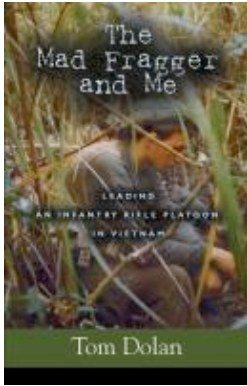


A photograph of a soldier in a jungle environment. The soldier is wearing a dark green helmet and a matching uniform. He is looking down and to the right, possibly at a rifle or some equipment. The background is filled with dense, tall grasses and other vegetation, creating a natural camouflage. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting a shaded area in the jungle.

The  
Mad Fragger  
and Me

LEADING  
AN INFANTRY RIFLE PLATOON  
IN VIETNAM

Tom Dolan



*The Mad Fragger and Me* relates the true experiences of a U.S. Army lieutenant throughout his training, culminating in a tour as an Infantry Rifle Platoon Leader in Vietnam. This is an articulate, sometimes graphically violent and often humorous account of the grunts in *The Famous 2nd Platoon*, who struggled to dominate the Quang Ngai Province elements of the North Vietnamese Army in 1971.

# **The Mad Fragger and Me**

## **Leading an Infantry Rifle Platoon in Vietnam**

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# **The Mad Fragger and Me**

Leading an Infantry Rifle Platoon in Vietnam

**Tom Dolan**

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## Chapter 5:

### GOING TO THE BUSH WITH BRAVO COMPANY

I got up early on 13 February 1971 and walked up the hill to CPT Davidson's CP (Command Post) in the dark. There had been several trucks blown up recently by land mines on the LZ Liz Access Road, and troops on them killed or wounded. For this reason, we foot-marched about two klicks (2,000 meters) along the Access Road, out to the hard ball, QL 1, for pickup by a convoy of deuce 'n halves. I had asked SSG Willard to keep Dink for me, but she must have gotten loose, because she found me as we were starting off from the firebase entrance around daybreak. I scolded her and threw clumps of dirt at her, but she would not go back and she happily followed me all the way out to the hard ball. We climbed on the trucks and headed North on QL 1. Dink urgently wanted to go with me and she chased the convoy for quite a long distance, probably a half mile or more, through the villes along Highway 1, until the trucks finally picked up speed in open country and left her behind. I was seriously worried about her, because she was wearing a leather collar with a rabies vaccination tag attached to it, and dog meat was high on the Vietnamese list of desirable cuisine. Native dogs never wore collars and were regarded as a source of protein, not as pets. Dink would have to make her way back to the firebase through a long and contiguous gauntlet of villages which were teeming with unfriendly humanity, while dodging vehicular traffic on Highway 1. But I couldn't take her to the bush with me and there was nothing I could do about her having gone AWOL from LZ Liz.

The convoy took us about 5 miles north to LZ Dragon, a long elevated helicopter landing zone, from which we made a CA (Combat Assault) by helicopters into the mountains west of Dragon Valley. The remnants of an old road ran through Dragon Valley, from Highway 1 to the mountains. The road had deteriorated into a

heavily used footpath and it was universally known as “VC Highway”. There were no hamlets in the valley, but plenty of VC/NVA. CPT Davidson and his CP group were traveling with Mac’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon on the other side of the valley. I watched Frank Korona plan his operations for two days and I went on several patrols. That was the extent of the orientation Frank was able to give me. On February 15<sup>th</sup>, at 1700 hours (5:00 PM) the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon hit an explosive booby trap, which we heard detonate. An “urgent” dust-off was called for two WIAs (Wounded In Action) with multiple shrapnel wounds. The two wounded were CPT James Davidson and 1LT Roger Mackintosh. They were initially taken to the 91<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital, but their wounds were severe enough that they were then flown to a medical facility in Japan. I never saw either of them again, but we heard later that they both survived, although not whether they were permanently disabled. Frank Korona was appointed as CO of B Company. He went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon’s location to assume command of the CP group and to direct the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon, which no longer had a platoon leader. I was designated to lead the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. So much for being oriented gradually by an experienced rifle platoon leader, but I needn’t have worried. As Shane Pinkston had predicted, the troops in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon assured me that I didn’t have anything to be concerned about. They all knew what they were doing. All I had to do was to follow their instructions and do everything they told me to do until they had me broken in.

B Company continued to find more booby traps in the VC Highway/Dragon Valley area. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, we were extracted from that AO (Area of Operations) and we were picked up for a CA into the Song Ve River Valley. The troops said that the Song Ve area was known for its bad juju and it was considered to be “Indian Country”. Four months earlier, on 12 October 1970, Bravo Company had made an Eagle Flight (one of a series of “cold” helicopter insertions) into the Song Ve area and had landed on top of a large NVA unit, which was occupying a group of old French concrete

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bunkers there. Four B Company soldiers were killed in action, including the Company Commander, and seven others were wounded. That had been LT Frank Korona's first day in the field, and the Song Ve Valley was where he began to establish his reputation as a warrior. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon guys said that El Tee Korona had saved the day, after CPT Francis Powers was killed. Frank received an impact award of the Silver Star for valor, because of his actions on 12 October 70. (He later also received two Bronze Star Medals with "V"/valor devices, for his actions on 30 October 70 and 12 January 71. He was additionally awarded an Army Commendation Medal with "V", for his actions on 4 May 71. That makes a total of four awards for conspicuous bravery in combat, a remarkable record. It was unusual for a lieutenant to be decorated in rifle platoons which operated autonomously, because it seldom occurred to an enlisted man to recommend his lieutenant for a decoration and an officer of higher rank was rarely present to observe a brave act. Frank Korona was our battalion's answer to Audie Murphy.)

The troops were angry about 1LT Mackintosh and CPT Davidson being blown up. They were also not happy about being sent into the Song Ve Valley. The villagers there were openly hostile towards us and we could see it in their faces, eyes and body language. We picked up multiple detainees, most of them adult females or middle aged men, and we sent them back to the rear for interrogation. We would look for irregularities in their ID cards (*can cuoc*), pack strap marks on their shoulders, soft hands and things like that. Or just bad attitudes, which were prevalent. Part of the attitude problem resulted from my soldiers being unnecessarily brutal towards the Song Ve villagers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon started by torching hootches when my back was turned. This was done arbitrarily and maliciously. It made me angry, even more so because while I was trying to stop it, the Battalion S3 (or CO?) was flying around at 2,000 feet in a C&C bird, transmitting radio messages such as, "I see that Zippo Squad moving through that ville", and "Watch where you drop those cigarette butts, ha ha!". I really lost it

when I saw an elderly Mamma-San wailing because her forehead had been laid open by a rifle butt and I had our medic patch her up. Like the burning hootches, nobody knew who butt-stroked Mamma-San. I went ape with the troops, reaming them out and making plenty of nasty threats. At least they probably got the message that their new El Tee would not meekly go along with whatever they felt like doing. I asked one of the more senior and steady guys, Roger Steward, "What the hell is wrong with these people?" He answered, "You will understand it after you've been out here for awhile." He was wrong. I never did learn to understand or accept that kind of behavior. I was seething mad to the extent I couldn't eat or sleep for several days. I sensed that some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon soldiers agreed with my point of view, but they would not talk about who was responsible. I understood that a few jerks might do that kind of stuff, but I could not understand why nobody else had enough courage to speak up against it. In hindsight, it was probably peer pressure and fear of the few thugs who were doing it.

We moved around in the Song Ve Valley for about four days, changing day laagers and NDPs, so as to not set any patterns. While moving to a new PB on the morning of February 19<sup>th</sup>, Squad Leader Roger Steward was walking "point" and he tripped a fresh booby trap. The fuse was from a U.S. smoke grenade and it popped like a firecracker. Fortunately, the main charge, a large #10 mess hall can packed with petna (properly, PETN), a high explosive used in artillery rounds, did not go off. The exploding fuse startled SGT Steward and he cursed, then ripped the device out of the tall grass in a display of temper. I was walking right behind him and if the main charge had exploded, it probably would have killed both of us. We destroyed the booby trap and I called the incident in. This mishap was my fault and I knew it. We should not have been walking on a trail in a place where we did not have to do it. That night and the next day, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon moved around a large mountain, hugging the east side of the Song Ve River, moving north towards Nui Vong/Hill 103. There was an old French Foreign Legion outpost



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on Hill 103 which 1/20 Infantry had occupied and used as a ground radar site.

On February 20<sup>th</sup>, a new lieutenant was sent out to 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon, to replace Roger Mackintosh. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon also made a CA to the opposite side of the Song Ve River and they began to move along the west side of the river parallel to my 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. The 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon was on our side of the river, but I don't remember if they were in front of or behind us.

The same day, February 20<sup>th</sup>, we were taking a break at the base of the mountain and I saw an M26 U.S. fragmentary hand grenade loft up out of a clump of brush into the midst of us. The frag looked like it was coming in slow motion, but the dink who threw it must have cooked it off because it exploded immediately after it hit the ground. A couple of other guys also saw it, we all yelled "FRAG!" and everyone hit the ground. It landed about 15 feet from me and exploded, but I wasn't touched. Another soldier near me, SP/4 Charles Beavers, was painfully wounded by shrapnel in his abdomen. The guys had started shooting into the brush automatically after the frag exploded. The second part of Shane's prediction then came true, because the troops were all looking at me with that "What do we do now?" look in their eyes. Fortunately, after a nanosecond of near panic, I knew what to do. I had been rehearsing various contingencies in my mind almost continuously for several days as we moved, and I had also mentally rehearsed the "call for fire". I called for a priority MEDEVAC and then got artillery coming, rattling off the call for fire into the radio. I started to adjust the art'y fire, but lifted it as the dust-off chopper came in for Beavers. We moved through and searched the area from which the frag was thrown. We found a little ground depression the enemy soldier had been occupying, with grass matted down like a deer's bed, but that was all. The dink who threw the grenade didn't hang around after he tossed it, but the artillery was intended to interdict his escape and clear any possible booby traps. A standard VC/NVA tactic was to booby-trap an area, then shoot at GIs or take some

other action to draw them into the mines. I knew this anecdotally, even though I was inexperienced.

The next day, February 21<sup>st</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon tripped a booby trapped 155mm artillery round which was suspended chest high in a tree. We heard the explosion from across the Song Ve River and saw a huge plume of smoke go up. There were two immediate KIAs, CPL Jim Califf and PFC Fred Young. Seven more guys were wounded, some of them grievously, including the new Platoon Leader, who had been in the bush for just one day. The lieutenant did not come back, nor did I ever meet him. (One of the wounded, PFC Steve Ast, later died of wounds on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.) After the dead and wounded were dusted off, the survivors, leaderless, refused to move and demanded helicopter extraction. 1LT Greg Studdard had previously been assigned to 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. He waded across the waist-deep Song Ve River, which was about 200 meters wide at that point, accompanied only by an RTO. After crossing the river, Studdard found some VC booby trap warning signs, a boot upside down on a stake and tall grass tied in knots, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon had not seen the warnings because they had followed a different route prior to hitting the trap. Lieutenant Studdard got the survivors moving, leading them back across the river.

