



The Anonymous Battle

by John B. Poindexter

This article grew out of a professional development program at the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Irwin, California, given by the author to the regiment.

John B. Poindexter was former commander of the regiment's A Troop in Vietnam, and was invited to discuss small unit leadership with junior leaders. The basis for his OPD session was a manuscript that he began to write 29 years ago, with the intention of publishing it in a military journal, but it was set aside and not completed until recently.

Though almost 30 years have passed since the "Anonymous Battle" took place, it still has lessons that today's leader can apply to small units. —Ed.

Foreword

The unifying theme of this fragment of the regiment's history is the American fighting man. His obedient and gallant performance in South Vietnam has been

obscured over the years by reports of drug abuse and civilian atrocities and by numerous analyses of our country's conflicting feelings about the war. We veterans of America's first defeat have said little in public about all of this. Some among us may feel that they were coerced into bearing a disproportionate share of the wartime burden by an ungrateful society. Others, including your predecessors, the combat veterans who attend the regiment's annual reunions, share a different attitude.

The men in ground combat units, probably no more than 10 percent of in-country personnel, performed their hazardous duties with skill and, if not always with dedication, at least with resignation. None of them "gave" his life, though each risked death continually for many months at a stretch under conditions that would earn the respect of soldiers of any era. Likewise, no American "lost" his life, though 59,000 were slain by a resourceful and motivated enemy. Personal confidence born of harsh experience and an innate sense of obligation, first to their

buddies and then to their unit, are the qualities that sustained our men in South Vietnam.

The anonymous battle that occurred near fire support base Illingworth on 26 March 1970 lives only in the memories of the young men who fought it. One of these men described the battle and the tragic night that preceded it to the author of a history of one phase of the war in Vietnam. An excerpt from this book, *Into Cambodia*, recalls the events of 26 March as they appeared to a young and probably inexperienced cavalry crewman:

TROUBLE WAITING TO HAPPEN

Specialist Fourth Class Angel E. Pagan, a track crewman from Puerto Rico assigned to A Troop, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, was sleeping before his turn on guard when his buddy, Rodney Dyer, was suddenly shaking him awake.

Explosions.

Flashes erupted from within the laager circle, lighting up the darkness, and Pagan, instantly awake, realized that burn-

ing embers had landed on his poncho and fatigues. He smothered them and jumped to his feet as Dyer rushed on to climb into the driver's compartment and start their track.

Explosions. Explosions. Explosions.

Pagan looked shocked at the mortar tracks in the center of the laager, burning and exploding in the dark. Two men were lying in the burning grass near the burning tracks, their fatigues aflame, and Pagan realized that they were still moving, and his mind reeled. Oh God, he was watching his buddies die right in front of him and he couldn't do a thing about it.

A medic tried to get through the flames.

He was stopped, forced back to safety. Everyone was scrambling aboard their tracks and hauling a __, running over their rocket screens and claymores in their chaotic escape.

Apparently, as the mortar tracks had been registering fire in the jungle surrounding their laager, a defective round had exploded in one of the tubes, igniting a chain reaction of explosions in the mortar ammunition stacked nearby. After their hasty flight, the troops spent the night sitting atop their vehicles, watching the explosions and fire. Come daylight, they drove back through the smoldering grass to police up the charred corpses of their buddies from the mortar section. Some of the bodies had been blown to pieces, and as these scraps were gathered into body bags, words were spoken only when necessary.

A Troop had just entered a world of hurt.

Specifically, they were in the fire support base Illingworth area of operations of War Zone C, under the operational control of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, whose newest fire base of the week was smack atop a known infiltration route and attracting much enemy attention. So it was soon after the mortar disaster that the ACAVs and Sheridans of A Troop were laagered in a clearing they had flattened in the underbrush to allow in a resupply bird when C Company, from their adoptive straight-leg battalion, humped in through the sun-dappled forest.

In the morning, 26 March 1970, C Company humped off through the woods and bumped into a company and then a battalion of the 95C NVA Regiment, which, in two hours, had Charlie Company pinned down from three sides. Three GIs were killed, some thirty wounded.

The wounded included the company commander. Lieutenant Colonel Conrad, CO, 2-8 Cavalry, instructed Captain Poindexter, CO, A/1-11 ACR, to immediately return to FSB Illingworth to drop off his disabled vehicles and to take aboard A/2-8 Cavalry from the berm line, and then to rush to the rescue of C/2-8 Cavalry. With the grunts of Alpha Company humping along on both sides of A Troop's column, they had to bust jungle almost the whole way in. They were moving single file, the lead tracks smashing down saplings and brush. Then they roared into the hasty, besieged perimeter of Charlie Company that was obscured by vegetation and roaring with gunfire. The troop tried to come on line — grunts were strung out in the vegetation as flat as they could get — and rocket-propelled grenades shrieked out of the jungle at them, then a troop's worth of machine guns and main guns opened up as grunts scrambled on their hands and knees to get behind the vehicles. Crewmen holstered at them to get the hell out of the way.

Everyone was firing and firing and firing, and there were Phantoms and Cobras orbiting and expending in sequence, orbiting and expending, the concussion walloping the men on the ground, showering them with shattered tree limbs. Captain Poindexter was everywhere, encouraging and directing. Crewman Pagan noticed that the captain's hand had been hit badly — he could see the bone — but Poindexter wasn't slowing down. Neither was Pagan. Three vehicles were disabled by RPGs, and he overheard a radio request for a medic. Pagan jumped from his track to find the medic and lead him to where the wounded were, then he ran back to his vehicle. Sergeant Young, his Tango Charlie, jumped in his s__ about leaving without permission, but finally just smiled and said to forget it.

The fire continued raining in both directions. The NVA were dug in, and although the sheer weight of A Troop's suppressive fire may have splintered the logs around some of the bunkers, may have disintegrated the men inside — the official body count was eighty-eight — it could not defeat a battalion. Captain Poindexter, though painfully wounded, was firmly in command of his troop and the two line companies, and he organized a withdrawal. By then it was dark, and flare ships circled overhead, making the forest a surreal carnival of intense white light and black lines from the blasted, silhouetted trees. The grunts helped their wounded onto the tracks, threw aboard their rucksacks and equipment, then

climbed aboard themselves, maybe ten to a vehicle, and hung on for dear life. They backed up to the trail that they had ploughed on the way in. Since everything had fallen forward as the tracks had originally ground in, all the branches and brush now pointed toward them as they tried to get the hell out. The bedraggled column jerked and rumbled its way seven kilometers to the burned clearing where the mortar platoon of A Troop had been blown up, and, with strobe lights pin-pointing the perimeter, numbed survivors rushed the wounded and the dead to the medevacs.

Captain Poindexter went out on the last one. Daylight brought more helicopters with a large ammunition resupply and a TC meeting with each platoon leader and platoon sergeant as A Troop reorganized. Afterward, Sergeant Young told Pagan that he'd recommended him for the Bronze Star, which was later disapproved along with many other awards the TCs had written their crewmen up for. Pagan had nothing to say to either bit of news. He was only doing his job, helping his buddies. They were the best people he'd ever known.

-From Into Cambodia, Spring Campaign, Summer Offensive, 1970, pages 37-39, Keith W. Nolan, Presidio Press, 1990, Novato, California. Used with permission.

That's the way it all appeared to young SP4 Pagan. Here's how I saw those same events after many months in the border jungles.

Alpha Troop's "Welcome" to War Zone C

More than a thousand square kilometers of multi-canopied jungle 100 kilometers northwest of Saigon, War Zone C was a swamp in the wet season and a blistering, dust-caked oven during the rest of the year. The area was a free-fire zone astride the most obvious of the invasion routes from officially neutral Cambodia to Saigon. Long deserted by civilians, it had been an enemy sanctuary and a southern terminus of the supply route from Hanoi since the defeat of the French Colonial forces.

Within two years, Loc Ninh, a town near War Zone C's western boundary, would become the provisional capital of the advancing communist government. The 1st Squadron of the 11th Cavalry had been assigned without respite during the past year to the Iron Triangle, the Loc Ninh area and, finally, through Alpha Troop alone, to War Zone C. Exhaustion was near.



Our first mission in War Zone C was to secure a road construction operation directly through its heavily forested heart to the abandoned village of Katum and the Tin Nhon Special Forces camp near the Cambodian border. The most effective form of protection that Alpha Troop could provide the vulnerable South Vietnamese and American engineers was aggressive patrolling against the invisible enemy. As the engineers' bulldozers hacked the overgrown jungle away from the ancient French roadbed, the troop reconned into territory where non-communist forces had been absent or ineffective for decades. On occasion, our tanks hammered through virgin vegetation and broke into clear oases not entirely reclaimed by the forest. Here once had been a rudimentary civilization, but the area was marked now only by eroding rice paddies and, sometimes, by an incongruous, vine-strangled concrete bridge whose road had long since vanished in the monsoons.

