

*Story of D. Co. 3/187th
Infantry (ABN), 101st
Airborne Division*

FORGOTTEN HERO

Second Edition

by JOSEPH LINDLEY

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FORGOTTEN HERO

SECOND EDITION

**THE STORY OF PUTNAM, CONNECTICUT'S
CALVIN WILLIAM HEATH
D. COMPANY, 3/187TH INFANTRY (ABN),
101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION**



**VIETNAM
1967-1968**

JOSEPH J. LINDLEY

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MARCH 18, 1968 - ISOLATION

At 4:11 a.m., two hours before sunrise, on March 18, 1968, Calvin and the men of Delta Company heard heavy gunfire and explosions to their southwest. Bravo Company, located approximately 1,000 meters from Delta's position, came under heavy attack as the enemy continued to probe for American weaknesses. Up and down the line, and now *behind* the advancing Americans, the VC/NVA sent out small teams to gather intelligence to establish the size of the American forces they were facing, find the weaknesses in their lines, and then determine the best way to exploit those weaknesses. Bravo Company was able to push the enemy probe back, sustaining one casualty, but the action resulted in the entire Rakkasan line being alerted for possible heavy hostile activity.²⁶³

By 4:30 a.m., the men in Delta's NDP were very uneasy. As daylight approached, the morning mist seemed to grow thicker by the minute, further limiting their already restricted view into the jungle. Everyone knew that the optimal time for the enemy to attack was just before sunrise and the men of Delta Company were preparing for the worse. Calvin looked into the jungle around him. He understood from the previous day's intelligence that they were dangerously close to the enemy and that there could be thousands of them. He later recalled, "That morning, I just knew we were in deep trouble. I could just feel it. The day before we had been uncovering stuff all day, and we all knew we were close to the enemy."²⁶⁴

By 5:35 a.m. the first bright rays of sunlight poked through the thick mist. The attack for which the men had prepared did not come. They ate quickly, eyes always toward the jungle, checked their equipment and weapons, and prepared to continue with the mission. Bucha and his lieutenants reviewed maps, reported to base, and briefed their men. The sergeants went to each man in their section of the perimeter and checked personal equipment and ammunition.

²⁶³ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁶⁴ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

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Calvin, who was with 1LT Wishik, was prepared and ready to move. The men of Delta Company were now 44 hours into their mission and 14 hours away from, what Dave Dillard would later call, their “defining moment.”

At 8:35 a.m., with Phantom Force in the lead, the men were silently and cautiously clover-leafing in the direction of the trail discovered the previous evening, searching for the enemy who left the deep ox-cart tracks. They were extremely fatigued, but exceptionally vigilant. Bill Heaney stated, “We were all pretty scared. We knew something big was coming.”²⁶⁵

As the men moved silently through the jungle, they searched for enemy strongholds and concealed booby traps, and found neither in the immediate area. Any ambush established by the enemy the night before had long-since moved on and the cat and mouse game continued, but now the men were wondering, “Who was the cat and who was the mouse?”

Around 12:40 p.m., approximately 1,500 meters from Delta Company, Alpha Company stumbled upon 2,000-3,000 pounds of rice (grid coordinates XT 930378). They also found more recently abandoned bunkers. Shortly thereafter, they made contact with ten enemy soldiers believed to be NVA resulting in one enemy KIA and one WIA. These ten men were most likely a rear-guard action protecting the main body as it tried to maneuver away from the Americans. Contact reports were sent to battalion headquarters further confirming the previous day’s intelligence that the Rakkasans faced a very large enemy force. Additional documents captured at the newly discovered bunkers indicated that the enemy they now faced also included the “81st Rear Detachment, supporting the Dong Nai and 7th NVA Regiments,”²⁶⁶ approximately 100 to 200 additional men.

At 1:35 p.m., Delta found another 2,200 pounds of rice, some rotted, that they destroyed in place (grid coordinates XT 957375). Twenty-five minutes later, they made contact with five or six enemy soldiers resulting in two probable kills. The Daily Staff Journal noted

²⁶⁵ Heaney interview with author, September 10, 2014.

²⁶⁶ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

that men from Delta Company were “moving in pursuit” of the enemy survivors.²⁶⁷ By this time, Delta Company had only moved 1,600 meters, one mile, in a north/northeasterly direction from their last NDP. Around 1:40 p.m., Delta was once again in contact with five or six VC/NVA and exchanged gunfire with them until 2:25 p.m., when the enemy finally broke contact.

Throughout the balance of the afternoon, the men found more booby traps, tunnels, abandoned supplies, and additional bunkers in the area. Several of the complexes were so large that according to the Daily Staff Journals, “it would take three or four days to destroy [them].”²⁶⁸ Minor skirmishes and contact with the enemy continued throughout the balance of the day. The men were running critically low on supplies and water, and more men dropped due to heat exhaustion and dehydration and needed to be evacuated.

At 3:14 p.m., Bucha had his men move to a small opening in the jungle to secure a temporary LZ. Calvin noted that he only had, “...a few hours of sleep over the past two days and we were beat.”²⁶⁹ At 3:40 p.m., the men were resupplied with ammo, food and water, and that several of the men, suffering from heat exhaustion, were evacuated by Lieutenant Colonel Forrest’s and Colonel Mowery’s command and control (C&C) choppers.²⁷⁰ The food was especially memorable. Forty-five years later, Calvin recalled the food being a “...delicious dinner of steaks with peppers, mashed potatoes, with all the trimmings.” Calvin added, with delight, “Boy, it was great!”²⁷¹ It would be Calvin’s last meal in the field. Years later, Calvin and the other men suggested that the helicopters flying in food and supplies that evening were what ultimately saved Delta Company from complete annihilation. Calvin later explained:

The Gooks are counting choppers coming in and out. Well between... that first chopper was the mail, it takes off and ends up coming back and going to take the mail out, so that

²⁶⁷ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Calvin Heath interview with author, June 2013.

²⁷⁰ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁷¹ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

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*chopper comes back. The four choppers that brought in the food, they leave and then they come back and flew the food back out or what's left over. And then the brigade commander, I think the brigade commander came in... so there were maybe 10 or 12 choppers that came in. Well, the only thing that makes sense to us, was they [the enemy] had to think that another company landed with us. They absolutely had to think that there were more of us than there really was.*²⁷²

After the men ate, they continued with their mission. Calvin later said, "The whole day was crazy. We kept finding shit and the NVA kept moving back and then they were shooting at us." He went on to say, "We never knew where the next attack was coming from, and every minute we felt like we would be attacked by that huge force we saw a few days earlier."²⁷³ Bill Pray adds, "I knew we were going to get hit."²⁷⁴

Bucha moved Phantom Force to cover the column's western flank. At approximately 6:15 p.m., they were alerted by their supporting dog team that the enemy was in the area. Almost immediately, they spotted an enemy water carrier. The Americans opened fire. The startled enemy dropped the water and ran. In 2016, Jeff Davis, Phantom Force Platoon Leader stated, "We had been following enemy signs, to include commo wire, for three days and when we came across that water carrier... The dog immediately alerted, and we fired. We then cautiously advanced." Davis reported that his team then carefully maneuvered through dense thick "scrub brush" until they came to a tree line where the thick vegetation gave way to a heavily treed area with opened ground. Davis sent two two-man groups right and left. The men then heard an explosion to their right and then all hell broke loose.

"...we had been doing reconnaissance for nearly four months as a small element, often operating alone miles

²⁷² Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

²⁷³ Calvin Heath interview with author, June 2013.

²⁷⁴ Pray interview with author, April 13, 2016.

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away from U.S. forces, so recklessness was not our modus operandi, and I was in direct communication with Captain Bucha as soon as my point men fired on the watercarrier. Movement had been slow and methodical, and this naturally continued forward from the point of engagement with the watercarrier...slow and deliberate in order to avoid an ambush, while determining exactly what we had in terms of enemy troops in the vicinity. It turns out that there were quite a few."²⁷⁵

What Davis and his men had found was the edge of a large base camp.

Order of Battle

Delta Co. 3/187th, 101st ABN

18 March 1968, 1800 Hrs.

Source: Colonel Mowery Narrative March 1968

Phantom Force (16 Men)²⁷⁶

2LT Jeff Davis

1st Platoon (25 Men)

SFC Kuykendal

2nd Platoon (23 Men)

1 LT Wishik (PFC Heath RTO)

Company HQ (8 Men)

CPT Bucha (SGT Dillard RTO)

4th Platoon (7 Men)

Heavy Weapons PLT

3rd Platoon (30 Men)

2LT Sherrill

²⁷⁵ Col. Floyd "Jeff" Davis phone interview, January 29, 2016.

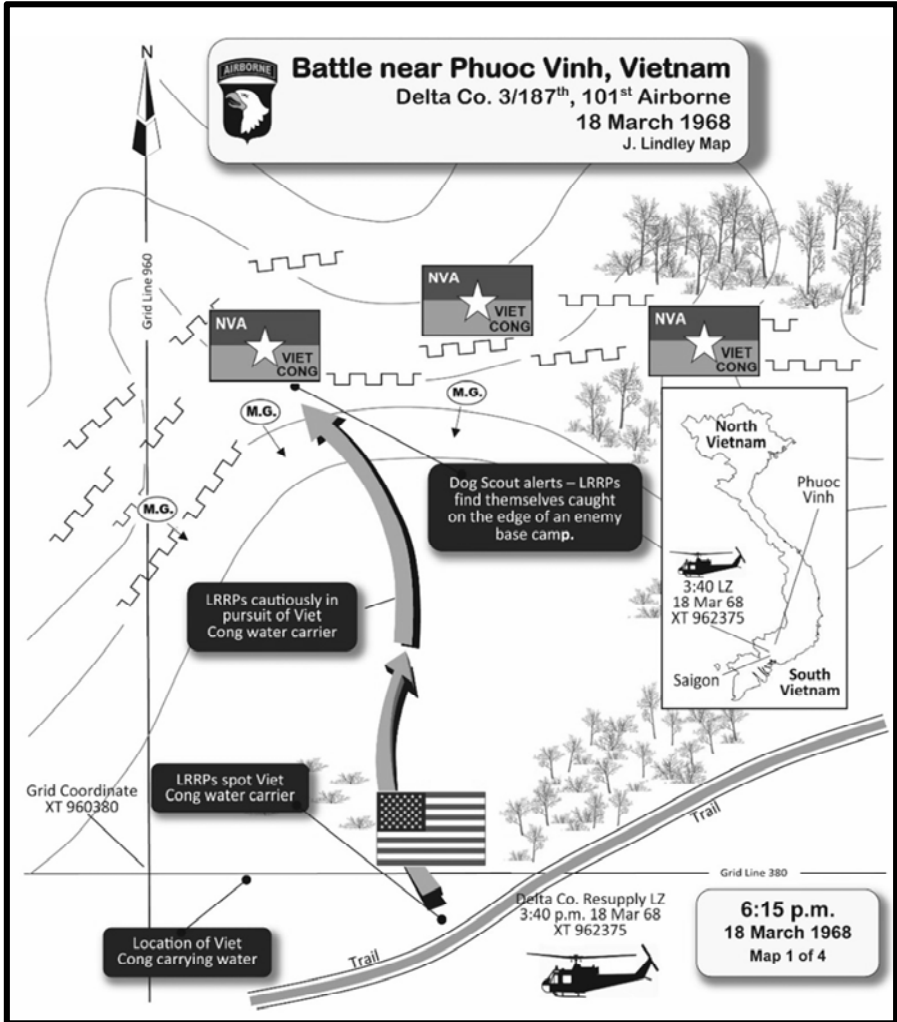
²⁷⁶ Note: There has been some disagreeing information as to the total number of LRRPs during the mission. Jeff Davis, Rick Shoup and others from Phantom Force confirmed they began the mission with seventeen and went into the battle with sixteen.