On 22 February 1971, we humped out to Nui Vong/ Hill 103, which we then helped a Combat Engineer outfit close down as a 1/20 Infantry outpost. I had a tough time keeping up with the unit when we walked out from the bush, even though I was probably carrying the lightest rucksack in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon at that point. I had put on weight but had not been getting any serious exercise, during my three months with Four Deuce. All that beer drinking and those steak cookouts had taken their toll. At only 24 years old I was able to tough it out, otherwise I might have been left behind. Grunts did not pay much attention to the personal problems of newbies, such as having trouble keeping up during a foot march. After helping to destroy the bunkers and perimeter wire at Nui Vong, B Company returned to LZ Liz. The first thing I did was check on Dink and she

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was there, safe and sound with SSG Willard. She gave me an enthusiastic greeting.

One thing that occurred to me after this first mission was that there might not be much future in the job of Rifle Platoon Leader. Each rifle company usually had four Infantry officers in the field on each mission, but Bravo Company had lost three such officers or 75%, two lieutenants and a captain, in ten days. One of the lieutenants only lasted one day in the bush. We'd also had 3 enlisted men tragically killed and 7 more wounded (including my guy) out of a probable total of about 80 EM, during the same 10 day period, which comes out to a 12.5% casualty rate for the enlisted personnel. I had come uncomfortably close to being blown away by both a booby trap and a hand frag during that same brief period of time. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

It may appear that I have a phenomenal memory for the sequence of events, names and dates, but that is not the case. Some experiences, such as seeing that M26 hand grenade coming, were burned into my brain and are still vivid. The sequence of events and dates were provided by CPT Chuck Sekeda's website, [www.1-20infantry.org](http://www.1-20infantry.org) and a feature on it called *A Daily Recap of Operations*. It contains transcribed summaries of the Battalion's S2/S3 journal, by year, date and company. Some of this material is not accurate, for example it lists another soldier as WIA from the frag on February 20<sup>th</sup>, but I vividly remember SP/4 Beavers grimacing in agony (he recovered and was given a rear job). Nevertheless, the *Recap* provided a fine chronological outline and was a wonderful memory-jogger while I was writing this memoir. The S2/S3 log also provides insight into the trivial incidents at LZ Liz which the TOC Commandos thought were important, because they documented them for posterity.

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned a Platoon Sergeant who might have assisted me in the above adventures. Do not jump to the conclusion that I did not have one assigned to me. *Au contraire*, Staff Sergeant John Warrior (a pseudonym) was

assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon as the Platoon Sergeant. Alas, Sergeant Warrior's presence in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon was not helpful to me. SSG Warrior was a burly African-American with a sour and resentful demeanor. When I picked an NDP or PB, he often grumbled about the location to the troops and there was intermittent griping about other operational issues, usually behind my back. When I issued orders he didn't like, he made disparaging comments to other black soldiers which implied that my decisions were influenced by racial bias. He did not attempt to support me in discouraging the ville arsons or the abuse of the civilians. I suspected that he knew who the perpetrators were but withheld that information from me. I quickly noticed his subversive behavior, but SSG Warrior was either not aware that I was on to him, or he did not think that I could do anything about it. In spite of his deficiencies, Warrior was a physically impressive man, both large and intimidating. As a result, he had a fair amount of influence over at least some of the troops in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, but his lousy attitude prevented that influence from producing positive results. This situation set up a direct conflict between us. As a result of Shane Pinkston's leadership coaching, I had no inclination to defer any of my command authority to an NCO, so the problem was only going to be resolved by the departure of one or the other of us. SSG Warrior had been in the bush for a long time and he had been through at least two other platoon leaders before I was assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. 1LT Korona told me that SSG Warrior had acted heroically during the battle in the Song Ve Valley four months earlier, saving two young soldiers from probable death, so there had been another side to him in the past. Warrior was long overdue for a rear job. He may have been overstressed and burned out as Platoon Sergeant, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and I needed someone in that slot who was functional and effective. However, I would deal with SSG John Warrior soon enough.

Despite the sudden exposure to violence and the high casualties during my first mission with B Company, by far the most

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stressful aspect of going to the bush was the rebelliousness of some of my troops and the noncooperation of my Platoon Sergeant. I understood my soldiers' hesitancy to accept a new and unproven lieutenant. I also fully understood that I was responsible for their welfare and this responsibility weighed heavily on me. I could not allow them to do as they pleased, so I had to either persuade or force them to comply with my orders. I have read several accounts by Vietnam veterans about the sense of alienation they felt as newbie enlisted men, when first joining a rifle platoon. As they entered their new and violent world, they discovered it was inhabited by indifferent strangers, who didn't seem to be interested in becoming friends, or teaching them how to survive on the battlefield. Those accounts are unquestionably truthful, although perhaps not accurate in identifying the reasons for the uncaring attitudes. But cherry enlisted men did not have their new comrades working *against* them, as seemed to always occur with Infantry platoon leaders. This problem of establishing leadership credibility in combat units is an ancient one which will never change as long as mankind engages in warfare.

Our general operations followed the pattern described above. There were four rifle companies, A through D, which took turns manning the defensive perimeter at LZ Liz. Firebase security duty would generally last 3 or 4 days, then the company on Liz would return to the bush and another company would come in from the field to replace it, with some overlap on the day when the units were coming in/out. Stints in the bush would therefore usually last about 12-14 days.

Whenever we came in from the boonies, we had been wearing the same uniforms for about two weeks and we were pretty gamey by then, although everyone made an effort to stay reasonably clean in the bush. When I first joined Bravo Company, Battalion Headquarters always set up a "Circus" at the bottom of the hill, outside of the LZ Liz entrance. They had a field shower unit there, which consisted of eight 5 gallon canvas bags with shower heads

attached to the bottoms, suspended from an open steel frame on a trailer. We were required to strip off all our clothes and take cold showers. They gave us towels to dry off with and then we got in line, naked, for a medical exam. The medics set up an open air aid station at the Circus under the direction of the Battalion Surgeon and they gave everyone a good going over, especially checking feet/groins for jungle rot and bodies for any open sores. Treatment, care instructions and medications were issued on the spot. Then the EM tried to find clothes that would fit them by rummaging through the bags of clean uniforms which had been brought out from the rear area at LZ Bronco. These ragged uniforms were stripped of name tapes and other insignia. They were faded, well-worn and some had been repaired a number of times, or needed repair when they were handed out. There always seemed to be plenty of spectators around, just like at a real circus. The only thing missing was popcorn and cotton candy. There is no modesty among grunts, but that doesn't mean they enjoyed being stared at like carnival side show geeks. I thought that these troops, the small percentage of soldiers who were really fighting the war, were being treated like animals. They were not allowed to enter the firebase until they had been deloused and inspected like cattle, and they were then dressed in faded cast-off rags. The officers fared slightly better, because the First Sergeant brought out a clean personal uniform for each, with his rank and name affixed. The Company Supply Sergeant also brought a truck full of field gear to the Circus, so equipment could be issued or exchanged. This was no doubt seen as an efficient way to handle the refitting of a rifle company coming in from the field, but it was unnecessarily demeaning. It also preempted the responsibility of platoon medics and leadership personnel to monitor and care for their troops. A short time after I joined B Company, the Circus operation was dropped and we were allowed to move directly into the bunkers and get cleaned up/refitted there. I never saw the slightest difference in outcomes

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for the troops, except that they were treated with the dignity that they deserved.

As soon as we came in to Liz, we were given perimeter assignments by bunker number, so each platoon had responsibility for a segment of the bunker line, about five bunkers per platoon. The bunkers were fairly primitive and looked like they had probably been built by grunts. There was no standard in design or dimensions. They were framed with timbers, with plywood interior walls and steel PSP roofs. The walls and roofs were covered with sandbags, which had an overlay of cement or tar as a preservative. They had rough concrete floors and wooden double bunks built in, with wooden slats, no springs or mattresses. There were spotlights which illuminated the perimeter wire. Some bunkers were wired for a single light bulb, but many of them only had candles. There were vertical timbers from which jungle hammocks could be hung. There was no furniture, except sometimes a few wooden boxes. Some of the bunkers had firing ports and some did not. Guard duty was pulled outside, often from a fighting position on the roof. There were additional fighting positions around each bunker, usually simple ones with sandbagged culvert halves as overhead cover, sometimes with chain link RPG Screens to provide "stand-off" of B40 rockets. The perimeter bunkers were usually dirty and poorly maintained, except for the structural basics. There were permanent claymores and FUGAS drums (55 gallon drums filled with a mixture of JP4 aviation fuel and diesel, with an explosive charge on the bottom) placed to the front of the bunker line. The barbed wire and other defenses were generally in marginal shape. The enemy could have penetrated the perimeter without too much difficulty if they had made a determined attack on LZ Liz. The bunkers were widely separated and lightly manned, grass had grown up in the wire and there were areas where some dead space existed. There was a system of field telephones, between bunkers and CP, with battalion switchboard access. We supplemented the defenses with our own radios, trip flares and claymores.

One persistent problem in the perimeter bunkers was rats, which came in extra large size only. We had plenty of those, but rat traps were always in short supply for some reason. I usually slept outside under the stars, unless the weather was bad. One night I was sleeping inside a perimeter bunker and something woke me up, by scurrying down my hammock rope to my feet. I was wide awake instantly and of course I knew what it was. A jungle hammock wraps around you like a cocoon, so I couldn't do anything but lay there on my back with my eyes closed and let the rat run over my legs, body and face, then up the other rope. While I was in Four Deuce, we sometimes shot rats inside the bunkers with "soap rounds" in our M16s. These were 5.56mm cartridges which had the bullets pulled and replaced with wads of soap or candle wax, so they could be fired indoors with relative safety. Jujubes were sometimes used as projectiles, which was a good use for them because they tasted like crap. At close range, soap rounds had enough punch to kill rats. But rats are smart and when you start shooting them, they quickly become wary and totally nocturnal. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon we improvised our own rat traps when we were at Liz, which were patterned after the "Mechanical Ambush", which I will describe in more detail later. These traps were set up outside the bunkers, inside steel ammo cans turned on their sides. Our improved rat trap featured an electrical blasting cap, attached to a short section of claymore firing wires with a triggering device, hooked up to a battery, so the trap was trip-detonated. When the rat grabbed the bait and tripped the trigger, he would blow himself to Kingdom Come. A blasting cap alone generated enough shrapnel to kill a rat inside the confines of an ammo can, but molding a small ball of C4 plastic explosive around the tip of the blasting cap produced a more spectacular assassination of Mr. Rat. These improvised traps actually worked better than factory-made rat traps. It was always satisfying to hear one go bang in the middle of the night.

When we were at LZ Liz, we were able to eat regular hot rations in the firebase mess hall. The mess hall was a large and airy



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building enclosed all-around by screens, nicely built, probably by Army Engineers or Seabees. The food was pretty good by Army standards, but it would have been considered swill in Navy or USAF mess halls. Unlike the troops assigned to the firebase, the grunts never complained about the frequency of roast beef. When I was in the Heavy Mortar Platoon, I usually ate in the Battalion Commander's Dining Room, which was a small building which could seat about 16 officers at a time. It sported a small window A/C unit and was the only air conditioned place on LZ Liz. That option was still open to me, but in B Company I often ate with my troops in the mess hall. Line companies were required to provide KPs while they were on Liz. The Four Deuce Platoon pulled KP duty on days when line companies were rotating in/out, but all other firebase enlisted men were exempt from KP. This was an example of how the grunts were always treated like second class citizens in any rear area, even at a so-called Forward Firebase, like LZ Liz.