When the highway neared completion, less combat-vital units took over its security. Our 150 men and armored equipment soon were reassigned to serve with a straight-leg infantry unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), then situated in the Dog's Face region of War Zone C. Not until 1 May 1970, when U.S. forces invaded Cambodia, did we learn why the Army had expended so much effort to build an apparently useless, all-weather road through the center of War Zone C.

Because armored cavalry and unmechanized infantry units are organically incompatible, we had to devise an effective plan of joint action. The best solution seemed to be to cut out a huge swath of jungle and combine an infantry company — Alpha Company of the 2nd of the 8th — with Alpha Troop and allow "Team A" a free hand within the area's specified boundaries. The plan called for the infan-

try to ride aboard the cavalry vehicles and to either support armored assaults or patrol independently, thereby securing for Team A the advantages of speed, superior force, and intensive terrain coverage. As it turned out, this unorthodox field expedient performed well in terms of at least one criterion, enemy body count. But it also drew us into firefights more frequently than might otherwise have been expected, exacting a heavy toll of combat injuries and fatigue-induced accidents.

By the evening preceding the anonymous battle, Team A had learned to draw its vehicles and infantry into a tight circle, much as a wagon train might have settled in for the night on the western plains more than a century ago. However, at close range — and nothing else mattered in the dense jungles along the Cambodian border — ominous dissimilarities were visible even in the dim moonlight.

Instead of fluffy prairie schooners, Alpha Troop's six surviving M551 Sheridan tanks were oriented flat into the jungle wall 50 meters out. The troop's M113 armored cavalry vehicles filled the spaces between the Sheridans at 10-meter intervals. Called "tracks" or "ACAVs" by their crews, 21 of the normal complement of 27 still functioned. Each stood in the defensive circle so that its single caliber .50 and two M-60 machine guns, mounted behind steel gunshields, pointed dead-on into the black curtain of vegetation. In the center of the night defensive position were three 4.2-inch mortar tracks, two armored administrative vehicles and a now-crewless ACAV disabled by a landmine two days earlier.

Weary and depleted, Alpha Company, numbering something less than 100 survivors, was dug into shallow holes scooped out between the armored vehicles. One grunt was supposed to remain awake at each position during darkness, but sleep usually proved irresistible to the infantrymen as long as the reassuring armor was nearby.

Each ACAV crew had placed a shrapnel-projecting claymore mine out front. A thin detonating cord snaked from the mine back to the sentinel's position at the caliber .50 machine gun. Each tank's main gun tube was locked and loaded with a 152-millimeter canister round, which could do to humans what a 12-gauge shotgun does to small birds. Unlike the infantry, most of the cavalry sentinels remained fairly alert, a victory of sorts for personal anxiety over the everlasting fatigue. The explanation for this welcome uptick in discipline was, unlike the peace we often heard about, at hand.

Some weeks before, Alpha Troop had been thrown, without notice, into an earthen fortification north of Tay Ninh City that was garrisoned by the South Vietnamese Army. Our new headquarters had warned us to prepare for an NVA sapper attack on this, the troop's first night in War Zone C. During the moonless night, misty figures crawled in inch by inch, their explosives and assault weapons in tow. The North Vietnamese lost 17 and whatever number of dead and wounded they were able to drag away from the eyeball-to-eyeball struggle. Alpha Troop's casualties required several helicopter evacuations. The South Vietnamese detachment needed none.

2300 Hours, 25 March 1970

By late evening, after the refueling, maintenance and rearming chores that had followed another tense day of jungle reconnaissance, nearly all was still in the diesel fume-permeated air at the night defensive position. On my final circuit of the perimeter, I stepped over Captain Jim Armer's inert Alpha Company infantrymen and tapped on the steel gunshield of one of the ACAVs in the second platoon line.

"Huh, what the ...?" The drowsing crewman supposedly on guard awoke with an irritated start. "Oh, how's business, Captain?" He yawned under heavy eyelids. Not much more than teeth and the dull glint of his machine gun barrel stood out in the dusty moonlight.

"All right," I replied in a tone somewhere between disapproval and hopeful encouragement. "You going to be able to keep your eyes open or do we need to get the next man up?" Although sleeping on guard duty was a serious offense, punishment was without meaning. Jail represented an improvement in lifestyle. As for fines, the threat was humorous in view of the inability to spend military scrip in the jungle. Only habit born of common sense, peer pressure, and the example set by most of the officers and NCOs held the troop together. The purer degrees of leadership were reserved for life and death situations.

"No sir. I'm cool." Smile. "Don't need to wake up nobody else." No man wanted to listen to his buddy complain throughout the next day about double sentry duty. With his eyes now fixed on the wood line where the darkness of the ground merged with the slightly less inky texture of the trees, the guard acted as though he might last awhile.

"OK." I walked on, mumbling meaningless phrases to the other sentries in the

line, most of whom were reasonably alert.

At least twice during the quietest hours of the night we scheduled a “mad minute” during which the command radio operator ordered all vehicles to fire their weapons simultaneously toward the wood line for several seconds. NVA sappers staging a night assault would, thus, be hit on the open ground as they crawled slowly toward our perimeter. This technique had the further advantage of awakening all of the guards. Also, at random intervals during darkness, the mortar section chief fired on pre-selected trail junctions, likely stream crossings, and areas of suspected enemy activity to discourage NVA movement in the vicinity. And to keep the guards awake.

These precautions, together with frequent and erratic movement within our area of operations, had ensured that the troop and its infantry attachment were not attacked at night, a rare achievement in Vietnam and especially in War Zone C. When offensive action was warranted, we set out infantry ambushes and readied a cavalry platoon as a night reaction force. The previous week, an ambush had killed two NVA soldiers who were prowling through a defensive position that Team A had abandoned quickly when mortar fire from across the occasionally neutral Cambodian border chased us away. Another night’s sleep lost, or more accurately, invested.

The arrangements for the evening appeared satisfactory. I headed for the M577 armored administrative vehicle in the center of the perimeter, where the duty radio operator had accumulated the evening’s messages from battalion headquarters. Pushing aside the grease-stiffened canvas flap, I walked into the tent extension attached to the rear of the tall, ungainly track. The sweating radioman, stripped to the waist, was reading a letter from back home in “the world” in the dim light.

“Hi, sir. Nothing special, just the usual stuff. The XO says we got three newbys on the way to replace the medevacs from the mine. Can’t get a new track, though. And headquarters wants to know what the plans are for tomorrow. What’ll I say?”

“I haven’t figured out anything yet. Wait an hour or so until they’ve all hit the rack, then call Flange Control. Tell battalion that we’re going to recon in force near” — we bent over the plastic-coated map with its coded check points that lay on the deck — “charlie papa Kentucky. I’ll probably change that in the morning to something a little tougher, but that’s

OK for now. You got the times for the mad minutes?”

“Sure, right here.” He returned to his letter as I walked back through the canvas entrance to a cot devoid of bedding that had been set up in the less-stifling air outside. I tossed my olive-drab, dirt-grey and exhaust-black fatigue jacket on the ground and my skinny body on the flimsy cot. Sleep was instantaneous as there were no insects for a change.

The sudden explosion was both awful and very, very wrong. Awful in its ear-shattering, breathtaking proximity and wrong in that it was outside the carefully defined tactical arrangements. Yet, somehow, flames shot 30 feet into the sky from the mortar tracks just a few dozen meters away. The glow illuminated the team’s position against the surrounding wood line for the enemy — an unthinkable predicament. Explosion after explosion shook the three mortar tracks, one of which seemed covered with fire. Men screamed in agony. Exhaustion instantly became wide-eyed terror.

Dressed only in fatigue trousers and without boots, I clutched the ever-present .45 and ran toward the mortar vehicles. At the same time, I shouted to the RTO to radio for a casualty evacuation mission.

“Flange Control, Flange Control, this is Writer. At my last reported november delta papa I need an emergency dust off...,” began the calm, well-exercised voice directed at the bank of radios lining the relatively safe walls of the M577.

Oddly, I saw no muzzle flashes from the wood line. Nor were incoming rocket or artillery rounds exploding in the now brightly lighted fields inside and around the troop’s perimeter. If the NVA were not shelling the position — an improbable event given Team A’s frequent relocation — then the disaster must be self-inflicted. But how?

Speech was useless in the growing din as the nearest tracks were waved off the perimeter, away from immediate danger. Their drivers’ heads popped up through the forward hatches, eyes squinting in the unaccustomed glare. Smoke spouted from cold exhausts as the clumsy tracks pulled out. With care, the crews might not run over the confused infantry or the claymores. However, they almost certainly would run down many of the chain-link vehicular screens, designed to entangle incoming rocket-propelled grenades but requiring 20 irritating minutes to erect each evening.

The intensifying heat reached a few of the mortar rounds that crews had pre-

pared for the evening firing program and stacked near the tracks from which they would later be shot. The whistling sound of steel shrapnel added to the blasts of the projectiles exploding inside one of the mortar carriers and the hissing of the burning mortar charges.