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326th Combat Engineers (3 Men)²⁷⁷

1LT Mike Blalock

TOTAL: 110 Men

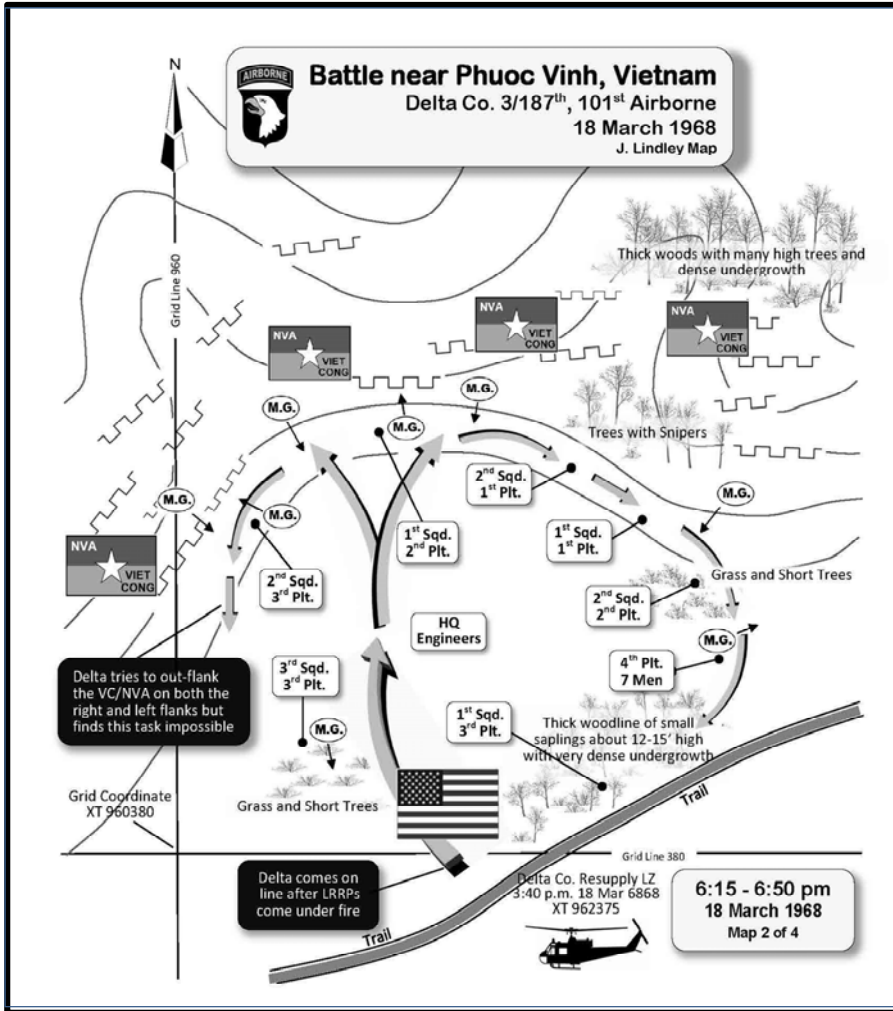


Above: 6:15 p.m. March 18, 1968. Phantom Force spots VC/NVA water carrier and cautiously gives chase. They soon find themselves inside the enemy's basecamp

²⁷⁷ Note: Speculation on the author's part.

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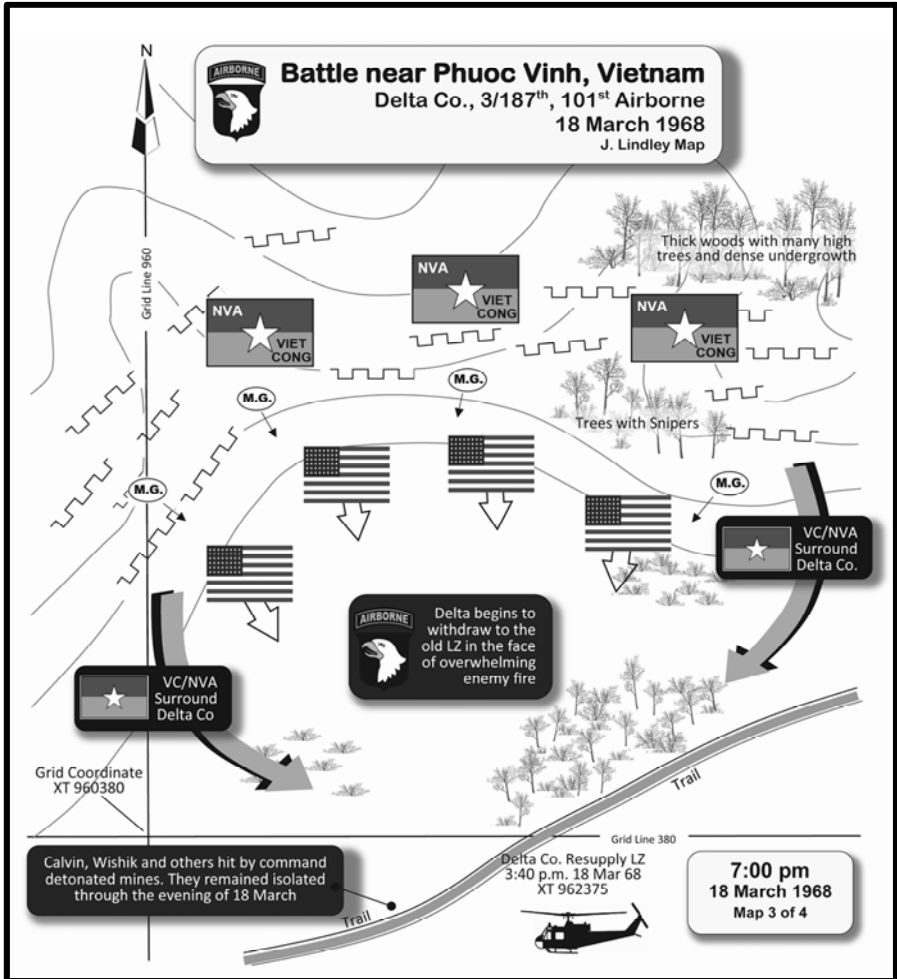
receiving heavy fire. According to Calvin, all the members of Phantom Force were killed or wounded. Conversations with Phantom Force members later proved this was not correct. Several were not wounded and were able to engage the enemy. J. Lindley map.



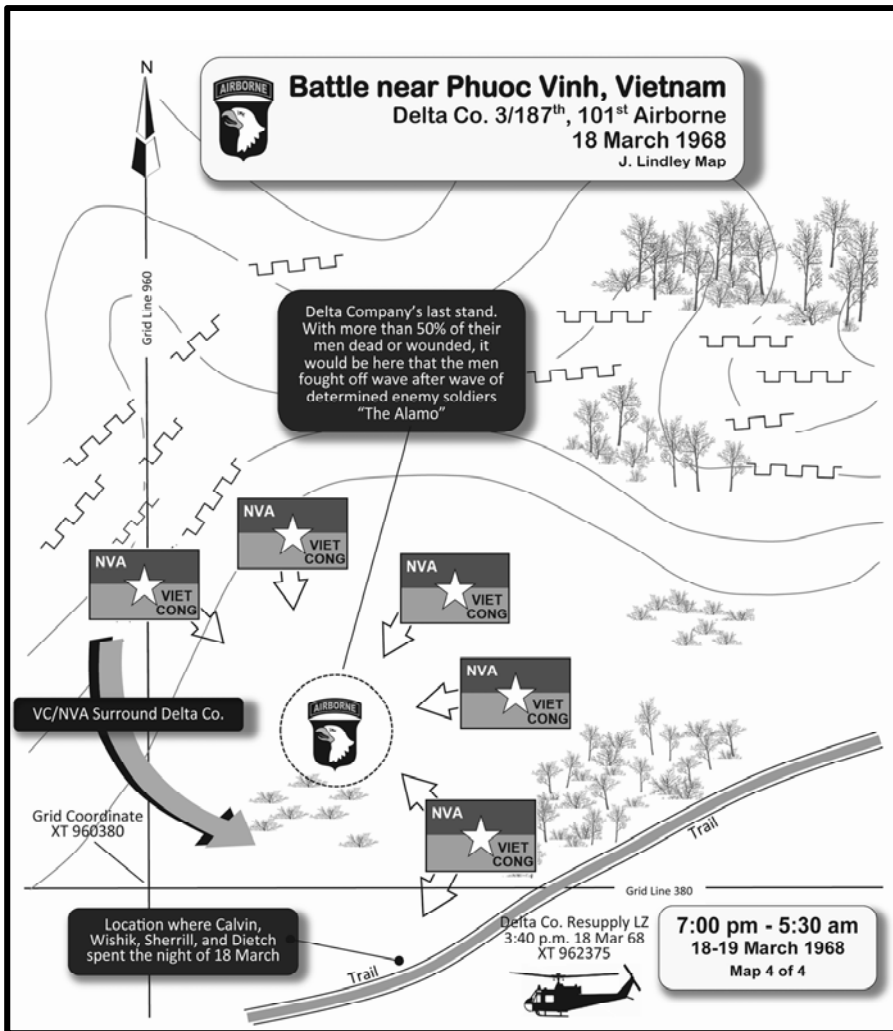
Above: 6:15 – 6:50 p.m. March 18, 1968. Delta advances and tries to outflank the VC/NVA positions only to find that the enemy lines are much too large to out-flank. Many men are wounded and killed. Calvin's best friend Paul Conner was killed,

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most likely at the head of the column in the 2nd Squad-1st Platoon area. The gunfire, according to Calvin, “Just never stopped.” J. Lindley map.