B Company left LZ Liz after my first stay there with B Company, on 26 February 1971. We humped out on foot about 3 klicks to an area west of LZ Liz, which was known as "The 515 Valley", named after the route number of an old road that ran through it from QL 1. I was to later spend a lot of time in The 515 Valley and it became my favorite place for combat operations. The area was pretty well pacified and the villagers were usually friendly. There were always a lot of kids present and they liked to hang out with us. The troops sometimes called this area "Happy Valley". There were very few booby traps, which facilitated night operations, and we could sneak around and be "tactical". The VC/NVA seemed to use Happy Valley as an R&R area and there were always enough enemy around to keep things interesting.

Because of the leadership void, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoons were initially combined under Greg Studdard, until a new platoon leader (1LT Doug Knight) joined us later during this mission. Frank Korona accompanied me and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, probably because I was still a rookie. This was Greg's last tour in the bush as a rifle platoon leader,

so I did not get to know him very well. The S2/S3 log entries repeatedly refer to the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, but there was no such platoon, only a small group of 11 Charlie mortarmen, with one 81mm mortar tube. They had a lieutenant assigned to them only briefly (1LT Jim Waugh) and they were usually led by SSG Larry Spangler. The mortar group went with whichever rifle platoon the CO was with. The general pattern in the bush was that the three rifle platoon leaders operated independently within assigned AOs and the Company Commander accompanied one of them.

The day we went out, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon patrol suddenly came upon and captured a suspected VC/NVA, estimated to be 40 years old, who was carrying a map of North Vietnam and Laos. He was sent back to the rear for interrogation. We also killed a Viet Cong soldier at grid 736437. I remember the event clearly, but the S2/S3 journal entries about this incident are totally inaccurate. Frank Korona had ordered 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon to search a ville at that location and he described how he wanted it done. We went in very rapidly and quietly, one squad wrapping around the outside of the ville to block on the left, and a second squad encircling to block on the right side. The third squad went high-diddle-diddle, straight-up-the-middle. This was the classic "Cordon and Search" maneuver, but executed at high speed. I was with the middle squad near the front of the file and I saw a military aged male, 25 to 30 years old, dressed in black pajamas, playing with a small boy, next to a dwelling. He spotted us, jumped up and ran into the hootch. SP/4 Keith Moore was walking point and he yelled "Chieu hoi!" (Vietnamese for "open arms"... roughly meaning "surrender and come over to our side".) Keith ran up on top of a bunker mound which was attached to the back of the hut and his "slack" man followed the dink inside, an impressive demonstration of instinctive teamwork. Moore saw the guy come out of a tunnel into the hedgerow behind the hootch and he hosed him with a long burst from his M16. The hedgerow was very thick and we could hear the dink moving around and groaning, but we could not see him. We did not know whether he was armed or not

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and I did not want to risk sending one of my men in there. So I pulled the pin on a frag and tossed it into the brush in the direction of the noise, which finished him off. Two of the guys went in and dragged him out, his brains spilling out of his skull as they pulled the body out by the feet. The little boy, about five years old, had seen the whole thing and he was screaming bloody murder. The new widow had also appeared and she was wailing while trying to console the kid. It was a very ugly scene, one which is forever tattooed on my brain. The casual brutality and the stark finality of the killing were shocking, but I realized that the dead person could have just as easily been one of us. We searched and found a stash of trip wire, blasting caps, fuses and petna, i.e., booby trap materials. I've sometimes thought about this incident and wished we'd let the guy go, instead of killing him in front of his son, but he shouldn't have tried to run. *Xin loi*. (Pronounced "sin loy", Vietnamese for "too bad" or "sorry"; but when said by a G.I., it always meant "tough shit.")

Two nights later, 28 February 1971, we moved a relatively long distance into a Night Defensive Position, which was located along a major trail leading into the mountains. The NDP was in a small abandoned rice paddy, with old dikes which could be used as defilade positions. We went in quietly after dark. Frank Korona's idea was to set up a platoon-sized night ambush and NDP combination on the trail. I verified that the squad leaders were setting up their positions, then went back to my ruck and started to roll out my bedroll. Frank came up to me and whispered that he wanted me to go with him to inspect the defensive positions. Thinking that we would remain inside the NDP, I stupidly left my rifle leaning on my rucksack, a thoughtless act that my Grandfather Dolan would have called "A Dumb Irish Trick." I followed Frank Korona to the far side of perimeter, where we talked to the squad leader in whispers. Frank decided that he wanted to go outside our perimeter, to check for dead space and possible approaches to the NDP. We walked out about 50 meters and were looking around,

when all hell broke loose in the perimeter behind us. The guys on the far side lit up somebody with full automatic M16 fire and a machine gun quickly joined in, streams of tracers going out. Then they started sending up white parachute illumination flares and we could hear “bloop-CRUMP”, “bloop-CRUMP”, “bloop-CRUMP” from 40mm grenade launchers. We crouched and watched the action for a minute or two and Frank calmly said, “I think we’d better go back in there”, which was such a nice understatement that I kidded him about it later. I was unarmed and I asked Frank if he had a frag. He said, “Where is your pistol?” I usually carried the .45 around at night in my hip pocket, but it was still in an outside pocket of my rucksack. He handed me a frag. By this time our guys were really bringing pee on whoever they were shooting at. We started running in, yelling “FRIENDLIES COMING IN!” As I was running, I pulled the pin and threw the grenade off into the dark as far as I could, not at anything in particular. We somehow got back inside the NDP without getting shot and my adrenalin was really pumping by then. Frank called for gunship support and one came out pretty quickly, but it was really all over when the gunship arrived. We later questioned the troops and found out that everyone had been busy setting up their bedrolls, so they were not paying as much attention as they should have to what was going on outside of the perimeter. SGT Roland “Roop” Ruppert, from the CP group, heard some voices chattering in Vietnamese and he turned around to see a large NVA rice carrying party standing there in the dark, talking. Roop picked up his M16 and blasted them, gunning down two right there, about 25 meters out. The rest of 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and CP group joined in as the other dinks dropped their packs and scattered.

After the gunship shot up the nearby woods, we called for more illumination, then went out and checked the area, finding more bodies and packs. The S2/S3 log says that we got two KIAs and Saber 40 got three, but that was just the result of Frank Korona buying goodwill from the aviation unit, by giving them credit for some of our kills. In reality, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and the CP group probably

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got all five KIAs that night. We found 7 very large NVA packs full of rice and salt. We did not find any weapons, although a couple of people in each rice-carrying party were usually armed, so we thought they probably got away. It took awhile for all the commotion to die down and then we packed up and moved out to a new NDP, arriving around midnight. We booby-trapped two of the bodies with grenades that night, before we moved to the new NDP. The frags did not go off and we came back at first light to neutralize them, so no villagers would be hurt burying the corpses. It was a little dicey to reach under the bodies and remove armed frags, so we dragged the corpses with claymore wire, blowing the grenades. One of the dead soldiers was unusually large, causing speculation that he might be Chinese. Two days later, on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, we found another body and rice pack nearby. The KIA was dressed in a khaki uniform like some of the others and he had been shot to death, either by us or by the gunship. That brought the total bag for February 28, 1971 to 6 KIAs.

1LT Doug Knight joined B Company sometime during this period. Doug took over the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. The entire company consolidated into a single large patrol base one day and for some reason we received a double or triple issue of Class A rations on the resupply bird (roast beef again). We decided to feed all the neighborhood kids, to get rid of the large amount of leftover food. Word went out to the surrounding villes and a large crowd of young children quickly showed up. We tried to get them into an orderly chow line to serve them, but the excited little boys kept pushing and shoving each other. We finally gave up and Frank Korona took them all about 20 yards away in a mob. We gave each of them a paper plate, then Frank pointed to the line of mermite cans and shouted "SOUVENIR!" I got some good pictures of the ensuing food fight. Our company officers and NCOs were able to manage and maneuver three platoons of combat infantrymen, but we could not control a gang of hungry children.

We found and blew up some bunkers, and picked up some detainees, sending them back for questioning, as a result of patrols. But I also began to realize what a wild and crazy guy 1LT Frank Korona was. I guess he was worried that 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoons were feeling left out of the action, so he led some of them in a "Rat Patrol" in a ville on March 6<sup>th</sup>. A "Rat" was a night raid on a ville. The troops did not have much enthusiasm for them, because they were pretty scary and no one got much sleep the night that one was done. The 81mm mortar section was set up to fire illumination over the selected ville and preplanned artillery fire was laid on around it, with Delta Tangos plotted on expected escape routes. The raiders would walk to the ville after it got really dark, call for the illumination, then move in quickly and go door to door, trick or treating with dim flashlights and M16s. Night vision goggles had not yet been invented. American-made BA30s (D cell batteries) were almost impossible to get through supply channels and Vietnamese batteries purchased along QL 1 would only last a few minutes. We never had many flashlights anyway. It is amazing to me now that we were able to make-do then, with the little we had. The idea behind a Rat Patrol was to catch the VC/NVA taking their R&R breaks in the viles, during times when they did not expect GIs to show up to spoil the fun. The troops told me that 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon had caught a VC/NVA in a hammock with his wife or girlfriend on a prior Rat Patrol and shot/killed both of them *in flagrante delicto*, when he reached for his weapon. Frank Korona loved doing that kind of stuff, but his zeal for it was not very contagious. He led another Rat Patrol with some of my 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon troops two nights later. Neither of the two Rat Patrols produced any results, except to keep Frank pumped up, but he was always gung-ho anyway.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon spotted 10 VC/NVA just before dark on March 9<sup>th</sup> and engaged them with artillery and a helicopter gunship. They searched the area and found two KIAs, which were credited to Saber 40, the same gunship which shot for us on February 28<sup>th</sup>. They also found 3 bunkers, which were blown, and 15-20 fighting

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positions. They finally got into their NDP at 5 minutes after midnight. We were feeling pretty good about getting revenge for our casualties on the prior mission. Nine VC/NVA were killed in the 515 Valley on this trip, of which 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and the CP Group probably got seven. The crew members of Saber 40 were no doubt our friends for life.

On this mission I started to notice something about my troops, which was confirmed during subsequent operations. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon sometimes appeared to be an undisciplined mob, especially during down-time. But whenever a firefight started, the 25 to 30 individual delinquents magically transformed into a well oiled fighting machine, usually needing only general direction from me. My primary jobs were to provide daily operational planning and to call for fire support when the action began. My other normal role was to nag my soldiers about basics, because they sometimes tended to bunch up in movement, cluster in groups when halted, or do other dumb things when the action was slack, i.e., when they had relapsed into the rabble mode.

Bravo Company returned to LZ Liz for perimeter duty on March 10<sup>th</sup>, so we had been in the bush for 13 days.

We went out again on March 13<sup>th</sup>, making a CA from LZ Dragon into the mountains near the VC Highway. When we got off the helicopters on a mountaintop, we saw several cardboard signs with Vietnamese words written on them in grease pencil. A Kit Carson Scout (KCS) said the signs indicated we had landed in a VC/NVA minefield. There was a lot of thick waist high brush surrounding the small LZ clearing on the mountaintop, making it impossible to see any trip wires which might have been there. This gave everybody pause, except Frank Korona, who did not hesitate. He said, "We'd better get out of here... follow me" and started bulling his way through the brush, leading the company out of the LZ and walking "point" down the mountain. Like I said, he was a wild and crazy guy.