From the darkness, a crewman ran skirting the flames, his eyes the merest of slits in the smoke, to the only mortar vehicle that appeared undamaged. He dove through the open rear ramp and, moments later, started the engine with a crankshaft-damaging roar. The track lurched off blindly into the night, the scalding heat preventing the driver from extending his head through the hatch to guide the vehicle and its nearly ignited load of fuel and ammunition. This singular act of heroism saved lives that night and would help to save more within 24 hours.

A quick glance up close at the two remaining mortar vehicles was sufficient to determine the cause of the tragedy. A defective round had exploded inside the mortar aboard one of the tracks as it was being fired, destroying the gun tube and igniting the basic load of fuel and ammunition.

“That tube looks like a damn tulip,” a voice muttered in the flickering orange light. “Jee-sus!”

Not half a minute had elapsed since the initial blast. Now, in the aftermath of the first paralyzing shock, more men began to react to the spreading danger. Many calmly led vehicles or helped their buddies away from the radiating heat of the burning diesel fuel and charges. Some of the wounded slowly dragged themselves farther from the flames, clutching bleeding and burned limbs. Two remained where they had been thrown, immobile and broken. A few men thrashed about a couple of meters from the disintegrating mortar track, alive but almost on fire.

Several of us crouched at the edge of the scorching heat, licking grimy, cracked lips, mesmerized by the flames near the writhing victims. Shrapnel screamed overhead. No one knew at what moment the fuel in the second mortar track might go up or whether the heat might reach a large group of prepped rounds, causing a second devastating explosion.

Certainly it was not patriotism nor any desire to win acclaim, but first one man and then another rose from his place of safety. Some clutched rags and towels to their faces as we, half naked, sprinted across the short stretch of smoldering grass, almost into the fire.

In the brightness where there was no breath lay the sergeant who had been in

charge of the night firing crew. He was a handsome African-American who had requested a transfer from the field a few days before. Denied: the only responsible reaction available to me. A ruthless toss of the dice had deposited most of us here, and reprieve was out of the question until the allotted time was served. The black sergeant had been too proud to take advantage of one of the many dishonorable routes out of the field.

I clumsily groped at him under his armpits, squinting through nearly closed and streaming eyes. It seemed almost easier to see through my glowing eyelids than to open them. I began to drag him back into the now shivering cold night. He felt weightless.

The sergeant opened his eyes and looked into my sweating upside-down face inches from his own as we struggled back through the dirt. "Why did this have to happen to me?" Quietly he whispered, bemused, over and over. "Why to me? Why?"

Ripping my eyes from his bleeding face, I scanned him for serious wounds in that second-nature style that so quickly became routine. There were no visible holes above the waist and his head, though swollen, was still together. Then further down. Oh God! There were no legs. Nor anything between the short stumps where his legs had once been. He died without a whimper as we hunkered down behind a pile of debris with some of the others. The fuel of the second mortar track became a momentary fireball a short time later.

The danger ended for the time being as there was nothing remaining in the immediate area to ignite or that was likely to explode. Those involved in the rescue seemed to have come out whole, more or less. We lay, the injured and the merely singed, tangled together for a few moments in a clump at the end of a converging network of drag marks. Then the medics arrived and each man rose silently to go or to be carried away.

At length, the fires receded and the dust-offs arrived, guided by the diminishing glow in the inky jungle. Our medics hustled the injured through the dirt storms created by the rotors of the hovering aircraft. Then, once again, we were alone. Six casualties, mostly from the mortar section, were evacuated. Only the calm handling of the armored vehicles prevented more. The poncho-covered dead and their recognizable parts were laid beside the shattered hulks of their tracks. For them, there was no haste.

We established a new night defensive position about 100 meters to the southwest in the same dry swamp bed. Like the transitory but real professionals that they were, the cavalry and infantrymen ignored slight injuries and marched away in the fading artificial light, lugging those pieces of gear that lay conveniently at hand. The following morning they would return to salvage all that could be recovered and destroy the remnants so that the enemy could not use them against us.

As the men slumped down to gain what slight rest the night still afforded, there may have been a flicker of envy for those who had been evacuated with readily mendable injuries. Except from their closest friends, there was little pity for the maimed and the dead. The reservoir of this emotion was at a low ebb perpetually in War Zone C.

What the ubiquitous North Vietnamese thought of the turmoil is unknown.

Dawn, 26 March 1970

A few hours later, at first light, I walked through the dry-season dust haze to the site of the tragedy. Soon, senior officers would begin arriving to receive reports on the disaster. It was imperative that the various staffs with some form of jurisdiction — the cavalry squadron and regiment, the infantry battalion and division and others — agreed on the basic facts. Incongruities would lead to questions and doubts. Accusations would follow. Ultimately, company grade officers would be held responsible for the disaster unless they, like their superiors, were agile enough to pass the blame along.

What had gone wrong last night? Had we made some terrible mistake? As I contemplated the shrouded bodies, no real answers came to me, only superficial explanations. "Yes sir, very bad luck indeed. About 0100 hours, a defective round during the evening firing program. Step over here, sir. Notice the splayed tube? Gutted the track and ignited the adjoining vehicle as well. The men responded superbly. The infantry, too. We had no injuries except those directly related to the original explosion of the round. A few citations are on the way. Right, sir. Thank you very much." Piece of cake.

But beyond the official explanations, straightforward though they would be, there was much more to ponder when lives were lost. Why, as the dying mortar section sergeant had asked me, did this have to happen? The men of Alpha Troop were competent, an evaluation supported by our well-maintained weapons and

vehicles, our tactical responsiveness, and our combat record. We rarely committed ignorant mistakes, a fact that our observant enemy surely had come to recognize. But if the real answer for last night's events was not human error, then it must, once again, merely be the randomness of war — our terrifying inability to predict the luck of the draw.

I remembered another day something like this one, a month before and at the opposite end of War Zone C. Late in the afternoon, the Sheridans, working behind three bulldozers equipped with massive steel blades, led us through a thick jungle where visibility was measured in feet. Suddenly, small arms fire erupted from the green wall on the right, splashing on steel gunshields like hail. More rounds immediately began to pour in from the front and left.

Automatically, the machine gunners ripped the oily towels from their weapons and began to blast into the leaves just inches from their muzzles. The lead tanks shouldered their way forward between the dozers, whose operators had abandoned them for the relative safety of the ground. Shotgun-like canister rounds from the tanks began to carve channels into the forest. Twenty-seven unmuffled engines jockeyed for position, their roaring and screeching merging with the painful, eardrum-piercing staccato of the machine guns. The detonations of the tank main guns at close range were nearly unendurable, yet reassuring.

We had slashed into a camouflaged bunker complex like a fist penetrating a nest of hornets. The first and third platoons came on line in the direction of the main complex to the right while the second platoon pushed in the opposite direction to clear a landing zone for the evacuation of the wounded and those yet to be hit. Alpha Company jumped off the decks of the vehicles and clustered at the rear of the armor. For the moment, the grunts could only search for snipers.

There is only one cavalry reaction to any but the most overwhelming ambush: assault. The armored vehicles bulled forward, squirming around trees and old bomb craters, spewing forth a furious stream of fire. Well-trained North Vietnamese regulars answered from fortified underground bunkers that we could not see until too late. Worse, the dreaded rocket-propelled grenades began to explode around us. When an RPG hit a vehicle and penetrated the thin armor, the effect was similar to a pipe bomb thrown into a bathroom. When there was no armor penetration or a detonation in the



A segment of the perimeter in a night defensive position. The vehicles are located in a dry swamp bed that during the rainy season would be unusable. The early evening coordination and maintenance chores are beginning.

trees, the grenade's shrapnel devastated everything within several cubic meters.

Our enemy — always the North Vietnamese regulars and never the less effective Viet Cong — held the tactical advantage in their protected underground positions. They had only to await the troop's advance in our tall, awkward vehicles over ground they knew well. It is true that we had overwhelming firepower, but they usually got the first shot at individual vehicles. Often, the tactical situation devolved into a series of isolated duels between a single bunker and a cavalry crew. Victory went to the side most willing to stand fast and slug it out.

The battle moved forward and we began to uncover bunkers that, almost always, were empty except for equipment abandoned by the NVA as they scurried away through tunnels and trenches. Our drivers steered to and fro over some bunkers, crushing their reinforced roofs, but it was primarily the infantry's task to deal with the revealed fortifications. Crawling about in darkened tunnels, expecting a grenade to roll around the next turn, was a job best left to the grunts.

A-66, the command ACAV, unexpectedly churned up two NVA soldiers from a partially destroyed bunker we had shot up and overpowered. The two lay stunned for the moment, sticking out of the earth a few feet to the rear of our track. I gestured wildly to Jim Armer, the A Company commander kneeling behind us.

"Take 'em alive!" I pointed to our interpreter, a converted NVA regular riding on a track nearby. "Interrogation."

Jim's radioman grabbed his shoulder and pointed him toward A-66. "OK," Jim mouthed back into the racket, nodding widely. "Chui hoi! Chui hoi!" he shouted, using the Vietnamese term for surrender,

as much to his own men as to the enemy. His grunts, already aiming their M-16s at the finally visible enemy, subdued the overwhelming urge to kill. The two NVA in their unfamiliar olive uniforms remained unharmed.