Above: 7:00 p.m. March 18, 1968. Captain Bucha, now knowing he faced an overwhelming enemy force, pulled his men back to consolidate their lines and evacuate the wounded. Rakkasans, including Calvin, Wishik, and Dietch, were sent to the old LZ to secure the area. They were met by an overpowering VC/NVA force who had moved behind the men in an attempt to surround Delta Company. J. Lindley map.



Above: 7:00 p.m. March 18 – 5:30 a.m. March 19, 1968. Delta moves to a small perimeter. Many Americans are caught outside Delta's main lines with several KIA and WIA. Calvin, Wishik and Dietch were the only men outside the lines for the entire night who survived. The VC/NVA attacked in wave after wave. J. Lindley map.

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Captain James Bond, an officer with 3/187th later noted, “It appears at this point, that Company D had been led by the VC into an ambush and then surrounded by the VC/NVA forces.”²⁷⁸ This assessment of Delta’s situation at this time of the battle would later prove to be a sensitive issue for Calvin and the other men, one addressed later in this piece.

Dave Dillard, located in the center of the column with Captain Bucha stated, “Then all of a sudden the jungle exploded.” Bill Heaney added, “We were used to seeing eight to nine guys, now it’s 80 to 90, maybe 1,500 to 2,000. We just didn’t know.”²⁷⁹ Shooting quickly intensified and Phantom Force was taking serious incoming fire. Calvin later stated, “We could hear the guys in the front had pushed right into a big force. Shit was flying everywhere!”²⁸⁰ He also added that of “...the 18 LRRPs [in the lead group], I believe that all but maybe two of them ended up getting killed. I remember Bucha on the horn telling them to attack and he radioed us to come on the run... to support them and so we ran across the field (LZ).”²⁸¹

Delta Company’s “Battle of all Battles” began at 6:50 p.m. on March 18, 1968. After the company had run straight into the VC/NVA basecamp, Bucha reported to LTC Forrest that his men were in a quickly developing firefight with an estimated “...VC reinforced squad at XT 962375.”²⁸² His report severely underestimated the number of enemy they faced by many hundreds, perhaps thousands of men.

As the men scrambled and maneuvered, the small arms fire reported by Bucha to headquarters a few minutes earlier quickly escalated to “...heavy automatic weapon, heavy machinegun, rocket-propelled grenades, Claymore mines, and small-arms fire.”²⁸³ One of Delta’s men was hit almost immediately and was killed. Less than

²⁷⁸ Bond, p. 27.

²⁷⁹ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

²⁸⁰ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

²⁸¹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009. Note: All records indicate there were 11 LRRPs, several, to include Jeff Davis, were seriously wounded.

²⁸² Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁸³ Bucha’s Medal of Honor Citation.

five minutes later, Bucha reported having six more men down.²⁸⁴ Clarence Jones, one of the men moving forward to help Phantom Force, stated, “I saw Sgt Estrada hit by a machine gun on our right flank, and the medic that went to get him also went down; several members of my platoon went down also.”²⁸⁵ Things were quickly getting out of hand and LTC Forrest scrambled a light fire team – helicopters equipped with machine guns – for air support.²⁸⁶ Some of the wounded men were brought to a make-shift company command post near the center of the rapidly developing perimeter. Dave Dillard, who was with Bucha stated, “The wounded men looked like a book of names. And [now] we know we are in the middle of it.”²⁸⁷ Bill Pray was hit with a Claymore mine and received serious wounds. The force of the explosion knocked off his helmet. “The guys swore my head was decapitated, because they saw my helmet rolling around.”²⁸⁸

Bucha knew that he and his men were now in serious trouble. His entire lead element was either wounded or dead and his main body was pinned down. He also knew that if he did not move quickly, his entire company could be trapped, surrounded and overrun. Calvin, who was listening to the company radio traffic stated, “Bucha kept on the phone calling the first platoon up front, ‘What’s going on? What’s going on?’ Well everybody got hit. So, he didn’t know what was going on so he went up there.”²⁸⁹ Bucha moved to the front to see if he could personally gain control of the rapidly deteriorating situation. What he found, when he arrived, was utter chaos,

Within minutes of Phantom Force making contact with the VC/NVA lines, Delta’s first platoon, who were advancing behind the LRRPs, moved forward to help extract the wounded men. They quickly became pinned down under extremely heavy machine-gun fire. A concealed bunker, located approximately 40 meters to their

²⁸⁴ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁸⁵ Jones, Clarence, letter dated April 22, 2001 for the recommendation of 1SGT Harjo for Medal of Honor.

²⁸⁶ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

²⁸⁷ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

²⁸⁸ Pray interview with author April 13, 2016. Note: Pray was thought to be KIA. Seriously wounded, he was able to crawl and rejoin the line some time later.

²⁸⁹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

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front, stopped the men dead in their tracks and poured crushing machinegun fire into them, ripping them to pieces. Men were dropping everywhere, some literally exploding apart. Other men who had been hit were clutching their wounds trying to stop the bleeding.

Seeing many of his men in the lead element dead or wounded, Bucha reacted. Without consideration for his own safety, he ran forward, located the concealed machine gun, and “crawled through the hail of fire to single-handedly destroy the bunker with grenades.” During this heroic action, Bucha was “painfully wounded by shrapnel,” but it would be some time before he had the wounds treated.²⁹⁰ Calvin added, “[He] really shouldn’t have done that. The Company Commander... shouldn’t have been out in front of the company, but he did, and he made all the right decisions that night. All of them!”²⁹¹

One of the men hit in the initial action was acting 1st PLT Leader, SFC Stephen Kuykendal. Calvin reported that Bucha, after reaching the front, instructed Wishik to move forward to take command of the lead element. “He radioed us to come on the run... to support them so we ran across the field.” Colonel Mowery, in his after-action report stated, “The Company Commander next directed Second Platoon Leader, 1LT Wishik, to leave his element in command of his platoon sergeant and to move forward and take command of the First Platoon.”²⁹²

During this phase of the battle, Senior Aidman SP5 Dennis Moore also distinguished himself by leaving...

...the security of the company headquarters element voluntarily to go to the aid of the wounded in the front element. As he approached the first of eight wounded comrades, he was seriously wounded in the leg and stomach. Completely ignoring his own wounds and safety he pushed ahead into the enemy fire. He discarded his personal weapon so as to better aid the wounded. In the course of moving from

²⁹⁰ Jones, p. 151. Paul Bucha Medal of Honor citation.

²⁹¹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

²⁹² Bond, p. 45.

*the first to the sixth man who lay only ten feet from an enemy machinegun bunker, Specialist Five Moore was wounded repeatedly. Not once did he stop to tend his own wounds but continued to crawl to the front, treating the wounded as he moved. He courageously moved to the lead man and began treating him, when he was mortally wounded by machinegun fire.*²⁹³

For his actions that day, Moore was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor.

After destroying the bunker, Captain Bucha, understanding the dire situation of his lead elements, ordered second, third and fourth platoons up front to quickly fill the large gaps in his developing defensive line. Bucha knew if he did not get men on that line, and fast, the enemy would break through and his whole perimeter would quickly collapse, spelling disaster for his entire company.

The ferocity of the firefight was like nothing Calvin and the men had ever experienced. Cut and shredded vegetation stripped from the trees and bushes by machine gun fire, fell to the ground like snow. Overwhelming enemy fire seemed to be coming from every direction and many of the Americans were now lying dead or wounded. The NVA understood they needed to get close to the Americans and pour withering small-arms fire into their lines before they had the chance to use their far-superior artillery and air support.

Second platoon ran the entire 300 meters to reach the company's ad-hoc command post, situated near the front of the rapidly developing battle. As the second platoon reached the main body, Captain Bucha, having just returned from neutralizing the machine-gun bunker, was organizing the deployment of the arriving men. The American lines to the front were already beginning to collapse and the threat of being overrun was almost inevitable. According to Calvin, Bucha placed the arriving second, third, and fourth platoons, who were originally in the middle and rear of the advancing American column, into positions along the front and sides of the American position in an attempt to first establish a stronger defensive line and

²⁹³ Moore, Dennis, Distinguished Service Cross Award.

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then, to push the enemy back. This was proving extremely difficult for Bucha and his men because of the heavy enemy fire from well-established positions within their own basecamp, and the rapidly rising Delta casualties.

Calvin said later, “It was absolute chaos. We ran a long way to try and help the other platoon and the bullets and shit were just flying everywhere. I could see wounded guys everywhere, but we couldn’t stop, or we’d be dead.”²⁹⁴ Calvin continues:

*When we went there [Bucha] was in this little clearing. He said, “Go over and reinforce first platoon, and try to push through the [enemy].” Well, when we got up there was no way we could push. So Wishik decided we were going to try and outflank them. We went left, Second Lieutenant Sherrill was over here (looking at the map and pointing to Sherrill’s position) and he took some guys and he went to the right trying to find [a way to move around their flanks].*²⁹⁵

The men moved in several directions in an attempt to outflank the enemy, but as Calvin related:

*...we went maybe a couple hundred yards and we were on a dead run. And as we’re running [there was] a little bit of a clearing maybe every 20 yards – you can see where a trail shoots this way... as we came to [the NVA/VC] we would be firing down [the trails] and you could see the Gooks firing back at us.*²⁹⁶

It became quickly apparent to Wishik that the VC/NVA lines were far too extensive to outflank. No matter how far down the line they went they encountered more and more NVA and VC soldiers. Bill Heaney added, “We probed to get flanks out there and the [lines just] kept going and going and we kept finding more and more enemy.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

²⁹⁵ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

The continued thinning of the Delta lines by attempting to outflank a superior and well-established enemy could have been disastrous, as thinning lines when facing a vastly superior enemy, seldom hold. The men's tenacity and audacity, however, had the opposite effect. The enemy assumed that the American unit they faced, because of their rapid flanking maneuvers, was much larger than it actually was. "We just kept going down, hoping we would find the end of the lines, but we didn't, they were everywhere," stated Calvin.²⁹⁸

Back at the Delta Company CP area, Dillard was busy calling in air support and relaying information from the individual platoons to Captain Bucha and to Battalion Headquarters. There was no doubt by everyone in the chain of command, that Delta had stumbled into a major basecamp and was in very serious trouble. In less than 15 minutes after the battle began, Dillard estimated that of the 89 men remaining in the field, 40 were now dead or wounded. "I could hear, 'I got four men down,' 'I got three men down,' etc. So, we had to clear an LZ. Bucha tells me, 'You have to stay here and get these men out of here!' The Alamo was established."²⁹⁹

Sergeant First Class Stephen Kuykendal, the first platoon sergeant, later wrote a narrative explaining the actions up to this point:

Unbeknownst to us, they (NVA/VC) lay in wait while we cautiously proceeded toward the north. Evidently, they did not realize that the approaching element was of company size, and when the 11 members of the LRRP came upon the first signs of impending contact they stopped and dispersed their men. The enemy opened fire with a significant and overwhelming amount of fire power. The fact that the carefully planned ambush had been sprung by them prematurely allowed the company to deploy to its greatest

²⁹⁸ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

²⁹⁹ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013. Note: 89 was the number of men from Delta. This did not include the remaining members of Phantom Force, Combat Engineers, forward observer, etc.