We split up and Frank went with Doug Knight's 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. We spent most of the next 14 days moving around on the high ground

between various NDPs and PBs, running patrols in random directions downhill. The terrain was very rough and the jungle was dense, so the area was too confining to suit me. There was only one main trail running down a very long ridgeline, which channelized our movements and I began to worry about the VC/NVA patterning and exploiting us. One afternoon from our day laager, my Kit Carson Scout, Huynh The Hy (pronounced “when-tay-hi”) saw an Indochinese Tiger on a distant mountainside and he pointed it out to me. I could barely see the tiger with the help of binoculars and I have no idea how he spotted it with bare eyeballs. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, we were reconning an NDP location and I heard something in the jungle next to the main trail. I squatted to try to look under foliage and got a flash-glimpse of a moving black object, maybe a man, evading down the mountain. So I pointed my rifle and blasted off a whole magazine, the only time I remember ever firing my weapon on full automatic, except to test fire it. We searched the area in cursory fashion, but it was getting late, the undergrowth was very thick and we didn’t find anything. The next day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon, which was on the next ridgeline to the west, found sandal tracks and followed them to a fresh grave. They also found a bloody hammock and a long pole, which had apparently been used to carry it, at the gravesite. They opened the grave, which they estimated to be 8 to 10 hours old. It contained a dead VC dressed in black pajamas, with multiple gunshot wounds, to the head, face, chest and thigh. The S2/S3 log attributed the kill to the action the evening before. I was the only person who fired his weapon in anger that evening, so I guess I got my first kill, not counting the “assist” I had given Keith Moore in The 515 Valley.

While we were operating in the mountains I had a clash with B Company’s Artillery Forward Observer (FO). The artillery lieutenant had plotted some Delta Tangos (defensive targets) around my Night Defensive Position one night and he called for the DTs from his location with the Company CP Group, but without me requesting them. He probably did that on the theory that firing artillery near



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our NDP would keep the enemy away from us, but that was not properly his tactical decision to make. The artillery fire landed dangerously close to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon's NDP on a mountain slope and I urgently called for a check-fire. I initially had trouble getting through on the radio and the art'y kept coming in. When the Forward Observer finally answered and I complained about the close proximity of the artillery, he scoffed at my protest. His comments implied that I was just a timid cherry-boy, who didn't have any idea what "too close" meant. But I had already commanded the Battalion Heavy Mortar Platoon for 3+ months, whereas the FO had never commanded anything in Vietnam. SSG Willard had also thoroughly schooled me on spooky-close indirect fire when we shot in the LZ Liz FPFs, which was an experience I doubted the FO could match. He called in the Delta Tangos from another location in the dark, so he had no idea how close the impact was to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. After I objected, he then tried to blow smoke up everyone's skivvies at my expense. I had met a number of Artillery FOs on LZ Liz and I was not impressed. Some of them had a haughty demeanor and I had also become aware that FO duties in a rifle company were pretty trivial. I therefore regarded all Artillery FOs as dilettantes and Feather Merchants. Because of this bias, I was probably angrier about being razed by a redleg lieutenant than I was about the near miss friendly-fire incident. I was still seething when we came in from the bush and I had made up my mind to confront our FO and pick a real fight, but he apparently left B Company before we returned to LZ Liz.

During the ensuing days, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon found 5 NVA bunkers in two locations and various items of food and equipment, which we destroyed. I had to dust off one soldier for a medical problem, a rectal fissure according to my new medic, Tommy "Doc" Wright. (Doc actually called it a "wrecked 'em fish-hook", but I figured out what he meant.) On another day, the NVA crept up on us along the jungle's edge and they attempted to shoot down the S3's LOACH as it was trying to land at to our day laager. We then had a guy slightly

wounded by friendly-fire, a 40mm grenade that someone fired too close, in the ensuing firefight. When we were checking the area after that engagement, I found a stash of spanking new NVA web equipment, including a pack, a complete mess kit, a canteen, a pistol belt with a red star on its metal buckle and an unusual olive drab bush hat. I carried the enemy gear in my rucksack until we went to LZ Liz, intending to take it home to my little brother. I sent it to the B Company Supply Room for storage, but like all my battle souvenirs, it was later stolen by REMFs. (RE stood for “Rear Echelon” and MF stood for what it usually means.) That NVA equipment is probably now displayed in an ex-Supply Clerk’s family room, to illustrate fanciful tales about his combat experiences in Vietnam.

Our final several days in the mountains were spent waiting out a driving rainstorm. We completely ran out of food because the RS bird couldn’t fly, but I didn’t run out of cigarettes, because I had them squirreled away in every nook and cranny of my rucksack. We set up two-man poncho shelters, clustered around a clump of small trees on the side of a mountain slope. 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon just remained in a tight defensive posture, not sending out any patrols. It was the only time I ever stayed in the same location for several days, but visibility was severely curtailed and I didn’t think the dinks would be out walking around in the downpour trying to find us. The lightning was so bad that it blew out a radio and set off some claymores. Water was running through the poncho hootches, as if we were camped in the middle of a stream. Some lucky men had air mattresses, but everything soon became soaking wet. Everyone was drenched to the bone, shivering and miserable. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon guys shared their last remnants of food, coffee and hot chocolate, so it was a bonding experience, despite the misery. Lightning blasted a nearby tree, knocking all the limbs off of it, and some soldiers said they could feel the electricity running through the water. When the torrential rain finally lifted, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon also ran out of smoke grenades, because we used up all of them on a resupply pilot who didn’t know

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how to read a map. I finally brought him in with flashes from my emergency signal mirror, which I carried for shaving. When I ran out into the LZ to help bring in the supplies, I became lightheaded and almost fainted from the exertion, probably because I had not eaten anything for several days.

On the last day, March 26<sup>th</sup>, we humped down into the Dragon Valley and rendezvoused with rest of B Company in a combined day laager. I met CPT Guill and LT Cox there for the first time. Incoming Captain Randy Guill had just been assigned to Bravo Company, to replace LT Frank Korona, who was reassigned as the Battalion Recon Platoon Leader. Our new CO was an OCS graduate and the same age as me, but far more experienced, already on his second Vietnam tour. Lieutenant Dave Cox, also a graduate of Benning's School for Boys, joined the company at the same time and he took over 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. With Doug Knight also aboard in 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, all line officers in B Company were now Fort Benning OCS graduates. B Company was airlifted back to LZ Liz for perimeter duty.

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon was the firebase duty platoon and was tasked with sending an overnight "snake" (night ambush) out on the LZ Liz Access Road. This was being done regularly to keep the road open, because several trucks had been blown up there by VC mines, despite mine sweeps by Combat Engineers every morning. I put SSG Warrior in charge of the snake, because he was overdue for a crappy detail. The next morning, after the night ambush detail came back in, SSG Earl Willard, the Four Deuce Chief of Smoke, came and found me on the bunker line. He had an angry look in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong, and he said, "One of the soldiers in B Company shot your dog". Dink was not dead, but he didn't know how badly she was hurt because she had crawled under Willard's bed and wouldn't come out. I went to Sergeant Willard's hootch, got on my knees and called her. Dink immediately came out and crawled into my arms, shaking and whimpering. She was shot through the ham in a hind leg and we awkwardly bandaged it to stop the bleeding. SSG Willard borrowed a jeep and drove to FSB

Bronco, with me holding Dink in my lap. She trembled during the entire trip and cried whenever we hit a rut. We found the 59<sup>th</sup> Infantry/Scout Dog Platoon at LZ Bronco, but they told us that their veterinarian was away on R&R in Hawaii. We drove back to LZ Liz and I took Dink to the Battalion Surgeon. He said he didn't know much about dog anatomy, but he agreed to do the best he could. I told him that Dink was vicious and we might have to muzzle her, but I held her against my chest and she was stoic as he probed the wound. She seemed to know that the Doc was trying to help her and she did not try to bite him. The Doctor did not think the bullet hit bone. He cleaned and dressed the wound, giving Dink a shot of antibiotics. (Army physicians in Vietnam were *truly* full-service medical practitioners!) We took Dink back to the Four Deuce area and fixed a convalescent bed for her in SSG Willard's bunker.

SSG Willard told me Dink had gone down to an open area outside the perimeter wire, below the Four Deuce area just after first light that morning, where she always went for her morning poop. After taking care of business, she was running around and playing. As the B Company snake detail was coming back from the Access Road, one of the soldiers saw her and shot her, apparently just taking target practice. She was hit, but ran for it on three legs through a barrage of automatic rifle fire and made it back to Willard's hootch.

I went back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and started questioning the guys who had been on the ambush detail, deliberately skipping SSG Warrior, because I didn't trust him. I picked Gary "The Mad Fragger" Smith, to start with, because I thought he was most likely to tell me the truth. He didn't want to tell me who did it, but I got totally evil with him and he finally said "Sergeant Warrior shot the dog". I asked him why, but he didn't know. They were coming back from the snake detail and they saw the dog playing around at the bottom of the hill. Warrior shot her and then laughed when she ran away bawling.

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I immediately confronted SSG Warrior. He wasn't laughing any more. I'd had plenty of time to stew about the casual cruelty of the dog-shooting and I also had lots of accumulated anger about Warrior's lousy attitude and toxic behavior. It had been only 6 weeks since I joined B Company and Warrior may have recognized Dink as the dog which had followed me then, out the LZ Liz Access Road to QL1. I really wanted to shoot SSG Warrior through one cheek of his ass and ask him how it felt. I'm sure that flames were shooting out of my eyes, but I simply leaned forward at him and asked, "Why did you shoot my dog?" through clenched teeth. He said, "I didn't shoot your dog, El Tee", but he was unable to maintain any eye contact as he said it, looking at the ground. I instinctively knew that Warrior was finished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon when he lied to me about this, because I would never again be able to put even the slightest trust in him. I told Warrior that he was a lying son of a bitch and that I detested liars. I said I knew he had been continually undermining me and that he was a sorry excuse for a noncommissioned officer. I cursed Sergeant Warrior until he stunk so bad that a fly wouldn't land on him, but he kept his eyes averted and there was no backtalk. I told him to pack his gear and get out, because he was finished in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. I left the bunker and went to see my new CO. I told CPT Randy Guill what had happened and he immediately understood that the problem wasn't just about the dog being shot. CPT Guill confirmed that Sergeant Warrior was fired, but he said he didn't have a replacement platoon sergeant to assign me. I told him it didn't matter because SSG Warrior was worse than worthless and I'd rather do without a platoon sergeant. I went back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and told SP/4 Keith Moore that he was Acting Platoon Sergeant. Moore was already wearing Acting-Jack buck sergeant stripes as a squad leader. This arrangement lasted only a very short period of time, because SSG Donald R. Bland unexpectedly joined the unit as an in-country transfer from the First Cavalry Division and he was assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon before we went out again. SSG Bland was professional, positive, reliable, and he

always backed me in everything. The troops immediately respected and admired him. Things were starting to look up.