"Six" — my call-sign — "I'm hit! RPGs all over the place!" Bill Nash, the first platoon leader, located two vehicles to the left of A-66, was in big trouble. One RPG had already scored a glancing hit on the aluminum armor surrounding his engine compartment. Fortunately, the rocket missed the crew, but it left a deep network of scars to provide an aiming point for the next round.

The POWs were forgotten instantly. Nash's best chance was that the NVA grenadiers might be distracted by an unexpected attack. Perhaps he could pull back — if his engine still worked. Only the crew of A-66, having overheard Nash's plea on the command frequency, could react in time.

Instinctively, after the briefest of commands, our driver crashed directly into a thick curtain of bamboo several meters out front. As the vegetation flattened, all in one great wave, A-66 rode atop it, stranded and powerless to move farther. And there, squatting in a foxhole under a stunted thorn tree was an RPG grenadier. The point of his weapon was no more than four feet from the left side of our thin-skinned track. All that he need do to destroy us was press the trigger of the launcher resting upon his shoulder. The left machine gun could not be brought to bear despite the maniacal exertions of its gunner.

Yet, randomness prevailed once more. As A-66 accelerated forward, throwing all of us in the fighting compartment askew, I drew my pistol and struggled over to stand at the elbow of the left gunner. As the grenadier aimed his rocket

launcher, trying to decide whether to fire at such suicidally close range, I leaned over the side of our track and, staring directly into his face, squeezed the trigger of the .45. And again. The rounds slashed into his naked chest. His eyes rounded and his mouth opened, the scream lost in the pandemonium. The launcher fell to the ground. He crawled only a few feet.

Just then, an exploding hand grenade threw fragments and dirt directly against the rear of A-66, and rifle fire began to ricochet from our steel fittings and pit the aluminum plate. A sudden firefight had developed between the grunts following us and the NVA inside the partly crushed but still defiant bunker we had left in our rear. Perhaps A-66 had collapsed the escape tunnel leading from the bunker and the North Vietnamese had returned to fight it out.

The grunts snaked their way up, finished off our two intelligence sources without hesitation and rolled grenades into the apertures of the buried fortification. Sub-surface blasts lifted inches into the air the infantry lying on their stomachs nearest the bunker. Other grunts trotted up to our rear ramp and began to pepper the brush forward of A-66, while the nearest vehicles lumbered ahead and arranged themselves on our flanks. Nash and his scarred track bounced back, as if expelled from the grasping wall of vegetation.

Very soon, almost abruptly, the enemy fire died out and the field was ours.

After the battle, a crewman examined the captured RPG launcher. Later, he casually remarked that the firing pin had pitted the percussion device but failed to ignite the rocket. None dared ask whether he was serious. Randomness: A faulty rocket, the hand grenade that missed A-66, a defective mortar round last night. Was it all so capricious?

There was no answer to this question, no reassurance, only each man's very private accommodation to the cruel facts of survival. For some, apathy. For others, escape into drugs or resistance to the system. But for most of the survivors in Alpha Troop, the response was a quiet, abiding sense of confidence in them-



At left, an Alpha Troop platoon in a tight daytime defensive position, while on patrol in War Zone C. Above, the result of enemy fire that ignited the basic load of fuel and ammo on a Sheridan tank.

selves and their fellow crewmen. Together with a driving need to strive against the luck of the draw.

My memory of that battle a month earlier ended abruptly when a radio telephone operator shouted from the edge of the new perimeter 100 meters away. "Hey, Six! Headquarters on the horn. They're on the way."

Walking through the sluggishly stirring encampment, I decided that it would be a good idea to plan a quiet day and give the men a break. As March is the height of the dry season, the best time of the year for operations, we could make up the lost day later. Maybe just a light recon for now.

How very wrong I was. Again.

1200 Hours, 26 March 1970

The official processions had come and gone without much comment. Lieutenant Colonel Conrad, the thin, sunburned commander of the 2nd of the 8th, was the most understanding, as expected. Jim Armer and I sent the cavalry platoons out at mid-morning on simple close-in missions designed to allow the platoon leaders maximum flexibility in not noticing that their crews and the attached infantry were napping. The three combined-arms platoons were aimed in separate directions with instructions to lightly search areas that we knew were devoid of recent enemy activity.

After their departure, however, ugly things began to happen. The sounds of a serious battle erupted nearby, and each of us knew at once that someone was in trouble. The men of the first and third platoons could hear only the flat report of the 500-pound bombs, perhaps five kilometers away. But the cavalry and infantrymen of the second, most northerly platoon could distinguish M-16 rifle fire from the shriller tone of the enemy's AK-47s. The unit engaged, we soon learned,

was Charlie Company, from the same battalion as Jim Armer's Alpha Company. Worse, Charlie Company had ridden with us and made friends for weeks until the time of Alpha Company's assignment to Team A.

During the mid-morning hours, M-16 rifle fire dominated the contact. But as noon approached, it became clear to 1LT Mike Healey and his second platoon of cavalry that the North Vietnamese had gained the advantage. After 1100 hours, each pause in the American firing and aerial bombardment was shattered by enemy weapons, apparently well supplied.

Our monitoring of local radio traffic revealed that Charlie Company was up against a reinforced battalion of the elite 272nd North Vietnamese Regiment. The enemy troops seemed to be leaving their protected bunkers and encircling the grunts as responses from the Americans became weaker. There were hard-to-believe reports of North Vietnamese firing on low-flying American choppers from the upper branches of trees.

The constellation of helicopters overhead had acknowledged appeals for ground assistance from the infantry company commander, CPT George Hobson, but the requests were, so far, unfulfilled. Pinned down and vastly outnumbered, the Americans could not break out to a landing zone even if there had been a cleared area nearby. Neither, due to the lack of adjacent LZs, could infantry reinforcements move in to provide relief in time. Charlie Company's ammunition was already low and declining, and the NVA were so close that chopper kick-outs would resupply the wrong guys. Fixed-wing air strikes and helicopter gunships only delayed the inevitable.

"Writer Six, this is Writer Two-Six." Two-Six, Mike Healey, was the most experienced lieutenant in the unit following the recent transfer of 1LT Nash.

"What's going on now?" I stepped into the M577 and took the hand mike from Seege, the chief radio telephone operator. He sauntered out to open a couple of cokes for us.

"Two-Six, this is Six," I responded. "The grunts are still taking a pasting to the north, at the stream junction. They've got plenty of casualties now and can't move out. It looks bad."

"This is Two-Six, roger. Has Flange Two-Nine" — LTC Conrad's radio call sign — "said anything about us?"

"Nope. We'll probably contact him soon. What are you doing?" I could picture Mike, bony and almost delicate in appearance, lounging atop his ACAV behind the track commander's cupola, relaying comments to his crew and platoon. In a land without television, gossip and speculation were the common forms of entertainment, and nothing was quite as interesting as someone else's firefight.

"This is Two-Six. My current location, from Charlie papa Kentucky, down one point two, left zero point nine. The grunts're cloverleafing and we've got a couple of bunkers, nothing fresh. I'm still paralleling that old trail to the north. Over." Mike was near to but not on the enemy trail. The troop never moved over previously used ground that could have been mined or strewn with booby traps.

"Six, roger, out. One-Six and Three-Six" — the call signs of the other two A Troop platoons — "did you monitor?"

"This is One-Six, affirmative. Same location as my last. Grunts are still checking the area out. No sign of any dinks here." The acting first platoon leader was Platoon Sergeant Willie McNew, a veteran of more than 20 years. Willie, perpetually pink and balding, did not belong in the field at his age, but the troop leadership was depleted, and there was no alternative. He was an NCO of the old school, respectful of immature officers'

clumsy attempts to exercise authority, always helpful.

"Ahh, Six, this is Three-Six, ah, wait a minute." Long pause. "OK, I'm located from check point Nevada up one point four, right one point two. Over?" 1LT Bob Henderson of the third platoon was a newby and, except for a brief action about a week before, had never seen a firefight. Ideally, Bob should have been combined with Willie so that he could not endanger himself and his platoon while he learned. Perhaps he might pick up a few things before...

"Six, out."

Inside the M577, the temperature was a humid 100 degrees or more, and the tiny, erratic fan did little to alleviate the discomfort. Most of us at the command post would have preferred to be out with the platoons where it was cooler and less monotonous under the jungle canopy. That was especially true today, when the mission involved minimal danger. Out there, the principal concern would be falling trees and branches, which produced only a couple of minor injuries each week.

Our war was an exercise in boredom, relieved by abrupt intervals of terror and pain. Only time-consuming attention to detail and competently applied experience minimized the costs of combat. Under conditions as unpleasant as these, it would have been reasonable to expect soldiers to seize any pretext to leave the field. In Vietnam, many pretexts were available.

