25]

According to author Andrew Woods, writing forty years after the battle, Lieutenant Colonel William S. Hathaway was instructed to "entice" the enemy to attack his companies by

isolating them from supporting positions. On March 30, 1966, the 2nd Battalion, 16th Regiment went hunting for the enemy by presenting their units as bait.[26] The battalion was airlifted into Landing Zone Norman on the Courtenay Rubber Plantation buried in the heart of the May Tao Secret Zone in the jungles between Saigon and the port of Vung Tau. The battalion was then scattered into its company components and sent out into the jungle to invite the enemy to strike. Battery A of the 1st Battalion, 7th Artillery, followed. Their mission was to atomize any enemy that might bite at a Big Red One infantry company. This pattern of search and destroy would be repeated through the early days of April: swarms of helicopters debouching troops into jungle clearings, then "sweeps" into that jungle in efforts to catch D800 and other elements of the enemy's 5th Division.[27§]

Many Company C men remained tense through the night of April 10/11. The unit was expecting a mortar attack or an enemy rush. Officers moved among their men, checking to make sure the soldiers were alert. While making his rounds, Libs met up with 30-year-old Lieutenant Marty Kroah of 3rd Platoon. The two officers were friends, and as the likelihood of battle loomed, Kroah took the opportunity to tell Libs, "Well, we're going to get the shit kicked out of us tomorrow."

Libs responded with a bit of pure Libs bravado, "But we found D800. We're going to kick ass, Marty."[28]

Other members of the company simply did not notice the tenseness surrounding them. Over in the 2nd Platoon's area Pfc Galen Summerlot, a recent replacement, did not sense that things were wound tight. He was just doing what the other, more experienced men were doing, standing guard and writing letters. Before Easter, he had written a letter to his folks back home in Indiana, reassuring them that things were indeed quiet.

"I am on guard [duty] again tonight. We take turns keeping awake and guarding. I don't [know] if I will ever see much action around here."

Nothing happened that night. The calm allowed medic Bob Fisher to mull over Sergeant Lawson Passmore's words regarding the overpowering use of force against the three scouts.

> "I thought about what this man had said…I don't know what I had expected when I came to this country [South Vietnam], but this was not it. The rules [were] different. What might seem inhumane and immoral back home may be the only means of survival in this jungle. Right and wrong are moving targets."[29]

Writing of that night five years later, Fisher added, "Little did I know…that within 24 hours I would live with such fear and confusion that no precept…that I have held would remain."

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[*]Gilbert Delao, another RTO, recalls receiving a radio message from the LP. Pfc Bobby Holton, also an RTO, recalls spotting the three Vietcong from his place along the tree line and "…trying to raise the other platoons on the F" (frequency), but he couldn't get through.

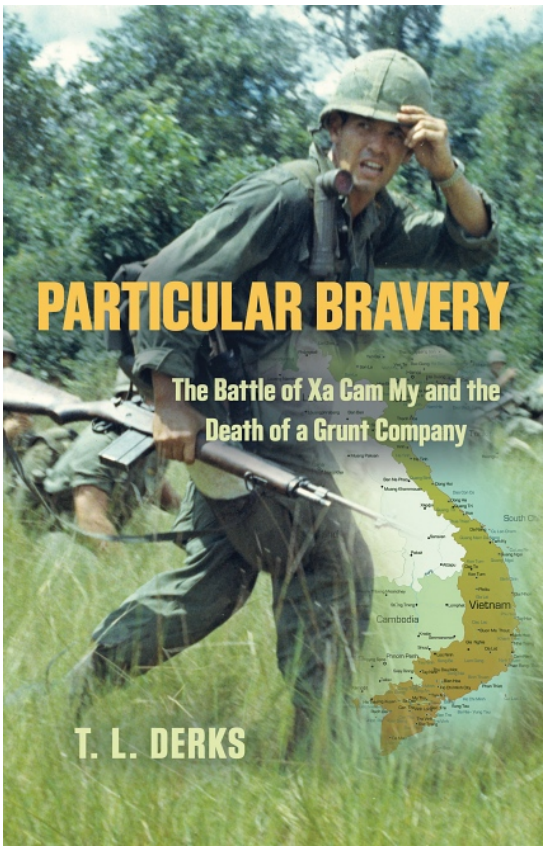
There was radio traffic before the shooting; whether it sparked the shooting is unclear.

[±] The Duty Officer's Log for April 10, 1966, entry for time 1947 reads: "The Dead VIETCONG had papers on him that identified him as being a member of D-800…."

**Pfcs John Babino and Bobby Holton of 1st Platoon confirmed that Robinson took the trophy. Holton also recalled that, before the operation began, First Sergeant Takeguchi urged the squad leaders to take trophies. "I want to see ears," he told the NCOs. Wes Carpenter recalled that one officer carried a pouch with a collection of trophy ears inside.

‡In a letter from General William DePuy to John Libs dated August 24, 1988, the general stated that Libs was the "real leader of the company as well as your platoon."

§In the same August 24, 1988, letter as above DePuy denied that the company had been bait. He further stated that he had only used units as bait one time in Vietnam, some months following Operation ABILENE.



In April of 1966, the soldiers of Company C walked into an ambush and were systematically slaughtered by a VC battalion near the village of Xa Cam My. "Particular Bravery" tells the story of that jungle horror through the eyes of survivors.

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The Battle of Xa Cam My and the Death of a Grunt Company
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