On the night of 28 March 1971, the same date that Dink was shot, Fire Support Base Mary Ann was overrun by NVA Sappers, resulting in 30 GIs killed and 82 wounded. This was one of the most disastrous battle losses ever experienced by the Americal Division and it was the deadliest U.S. combat action of 1971. LZ Mary Ann was the home firebase of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 196<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, which was located in Quang Tin Province, not far northwest of our battalion's Area of Operations. There was a big flap over this, which resulted in both the Americal Division Commanding General and the 196<sup>th</sup> Brigade Commander being relieved of their commands, thus ending their careers. The disaster was caused by a general lack of alertness, based upon an assumption that the enemy would not bother launching major attacks, with the war winding down and the U.S. withdrawing its troops. It could just as easily have occurred at FSB Liz for the same reason. The FSB Mary Ann debacle did prompt a sudden sense of urgency within our battalion about regularly checking the defensive perimeter during the night, as reflected in our unit's subsequent S2/S3 journal entries. Predictably, this nocturnal checking was usually delegated to line company officers or platoon sergeants and was seldom done by the underworked battalion staff. I was already in the habit of walking my platoon's sector of the LZ Liz bunker line to ensure that my guys were awake and alert, after I finished my turn on guard duty each night, just as I checked my perimeter in the bush. I'm sure that Doug Knight and Dave Cox did the same thing. But after LZ Mary Ann was overrun, Battalion HQ ordered that designated officers or senior NCOs conduct random unannounced tours of LZ Liz guard positions during hours of darkness and formally report our nightly inspection results to the TOC each morning. If the written report was submitted late, or the inspection checklist was not completed satisfactorily, there was a lot of fussing about it from the TOC. On the rare occasion when a battalion staff officer checked

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the bunker line, the grunts sometimes amused themselves by having him jump through a few hoops. One staff officer entry in the S2/S3 log recorded: "At 2230 hours, Bunker #9 challenged and the inspector responded with the correct password. The inspector was told to advance 10 paces, place his ID card on the ground and back up. He was also told that he was covered with a buckshot round. The senior man on the bunker then took charge and the inspector was allowed to advance. The inspector believes the bunker had prior knowledge of the inspection and one individual decided to clown around." No doubt, probably because the "individual" thought the password requirement was silly. Grunts in the bush never used a challenge and password, which was an archaic rear-area folderol. Out in the boonies, talking about anything at night would get you killed, so we literally shot first and asked questions later.

It is noteworthy that my name was never mentioned in the operations journal entries, except in connection with the nightly perimeter inspections on LZ Liz. The S2/S3 staff apparently thought that "At 0130 hours LT Dolan inspected LZ Liz bunkers #1, 2, 3 and all were satisfactory" had more historical and operational significance than anything else I ever did. This is a nice indicator of the CYA mentality at Battalion Headquarters and the staff's tendency to focus on trivial activities at LZ Liz.

## Chapter 9:

### REAR AREA FOLLIES

Although we did not spend much time in the rear areas at LZ Bronco (Duc Pho) and Chu Lai, interesting things happened when we did get there. I have already written about Duc Pho and don't have much to add, except that Mai and Lei lost their jobs with E Company and they were left behind when the Battalion rear area was moved to the sprawling Americal Division base at Chu Lai. For us, Chu Lai was mainly a recreational area. It was located along the South China Sea and the 1/20<sup>th</sup>'s cantonment area was at the opposite end of the base from the Division Headquarters' facilities. The base was relatively narrow, perhaps one mile across, but six or seven miles long, wider at the southern end where the airport was located. There was a hardball road running through the center of it, roughly north and south, with smaller unpaved finger roads going off of both sides. The 1/20<sup>th</sup> area was not far from the airport, sea-side of the main road, adjacent to a beautiful beach with white sand. There was a sandy Battalion street, featuring a row of screened single story plywood buildings with peaked tin roofs along each side, which were the company orderly rooms, supply rooms and battalion offices. There were other buildings scattered around the area in a random way, a mess hall, staff sleeping quarters, a shower building and so forth, which were shaded by evergreen trees. The buildings had been constructed by Seabees during our area's previous life as a USMC compound and they were simple but well built. Our sandy little village had a rough but comfortable feel to it. Probably because there were few vehicles around, it was reminiscent of a frontier town in the western United States. At the far end of the Battalion area from the entrance road was a large Stand-Down Compound. The Compound was next to the beach and it contained about a half-dozen one story plywood barracks



buildings and some other structures. It was always hot in-country, but there was usually a breeze at Chu Lai, the sea air was wonderfully fresh and it was mostly devoid of the strange odors which permeated the rest of Vietnam.

Stalking Moon had been sent to the rear because of his knee injury, initially as the B Company XO, but then he was transferred to Headquarters & Headquarters Company as the Battalion Support Platoon Leader/Assistant S4. He obtained a very comfortable building for his quarters, where he invited Doug Knight and me to stay when we were in Chu Lai. (CPT Guill had quarters in B Company's Orderly Room building.) Dave Cox's airy building was about 16'x24' and it was built on low stilts above the sand. It had screens around all sides, from the tops of the plywood half-walls to the peaked tin roof, with enough overhang of the eaves to keep the rain out in a moderate wind. There were also plywood storm flaps which covered the screens during monsoons. There was a nice bar in one corner, with barstools, and a small refrigerator which Dave kept stocked with beer. He had standard G.I. bunks for the three of us, with springs, mattresses, sheets, cased pillows and blankets. There was a large oscillating floor fan. Each lieutenant also had a wall locker for his spare jungle fatigues and personal belongings. My wall locker already had a little strip of Dymo label tape on it which read KILL VC FOR MOM'S APPLE PIE.

According to the S2/S3 journal, Bravo Company was in Chu Lai only once for Stand-Down, for four days from July 14<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup>, 1971. It is now hard to believe that so much occurred during just a four day period of time. I went through Chu Lai on several other occasions, going to and from R&R to Hawaii, and on leave to Bangkok, but I was traveling alone at those times. The normal Stand-Down interval for rifle companies was once every three months, confirming that there was just one four day visit there with B Company.

A Stand-Down period was a short vacation, during which grunts relaxed and partied. We listened to music, gambled, played

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silly word games with Donut Dollies, drank beer, attended rock 'n roll floor shows and watched Hollywood movies. The Stand-Down Compound was surrounded by a tall chain link fence topped with barbed wire, much like a prison enclosure. This was a symbolic barrier, to keep us primitive grunts separated from the more civilized members of the U.S. Army. Although we could come and go as we pleased, it was clear to us that we were not supposed to mingle too much with the REMFs. The first thing we did upon arrival for stand down was to turn in all our weapons and ammo at the supply room. I always kept my .45, which was not on the property books or officially issued to me, but I seldom carried it around in Chu Lai, because we were not supposed to enter the Officers' Clubs, the PX or other facilities with weapons. The Stand-Down Compound contained barracks, latrines, a beer hall/club, and a roofed outdoor stage building with open sides. Boxing gear, footballs, basketballs and softball equipment were available. There were Americal Division facilities we could access at the northern end of Chu Lai if we could find transportation, such as a barber shop, tailor shop, PX, NCO Clubs, Officers' Clubs, plus small Vietnamese purveyors of souvenirs, engraving and embroidering.

While we were on Stand-Down, B Company's platoon leaders and platoon sergeants stayed with the troops in the compound to keep a lid on their high jinks, so we were never completely off duty. Chief of Smoke SSG Earl Willard was in the Stand-Down Compound with about 10 guys from the Four Deuce Platoon, while B Company was there in July. The first day, I ran into him in the club and he invited me to the Four Deuce Platoon's barracks for a quiet snort of some good whiskey he had in his duffle bag. When I walked ahead of him into the building, something brown and furry with a mouthful of flashing teeth leaped at me from the top of a double bunk next to the door, shrieking and screaming. Willard grabbed the monkey's chain and jerked it across the bunk toward him, simultaneously slapping it hard across its face with his other hand, knocking it back into the corner, gruffly commenting "You damned

filthy bastard.” Sergeant Willard had that right, because the little beast had fouled the mattresses terribly and that corner of the barracks was as funky as a monkey. The monkey cowered in the corner, covering its head with its arms and paws, peaking out occasionally with its bright eyes to see if Sergeant Willard was still close enough to strike it. Its facial expressions clearly communicated that it feared SSG Willard, just as its grimaces expressed its hatred for the GI who teased it daily (a month later) on Nui Vong. I invited SSG Willard to move into the barracks B Company had for our lieutenants and platoon sergeants, so he did.

During the days, we played softball, went to the beach, hung out in the compound’s beer hall/club, or attended traveling floor shows. At night, we usually watched movies or left the compound to go to the Chu Lai Officers’ or NCO Clubs. Dave Cox now claims that he and I got up on the stage one afternoon, to dance with the showgirls in a Filipino rock ‘n roll floor show, to the delight of B Company troops. I always say that I didn’t go to floor shows, rather I stayed in the barracks and read my bible. He also claims to have photos, but I still haven’t seen them. Dancing with the show girls to entertain our troops sounds credible, but I don’t remember doing it, so I will probably continue to deny it unless I see photographic proof.

The troops were always told to turn in their weapons, ammo and explosives at the Supply Room. I didn’t like to disarm my guys, but there didn’t seem to be any choice. Weaponry does not mix well with alcohol, which flowed freely in the Stand-Down Compound, but it was an honor system and we did not shake them down for weapons or explosives. Grunts leaned heavily on each other all the time, which tended to form a bond of trust between officers and EM, so I could usually assume that my soldiers would follow instructions. One night SP/4 Joe Stephens got tanked up and he found a hand-popper which he had forgotten to turn in, in his rucksack. Hand-poppers were pyrotechnic signal rockets which, when fired, go up with a loud “whoossh” and then explode in a

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white, red or green star cluster a couple of hundred feet in the air, like fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Stephens wondered what a hand-popper would do inside a building, so he fired it off in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon's long one-room barracks. I wasn't there to see it, but it apparently created a spectacular special effect, when it ricocheted around the ceiling, floor and walls and exploded in a red star burst, setting a bed on fire. I was angry and I reamed out Stephens, but nobody was hurt, nor did the barracks burn down. That was another thing about leading 25 to 30 boisterous young soldiers. You could never predict what one of them might do next.

SSG Wayne Wilson and I had extra uniform shirts made up to simulate each other's ranks, so we could go to the Officers' Clubs and the NCO Clubs together. Wayne claims that "1LT" Wilson, 1LT Korona and 1LT Dolan were at an Officers' Club one night and we attempted to hit on some Army nurses, but we were rebuffed because they said we smelled bad. Frank Korona was in fact at the Stand-Down Compound while B Company was there in July 1971, but he doesn't remember that incident and neither do I. I will admit it's the type of memory we'd probably try to suppress. Wayne and I did go to one of the Officers' Clubs and it is highly probable that Frank or other lieutenants were with us. The Main NCO Club was more fun than the Officers' Clubs because it was much rowdier, but there can be too much of a good thing. I was in the NCO Club one night with most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon (everyone was given temporary promotions to E5, by pinning sergeant stripes on them) when "SSG" Dolan tried to pacify a giant buck sergeant, who was bent on beating the snot out of Keith Moore. SGT Moore, who was about one-third the other guy's size, had shown undue attention to the stranger's favorite Vietnamese bar girl and Keith refused to back off. The huge E-5, who could have been Shaquille O'Neal's father, grabbed me by the lapels and literally lifted me off the floor, earnestly telling me what he was going to do to me if I didn't mind my own business. The next thing I knew, Pancho Ramirez had the guy by the throat, and he was furiously saying, "Let go of him,

THAT'S MY LIEUTENANT". Pancho was a tough Mexican-American, even smaller than Keith Moore. It was a mystery how Pancho managed to reach the guy's throat, but maybe he was standing on a chair. In another second, the massive buck sergeant was surrounded by SSG Wilson and the other guys, who were all ready to fight. I was more conciliatory because I was thinking ahead, about how I would explain to the Battalion Commander why I got into a barroom brawl and busted by the MPs, while impersonating a Staff Sergeant. Anyway, the Chu Lai NCO Club was a rockin' place.