We usually sent a troublemaker or someone with a real or imagined psychological disability back to headquarters. Hard drugs and grass, although uncommon in my experience with the 1st Squadron, could be purchased everywhere in the rear areas and were a constant temptation. Failure to take the troublesome anti-malaria pills or the consumption of unchlorinated drinking water often produced illnesses that required treatment at a field hospital. And in most troops, when a vehicle malfunctioned through negligence or exhaustion, the practice was to send some or all of the crew from the field during its repair.

Thus, those who desired could get out if they were willing to pay the usually moderate price. Yet few did. The men thrashing through the jungle that day had freely elected to remain at their assigned stations. They chose to "do their jobs," as it was phrased, without using drugs in the field or taking their anger out on civilians — on the rare occasions that they saw any.

Grabbing my coke, hot by now, from Seege, I walked down the M577's ramp and slumped into a canvas chair in the tent extension attached to the vehicle's rear. The tent cover was invaluable in the miserable five-month rainy season. Its value in the equally miserable seven-month dry season was questionable. A couple of field mechanics and mortar crewmen stood around outside, trying to decide whether a delicious meal of C rations and dust was worth the effort.

"Flange Two-Nine, this is Racer Two-Nine." George Hobson came up on the battalion net again. I'm getting down toward the last of my smoke grenades and a few magazines per man. Over."

"This is Flange Two-Nine, roger. We've got some more air for you now, so get ready to mark your position." Flange Two-Nine, LTC Conrad, sounded reassuring as he continued to do all he could, but those grouped around the radios in the M577 had listened to the traffic on the command frequencies for much of the morning. Charlie Company had about eight hours left until darkness. Charlie Company had about eight hours left.

Racer Two-Nine's voice, cracking under the strain of a four-hour firefight against severe odds, betrayed the despondency of a man who had exhausted his limited options and was merely awaiting the final outcome to be thrust upon him. Lying on his back with a painful face wound amid the bullet and shrapnel-scarred trees, George stared into the unclouded sky at the aircraft circling symmetrically overhead. He could read a map and he now knew the size of the enemy force. It had to be clear to him that he faced the North Vietnamese, not the Viet Cong, and that they would not run away from the bombs and the gunships.

"Well, what are we going to do? It's about four and a half clicks, maybe five from us to George." Jim Armer laid his plastic-coated sectional map on a five-gallon water can next to his chair in the tent extension and smiled. We were now face to face with the subject that had brought our never robust pace of conversation to a near standstill for the past hour. Except for the busy radios, there was silence under the canvas. Outside, an engine fired up, probably to heat a few cans of C rations.

"Four hours for the whole trip, maybe more," our new and still overweight First Sergeant ventured. The shrinkage of waistlines was directly proportional to the number of weeks in the jungle. "The busting looks pretty bad, but at least there

aren't any big streams between Charlie Company and us. It'll mean a night operation coming back and the men are just about shot after last night."

The sergeant in charge of the landmine-damaged ACAV marooned inside our perimeter, with many more months in country than our First Sergeant, was obviously preparing to unburden himself. At least our small part of South Vietnam was free, admission to the M577 was not restricted and everyone was entitled to an opinion. "There's a good chance of an ambush on the way with all them dinks around here. Do you want to volunteer, sir?" He spat as he laid down the challenge.

"No." Jim recoiled from the TC's question, which had but one sensible response in Vietnam. "But if I was with those guys, I'd sure want somebody to get me out." Since his men rode where we drove, Jim's planning inputs tended to be suggestive rather than determinative. The company commander of our infantry detachment sat patiently next to his map, a sturdy young man in a sweaty olive undershirt, glasses and slowly corroding steel dog tags.

I worked through the logic yet again. It was unlikely that the infantry-oriented senior officers overhead imagined that Alpha Troop could traverse the impossible forest terrain to Charlie Company in time to be effective. On the other hand, someone in the command structure might decide later in the afternoon that it was necessary to try, resulting in an unduly perilous night mission for the troop. And, of course, the resourceful LTC Conrad might have a last-ditch plan that employed Team A reasonably. But would it not be best to stand up right now and carry out this unsought task our way?

The rawest newby sitting around listening to the intermittent conversation could tell that to be involved at all probably would cost lives, perhaps his own. It was not entirely paranoiac to suspect that the NVA considered the troublesome Team A to be the real objective and was setting us up. Still, there were almost 100 Americans trapped and already dying up there. The sweat ran freely.

After some moments, the right answer, the only answer, could no longer be avoided. "Seege," I sighed.

"Sir?" The Chief RTO sat as if he expected to be slapped but was resigned to the blow.

"Call Flange Control and tell Conrad that Team A is prepared to react."



“Roger. What else?” There had to be more, of course. It was never so straightforward.

“Tell One-Six and Three-Six to pick up their grunts and move back here ASAP. Two-Six is to continue busting a trail north. Don’t say north, just tell him to continue as rapidly as possible in his current direction after picking up his people.” Mike would know we were joining him when we arrived, and we did not need to inform the North Vietnamese monitoring our frequencies. The men under the canvas, their tension now dispelled by the immediacy of action, scattered into the sun to prepare their vehicles and collect their gear. Team A would start upon its mission before LTC Conrad ordered us to move. Jim smiled for the last time that day, relishing our macabre little game of military one-upmanship.

1330 Hours, 26 March 1970

Within 15 minutes, the first and third platoons had returned to the night defensive position and had married up with the command section, consisting of A-66 and the medic and artillery forward observers’ ACAVs. As soon as the expected instructions arrived from a preoccupied LTC Conrad, we were on the move north to join the still-rolling second platoon. At the night defensive position, only the M577 with Seege’s radiomen, the de-

pleted mortar section, the recovery vehicle, and one disabled track remained. We left two squads of infantry for their protection, but we took the crewmen from the inoperative ACAV to fill vacancies in their platoon. Thus, the first big risk of the mission was a dangerously thin night defensive position that hadn’t been moved in two days. No choice.

Closing on the second platoon, the troop quickly reorganized into jungle reconnaissance array and pushed toward the encircled Charlie Company. Each cavalry troop had its own set of formations designed to deal with particular tactical situations. In thick brush and forest, we reconned in three columns. The left and right columns each consisted of one platoon with the platoon leader’s ACAV immediately behind his lead tank and the balance of the unit following at five-meter intervals. The last platoon squared off the rear of the formation and was usually deployed as the maneuver element in small engagements. The center column contained the troop headquarters, led by a Sheridan tank from one of the line platoons with A-66 second. Positioning the troop and platoon command tracks so far forward was illogical but unavoidable because the American soldier is willing to be led but is reluctant to be directed.

As we snaked through the multi-canopied jungle, more than 200 cavalry

and infantrymen perched atop 27 metal boxes, each man keenly aware of the inevitability of battle and of the possibility that an ambush could erupt at any moment. For these men, unlike their horse cavalry antecedents, there was no heart-pounding charge across an open field in an all-or-nothing gamble. In Vietnam, victory went not to the bold but to those who best withstood the tension and committed the fewest mistakes. We were opposed by masters in the art of patience, whom we had to seek out on their terms and on their own ground. Every advantage of temperament and terrain was theirs.

Among American soldiers, the crew of A-66 was fairly typical. Topper, the left machine gunner, had an open, trusting face and a thick shock of hair barely concealed under his helmet. He was a fairly recent replacement and too green to brood over dangers that he could visualize only dimly. His buddy on the right M-60, also being broken in, was similarly naive. Both would soon be more wary.

On the other hand, our driver, Marty, was well seasoned but so steady under fire that it was clear to me he did not fully appreciate the seriousness of his situation. During one battle, he had been observed reading an issue of the limp pornography included in the publications shipped to the troops in the field. He seemed undis-



tracted by the heavy caliber .50 machine gun pumping away just over his head and the M-60 working over his left shoulder. About one inch of aluminum plate separated him from incoming frontal fire, and a layer of sandbags below his seat provided some protection from landmines.

Sergeant Dennis Jaybusch, the track commander, was a tall, gangly fellow with a light blond mustache and all the grace of an adolescent giraffe. When handling the radio, his soft, conscientious voice reliably backed me up on the invisible network that was our sole lifeline to the world. However, it was becoming obvious that Dennis was just about through. He'd been exposed in his cupola behind the caliber .50 for too long and now merely plodded through the remaining few weeks before his rotation date.

Peering intently into the thick underbrush, the closely packed infantry and armored crewmen on A-66 and the other tracks attempted to spot the camouflaged enemy before they heard the incoming. The lead tanks, always working with a 152-millimeter canister round in the chamber in hopes of an early shot, squirmed around large trees and smashed smaller ones as the underbrush flattened into a path. The loaders on the jungle-busting Sheridans had the difficult and dangerous assignment of riding outside on the rear decks to brush fallen branches

and debris away from the engine air intakes.

Each vehicle followed in the path of its predecessor to avoid detonating randomly placed mines. Sweat soaked into bulky flak jackets and caused ink to run on forgotten letters in dirty pockets. The humidity was so high under the foliage that it was almost possible to watch rust form on the well-oiled machine guns.