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*advantage. The call came from the LRRPs for reinforcements, and an element from the company was able to take up positions and form a perimeter around them within minutes. The LRRPs had taken 100% casualties. The enemy was attempting to overrun this position and the company commander [Bucha] called in artillery and air to overwhelm the enemy.*³⁰⁰

Around 7:35 p.m., seeing the situation further deteriorating, Captain Bucha began to consolidate his perimeter.³⁰¹ At the same time, Dillard was still on the radio frantically seeking air support and requesting dust offs. Calvin and the men of second platoon who tried to outflank the enemy, were now under heavy fire, trying to desperately fight their way back to the main company area. According to Calvin, the scene was so chaotic, that several NVA soldiers actually mistook Calvin and the other American soldiers running *toward* the American lines as their fellow soldiers and jumped out and ran in front of the Americans, thinking they were joining an attack. These enemy soldiers were quickly killed by Calvin and the other Americans from behind. A few seconds sooner, Calvin and his small band would have been the ones who were shot in the back.

As Calvin, Wishik and the other men continued to move back to the company area, the enemy detonated anti-personnel mines and fired RPG rounds into the trees to maximize the shrapnel raining down on the men. The men of Second Platoon, including Calvin with a radio strapped to his back, crouched down and ran for their lives through a hail of bullets, shrapnel and debris. Some of the men carried and assisted wounded soldiers. Calvin later reported that, "If I stood up we would have caught [bullets or shrapnel] in the chest," As they moved closer to Bucha and their own lines, Calvin and Wishik were suddenly caught by several exploding mines. Calvin stated, "I remember they were going down through us [blowing mines]. I stopped for a quick second because of my legs. I rubbed them... I can remember [thinking] 'God damn, fucking fire ants!' That's what it felt

³⁰⁰ Bond, pgs. 28-29.

³⁰¹ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

like, and it turned out it was actually shrapnel I had taken in the legs.”³⁰² Calvin’s legs were peppered with small shrapnel wounds and they were now bleeding badly. He knew, however, that if he slowed down or dropped because of his wounds, it would mean certain death for him and any soldier stopping to assist him. Wishik’s actions that day eventually earned him the Distinguish Service Cross. His citation described this part of the battle:

*The fierce enemy onslaught of small arm, automatic weapon, claymore mine, and grenade fire inflicted heavy casualties on the point platoon, including the platoon leader. Charging through the storm of bullets, Lieutenant Wishik took command of the stricken lead element. While exposed to the hostile fire, he positioned the men and carried the wounded back to the defensive perimeter.*³⁰³

Calvin reported that Wishik and the rest of the uninjured men continued to exchange fire with the enemy as they feverishly rolled back their dangerously extended lines. As the two men passed the next man in line, they would kick the soldier’s feet yelling “fall back!” One after the other the American line began to withdraw in order to consolidate at the main company area. As Calvin withdrew, he came to the next man in line, one of the company’s M-60 machine gunners, his best friend, Paul Conner.³⁰⁴

Conner had been experiencing his own brand of hell. He was among the lead element attempting to extract Phantom Force when the lines exploded with enemy gunfire. His Silver Star citation states, “A large enemy force attacked the company, hitting hardest at the lead element. Private First Class Conner, along with the rest of his squad, was engaged by a numerically superior enemy force while attempting to lay down a protection base of fire for the lead

³⁰² Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁰³ Jeffrey Wishik Distinguished Service Cross Citation. Note: Calvin was at Wishik’s side during this part of the battle.

³⁰⁴ Paul Conner letter to Claire Mooney dated February 15, 1968.

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element.”³⁰⁵ While other elements were rapidly moving forward to reinforce the lead elements, Conner and the other men of his platoon were desperately trying to lay down covering fire. Enemy machine guns were ripping the American lines apart and Conner and the rest of his platoon knew if the enemy gained the advantage the entire company would be overrun. His citation goes on to state:

*Upon spotting the enemy fire coming from a fortified bunker, Private First-Class Conner unhesitatingly and with complete disregard for his own safety single-handedly assaulted the enemy position with automatic rifle fire until he was only a short distance away. He then silenced the position with a hand grenade. As he was returning to his squad, he noticed one of his companions lying in an open position, seriously wounded, and calling for a medic. Private First-Class Conner immediately moved to the site of the wounded man, administered first aid and courageously carried him back to a more secure area.*³⁰⁶

When Calvin reached Paul, he was in the prone position laying down covering machine-gun fire to keep the enemy’s head down long enough for the other men to pull out the wounded and fall back. Without Paul’s supporting fire it is with great certainty that more men in that sector would have perished during the withdrawal. Calvin kicked his best friend on the foot and screamed “Paul! Time to go! Pull back!” Conner turned and was pleased to see that Calvin was still alive. He nodded and gathered his equipment and began to move.³⁰⁷

Calvin moved to the next man in line to tell him to withdraw, but there was a sudden flurry of bullets hitting behind him and he knew instantly something was horribly wrong. He turned back to see his best friend on his knees, badly wounded, looking down in horror as

³⁰⁵ Paul Conner Silver Star citation dated August 3, 1968. Note: Calvin recalls Paul manning an M-60 machine gun. His citation suggests he had an M-16. Paul could have been an assistant gunner and manned the gun after the gunner was injured or killed.

³⁰⁶ Paul Conner Silver Star citation dated August 3, 1968. Note: According to Jeff Davis, this was possibly SP4 Clark Karrell, a member of Phantom Force caught behind the enemy lines.

³⁰⁷ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

his insides began to pour out, his right hand trying desperately to hold his entrails in place. According to Calvin, Conner had taken a machine gun blast that nearly cut him in half. Calvin later recalled, "He was right on the side of me and how he got it I don't know. He cried, 'Help me!'"³⁰⁸ Calvin scrambled back to help his friend, but he had seen enough death by that point to understand that there was absolutely nothing he could do. Conner's last words to Calvin were, "I don't want to die." Calvin later remembered telling his friend, "I got you buddy." At great risk to himself, Calvin tightly held his friend as the life quickly drained from his body. To Calvin, it seemed like hours, but in fact was only a few short seconds. The last thing Paul Conner saw before he passed away was the face of his close friend Calvin Heath holding and comforting him. For the rest of his life, Calvin had hoped that being there at that moment was somehow enough for his friend.

Calvin was now covered in Paul's blood. He gently laid him down on the ground and continued to move up the line to make certain the others, especially the wounded on line, were pulled out.³⁰⁹ For Calvin, there would be more time later to process what had just happened to his friend. At that moment there were other men to save. Under intense fire, and despite losing someone close, Calvin continued to assist Wishik in conducting an organized withdrawal. Delta Company was now outnumbered nearly 20 to one.³¹⁰

After the other men were pulled off the line and headed back to the main company area, Calvin held back and found another American soldier dragging Conner's body by the web gear back to the company area.³¹¹ Calvin became suddenly enraged and smacked the

³⁰⁸ Dr. Schweitzer report, August 27, 1997. Author's note: This is Calvin's version of Paul's death. The official reports, and the report the Conner family received, indicate that Paul was killed by a fragmentation wound. I offer that this is incorrect because it was Calvin who was one of the men with Paul when he was killed.

³⁰⁹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³¹⁰ Note: This number is derived using 1,500 VC/NVA to 89 Delta men. Some estimates place the actual number faced at 2,000 which would place the ratio at 22:1.

³¹¹ Author's note: Web gear is the belt and shoulder straps that hold the soldier's back pack, ammo, canteen, etc. It is a modular system that allows the soldier to add or remove equipment based on the mission.

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guy in the back of the head with his hand. “I don’t know who the guy was. I don’t remember his name. He was dragging [Paul] and I got really pissed. I remembered that I said, ‘Don’t drag him!’” Under heavy and constant fire, Calvin picked up the body of his best friend and carried him back to the company CP area where he placed him among the other dead and wounded men.³¹² He stared at his friend for a few seconds, absorbing the enormity of the moment, regained his wits, and then quickly returned to the battle. When asked later how he felt at that very moment, Calvin would only say that he was, “Really fucking pissed off.”³¹³

When Calvin and Wishik returned to the company area, Bucha ordered them to make their way back to the main lines and assist with the wounded so they could be medevac’d back to Phuoc Vinh. The minutes ticked by as if in slow motion as the men tried to reestablish their lines and recover the wounded and dead. The scene was total chaos. Mortar rounds were landing all around them and men were lying everywhere dead or dying. When I asked Calvin how many were wounded by that point of the battle, Calvin replied, “Just about everybody!”³¹⁴ As the men began organizing the wounded, it became painfully apparent that the jungle area in which they were now located was too thick for a helicopter to land.

As things continued to deteriorate, Dave Dillard was at the company command area trying to help control the Alamo. The incoming choppers were still unable to land, and they were under heavy enemy fire from all directions. Still, they flew in low over Delta’s command post trying to drop supplies and gurneys for the wounded. During the early phase of the battle, the men at the Alamo managed to get a few of the seriously wounded, to include 1LT Jeff Davis, Phantom Force Leader, on a medevac.³¹⁵ Dillard later reported:

A few choppers flew in and gave us gurneys. We had a chopper hovering about ten feet off the ground and we were

³¹² Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³¹³ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Jeff Davis interview with the author January 29, 2016.