Wayne Wilson discovered that there was a Korean Restaurant in Chu Lai and he suggested taking Hy out to dinner there, because we couldn't get away with dressing him up as an American officer or NCO. Hy was at stand-down with us and he legitimately ranked as an ARVN sergeant, but Vietnamese enlisted personnel were not allowed into any of the GI clubs outside of our Stand-Down Compound. At the Korean Restaurant I had my first exposure to kimchi, the Korean national dish. The kimchi was so incredibly hot that it brought tears to my eyes and made my nose run, but I really liked it. The fried rice with beef was excellent and the meal was served with beer and chopsticks. I thought the Asian waitress was probably Korean, but Hy rattled off something in Vietnamese, she nodded and left, coming back with a large table spoon. Hy held up the spoon and said "number one". Then he held up the chopsticks and said "number ten". We had a great time, despite Hy's limited English and Wayne's/my even more limited Vietnamese. We were completely at ease with each other and the difficulty in making ourselves understood just added to the hilarity.

One night I was asleep with several other lieutenants and senior NCOs, including SSG Earl Willard, in the one-room officers' barracks. Around midnight, the door on the far end burst open and my squad leaders, Doc Wright and several other senior guys from 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon staggered in, led by SSG Wayne P. Wilson, who kept shouting "Follow me, men!" They were all roaring drunk and unrecognizable, except for their voices, because they were wet and

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completely covered in sand. They looked like sand statues you'd see on a beach in a resort area, except for their blinking eyes and pink mouths. They had been out on the beach, partying, and decided to go swimming in the South China Sea with their clothes on. Then they all rolled in the sand and decided to find me and wake me up, so I could join the party. (In the group was a redheaded Shake 'N Bake buck sergeant named Lenny or Lonnie-Something. Lenny/Lonnie was not a Squad Leader, rather he was designated as an assistant to SGT Malonson, but he had extended his tour to get a rear job and he was scheduled to depart the next day.) After everyone was wide awake, Wayne Wilson again shouted "Follow me, men!" and led them out the door at the other end of the building. Lenny/Lonnie remained behind to verbally abuse a newly assigned 2LT, because the lieutenant was wearing jump wings and a ranger tab. I told Lenny/Lonnie to knock it off and get out, but he turned on me, defiant and threatening. The confrontation immediately escalated into a fight, but Lenny/Lonnie was so sloppy drunk that I couldn't hurt him. We fell on my bed at one point, grappling with each other. Then I got a grip on him, dragged him to the door and physically threw him out of the building, down the outside steps. I was wearing only OD boxer shorts and by the time the scuffle was over, I was covered with sand and my bed was full of it too. I had to strip the bed and shake out the sheets, then walk all the way over to the shower building to wash off the sand. I tried to talk to Lenny/Lonnie the next morning before he left for his new job, but he was surly and hostile. Prior to this incident, Wayne Wilson and I had been puzzled about why other guys disliked him, because none of them could cite anything specific.

One afternoon after watching a floor show, I got a whuppin' from Mike "Wooly" Jones, who was a sturdy kid and strong as an ox. I think he had been a varsity wrestler in high school. Mike was feeling his oats, probably fueled by a few beers, and he challenged me to a wrestling match. An infantry platoon leader could not turn down a challenge like that, but I was badly outmatched and Mike

pinned me in no time. Unlike the barracks fight with Lenny/Lonnie, the wrasslin' bout with Wooly was just rough horseplay. During that same Stand-Down, Mike Jones and Bob Swanson went partying together one night, out of the compound. They got falling-down drunk and were trying to find their way back to our barracks area, holding each other up as they staggered down a road. They came upon a cluster of buildings in the dark and the soldiers outside one of the buildings called out something to them. Swanee and Wooly didn't understand what they said, but they thought the strangers were trying to pick a fight, so they shouted insults at them and charged the building. They ran directly into an unseen barbed wire and concertina barrier, becoming badly entangled. The soldiers inside the compound came out and untangled them from the wire, then brought them into the building and patched up their razor wire cuts. They put Swanson and Jones in their own beds to sleep it off and sent them on their way the next morning. Mike and Bob had fortunately blundered into the Warlords, the Americal Division's Aero-Scout Rifle Company. They were no doubt recognized as fellow grunts in distress and taken care of for that reason.

Around midnight on July 15<sup>th</sup>, SSG Wilson and I got word that the MPs had three of our guys locked up for busting up an artillery battery's club. All three were former members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon who only recently had been reassigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. We borrowed a jeep and went to the Chu Lai MP Station to get them out. When we pulled up outside, we could hear someone screaming and pounding on sheet metal. That proved to be Jethro Dingleberry, who was confined in "D Cell", which was a steel CONEX shipping container they used to lock up violent prisoners. We talked to the other two guys, who were not confined. One of them was SP/4 (later, SGT) Rob Thomas, who had unsuccessfully tried to contain the situation as it escalated. I don't remember who the other soldier was. They had been out drinking and they crashed an art'y battery's club, where a brawl started. The Artillery Battery's First Sergeant tried to break up the fight, but Dingleberry, always the thug, bravely

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beat the crap out of the much smaller man. Dingleberry also assaulted several MPs, which is why they locked him in D Cell. The whole time we were at the MP Station, Dingleberry was banging on the walls of the CONEX and shrieking obscenities, making a continuous and deafening racket.

I told the MP NCOIC, a Staff Sergeant, that the boys had been in the bush a long time and they were just being frisky. I said we would take them off his hands and our CO would come up with a suitable punishment (certain that CPT Guill would laugh it off). The sergeant said he couldn't release them on his own authority, so I told him to go get his Staff Duty Officer. He refused to do that, because the SDO was a major and he was asleep. The major would not be happy about getting up in the middle of the night to talk to a lieutenant about something the SSG should have handled. I tried telling the MP/NCOIC that the situation was obviously a fight, not an assault. If he was going to keep my guys locked up, we wanted to press countercharges against the artillery troops, because they had started it by making disparaging remarks about the Infantry and our guys were just defending their honor against those vulgar Redlegs. He said we couldn't press countercharges, but I quoted the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice) clause that says any service member subject to the UCMJ can press charges against any other service member who is subject to the UCMJ. I began demanding that the MPs go pick up the artillery people, that the sergeant go get the SDO out of bed, and everything else I could think of to demand. SSG Wayne Wilson chimed in and added to the clamor. The beleaguered sergeant then said he'd release SP/4 Thomas and the other soldier to me, but not Dingleberry. With the benefit of 20:20 hindsight, I should have left Dingleberry there to rot, but this incident was the first real indicator of a problem with him, so I said we had to have all of them. The argument went on for quite awhile, with Dingleberry going bonkers in D Cell the whole time. Finally, the sergeant said he could release Dingleberry only if the art'y battery's First Sergeant agreed to drop his charges.



Wayne Wilson and I somehow found the artillery battery and we got the First Sergeant out of bed. He was a very small fellow with bandy legs and he came out to meet us wearing white boxer shorts, a white tee shirt and shower shoes. He looked like a little white raccoon, because he had two black eyes and it was hard not to laugh when we first saw him. He was still seething mad about being assaulted in his own domain by our hooligans and we had to do a lot of apologizing and fast talking. We finally persuaded him to sign a statement that he would drop the charges.

Dingleberry was still going berserk in D Cell when we returned to the MP Station. SSG Wilson, the other two EM and I had a hard time getting him under enough control to hustle him out of the building and he was sullen on the jeep ride back to our company area. We sent the troops to bed and Wayne and I went to the B Company Orderly Room. We were in there drinking a beer and rehashing the night's adventure, when the Battalion S1/Adjutant, a 1LT, came in and started jumping all over us. By that time, it was probably 0300 or later, I was really tired and he caught me off guard. I took the abuse silently, while trying to mentally process what he was saying. He was upset about a phone call he received about our troops wrecking another unit's club and/or my behavior at the MP Station. I think he may have had other grievances about incidents in the Stand-Down Compound, or other mischief we'd done. Fortunately, SSG Wilson was present and he was his usual helpful self. He assured the lieutenant that we *really* didn't give a damn about what some staff puke thought about our behavior, the S1 was not in our chain of command so he could go to hell, and so forth. The rebuttal was over the top, even for Wayne Wilson, who was never a shrinking violet. I was giddy with fatigue and I had a good laugh at Wayne's diatribe, which did not go over well with our esteemed Adjutant. The lieutenant was an overbearing Ring-Banger and he tried to lock SSG Wilson's heels for being insubordinate. Wayne remained completely defiant and of course I didn't intervene because the S1 had tried to jack me up too. I don't

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remember his name, only that he was a West Pointer, a gadfly and an idiot.

There was already some bad blood between us for reasons I no longer remember, but from that point on, that S1 and I were bitter enemies. Within a day or two of the MP Station incident, he tried to flex his muscles by involuntarily reassigning me to Brigade Headquarters as the Public Information Officer (PIO). That was actually a cushy rear job, which involved traveling around and interviewing soldiers, then writing Hometown News Releases and similar articles for publication in civilian and military newspapers. But it was a convenient way to get rid of me and the Adjutant knew I had turned down other rear jobs. CPT Guill tried to get me out of the reassignment because he knew I wouldn't want it. Randy Guill told me I wasn't going to be able to stay with B Company this time, but I went to see the S1 about it anyway. The Adjutant told me I had no choice in the matter because I had been selected for the job personally by the Brigade Commander and I was the only lieutenant in the Brigade who had a degree in English, so I had been irrevocably anointed as the new PIO. Our S1 was obviously gloating about forcing me to do something I didn't want to do, which made me even more determined not to do it. He told me to draw new jungle fatigues and boots. I was also instructed to get a haircut, spit shine the new boots and take the fatigues to the tailor shop for alteration. I was to turn in all my field gear, weapons, ammo, and report to the Brigade S1, a Captain Somebody, at a specified time the next morning. Yeah, right. What were they going to do? Put me in the Infantry and send me to Vietnam? I ignored his "orders" about getting a haircut, replacing my uniforms and turning in my gear.

The next morning, 18 July 71, I told CPT Guill I would try to rejoin B Company at the airport, before it was picked up for the planned Combat Assault. I put on my most disreputable fatigues, my old boots and bush hat. I shouldered my rucksack, picked up my rifle and hitchhiked to the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters. I walked into

Captain Somebody's office at the Brigade S1 Shop, wearing my bandoliers, frags and rucksack. I grounded my weapons and gear on his office floor and introduced myself. The S1 did a double-take. Hadn't I been told to turn in my field equipment and draw new uniforms? Yes I had, but I didn't want to be no stinking Public Information Officer... in a flash of inspiration, remembering the Dymo tape motto Dave Cox put on my wall locker, I said, "I just want to go back to the bush and Kill VC for Mom's Apple Pie." The Captain laughed and told me to get the hell out of his office, so he could find a sane person for the PIO job. I hitchhiked out to the airport and found Bravo Company, just before the choppers arrived. When I came humping down the road carrying all my field equipment and weapons, Captain Guill just shook his head in disbelief. I was especially gratified when I thought about the frustration our Battalion S1 would feel, when he was told to cancel the orders for my transfer to Brigade Headquarters.

All of the above incidents occurred during our unit's four day Stand-Down, 14-17 July 1971. Curiously, I hardly remember anything at all about B Company's earlier Stand-Down break at LZ Bronco/Duc Pho, which had occurred 16-18 April 1971.