For the first hour, the troop made exceptionally good progress, covering perhaps 100 meters of the dense forest every five minutes. At this rate, however, the lead Sheridans overheated, their power plants too light for the brutal work of busting jungle. We rotated the leads every 30 minutes as the retiring tank crews pulled over to the side of the route, swung their turrets off center and removed radiator caps. Careful handling prevented anyone from being scalded by the resulting geysers of steam.

Crashing forward, we wrenched a path from the unwilling jungle with about as much stealth as a parade down Main Street. But not a single vehicle threw a track from the road wheels despite the logs, stumps, and eroding bomb craters that we traversed. Not one engine, drive, or mechanical system malfunctioned from misuse or poor maintenance. Had a single vehicle gone down, an infantry

platoon would have had to remain with it until the repair was completed or the vehicle was dragged back to the night defensive position. In a jungle where enemy battalions roamed about, this was an unthinkable risk.

As the troop progressed, the gravity of the mission penetrated deeply into the consciousness of those crewmen who had not gathered around the M577's radios during the morning. Within the first hour of the march, as details spread among the last to be informed, gunners loosened the protective towels around the operating mechanisms of their weapons. Crews removed a few of the more accessible ammunition cans from stowage on the floors of the ACAVs and spaced them about on upper decks, mainly to place them within easy reach but also in a very human attempt to pile bulk between the crew and incoming fire.

Crews took extra machine guns from internal racks and placed them in convenient positions atop the ACAVs: No M-60 gunner was ever seen trying to replace an overheated barrel or damaged firing mechanism during a firefight. Men passed around pistols and rifles, even though no one favored hand weapons over the heavy machine guns. In battle, there is a perverse satisfaction in the feel and sound of the large automatic weapons. It is almost as if the enemy can be frightened away by the noise alone. Almost.

Over the radio, George again reported that his ammunition and pyrotechnics were nearly exhausted. When the last of Charlie Company's smoke grenades was expended, the forward air controller overhead would have to place air strikes from memory in the failing light. The artillery would be directed by LTC Conrad or his S3, MAJ Charles Blanchard, in the same risky manner. At that point, the danger to the infantry increased astronomically, but the alternative was a stand-up ground assault by the unharried enemy. With compasses and melting

grease pencils, the more experienced of the platoon leaders and I bent over our map cases. Jim Armer talked nonstop on his PRC-25 on the rolling rear deck of A-66. The hours passed.

Driving hard, A-18 in the rear of the first platoon column began to pour more than its usual volume of smoke from the engine compartment. This was our tiredest Sheridan and the overheated insulation appeared to be burning from its wiring harness. The tank's crew kept it plugging along through the unorthodox, yet seemingly effective, technique of dumping five-gallon cans of water directly into the engine compartment. A-18 finally got an opportunity to cool off when we penetrated an old B-52 bomb strike area and the drivers slowed down to thread a path through the closely spaced craters.

"Writer Two-Nine, this is Racer Two-Nine, I've saved one smoke. We'll pop it when we've got you in sight." For the first moment since the early morning, George's voice echoed a tentative note of hope. The sounds of Team A's splintering trees and racing engines must have penetrated the remaining distance to his position — and to the North Vietnamese lines as well.

"This is Writer Two-Nine, roger, out." No reason to disguise our intentions now.

"Flange Two-Nine, this is Writer Two-Nine. I'm putting out smoke on my point. Can you give me a spot relative to Racer?" The exact angle of our approach was critical as we had to arrive at Charlie Company's southeast flank, the vicinity of lightest reported contact. But, even if our navigation had created no tactical problems, the NVA commander might attempt to generate one for us by inserting a few squads between the American units during the approach. A spontaneous firefight could result in the lead tanks wiping out the exposed Charlie Company as well as the NVA.

"This is Flange Two-Nine, roger, wait. I'll come around and take a look." LTC Conrad's tone against the background of whirling helicopter rotors expressed no satisfaction, as was entirely appropriate, with Team A's timely arrival.

"This is Flange Two-Nine, identify green. Make a half turn to your left, Writer, and come around to a heading of three-one-zero. You've got about 200 meters to go. I'll put a little air on in the next few minutes."

"Thanks, Two-Nine. Out." Now, for the three platoons. "One-Six, Two-Six, Three-Six, this is Six. Elevate all weapons until we find the grunts. Nothing

heavier than an M-16. Do not fire directly forward under any circumstances. That's where the grunts are. Acknowledge!" If a trap had been prepared it would be sprung now, when we might be entering a minefield surrounding the enemy base. One of our most fundamental strengths, maneuver, was restricted and our flanks exposed as the drivers cautiously picked a path through the craters marking another chewed-up B-52 strike area.

The officers stowed their maps and compasses and everyone cinched their flak jackets tighter. Crews crouched behind steel gunshields, fingering the trigger guards of their puny-feeling rifles. The infantry lay as flat as their bulky equipment allowed on the exposed rear decks of the ACAVs, eager to jump overboard and bury themselves in the inviting bomb craters at the first shot.

Tension transformed into noticeable anxiety. Eyes refused to remain fixed for more than a moment. Anyone with even the most trivial task immersed himself in it. Hands not clutching a weapon were busy at nothing. Soft drinks appeared from the intestines of the tracks and were poured lukewarm down tightened throats. Quickly emptied cans bounced over the side, marking, as always, our progress across the face of South Vietnam.

Yet incomprehensively, there was no fire from the brush rimming the far side of the bombed-out area. Had the air strikes masked our arrival? Had the NVA radio operator who was assigned to monitor our traffic been injured or misunderstood our intention? Was the ambush in the wrong place or had the NVA commander simply made a mistake? Randomness, again.

Suddenly a spluttering smoke grenade arced out of a clump of brush ahead. "Racer Two-Nine, this is Writer, identify yellow."

"Racer Two-Nine, affirmative, affirmative!" George was elated.

Reentering the sheltering vegetation on the far side of the forgotten air strike, the lead moved only a few meters before Three-Six came up on the horn. "Ah, Six, looks like we've got some of our guys out front here. They're beat up all right."

The men of Charlie Company huddled apathetically behind scarred trees and in depressions scooped out under the brush. Few stood as the troop crashed through their position, forcing our drivers to move carefully to avoid running over survivors. The dead were a group of partly covered forms in the midst of a larger pool of wounded grunts.

Breaking from the reconnaissance formation, the medic track pulled up to the shore of the casualty collection area. After jockeying around to point their frontal armor toward the enemy, the medics dropped the rear ramp into the stained brush. Spec. Four Felthager and his two assistants went to work, using the medical supplies in their ACAV to supplement the meager resources of Charlie Company. Urgent wounds had to be handled immediately because there would be more from Team A soon.

Jim and I unhooked ourselves from our communications gear and jumped the six feet to the ground as George dragged himself over to A-66. While the troop was waved past the infantry command post in three columns, George briefed us from behind his lopsided face.

"Very strong, at least a battalion here. Lots of RPGs. Very well-controlled. Sure glad to see you guys," he said between bloated lips. His bandoleers and harness hung down empty of ammunition and grenades. "The main part of the complex is just north of my position here. But it's in a semicircle shape, and we walked right into the hollow part this morning. Never had a chance. Head-on and flank fire is bad, especially from the west. Lightest where you came in. Only about half the company is still effective. Whatever you do," he squinted at the lines of armor and infantry moving through as his walking wounded straggled in, "don't waste too much time on the dinks. My guys need help bad."

At this late hour, saddled with the Charlie Company injured, we could follow only one course of action: an assault directly into the center of the enemy bunker complex. There was no daylight remaining for a careful probe around the exterior of the enemy configuration for the weak element. No time to execute an attack on more than one axis and, without our sister units from the 1st Squadron, no opportunity to envelop the NVA battalion and eradicate it entirely. Just a brutal, unoriginal shot straight ahead, which the enemy commander would expect. And we probably were outnumbered two to one.

If the North Vietnamese were subdued quickly, I intended to release one of the platoons to bust a landing zone nearby and evacuate the wounded. Were this to be accomplished, LTC Conrad probably would use the same LZ to insert a couple of infantry companies with instructions to try to surround the enemy position, thereby leading to an all-night action. Speed was essential.

1630 Hours, 26 March 1970

Behind the hundreds of tons of metal, ammunition, fuel, and flesh that was the troop assault line, the spent men of Charlie Company slumped down to secure the casualty collection point. Alpha Company gladly dismounted to assume its customary position behind the tracks. The grunts and the tightly spaced vehicles faced north toward the Cambodian border a few kilometers ahead. The well-led first platoon occupied the dangerous left flank facing the greatest concentration of enemy activity. The less experienced third platoon leader held the center of the line with A-66 in close proximity to his right. The second platoon extended eastward through the least threatening terrain all the way to the bomb strike zone. A-18, now unquenchably smoking, was abandoned in the rear of the first platoon, a crippling loss.