*trying to get this wounded guy on, and I could hear ping, ping, ping as the chopper was getting hit [by enemy fire]. So, we had to wave him off. God help us if that chopper ever came down on top of us. He was getting fire from the south, so I knew we were surrounded.*³¹⁶

Dillard, understanding what the incoming enemy fire from the south meant, turned to inform Bucha that they were now surrounded. Before he could relay the information, however, Dillard was suddenly attacked and covered with swarming fire ants. He later stated, "Then all of a sudden I'm hit with fire ants, and I needed to tell Bucha that we were getting fire from the south, but I had the ants I had to deal with."³¹⁷ Anyone that has ever been attacked by fire ants knows the immense pain inflicted by these aggressive insects. Their bites are sudden, ferocious and sometimes deadly. Dillard, with the help of another soldier, quickly stripped off his clothes and dealt with the fire ants as best he could. Finally, just as he turned to Bucha to report the incoming fire from the south, the CP was hit with a grenade. Dillard continued:

*I was then hit by a grenade and the concussion threw me back, but by this time we were already in motion moving south. We were walking into an ambush. We pulled back as many as possible into the CP area while circling the wagons. We had 4-6 people that did not make it back.*³¹⁸

What Dillard didn't mention in his account above was the concussion from the grenade blast severely damaged his eardrums, making it nearly impossible for him, as an RTO, to assist his commander. After a few minutes, Dillard, now seriously wounded from the grenade concussion, badly shaken by the blast, and eaten up by the ants, returned to the Alamo to do what he could.

³¹⁶ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid. Note: According to Mowery's narrative, Captain Bucha was able to get three medevacs in. One of the men evacuated was 2LT Jeff Davis.

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In the meantime, Calvin and other men returned to the company CP area with some of the wounded, Bucha ordered all his men to fall back to the old LZ to the south (the one used at 3:40 p.m.) so they could evacuate the rapidly growing number of wounded, hunker down and call in artillery and air support.

On their way to the old LZ, the lead element, likely led by Jimmy Sherrill, encountered an overwhelming number of VC/NVA who were attempting to surround the Americans. According to Calvin, his small group encountered members of the lead group withdrawing in a near panic screaming. "They're coming and nothing's stopping them! There are hundreds of them! They're everywhere!"³¹⁹ Clarence Jones added:

*We organized the remaining Troops and they began to move down the trail towards the LZ. Captain Bucha, his RTO, myself and a couple of others remained to form a rearguard on our back trail. Suddenly, we heard a hail of fire breakout on the trail. I moved toward the firing only to meet the remains of our Company moving back up the trail towards the clearing. They had been ambushed as they had tried to move towards the LZ. My heart sank. We were cut off. A large enemy force to our front, another to our rear. We had more wounded than we could carry out and our KIAs were mounting. My Platoon Leader was gone.*³²⁰

Just as the men from the first group passed, the VC/NVA hit Calvin's small group with command-detonated anti-personnel mines killing several men and seriously wounding Calvin and Wishik. "I remember that vivid as all hell. I can remember [Wishik] flying over the top of me. I was thinking that he got blown up while I was standing. But I got blown off my feet too."³²¹ Calvin later recalled, "...we went about 50 yards down the trail, the NVA blew mines to our left front and opened up with machinegun fire, hitting Lieutenant

³¹⁹ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

³²⁰ Jones, Clarence, letter dated April 22, 2002 recommending Harjo for Medal of Honor.

³²¹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

Wishik, myself, and killing the man directly behind me.”³²² Calvin and 1LT Jeffery Wishik now lay severely wounded on the trail cut off from the main body with nowhere to go, several other men including a photographer were now dead.³²³ In a report to a psychiatrist in 1997, Calvin further explained:

*I was wounded in my left arm, both legs, [my] back, and left side of my head with little pieces of shrapnel. I saw the Lieutenant get blown over my head. Four men ran toward [me] from the front and said, “You’re all dead men!”*³²⁴

Within a few minutes of the mine detonation, Calvin and Wishik were joined by 2LT Jimmy Sherrill. Sherrill was part of the first group of men moving toward the old LZ when their group was hit by mines and small-arms fire. Juan Nazario and Steve Messerli were killed and Sherrill seriously wounded. Bill Pray, Sherrill’s point man during their movement to the old LZ, stated, “I turned around and all the men were gone! I asked Sherrill, ‘Where are the men?’” Pray knew the answer. Sherrill and Pray were the only ones left standing. Pray added, “Sherrill was hit. He was holding his stomach with his left hand. I yelled, you’re hit! He said, ‘Don’t worry about it.’” Pray continued, “We lost the radio, so continuing to the site [old LZ] was fruitless, because we couldn’t call in any air support or choppers.” Pray was then hit and lay seriously wounded 100 meters outside Delta’s lines for several hours before making his way back. Sherrill, most likely thinking he was the only one in his small group left alive,

³²² Calvin Heath affidavit, February 12, 1997.

³²³ Author’s note: According to Calvin, David Smith, a photographer from 3rd Brigade PIO, was killed instantly from a round that ricocheted off the trail surface. Captain Robert D. Williams 3rd BDE, PIO, in a letter dated April 16, 1968, to 1LT Jeff Davis states: “Things have been so quiet since the action last month that my people are really chomping at the bit. They have been told that they are not to be with the point element and to be careful. I believe that Smith’s death made an impression on them. It is a very bad way to learn a lesson, but I keep reminding them, SP4 Harrell and SSG Vanalstine will be with the 3/187th.”

³²⁴ Dr. Schweitzer report, August 27, 1997.

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was making his way back to the lines when he came across Calvin and Wishik.³²⁵

The VC/NVA had now maneuvered around the right flank of Delta's lines and within minutes had Delta completely surrounded. Within a few short moments, Calvin and his small group of badly wounded men found themselves caught approximately 100 meters outside their own lines, among the enemy who clearly had the advantage. Calvin understood the gravity of the situation and recognized their window of opportunity to return to the relative security of main lines was closing rapidly. As the main body of enemy soldiers continued to surround Delta, a small VC/NVA element spotted Calvin and the other isolated Americans and opened fire. In spite of being seriously wounded, the men quickly organized themselves and returned fire. They were not about to go down without a fight. Wishik's DSC citation picks up the action:

*As they made their way to the [LZ], the communists exploded a command detonated mine, injuring three members of the party and killing the others. As he staggered to his feet, bleeding profusely from multiple fragmentation wounds, Lieutenant Wishik was assaulted by six screaming enemy soldiers. Dropping to one knee, he switched his rifle to fully automatic and shot the assailants with one long burst.*³²⁶

In spite of dropping the six charging VC/NVA, it was painfully obvious to Wishik, Sherrill and Calvin, the only survivors from their small group of volunteers that they were in severe trouble. It was only a matter of time before more VC/NVA would spot them, converge, and annihilate them. Wishik and Sherrill were severely wounded and bleeding badly, Sherrill taking several shots to his stomach.³²⁷ As Calvin, the least wounded of the three, was formulating a plan to withdraw the other wounded men, he spotted another American crawling toward them. He immediately recognized him as SGT

³²⁵ Bill Pray interview with author, November 2, 2014. Note: According to Bill Pray, the radio was lost when Messerli, who was carrying the radio, was hit.

³²⁶ Jeffrey Wishik Distinguish Service Cross citation.

³²⁷ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

Bobby Dietch. Dietch was with the lead element and was severely wounded and temporarily blinded. Following the sounds of the Americans, Dietch was attempting to crawl back to the company lines. Calvin stated, "I can remember grabbing him and he was all fucked up."³²⁸ The April 22, 1968 edition of the *Screaming Eagle* newspaper reported Dietch's harrowing experience. It reads:

*A group of NVA regulars surrounded the badly wounded, young American paratrooper down on his knees praying. They touched his head and hands lightly and began to talk among themselves. "Suddenly I became aware that they were leaving. I knew they had been talking about me," said 19-year-old Sgt. Robert Dietch, Philadelphia. "When they saw my wounds and blindness, and that I was praying, they figured I was no threat and nearly dead anyway." Dietch crawled in an attempt to get off the trail. He suddenly felt "the cold muzzle against his head." The owner of the weapon asked Dietch who he was, Dietch recognizing the voice "of a lieutenant," said "It's me sir, Sgt. Dietch." There he lay in silence as the NVA moved all around him.*³²⁹

Bucha was immediately on the radio trying to reestablish contact with his lost and isolated men. After several long minutes, Calvin finally responded and gave the handset to Wishik. Bucha asked Wishik "How far are you?" Wishik replied that they were "... about 50 yards outside your perimeter."³³⁰ With most of the men now dead or seriously wounded, and now completely surrounded himself, there was little Bucha could do to help the trapped men. Based on the amount of fire they were receiving from all sides, Bucha knew that they were facing a vastly superior enemy and any rescue attempt would be disastrous for his remaining men. This was soon confirmed by the amount of enemy fire that an approaching helicopter received

³²⁸ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³²⁹ *Screaming Eagle* Newspaper, April 22, 1968.

³³⁰ Smith, p. 208.

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while trying to resupply the men. Bucha thought, “Holy shit, that’s a big unit that’s shooting at the helicopters.”³³¹

Bucha quickly understood that the only way for the remaining men of Delta Company to survive the night was to establish a “status quo,” much like William Travis did in Texas at the Alamo 132 years earlier, Bucha continued to consolidate his lines, hoping to hold until reinforcements could arrive. Delta Company’s small defensive perimeter had now truly turned into their own form of the Alamo.³³²

In the meantime, approximately 100 meters from the company’s perimeter, Calvin, Wishik, Sherrill and Dietch coped as best they could. Calvin later stated, “Wishik was hit real bad, Sherrill was hit real bad, Dietch was hit real bad. I just had the shrapnel wounds in my legs and when they blew the mines, I had got a big chunk in my leg, my arm and my head with all small little pieces...” But at least Calvin could still move.³³³

The wounded men exchanged gunfire with the enemy, and each went through several 20-round magazines. When the gun exchange finally subsided, Wishik considered his options. He quickly realized that he, Dietch and Sherrill, had no chance of returning to the company perimeter under their own power, but Calvin, despite being severely wounded might – if he left immediately. Wishik, knowing he was signing his own death warrant, turned to Calvin and said, “Calvin, get out of here. Get back to Bucha...” Without hesitation, Calvin told his commanding officer, “I’m not going to leave you!” Wishik, not to be deterred, then told Calvin, “That’s an order!”³³⁴ To which Calvin replied, “Sir, I’m not going anywhere... I’m not going to leave you guys behind.”³³⁵ When asked years later why he disobeyed a direct order from a commanding officer, Calvin said, “I couldn’t have lived with myself if I did that. I was not going to leave

³³¹ Smith, p. 208.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009. Author’s note: By this point of the battle, Calvin still did not completely comprehend the severity of the recently acquired wound to his back.