Many of the young Vietnamese women were very handsome, especially the ladies from the cities, who were usually slim, well groomed and beautifully attired in traditional ao dai outfits. The French had occupied Vietnam as part of their Indochina colony for a long time and the Eurasian girls were even more striking in appearance. Whenever I went through a rear area, particularly airports, I was exposed to and appreciated this exotic female pulchritude. I rarely saw any "round eyes" and the Army nurses or Red Cross Donut Dollies sometimes suffered by comparison to the local beauties. But there is an exception to every rule. I was in a busy airport somewhere in Vietnam one time and I saw two tall and leggy American girls I can still picture in my mind's eye. One was blonde, one was brunette, both were in their twenties and they were drop-dead gorgeous. They were wearing starched OD jungle

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fatigues which had been cut down to fit them perfectly. I had never seen jungle fatigues which were filled out like *that*, which is why I remember them 40 years later. The girls were not in the military, because they wore no insignia and they had tall, brown leather, high-heeled “Go-Go” boots. They were nicely made up, but wore no head gear, so their tresses flowed. The overall effect was amazing and they were clearly enjoying the carnal admiration of all the GIs coming through the airport. They were probably civilian entertainers, but I bet the MPs didn’t hassle them about their multiple “uniform violations”.

Stalking Moon and I always played a game of “Can you top *this?*” with each other, in and out of the bush. I now concede that Dave won the game, hands down. The Famous 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon outperformed all other battalion rifle platoons in inflicting mayhem on the enemy, but I never came close to matching Lieutenant David Cox’s panache, uninhibited hell raising and inspired lunacy. Whenever Dave was confronted with a problem to solve, he operated on the old military principle of “Do *something*, even if it’s wrong”. If the pressure was really turned on, he’d always shoot first and perhaps think about aiming later. He got himself into a series of scrapes in the rear area, so Doug Knight and I always looked forward to finding out what kind of trouble he had been in since the last time one of us was in Chu Lai. Dave’s escapades were always wacky, impulsive and entertaining. And he usually seemed to get caught with his pants down.

It was rumored that there was some sort of personal feud between our Battalion CO and the Brigade Commander. One purported outcome of this was an 11<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade inspection, which our Chu Lai mess hall failed because it did not provide a proper homelike atmosphere for the troops. Specifically the mess hall did not have curtains. This is an example of the nonsense with which the rear area brass would become preoccupied. The Battalion Executive Officer told Stalking Moon to put up curtains in the mess hall, before 11<sup>th</sup> BDE came back to

inspect it again, which was soon. The XO said he didn't care how Dave did it, which was always a mistake to say to him. Mess hall curtains were not an item which could be requisitioned through supply channels, or purchased on short notice. Dave borrowed a truck and went to the 198<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade mess hall, where he introduced himself to the mess steward as "the new Division Fire Marshall". He inspected the burners on field ranges, the fire extinguishers and so forth, complimenting the sergeant on running a tight operation. As he was leaving, the "Fire Marshall" suddenly had an afterthought and he asked the mess steward if his curtains had been fireproofed. The sergeant didn't know, because the curtains were already there when he was assigned to his job. 1LT Cox told him it wouldn't hurt to have the curtains treated again with fire retardant, so he could have the KPs take them down and load them on Dave's truck. He promised to have them fireproofed and to bring them back as soon as possible (*after* the 1/20 mess hall was re-inspected of course). While the curtains were being taken down and loaded on the truck, the 198<sup>th</sup> LIB Command Sergeant Major walked in and asked what was going on. He was introduced to "Lieutenant Cox, the new Division Fire Marshall, who is taking our curtains to have them fireproofed". The CSM responded, "He is NOT the Division Fire Marshall". They thought 1LT Cox was trying to steal the curtains and they called the MPs, who placed him under arrest. But someone in the Provost Marshall's Office apparently had a sense of humor and they let Dave go, after he explained his scheme.

On another occasion, Stalking Moon closed down the entire Chu Lai airport. He had been ordered to get an emergency resupply of artillery ammo out to the firebase ASAP. He ran around like a wild man, laying-on the ammunition, borrowing a truck and hauling ammo to the airport. He had a CH47 Chinook inbound to pick up the ammunition and deliver it, but no way to load it on the chopper, because he was making up this operation as he went along. He spotted a cargo net next to an airport office and "borrowed" it. The ammo was loaded into the net and Dave was connecting it to the

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Chinook's lift hook, when an irate warrant officer came running down the road yelling "Stop! You stole my cargo net!" Cargo nets were rated by ACL, or the maximum Acceptable Cargo Load, but Infantry lieutenants didn't know much about stuff like that. Dave heard the warrant officer shouting, so he signaled the CH47 Crew Chief to take off. The big chopper lifted off, but the overloaded net came apart over the main runway and hundreds of packing tubes of art'y rounds went rolling across the whole airport, shutting it down completely.

Fighting with enlisted men or NCOs was strictly prohibited by Army regulations and could result in court martial proceedings against an officer. Nevertheless, there was an unwritten rule in the Infantry branch that a lieutenant did not have even one hair on his butt, and was not fit to command troops, unless he was willing to do "close order knuckle drill" with any enlisted man, at any time. Dave Cox was responsible for the operation of the Chu Lai Stand-Down Compound, as an extra duty when he was the Support Platoon Leader/Assistant S4. While another line company was on Stand-Down, a floor show had been brought in for entertainment and the show girls were changing into their costumes in a dressing room above the stage. The dressing room was accessed by a long flight of stairs, built against the outside wall of the stage shell. The lock on the dressing room door was broken, so 1LT Cox was standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, guarding the door against intruders. Dave Cox was a pretty big guy. He had played fullback on the University of Georgia football team and he looked a little like Crazy Horse, so few sober people would tangle with him. A drunken Master Sergeant staggered up the stairs and tried to enter the dressing room. Dave stopped him and told him he couldn't go in. The MSG cursed at Dave and threw a punch at him, so Stalking Moon dropped him... down the entire flight of stairs. The poor man broke his arm. A hubbub was raised about the incident, but Dave insisted that he acted in self-defense and the matter was eventually

dropped. Every time Dave told us one of these stories, he'd laugh about it, no matter how much trouble he had gotten into.

There is an old story about an Army pack mule, loaded with equipment, which fell off a cliff in France in 1918. By the time everyone got done piling on, it was estimated that the dead mule had been carrying more than a million dollars worth of equipment, all of which was dropped from property books by various Army units. That is what was euphemistically referred to as a "combat loss". The same thing occurred all the time in Vietnam. Any time a firefight, a flood, an accident or some other mishap occurred in the bush which reasonably could be blamed for an equipment loss, the unit Property Book Officer could report any previously missing serial-numbered item as a combat loss. That piece of equipment would then be permanently written off the books and a replacement could be requisitioned. The problem was that the missing equipment was usually just misplaced and it generally turned up later in another unit's supply room, or in some other nook or cranny. The property books were continuous and they got passed along through changes of command, so these anomalies accumulated over time. All units would therefore end up with a lot of extra weapons and other equipment they weren't supposed to have, but that wasn't really a problem unless there was a strict accountability inspection. Those inspections occurred only rarely and under unusual circumstances, such as when a unit permanently stood down and its colors were retired. Then the current unit Property Book Officer (PBO) was left holding the bag. That of course happened when 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment formally closed out its Vietnam combat operations in early October 1971 and guess who the Property Book Officer was? A logistics Chief Warrant Officer usually filled that slot, but the last CWO was already gone, leaving the PBO job, by default, to 1LT David A. Cox. In preparation for the permanent unit Stand Down, all battalion equipment was inventoried and a lot of extra gear was found, including about three dozen excess M16 rifles. All of those weapons already had been

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dropped from the property books by prior PBOs. Dave was told that the rifles could not be turned in and that he had to get rid of them. So he reluctantly deep-sixed them in the South China Sea from a helicopter. On his way to his next assignment, Dave was also tasked with turning in the Battalion Colors in Saigon. There were around forty campaign streamers on the Battalion's flag, including 12 from Civil War battles. Dave's great-great-grandfather was killed in Pickett's Charge and he thought nobody would miss the Gettysburg battle streamer, so he took it as a souvenir. The flag inventory officer in Saigon almost immediately asked, "Where is the Gettysburg streamer?" It was too late to blame it on an Army mule falling off a cliff in 1918, so Dave admitted he had taken it, to honor his ancestor's death at Gettysburg. The indignant captain told Lieutenant Cox that stealing the battle streamer was a court-martial offense and he threatened to draw up charges. Stalking Moon had dumped thousands of dollars worth of weapons into the ocean and everyone expected him to do that, but a REMF officer in Saigon wanted to court-martial him for souvenirizing a four foot length of blue and grey nylon ribbon with "Gettysburg-1863" embroidered on it. (You *know* that I couldn't make up this stuff.)

There was a Class VI Resupply Yard in Chu Lai, which was a wonder to behold. "Class VI " is the Army euphemism for drinking alcohol and the Chu Lai yard was like a large retail liquor store Back in the World. They had every type and most brands of alcohol. One of the few perks I had as an officer was a Class VI ration card, which allowed me to purchase a generous amount of hard liquor each month. Ration cards were issued only to officers and to senior NCOs, pay grade E7 and higher. Each time a bottle was purchased, the cashier would punch a hole in the card, which was how they kept track of the monthly quota. The really miraculous thing about the operation was the pricing, because there were no import tariffs, taxes, profits or other markups. A quart of decent scotch, like Cutty Sark, J&B or Johnny Walker went for about three bucks MPC. Bourbon was even cheaper. I seldom drank hard liquor in Vietnam,



usually sticking to beer because the climate was so hot. But I sometimes took orders from my troops and NCOs, to make liquor runs for them with my ration card.

Bravo Company had a tall, dour and physically fit First Sergeant named Heinz Ruby, who had a reputation for nastiness when he'd been drinking. He had a strong German accent and there was a rumor that Heinz had served in the Hitler Youth, as a teenager in WWII. My troops told me that during El Tee Korona's first stand-down, he was sitting in the little club at the LZ Bronco compound drinking beer with the other 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon guys. 1SG Ruby came into the club, drunk, and announced that he was going to kick Lieutenant Korona's ass. Frank responded, "No sergeant in the entire U.S. Army can do that". A brawl ensued and 1LT Korona gave 1SG Ruby a thrashing, which greatly entertained the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon guys. (I asked Frank Korona about this incident and he gave me an evasive and ambiguous answer, commenting that you don't always clearly recall things that happened when you'd been drinking. *But* he didn't deny that it occurred.)

At a later date, First Sergeant Ruby lost his right-hand-man, the Company Clerk, due to normal troop rotation. Not long after the Clerk's departure, Ruby flew out on the resupply bird to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon's patrol base to see CPT Guill. I overheard 1SG Ruby complaining bitterly to the CO about not being able to get a school-trained Company Clerk as a replacement. I interrupted their conversation and told Ruby that one of my soldiers would probably make an excellent "OJT" Clerk. Angelo Onevelo (grunt-name, "Zip") was intelligent and conscientious. He had earned a bachelors' degree and he was drafted into the Army out of graduate school. Zip had mentioned to me in casual conversation that he was a pretty fast two-finger typist. Onevelo had no enemies in 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, because he was always friendly and considerate towards everyone. He never complained or shirked an assignment and he always tried hard. There was only one hitch in Zip's giddy-up, which was probably related to his kind and erudite nature. It normally took

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time for newbies to adapt to our violent and rude existence, but Zip had continued to be flummoxed by grunt life. Despite sufficient time to adjust, he remained jumpy, rigid and error-prone, making me worry that he'd get himself killed. After hearing all this, 1SG Ruby decided to try out Ange Onevelo as an apprentice Company Clerk. He did a superb job, pleasing our grumpy Top Sergeant to no end. Everyone was happy.