Blue max gunships ineffectually expended their loads on east to west sweeps just forward of the troop line as we prepared for the battle about to be joined. The principal value of the tactical air was to distract the NVA and to keep their heads down within the bunkers. Only rarely did the helicopter ordinance destroy the carefully constructed underground fortifications. Occasionally, when rockets detonated in the trees, they caused friendly casualties.

Up and down the line sounded the sharp clatter of men jacking back their caliber .50s and rearranging ammunition cans. Here and there, a final soft drink passed around and the container, as usual, wound up overboard. The grunts dropped their excess equipment into the weeds, scattered out while adjusting their bulging ammunition bandoleers and, pockets stuffed with grenades, waited silently.

All was still.

“Commence Fire!”

Twenty-five caliber .50 machine guns, 40 M-60s and five main tank guns blasted into action. The vegetation began to disintegrate and a few nearby bunkers became visible. The more skilled gunners began to work their rounds from two or three feet in front of the forward slope of their tracks out to almost horizontal deflection and then back in close. From bitter experience, they knew the fatal damage that could be done by an enemy rifleman lying in a concealed hole only a few feet away. The sharp rattle of the automatic weapons felt like ice picks on our eardrums and the concussions from the tanks' main guns a few feet away threatened to tear the smoky skin from our faces.

After bolstering our courage through the full demonstration of the troop's firepower, we began our advance. Twenty-five tracks in a long single line pressed forward into the unknown, firing at will into a jungle that yielded its secrets so grudgingly. After the first ten meters, the volume of fire picked up again. Excessively. The gunners were expending too high a share of their basic load in the early stages of the fight. A disastrous shortage of ammunition inevitably would ensue!

“Cease fire! Cease fire, let's see what's going on,” I radioed urgently. “Acknowledge!” The hallmark of a disciplined unit is its fire control, and we usually had been able to stop shooting within a few moments of the command. Today, however, nervousness must have been especially widespread as the rate of fire slackened only slightly. After perhaps five seconds, without warning, a long burst of AK-47 fire walked up the tank turret of A-27 and glanced off its gunshield.

The line re-erupted into a wall of flame and smoke. It was now obvious that the troop's rate of fire reduction had been paced by a corresponding increase in incoming. Staff Sergeant Pasquel “Gus” Gutierrez, the track commander of A-27, knew that crouching down for protection from the enemy fire would increase the likelihood that more would follow. Instead, he grabbed the TC's override and violently traversed his turret to the left. As soon as he judged the gun tube to be more or less correctly oriented, he let loose with the main gun and cleared a considerable swath of jungle. While his loader slammed another round into the breech and 27's gunner fired an M-16 from the left hatch, Gus lobbed grenades out front. Swinging around to the right, he blew away more brush, clearing a bunker roof near A-66.

“One-Six, Two-Six, Three-Six, casualty reports, over!” Short delay.

The radio hummed as the first platoon leader shoved the transmission switch on his CVC helmet forward. “I've got two hurt on one-two. They're on their way over to the medics. The grunts're carrying 'em.” McNew was already taking a beating on the left. Another static punctuated delay.

“This is Two-Six, only one man lightly hurt.” Gutierrez had performed. Long delay.

“Three-Six. Seems to be two hurt for sure and, I believe, one KIA.”

On and on, a meter at a time, the platoon leaders urged their men forward, always

struggling to remain as nearly on line as possible so as to afford all vehicles an unrestricted field of fire. Rolling over logs and around craters and trees, we advanced another five, ten, twenty meters. But, recognizing the increasing momentum of the attack, the NVA fought back with courage and determination. The RPGs began to hit with telling force on vehicles and in the trees.

In order to aim, however, the enemy soldiers had to expose at least their heads and shoulders, and we exacted our price. Nonetheless, by 1800, with about an hour of full daylight remaining, the situation had become grim. We had made too little forward progress through the thick jungle to consider establishing a night defensive position and clearing an LZ. The Charlie Company casualties were still suffering, and the medics reported that we had incurred many new ones. The race to darkness continued with little time remaining to break the numerous, entrenched enemy or to begin the journey home.

“Six, this is One-Six. I'm taking heavy fire from the left! What do you want me to do?” McNew was excited, a rare event.

“This is Six. Orient your outside ACAV to the left. Keep stringing them out as we move up. Let me know when you're down to your last track. Over.”

“Wilco. That won't be very long! Out.” Willie's report meant that we were flanked on the left and, although the echelon formation he was assuming should protect him in the short run, the distance that the troop could advance was now mathematically fixed. The hornet's nest had begun to close about our wrist as our fist thrust towards its center.

“Writer, this is Racer Two-Nine. By the way, we've had dinks behind us for some time. Don't stop, we can hold.” The NVA commander had apparently launched a counter stroke aimed at the casualty collection point, our weakest link. Even if George could hold them back — and he must or we would have to break off our attack — the trap was closed and we were surrounded.

Jim Armer picked his way through the tangled undergrowth to A-66 on line. As he clumsily stumbled forward, encumbered by his bulging ammunition pouches and assorted grenades, canteens, pistol and first aid kit, he didn't exactly resemble John Wayne on the silver screen. Severed by a stray rifle round, a branch dropped from the trees overhead and settled gracefully near him as he clambered onto the rear of our track.

“The RPGs are playing hell with us! I've got eight hurt now,” he shouted di-

rectly into my ear under the CVC helmet. "I'm moving up tighter behind the tracks." His face had miniature channels on each side of his nose where the sweat had worked away at the grime on the way to his chin. Like everyone else, his eyes were pink from the choking smoke and the exhausts.

"OK. How's it look?" I shouted back at him as he stood on one of the fender projections extending from the rear of the ACAV.

"No sweat" — the all purpose response. What an incongruity, I thought, as I admired his aplomb. "Most of their stuff is high now. We're hurting 'em bad." Jim lowered himself carefully to the ground and waddled back toward his men to reposition them and to direct their fire.

Meter by meter, the advance continued. Some of the weapons in the vehicles were silent now, their gunners dragged away through the brush and debris to the toiling medics. Occasionally, one of the infantrymen crawled up through the clutter of the battlefield to an ACAV and manned an idle machine gun, an heroic act for an untrained grunt.

Fifty meters now, and as the all-too-few minutes until darkness melted away, the enemy fire showed no sign of slackening. The NVA were proving to be just as efficient as we in recycling patched-up but still functional soldiers to replace the newly wounded on the line. Or else, unlike us, the enemy commander controlled tactically unlimited reserves that he could throw into the fire-storm.

Our gunners on A-66 seemed to take their first large-scale firefight in stride, especially Topper, who bent over his M-60 and fired skillfully into the more suspicious of the surrounding brush. Not yet 20 years old, he was, by now, almost certainly a killer of men. We had consumed most of the upper layer of the two levels of ammunition carefully arranged on the floor of A-66, and our path was littered with empty olive ammo cans and brass cartridge cases. One M-60 had been replaced, and Dennis had expended a pint of lubricating oil, pouring it directly on the almost glowing caliber .50 barrel. His adam's apple worked up and down furiously as he screamed for another can of .50 to be passed up. Gunners, even mature track commanders like Dennis, and especially those approaching their rotation date, rarely felt secure unless the thumb-activated trigger was depressed.

Inevitably, some leaders were more forceful than others. On this courageous day, whenever there was a momentary lag in the advance, Sergeant First Class

Robert Foreman thrust his Sheridan tank forward. Each time his platoon loyally followed. Again and again, SFC Foreman, our most senior African-American NCO, led the way when it seemed that further progress was blocked. Each effort required that his crew expose the thinner side armor of their tank to head-on fire. And then defend their exposed position until the lighter tracks, including A-66 on his immediate right, could pick routes forward to cover his flanks.

Regardless of the exertions of Foreman and others, however, it was becoming obvious that there were just too many North Vietnamese and not enough of us. I reached for the radio frequency control-box lying loose just behind the caliber .50 cupola and switched over to the battalion command net to discuss a situation which was now almost hopeless and growing costly beyond reason. Just as my mouth opened, a sense-destroying explosion enveloped me and I was hurled unconscious to the ammo and weapon strewn floor of the ACAV.

Utter blackness, deep and comforting. Sometime later, shades of grey and hazy images but no sound beyond the ever-present ringing of my ears. How long I lay there I don't know, but at last and very grudgingly, I began to function at some threshold level of awareness.

My first incoherent thought was that SFC Foreman, just to our left, had traversed his turret too far and blown us away. Nonsense. Then my eyes began to focus and I saw a pile of expended cartridge cases where my nose ended on the ACAV's floor. With a bit more reluctant concentration, Topper's fatigue sleeve came into range where it peeled away from his crimson arm. Straining to rotate my eyes, I slowly brought into focus the right gunner, peering out from his lacerated face.

I apprehensively flexed each limb of my body in sequence, much like switching on lights room by room. All of me turned on except for my left forearm. This seemed more than reasonable since my hand was a mess. My neck throbbed like a bass drum when I attempted to turn it, and blood dripped on my flak jacket from somewhere. Dennis was nowhere to be seen.