³³⁴ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

³³⁵ Ibid.

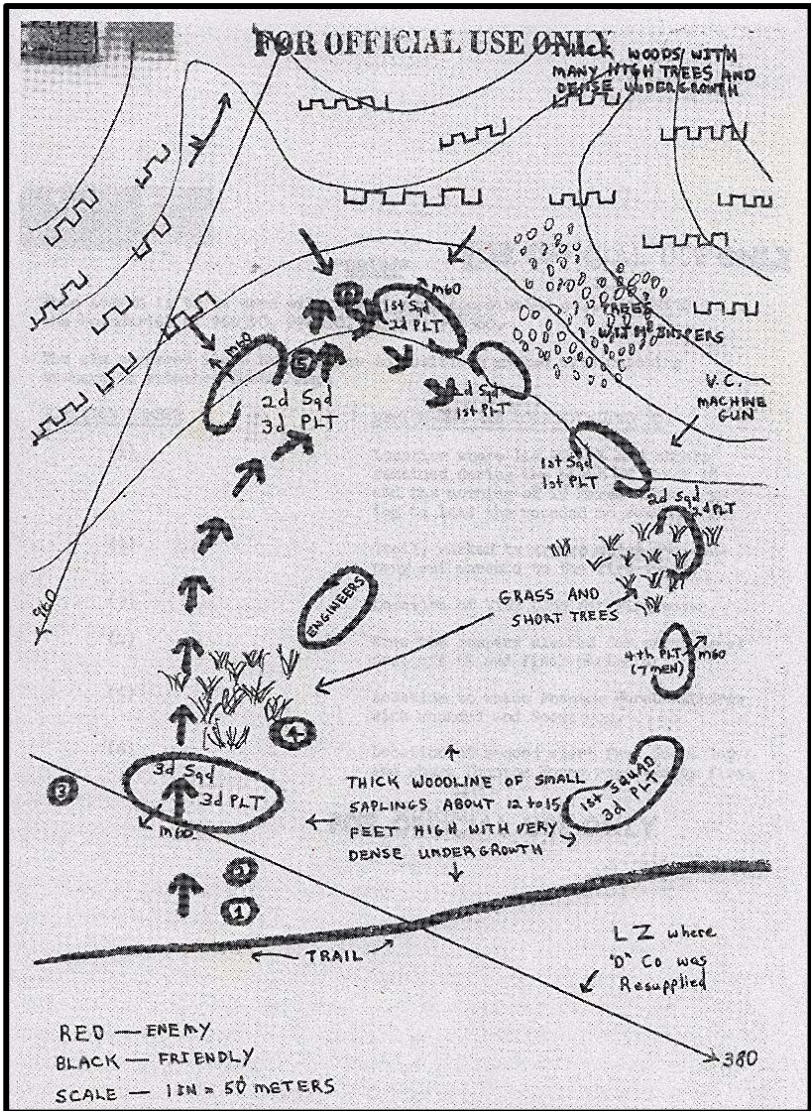
a man behind to die. In the Airborne you just don't do that. You don't leave anybody behind." He faded off and then added, "You just don't do it."³³⁶

Many heroes are created when an average person who is facing a life or death situation acts instinctively in a courageous manner. The clear difference between that type of hero and Calvin Heath, however, was that Calvin made a conscious decision to stay with the stricken men instead of saving himself. Calvin's older brother Bert later said, "[Calvin] was just a kid [when that happened]. He was told that they would come and get him in the morning, but he knew what that meant. He was on his own and [knew that he] may not survive the night."³³⁷ Nineteen-year-old Calvin Heath decided to put the lives of the other men ahead of his own. He understood that he and the small group were completely cut off and had little chance of surviving more than a few hours. But, despite this, he stayed with his wounded comrades.

³³⁶ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

³³⁷ Bert Heath interview with author October 24, 2013.

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Above: Delta's perimeter at approximately 7:00 p.m. March 18, 1968. Calvin, Wishik, Sherrill and Dietch were located between where the 380 line crosses the trail and the "LZ where "D" Co. was resupplied." Official U.S. Army Records.

At some point during the chaotic battle, the VC/NVA had captured several American radios and now had Delta's radio

frequencies so they could hear much of the company and platoon communications. Bucha called Calvin on the radio and asked for a situation report. Calvin reported his approximate position and Bucha told Calvin, "Stay right there. I'll be right up to get you." Calvin immediately radioed back and informed his commander, "Don't come up, they're all around us. There're hundreds of them, they're everywhere. They're waiting, don't come out. You'll never make it."³³⁸

Bucha then instructed the trapped men to play dead and he would come for them at first light. In spite of this, men from Delta Company, probably unknown to Bucha, made four attempts to try to rescue Calvin and the other men, all four attempts failed.³³⁹ Bill Heaney later recalled the feeling of utter frustration after he had been unable to reach the wounded men.³⁴⁰ Everyone within the company main lines who were aware of the isolated men now knew the group had little to no chance of surviving the night. Some of the men felt that they should have done more to rescue the wounded men and this horrible feeling stayed with them for the rest of their lives.³⁴¹ Calvin later stated that "There was absolutely nothing they could do."³⁴²

At 7:20 p.m., Bucha reported to headquarters that Delta Company was still under heavy fire from all directions and that they were now completely surrounded and pinned down. Five minutes later, he reported that he had ordered his men into a tight perimeter approximately 25 meters across; an area not much bigger than a regulation sized basketball court.³⁴³ Five minutes after that, Bucha reported that Delta had suffered very heavy casualties with at least 50 WIA and five KIA.³⁴⁴ This brought his effective strength to approximately 39 men against an estimated 2,000 enemy. The middle

³³⁸ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³³⁹ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Author's note: This is based on conversations Calvin had with some of the men during his first few reunions.

³⁴² Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

³⁴³ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

³⁴⁴ Bond, p. 30.

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of Delta's command area was full of wounded and dead men, many of the wounded incapable of defending themselves if the enemy penetrated their perimeter. Things were rapidly going from bad to worse. Calvin noted, "Based on the number of NVA that kept passing us, we knew that they were in trouble – *real* trouble."³⁴⁵

Calvin, now knowing there was no way the men of Delta Company could come to their rescue, contacted Bucha and requested permission to get rid of the radio. "I didn't want to have that on me because if I had a radio they'd kill me for sure."³⁴⁶ He added, "The CO said, 'Stay where you are, turn the radio off and we'll do our best to get you at dawn, [so] I took the radio off....'³⁴⁷ Bucha later stated, "I couldn't think of anything else to do. I heard the radio go off and that was it."³⁴⁸ With so few abled-body troopers, and reinforcements fighting for their own lives elsewhere, Bucha knew that any rescue attempt outside their ever-shrinking perimeter would mean total obliteration of the entire company. Forced with absolutely no options, he decided to fight through the night and attempt a rescue at daylight.

Back in the small company perimeter, Bucha looked around and suddenly realized that if his men fired indiscriminately from within their tiny perimeter, the enemy, using the muzzle flashes from the American weapons, would be able to quickly establish the American lines and easily determine just how small a unit they really were. Bucha's plan therefore was to fight back with indirect fire. "We threw grenades at random times in different directions..." stated Dillard. "[As a result] the NVA had no idea how large our unit was, and we were determined to keep it that way."³⁴⁹

Throughout the night, according to Dillard, other men from Delta Company continued to perform heroic acts that also helped save the company. "Dickie Quick crawled out to set up Claymores, but he armed it before he went out. No one does that! But he did! He gave the clacker (detonator) to one of his guys and said, 'If I call out you

³⁴⁵ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

³⁴⁶ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁴⁷ Calvin Heath affidavit, 1997.

³⁴⁸ Smith, p 208.

³⁴⁹ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

hit it!” Dillard thought for a moment and continued, “No one arms a Claymore first – no one.”³⁵⁰ Platoon Sergeant Dickie Quick was willing to give his life for his men. Dillard continued, “In the meantime, I’m trying to keep the wounded under control. I could see the muzzle flashes from the NVA guns and I can see their faces! That’s how close they were.”³⁵¹ 1LT Mike Blalock, also in the Alamo at that time, stated, “We were throwing grenades 5-10 yards out. If we hadn’t they would have overrun us.”³⁵² Years later, the men of Delta would all agree, that had the enemy realized just how few abled-bodied men Delta Company actually had left, there would have been no question – the Company would have been overrun and every man killed.

It was now 7:25 p.m. and the sun had set an hour earlier. The men of Delta were now utterly alone in the dark jungle surrounded by several thousand enemy soldiers. Green and red tracers were splitting the black sky everywhere. Explosions erupted throughout the jungle from all directions as the Americans and VC/NVA detonated mines and lobbed grenades at each other. Helicopter gunships and Tactical Air Control (TAC) arrived and dropped their deadly loads of bombs and fire power from above in an attempt to keep the advancing enemy from overrunning Delta Company. The noise at times was deafening. Through the explosion flashes, Calvin could see the silhouettes of hundreds of VC/NVA soldiers as they advanced through the area probing for Delta’s weaknesses and trying to locate any Americans caught outside their lines. He could hear branches snapping, the enemy talking, VC/NVA leaders directing their troops, all of whom were hell-bent on maximizing the rapidly developing opportunity. The Communist officers knew that completely overrunning and destroying a company from the prestigious 101st Airborne would be a feather in all their caps, and this was one time they would not fail.

After shutting down his radio, Calvin and the other men attempted to consolidate their position as best they could. He stated, “I grabbed Lieutenant Sherrill off of the trail and brought him into the

³⁵⁰ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

³⁵¹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁵² Mike Blalock telecom with author February 10, 2019.

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jungle part. He was bleeding from his stomach and his legs were all shot up. I didn't know [at that time that] he was gut shot. He never said a word.”³⁵³ Calvin then grabbed Wishik and Dietch and dragged them approximately five to ten yards off the trail into the thick vegetation.