I went through the Chu Lai Orderly Room in June on my way to R & R in Hawaii. When I came back from Honolulu, I described to Zip Onevelo the good time I'd had and he said, "You are entitled to go on leave too, Sir... so why don't you take leave and go somewhere else?" I commented that the CO would never sign off on that and Zip answered "CPT Guill signs EVERYTHING I put in front of him, El Tee". I knew that most REMFs were taking both R&R and leave, and I had certainly paid my dues in the bush, so I told SP/4 (later, SGT) Onevelo to go ahead and cut leave orders for me. When the orders came through, I told Randy Guill I'd be leaving on such-and-such date to go on leave for 7 days. He blew his stack, saying that I had just recently come back from R&R, and now, incredibly, I expected to go on leave too? I innocently asked, "Isn't this your signature on my orders?" which was the perfect squelch.

Leave orders were not destination-specific. I wanted to go to Australia, but unlike guys going on R&R, GIs who were going on leave did not have reserved seats and they flew standby/space-available. When I got to the R&R Center in Da Nang, I bumped into three enlisted men who had worked for me in the Four Deuce Platoon. They had been waiting there several days for standby seats on a flight to one of the R&R/leave destinations. They told me there was no flight to Australia anytime soon and most of the flights to other destinations were filled, but there were seats available on a plane to Bangkok the next day. That was where they had decided to go and they invited me to hook up with them, so I did. All four of us stayed at the Parliament Hotel in Bangkok, which was one of many on the list of approved U.S. Military R&R Hotels. The briefing officer

at the Bangkok R&R Center tipped us off to the merits of Tai rice beer, which is wonderful stuff, smooth, 18.5% alcohol, inexpensive and served in large (1 quart?) bottles. It took us a bit longer to discover the merits of the local cuisine, but when we did, we all but abandoned the Western-style food served in the hotel restaurant. We went on many sightseeing tours, to shows, clubs and we did a lot of partying, so the three EM quickly ran low on money. I decided to try to cash a personal check, in order to loan them \$100 each, and to get a little extra cash for myself. I took a cab to the U.S. Air Force Base PX and cashed a check for \$400 from my Maryland National Bank checking account. That was a very large amount of money in those days, but all I had to do was show the PX cashier my U.S. Army I.D. card! (The guys promptly paid back the entire amount, after we returned to Vietnam.)

After I'd left Chu Lai on leave, I realized that I had forgotten to sign out in the Orderly Room's Perpetual Sign-in/Sign-out Log, which worried me a little. When I got back from Thailand, I told our Company Clerk this, commenting that I needed him to fix the records. SP/4 Onevelo said OK, he would just cancel my leave orders and I should destroy my copies. I told him no, he didn't understand, the Perpetual Log had to be fixed, because I'd forgotten to sign out. Zip said, "No El Tee, you don't understand. You never *left* on leave. You didn't *go* to Bangkok. You were *here* the whole time. The Army will pay you for the unused leave when you are discharged." That is why I don't know when I was in Thailand... all copies of the leave orders were pulled from my 201 File and destroyed by Zip Onevelo. My non-trip to Bangkok was the most fun I never had. And when I was discharged, the Army did pay me for a week of accrued leave not used in Bangkok.

Wayne Wilson, Dave Cox and I had a mini-reunion in Ocean City, Maryland in May 2010. Dave asked me if I remembered the night we were thrown out of the Commanding General's Officers Club, next to the Americal Division HQ in Chu Lai. I did indeed remember it and I attributed the incident to an ancient and faded

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set of jungle fatigues with a “Stalking Moon” name tape, which Dave sometimes wore to confound the Lifers in the rear area. A major came up to us and told us we’d have to leave the O Club, because our attire did not meet their standards. I thought there was a third El Tee with us, but I could not remember who it was. Dave said that was generally correct, but it wasn’t just his Stalking Moon outfit that got us tossed out of the club, rather it was the fact that we were grunts and we were all wearing our field jungle fatigues, which were the only uniforms we had. (Our jungle fatigues were tailored and had all the required patches and insignia sewn on, but they were faded and had been repaired in places. The uniforms were clean and had been pressed, but not starched. The black dye in the leather parts of our scuffed and scarred jungle boots was leached out from wearing them in water all the time, so the leather was almost white and boot polish did not improve them much. We were slightly shabby from the wear and tear of combat, but we didn’t really look like bums. We’d had haircuts and shaves and we thought we looked presentable enough to go into a bar.) Dave said the prissy REMF major intercepted us in the Officer’s Club lobby, before we even got into the bar, and told us we were not welcome there. Dave asked me if I remembered what I’d said to Major Prissy, but I did not. This is how Dave told it to Wayne: “Every time Tom got ready to stir up some shit, he’d let his eyeglasses slide down on his nose and peer at you over top of them while he was thinking. Then he’d use one finger to push his glasses back into place and say whatever he was going to say. When that major told us we’d have to leave because our attire did not meet their standards, I saw Tom’s spectacles slide down to the end of his nose. He stared at the major over the top of them and I got curious about what he was going to say. Then Tom pushed the glasses back in place with his trigger finger and he said, ‘You people apparently are not aware that there is a war going on out there.’”

I do not remember saying that to the major, but Dave accurately described my habit of letting my glasses slide down on

my nose prior to delivering a zinger, so his story is probably true. Wayne Wilson listened to Dave's recitation about the Officers' Club confrontation and he said it reminded him of the time he and I went to the Chu Lai Post Exchange, asking me if I remembered *that* incident. I recalled being in the PX once or twice, but that's all. Wayne said we went to the PX together, but there was a long line of rear-area soldiers waiting to get in, which wrapped around the outside of building. According to Wayne's story: "Tom said, 'Come on, we're not waiting in line with all these damned REMFs', and we went right up to the front and barged into the queue. A major, wearing Signal Corps brass, came up to us and he said, 'Excuse me lieutenant, but do you mind explaining to me why you two went to the front of the line, ahead of all these soldiers who have been waiting to get into the PX, including *me*?' The major was so angry that he was shaking, but Tom was unbelievably calm. Tom said, 'No sir, I don't mind. As you can see from the appearance of our uniforms, we are grunts and we just came in from the bush. The Commanding General put out a new directive which says that infantrymen who come in from the field do not have to wait in line at the PX and they can go right to the front.' The major looked like he was going to have apoplexy, but he did not know what to say and he just walked away." When Wayne told this yarn, I said he and Dave had been hanging around with each other too much, and they were starting to make up terrible stories about me. Wayne adamantly responded, "I swear to God, that is the absolute truth, those were your *exact* words, I remember it like it happened yesterday. You braced that major and he didn't know what to do about it."

I thought about it later and I began to remember the conversation with the Signal Corps major. He obviously hadn't believed me, and plainly Wayne Wilson hadn't either, but I think there really was a CG directive saying that grunts didn't have to wait in line at the PX, or at least someone had told me there was. The story isn't as good that way, but the incident occurred many years

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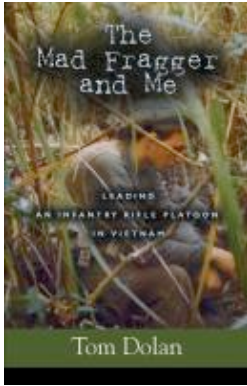
ago, so I'm not sure. Anyway, if there wasn't such a directive from the Commanding General, there *should* have been one. One of the regular complaints from grunts was that all the good stuff was always sold out at the PX, because the REMFs gobbled up everything as soon as a shipment of Japanese cameras, Seiko watches or Panasonic tape decks came in. The PX shelves were usually bare whenever the infantrymen got there.

When we came to the Chu Lai base and the guys would try to go to the PX or someplace like that, they'd often come back with DRs (Delinquency Reports) for "uniform violations" written by the MPs. This was usually done because their hair was too long, or they were wearing camouflage bush hats with OD jungle fatigues, or they didn't have name tapes on their shirts, or they were sporting Peace tokens, or some equally serious rear-area crime. CPT Guill always tore up the DRs, but it was irritating for our combat soldiers to be written up by MPs who were preoccupied with trivia. The rejection of Dave and me at the Officers' Club illustrates the attitude of many rear-area officers, who didn't have a clue that a few of us were involved in a shooting war. REMFs lived in a world of their own, with a completely different set of problems and priorities: *Will the Army ship home my huge stereo system at government expense? How can I get tickets to Bob Hope's Christmas show? Will Joey Heatherton be there? Who can we get to fix the pump in the Officers' Swimming Pool?*

Pogues usually gave grunts a wide berth, especially when we were coming in from the bush. When I was going on R&R to Hawaii, I bummed a chopper ride from LZ Bronco to Chu Lai. The pilot landed at the northern end of post, at Division HQ, several miles from our company Orderly Room. I started walking south with my thumb out, carrying 100+ pounds of gear on my back, in stifling heat of 110 degrees or more. I was quickly drenched in sweat. No one would pick me up, and empty vehicle after empty vehicle, except for a REMF driver and maybe a passenger or two, passed me on the road. I'm sure it was because they saw I was a filthy grunt,

staggering along under my huge rucksack like a crazed hunchback, dripping with grenades and other weaponry. Pissed off, I finally walked out in the middle of the road and stopped a deuce 'n half at gunpoint. The truck was empty, being driven by a Staff Sergeant. I showed him the black lieutenant's bar on my collar and I said, "I need a ride. Do you have any problem with that, sergeant?" He said he did not, but I would have shot out the tires on his crummy truck if he'd tried to drive around me. What could they do to me for that? Put me in the Infantry and send me to Vietnam?

I once read a Vietnam War novel in which the author, a former platoon leader, stated that all civilized people, including garrison troops and Vietnamese civilians, always reacted to an Infantry rifle platoon exactly like it was a traveling psycho ward, with all the patients armed to the teeth. That is true. It is also a fact that we grunts reveled in our fearsome reputation and played our role to the hilt whenever we were in a rear area, so it was not irrational for the REMFs to be wary of us. It is a mystery to me why the general public thinks that all Vietnam Veterans are created equal, when the vast majority of them were never really exposed to actual combat or to serious danger. It is true that rear area troops were occasionally killed by random enemy rockets or other flukes, but those incidents were rare. The general public is also not aware of the shabby treatment grunts generally got from everyone else in the Army, whose jobs actually existed only to support us. There was a saying in the Army that the Infantry is called "The Queen of Battle", because the Infantry gets screwed by everyone. *Xin loi, Crunchies.*



*The Mad Fragger and Me* relates the true experiences of a U.S. Army lieutenant throughout his training, culminating in a tour as an Infantry Rifle Platoon Leader in Vietnam. This is an articulate, sometimes graphically violent and often humorous account of the grunts in *The Famous 2nd Platoon*, who struggled to dominate the Quang Ngai Province elements of the North Vietnamese Army in 1971.

# **The Mad Fragger and Me**

## **Leading an Infantry Rifle Platoon in Vietnam**

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