Above: The M-18A1 Claymore mine fires approximately 700 eighth-inch ball bearings in an arcing pattern up to 100 meters. It is known for its brutal effectiveness and lethality. Some describe the mine as a “Big, badass shotgun.”

Shortly after Bucha instructed Calvin to turn the radio off, Dave Dillard heard voices through his handset. He later recalled, “I remember listening and hearing the radio coming back on, and hearing Vietnamese voices. I always thought they hollered at us or said something, but I think in retrospect we just heard them talking on the radio and it was our radio on our net!”³⁵⁴

Around 7:30 p.m., things started getting worse for the isolated men. Through the waning light, the men saw the dark shapes of enemy soldiers approaching. They stuck with their original plan of feigning death. They knew that they could not win a gun fight with so

³⁵³ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁵⁴ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

many enemy soldiers. Calvin urged the wounded men not to make a sound and he himself rolled face down on the ground hoping the enemy would pass by them assuming they were dead. As the VC/NVA soldiers approached the men, however, Calvin heard the distinctive click of one enemy soldier switching his weapon to fully automatic. He braced himself for what was to follow. The enemy soldier then sprayed the men with 20 rounds of 7.62mm bullets. All the men were hit, with Calvin taking point blank rounds to the hip and to his right groin area. He immediately knew the round to the hip found its mark and later stated that it was “like getting kicked by a cow,”³⁵⁵ but it would take hours for him to know whether or not he had lost his genitals. All he could do for now was lay motionless, bleed, and pretend he was dead.

The VC/NVA soldiers then moved closer and poked the severely damaged Americans with their rifle barrels. Calvin’s, Sherrill’s, Wishik’s and Dietch’s blood-soaked and motionless bodies convinced the enemy soldiers that they were dead.³⁵⁶ Calvin later stated, “[Moving or wincing] meant my life, so I didn’t make a sound. [The shots] picked me up and I landed right on top of my rifle. I never said a word. Didn’t yell... Nothing... None of us yelled.”³⁵⁷ The pain was excruciating. Convinced the Americans were dead, the VC/NVA took Calvin’s radio and moved on.³⁵⁸

Dillard later remembered that, “...after a hail of small arms fire, I heard the squelch [of Calvin’s radio] break again and the voice of a NVA soldier telling me, in broken English, that they were going to find us and kill us all.”³⁵⁹ The voice Dillard heard was most likely from the group who shot Calvin, Dietch, Wishik and Sherrill.

At 8:10 p.m., Bucha radioed Lieutenant Colonel Forrest stating that he now had three seriously wounded men and they needed immediate evacuation. He also reported that he had “...four persons isolated on a trail of the initial contact.” The Daily Staff Journal goes

³⁵⁵ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁵⁶ Calvin Heath affidavit, February 12, 1997.

³⁵⁷ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁵⁸ Note: Speculation based on the time line provided by the men.

³⁵⁹ Dillard narrative for Harjo.

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on to report that Bucha "...does have contact with these persons, [and] instructed them to hold position and try to resist contact."³⁶⁰

Back inside the company perimeter the remaining men of Delta Company were living their own nightmare. They repelled wave after wave of determined enemy soldiers and were now running dangerously low on ammunition. Bucha was busy trying to coordinate incoming air support and resupplies, but it was impossible for a chopper to land in such a small perimeter, now being assaulted by three enemy .51 caliber heavy machine guns. By 8:12 p.m., it started to look like all was loss, but then suddenly more air support began to arrive. This wave included the greatly-needed "Spooky," also called "Puff the Magic Dragon," a C-47 air cargo plane converted to a heavily armed air support system. Bucha had ordered his men to throw out bean bag lights and place helmets near them. The lights would give the Spooky gunners an idea of the perimeter, the pings off the helmets allowed Bucha to direct fire.³⁶¹ Their incredibly effective and accurate mini guns opened on the quickly advancing VC/NVA, decimating their ranks, quickly suppressing the attack, and providing Delta badly needed breathing room.³⁶² Calvin, lying in the jungle approximately 100 meters away, could see the air attack. He later recalled:

*We were laying there, and the gunships would come in and I remember hearing [what] sounded like rain coming. So I looked up in the sky and I could see the stars through the tree tops and then I looked over from where I heard it coming from and I could see this yellow sheet coming... and that was Puff the Magic Dragon.*³⁶³

What Calvin saw approaching through the trees was Spooky's 7.62mm General Electric mini guns "lighting up" the area. The three mini guns could each fire at a rate of up to 6,000 rounds per minute for a total of 18,000 rounds per minute – 300 rounds per second. At

³⁶⁰ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

³⁶¹ Bucha interview with the Pritzker Museum, 2006.

³⁶² Bond, p. 25.

³⁶³ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

the time, it was the deadliest close-air support system in the American arsenal. To help the gunner direct fire, the ammunition belts included “tracers” placed every 10-15 rounds. This allowed the gunners to “walk” their fire around bean-bag lights and onto the target area. The “rain” Calvin heard was the mini-gun’s bullets cutting through the jungle canopy. The “yellow sheet” he saw approaching was the guns’ tracers. Thousands of friendly rounds were hitting within a few feet of the isolated group and Delta’s perimeter.³⁶⁴ Calvin adds:

*We watched as they fired right over the top of us. But Bucha knew right where we were, so they got within five feet of us... firing... so that kind of kept the NVA off of us and every time they would mass up, to make their charges, our gunships were just chewing them up.*³⁶⁵

Calvin could hear the unmistakable dull thuds of bullets as they found their marks, especially when they found center mass, or the skull of the enemy soldiers. The sounds oddly reminded Calvin of someone hitting a side of beef with a baseball bat. The muffled thuds, as the bullets found their marks, were always followed by a blood curdling scream of a badly injured man or the soft, almost unperceivable sound as a man expended his last breath. Bill Heaney stated, “I was very surprised that Calvin and the others didn’t get wiped out. Puff came right up to our lines.”³⁶⁶

As Spooky left the area to rearm, the men within Delta’s lines heard the screams of dying men outside the lines. Some thought the screaming was Calvin, Wishik, Sherrill, and Dietch being tortured by the VC/NVA. Several of the men, infuriated with what they thought they heard, wanted to leave the relative security of the new perimeter to try to save the men, but they were held in place by more rationally

³⁶⁴ Note: Some might suggest that it was a matter of luck that the men were not killed by friendly fire. During our interviews, Calvin was adamant that it was Bucha’s skill and not luck that they were able to walk supporting fire in that close. Bucha later stated he had his men arranged bean-bag lights so the pilots could zero in on the enemy attempting to break through.

³⁶⁵ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁶⁶ Heaney interview with author, September 10, 2014.

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thinking comrades.³⁶⁷ What the men inside the lines were actually hearing was the VC/NVA dying a slow painful death after being shot up by Spooky's Gatling guns.

Other Rakkasans within the American lines, including Bill Heaney, thought that everyone outside their lines were now dead. "Once we settled into that [new perimeter] we didn't try to get out to them anymore. By the time we set up our perimeter, anyone who would have gone out would have been wiped out easily."³⁶⁸

The short break from the enemy fire allowed Calvin to test his badly injured body and assess his situation. He looked over to Wishik and Dietch and they were not moving at all, and Calvin now wondered if they were dead. Five feet away, Sherrill was leaning against the same tree on which Calvin had placed him earlier. He was visibly alert and extremely agitated. Calvin stated, "We were listening to [the enemy] yelling, screaming and dying. And that's when Sherrill was up against the tree and he started yelling at the NVA."³⁶⁹ Elated with the overwhelming American fire support, the severely injured Jimmy Sherrill, knowing that he was dying, threw all caution to the wind and started to yell at the enemy all around him. When asked his thoughts as to why Sherrill yelled out at that point, Calvin replied, "I think he knew he was dying. He was shot up pretty bad. He had gunshot wounds in the chest and the stomach and fragmentation wounds all over." Calvin went on, "They were yelling at us and he was yelling at them. Those guns tore them up so bad that he was yelling, 'Come on you mother fuckers, come and fuck with us some more!'"³⁷⁰

Concerned that Sherrill would give away their position, Calvin, who still lay face down on the ground due to his back and hip wounds, whispered to Sherrill to be quiet. Calvin reasoned that any attention to their area would be the end of them all. Calvin continued:

And I was lying down that way and I turned over and I was going to tell him to be quiet and an NVA was standing right

³⁶⁷ Dillard, Heaney, Rawson interview with author, October 9, 2013.

³⁶⁸ Heaney interview with author, September 10, 2014.

³⁶⁹ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

³⁷⁰ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

*there and shot him right in the head... killed him. So, I just laid back down and didn't move. He stood there for a few [seconds] then he left.*³⁷¹

Lieutenant Jimmy Sherrill was shot several times in the head and died instantly. Calvin, after watching Sherrill take the rounds to the head, slowly laid his head back on the ground and continued to play dead hoping the NVA/VC soldier who shot Sherrill did not see him move. He closed his eyes and waited for what seemed like an eternity for the next round to find its mark into his own head. Years later when Calvin told the story about Sherrill, it was easy to see that he held great admiration for the way in which Jimmy Sherrill died. "He went out basically telling the enemy to kiss his ass. It doesn't get much better than that!"³⁷²

Three days later, Sherrill's mother, Loretta Moore received a Western Union Telegram that simply read:

*The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your son, Second Lieutenant Jimmy L. Sherrill, died in Vietnam on 18 March 1968 from wounds received while on a combat operation when [he] engaged a hostile force in firefight. Please accept my deepest sympathy. This confirms personal notification made by a representative of the Secretary of the Army. Signed: Kenneth G. Wickham, Major General USA, the Adjutant General.*³⁷³

Shortly after Sherrill was killed, more VC/NVA soldiers moved through the area, policing up their own dead and wounded. Thinking that the badly damaged Americans lying among the VC/NVA were dead, one soldier stopped at Calvin. Calvin, sensing and hearing the man, completely froze. He didn't dare to even breathe, and he hoped the darkness would conceal the fact that he was still alive. Lying face down, he understood he had very little chance of surviving a hand-to-hand battle with a healthy man hovering above him. Even if he could,

³⁷¹ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

³⁷² *ibid.*

³⁷³ Western Union Telegraph dated March 21, 1968, Sherrill Family Collection.

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he realized that there were undoubtedly many other enemy soldiers nearby who would hear the fight and come and finish off Calvin and the other men.



Left: Second Lieutenant Jimmy Sherrill, Delta Company, 3/187th, 101st Airborne Division. Sherrill was part of the small group of men cut off from the main body. He was killed during the evening of March 18, 1968. Jan Sherrill Hampton photo.

The VC/NVA soldier stooped over Calvin and placed his rifle across his lap and began to rummage through Calvin's pockets looking for items that could be used or later sold. Once he picked the low-lying fruit, the soldier went through Calvin's pants pockets. When he reached into Calvin's right-hand pants pocket, he touched Calvin's recently-acquired bullet wound. Unable to control his reflexes, Calvin flinched in pain, startling the enemy soldier. The surprised NVA soldier staggered back and quickly grabbed for his rifle to finish off Calvin. As he turned his weapon on Calvin, he fell slightly back toward Jeff Wishik. Wishik, although severely wounded, near death, and falling in and out of consciousness, came to just when his RTO needed him most. Seeing that Calvin was in desperate trouble, he gathered what little strength he had left, grabbed his knife and reached up and grabbed the man from behind. He then quickly and silently slit the man's throat, immediately killing him and saving Calvin's life.³⁷⁴ The enemy soldier, his head now nearly severed, fell

³⁷⁴ Calvin Heath affidavit, February 12, 1997.

across Calvin and bled to death.³⁷⁵ Calvin, incredibly grateful for Wishik's actions, said nothing and continued to lay silently.

Meanwhile, the number of wounded within Delta's perimeter continued to grow. At 8:22 p.m., 3rd Brigade Commander, Colonel Mowery, informed the 3rd Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Forrest that he had requested four medics and two doctors to be inserted into Delta's area to assist with the seriously wounded.³⁷⁶ This was extremely good news to Delta Company medic Ray Diaz. Throughout the night, Diaz worked feverishly doing what he could to save the men within the quickly diminishing perimeter. Early in the battle, Diaz himself received fragmentation wounds to the neck and chest. He patched himself the best he could and moved on to the men who needed his help.³⁷⁷ He undoubtedly saved several lives that evening.

The Americans and the VC/NVA were now engaged in an ugly dance of death. TAC Air and helicopter gunships were in and out of the area attempting to destroy the enemy with accurate and deadly gunfire. When they left, the enemy would quickly renew their attacks on the American lines. At 8:35 p.m., Lieutenant Colonel Forrest, flying overhead in his C&C helicopter, came on site with a light-fire-support team from Phuoc Vinh and Bien Hoa. Four minutes later Delta's CP came under heavy enemy attack from the northeast and west and the light-fire-support team was deployed to those areas to keep the enemy from overrunning the American lines.

At 9:22 p.m., the enemy once again made an attempt to penetrate Delta lines and Bucha called in TAC Air to drop their bomb loads north of Delta's perimeter. The enemy was so close to the American lines, Bucha was forced to walk the deadly ordinance within a few feet of his own men. At 10:10 p.m., Lieutenant Colonel Forrest requested a Chinook helicopter to evacuate the wounded but was told by headquarters that none were available for the mission. At 10:24 p.m. a second wave of TAC Air arrived on station and deployed their ordinance to the north and northeast of the Delta lines. Twenty

³⁷⁵ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

³⁷⁶ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

³⁷⁷ Diaz interview with author, February 5, 2014.

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minutes later, Bucha reported that all movement in the area had stopped and there was nothing left but “burning trees.”³⁷⁸ The fierce onslaught from above was the only thing keeping the Americans alive.

With a slight lull in the action, a medevac helicopter was able to hover above Delta’s small CP area, and under heavy enemy fire off-load Dr. William Schultheis and several medics and evacuate some of the more seriously wounded men. For at least a few of the men, the horror of the night in the deadly jungle was over.³⁷⁹

For more than four hours, the enemy attacked Delta Company in wave after wave, oftentimes running right over the top of Calvin, Wishik and Dietch. The human traffic was so high at one-point, enemy soldiers were tripping and falling over the wounded men. Calvin later reported:

*For the rest of the night, the NVA were running away on both sides of us, to get away from the gun ships, I believe that the size of the NVA forces had to be in the thousands because it would not take hundreds of men four or five hours to move away from us. We could hear the company still being attacked throughout the night.*³⁸⁰

Around midnight, as one of the waves of enemy soldiers moved through Calvin’s area, one soldier made the fateful decision to stop and once again search through the men’s belongings. This time it was Calvin and not Wishik who would respond with deadly force. Calvin, still lying on his stomach and soaked in blood, was rolled over onto his terribly painful back wounds by an enemy soldier. Knowing there was no way to prevent from wincing in pain and hiding the fact he was still alive, Calvin, in that split second, decided his course of action. As he was rolled onto his right side toward the VC/NVA, he drove the large survival knife he had hidden in his left hand into the man’s right rib cage.³⁸¹ The sharply honed weapon sliced into the

³⁷⁸ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Calvin Heath affidavit, February 12, 1997.

³⁸¹ Note: Calvin suggest this was a Bowie knife.

man's chest cavity, cutting muscles, colon, liver, and puncturing the man's right lung. The attack was so violent and so precisely and quickly executed, that the soldier was caught entirely off guard and could not respond. He silently stared at Calvin in utter disbelief, thinking, *how could I have made such a foolish mistake?* He died within seconds as his sliced organs ceased to function.³⁸²

Calvin now had two dead enemy soldiers lying with him, the last man lying face-to-face as he quickly bled out. Calvin watched as the man, only inches away, took his last breath. Calvin then took a deep breath and prayed for this hellish night to be over. For the second time that night, a man looked directly into Calvin's eyes as he died. The first was his best friend; this time it was someone else's.

Calvin later recalled the man's final moments with vivid detail. He described the dying enemy's emotions as they moved rapidly from shock to disbelief to acceptance and then finally to peace.³⁸³ Calvin also noted his own conflicting emotions. He did not hate this man, even though a piece of him felt he should. He was a soldier just like him, doing his duty. He was someone's son, brother, husband and possibly father. For the rest of his life, Calvin often thought about that man.

Soon after Calvin killed the second enemy soldier, another group of approximately six NVA silently advanced towards their position. Calvin watched as they methodically moved from one dead soldier to the next. The sounds of the battle were all around him. He was fighting from going into shock, and he could not quite make out exactly what they were doing. VC/NVA, moving through wounded Americans, bayonetting them to insure they were dead, was a common practice in the jungles of Vietnam, and Calvin half expected to soon feel the cold steel of his enemy's blade. Questions began to run through Calvin's mind, *should we make a last stand? Are Wishik and Dietch even alive or conscious? Do we have any ammunition? Do the other men have weapons, and can they bring them to bear quickly enough if I make a move?* After thinking long and hard on the

³⁸² Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009. Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

³⁸³ Calvin Heath interview with author, April 26, 2013.

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prospects, Calvin realized that they were in absolutely no shape to fight back. Any attempt to defend themselves would be futile. He knew he might have a chance to escape, but he also knew that any movement would bring attention to Wishik and Dietch.

Calvin remained completely still, wondering when that last bayonet thrust to the chest or bullet to the head would finally come. Miraculously, it did not. This new wave of enemy soldiers moving through the area were not interested in American plunder – they were there to retrieve their dead and wounded comrades.³⁸⁴ They collected what they came for and, much to Calvin's relief, left the immediate area. Calvin, Wishik and Dietch had once again escaped death.



Above: The Douglas AC-47 Spooky with its three miniguns. It was guns like these that provided the “yellow sheet” and the “rain” Calvin saw and heard during the evening of March 18th. Their incredible fire power was a key reason Calvin, Dietch and Wishik survived. Source: Vietnam Conflict Aviation Resource Center.

³⁸⁴ Adam Piore interview with Calvin Heath, 2009.

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Calvin noted that during the first four hours of the battle, the gun fire and explosions were continuous. He later said, “Joe, it just didn’t ever fucking stop. It was steady heavy shooting and stuff from seven o’clock until way past midnight.”³⁸⁵ He could feel the concussions of the hand grenades and see the explosion flashes. Vegetation fell like rain, and several times, supporting fire was so close he could feel the hot flying fragments peppering his body. Life or death inflicted by both sides was literally measured in inches, but despite the chaos, Calvin and the other men did not panic and continued to lay silently, using what little cover they could.³⁸⁶

By 11:42 p.m., Bravo Company had maneuvered within 300 meters of Delta’s lines and could advance no further. Dealing with heavy enemy contact of their own, they reported that they were in no position to assist Delta Company during the evening and would proceed to their location at first light. Delta would have to hold their rapidly shrinking lines until morning. Calvin and the other isolated men, who were now presumed dead, were on their own.³⁸⁷

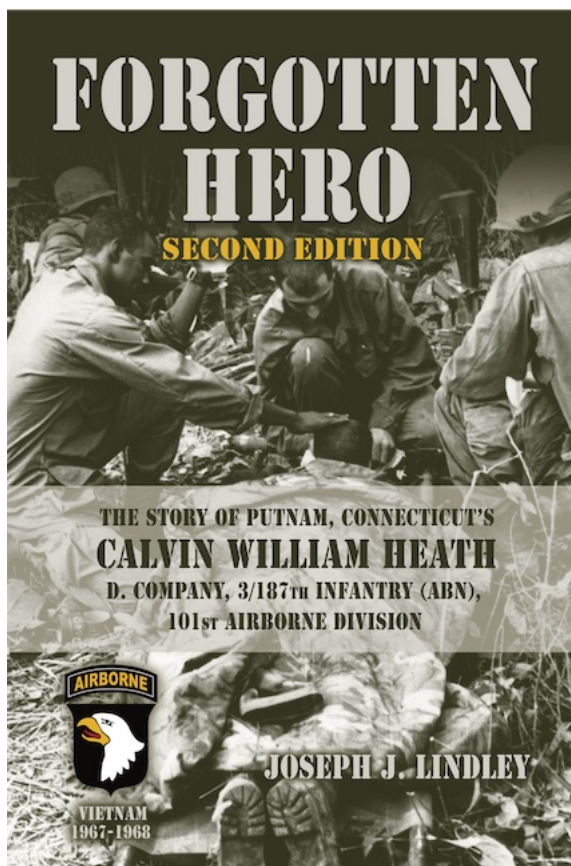


Left: Men of the 3/187th, 101st ABN DIV maneuvering through the thick jungle. The 187th spent most of their time in Vietnam on search and destroy missions. Many of the men stated they were often used as bait to draw the enemy into the open. Bill Pray photo.

³⁸⁵ Calvin Heath interview with author, May 2013.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Daily Staff Journal, March 18, 1968.



*Story of D. Co. 3/187th
Infantry (ABN), 101st
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