Struggling to stand, Topper began to yell, not particularly noisily but with conviction. He hoisted himself out of the fighting compartment onto the rear deck, rolled over and fell into the brush with a thud. Holding his dangling arm to his side, he ran in a limping but resolute manner toward the medics.

The right gunner rallied, grasped his M-60 and began to fire furiously, although it was unlikely that he could see much from behind his sliced up face. After a few rounds, he shot away one of the radio aerials, shrugged and followed Topper to the rear. Dennis was still among the missing. The invincible A-66 was, like me, a helpless spectator.

Smoke curling out of the turret and a scarred gunshield on SFC Foreman's Sheridan explained our helpless condition. An RPG had landed squarely in the center of his machine gun's shield, punching a hole through it and exploding his upper body. A very brave man, operating in a racially ambivalent time and place, had repeatedly risked his life on our behalf and, finally, had lost.

The rocket that had disintegrated Foreman and immobilized A-66 also had knocked out the ACAV on his far side and had sprayed shrapnel among the grunts nearby. With three tracks and the adjacent infantry silent, the center of the line was in grave jeopardy. Soon the alert enemy would pour fire through the gaping hole created by the unfortunate rocket. The incoming would fall not only upon our vehicles, but upon the unprotected infantry, the injured Charlie Company and the casualty collection point directly behind us.

These images drifted listlessly through my mind to merge with some immensely distant recollection of duty and personal obligation to the men. There was no seasoned second-in-command among the cavalry platoon leaders who would be able to handle three company-sized units in a desperate battle. The two infantry captains on the field knew little about armor, and the senior officers circling overhead could do nothing for us on the ground.

Senselessly ignoring the still functional M-60s, I stood up to full height near the left gunshield, groggily drew my dependable .45 and aimed the ineffectual pistol at the area from which the RPG had come. I squeezed off one round into the green fog, and then another and another. The shots filled the dead space, their effect unknown. Yet, for the moment, no more rockets shattered the pistol punctuated silence. The magazine emptied. I stood, awaiting the inevitable.

Jim Armer, comprehending our desperate situation, unexpectedly ran from his position in the underbrush to Sergeant Foreman's tank. He struggled onto its rear deck and leaned over the turret, grasped the bloody caliber .50 machine gun handles and began hosing down the

jungle. Jim had fired only a few rounds when Dennis' head bobbed up unsteadily within his cupola. He blinked his bulging eyes, pointed to his neck and asked wordlessly in the reviving din what was wrong. With blood leaking from the back of his neck he didn't look too fit, but my dreamy smile reassured him and he leaned into the .50. Now two machine guns clattered.

Jim soon ran out of ammunition in the tray or jammed his weapon. Knowing how to solve neither problem, he fired several magazines from his rifle and then jumped down from the tank. He probably moved some of his grunts up to replace the newly wounded and reestablish a base of friendly fire in the center of the line. By this time Dennis and I, mostly by instinct, had the guns in our track going and the ACAV on the other side of Foreman's Sheridan got back in the fight. A-66's bandaged gunners returned a little later and relieved us of our frantic, three armed exertions. Gutierrez cleared the area in contention with his main gun.

It seemed almost as though the attack on SFC Foreman had been the tactical climax. An unaccustomed silence began to spread, along with the deepening shadows, across the battlefield. Our ammunition supply approached a level that could not long sustain the troop, and replenishment remained impossible. Our advance was now effectively contained by enemy flanking forces on the left, and we still had no way to evacuate casualties.

The only rational course of action was to attempt to disengage and fight our way back to last night's defensive position. Of course, we had been surrounded at last report, so the success of a withdrawal was problematic. My comprehension of our perilous situation slowly floated toward full consciousness as I found myself on the radio requesting permission to withdraw and, apparently, helping to direct the air strikes.

Field mechanics and crews swarmed over those tracks that had taken hits, attempting to restart them. Others were towed off line so that repairs could take place away from the continuing sporadic fire. Exercising good field judgment, the mechanics cannibalized essential parts from two vehicles that obviously were finished. One of these was A-34, a shattered wreck wedged, immobile, between two trees.

I instructed Bob Henderson, the third platoon leader, to strip the hulk of its armament, ammunition, and valuable parts. He dismounted to supervise his men swarming around the permanently

lodged track as they wrenched equipment free from mountings, dragged it the few feet to a waiting ACAV and heaved it aboard. The carcass would be left for the aircraft to destroy after our departure, a mission at which they might be more successful than they had been in their attempts to demolish enemy bunkers.

As we began the slow disengagement, incoming fire slackened further, and I was able to disconnect from the life-sustaining radios and climb down carefully from the faithful A-66. After prudently cleaning myself up enough to be presentable, I picked a path over to Bob and his toiling men. My route crossed a forest junkyard through which a herd of bulldozers seemed to have run amok. Shattered trees, scarred ground, crushed bunkers and trenches, discarded ammunition cans and assorted junk lay everywhere. In the midst of the disorder, the inexperienced lieutenant did a speedy job on A-34, standing next to the collapsed rear ramp and pointing out items he wanted pried loose. Standing still, however, was an error. Just as I scuttled up to him in that crablike posture we quickly learned, Bob's face assumed a perplexed expression and he sank to the ground.

Kneeling at his side while the men continued to slash at the carcass of A-34, I rolled up the jungle fatigue trousers through which he was bleeding. Several lacerations, none spewing blood, meant that he had picked up only some shrapnel. No problem, if the rate of leakage didn't increase before his blood clotted.

"I'm OK, sir. We should be done in about five." Insisting on rising under his own power, although unsteadily, Bob hobbled to the far side of A-34.

The more experienced of his men had been working there all along.

1930 Hours, 26 March 1970

During a sunset invisible through the towering trees, we finally started all vehicles except for the abandoned A-34 and A-18, which was rigged for towing. The bruised line of armor backed across the battlefield, which had been so costly to gain, frontal slopes and weaponry always oriented in the direction of the now silent enemy. Not surprisingly, there were few NVA casualties visible on the field as we inched away. The enemy commander had executed an orderly and effective withdrawal within a well-prepared defensive position that was far larger than any I had previously experienced.

"Flange Two-Nine, this is Writer Two-Nine," I reported. "I'm ready to move out

the advance element now. Can we get any light for the trip?" Overhead aircraft or artillery flare illumination would be necessary within minutes unless we fancied the suicidal technique of turning on our headlights for the return journey, assuming any headlights had survived the firefight.

"This is Flange Two-Nine. Go ahead and move out. Have your point and rear elements throw smoke so that I can put some air on your flanks and rear.

"Writer Two-Nine, wilco, out."

"Two-Six, this is Six. Listen up. Move your tracks out on the route we came in on. If you see anything at all suspicious, shoot it up big time. Be careful. They're out there. When you get through and after you've moved about 300 meters, all the way back past that bombed out area, toss some smoke and contact me. Also, I've been hit. I'm OK" — just like Bob Henderson — "but if you don't hear me on the horn for awhile, you're in charge."

"This is Two-Six. I'll get through. On the way." Mike Healey, with the least bloodied platoon, could best deal with the ambush likely to await us down the trail. Driving straight into it, he might be able to smash his way through and clear the path for the rest of us. There was scant possibility of busting a new trail through the jungle after dark.

The casualties were distributed among the remaining tracks as quickly as their pain allowed. Insufficient time remained for the medics to segregate the dead from the wounded, and both were crowded haphazardly on the vehicles nearest the aid station. Alpha and Charlie Companies' soldiers swarmed aboard, rendering the cavalry vehicles' weapons inoperable and covering the ammunition stacked on the ACAV's floors.

"Writer, this is Racer. We're all loaded up."

"Six, this is One-Six. I'm ready to go."

"Six, this is Three-Six. Me too."

From the rear deck of A-66, Jim grabbed my flak jacket and nodded. He was ready to pull out also.

"One-Six, this is Six. I'm afraid you're last. Make a lot of racket when the rest of us move and throw some smoke out for the choppers. Give us a couple of minutes and then come out as fast as you can. Good luck."

"This is One-Six. No sweat."

The tracks began their ponderous exit from the field. We were completely at the

mercy of the NVA if the second platoon could not break out. Had the expected mines been planted and trees felled across our only exit route? Was the killing zone covered with automatic weapons and grenadiers? The minutes passed as the burdened troop pursued the second platoon. No firing echoed down the trail after Mike's initial bursts when his tracks first pulled out.

"Writer, this is Flange Two-Nine. I've got your rear in sight, also the point. But where're you? Get out some smoke so we can cover you, huh?" A note of irritation intruded into the battalion commander's voice.

"This is Writer. Wilco." I switched over to the intercom. "Hey, Dennis did you get that? How about throwing a few?" Without turning, probably because his neck wouldn't pivot, Dennis unhooked two of our last smoke grenades from a strap securing them to the side of his cupola armor. He dropped the two fizzing olive soup cans over the side. With a gentle pop lost in the roar of the engines, the artillery forward observer's track behind us was wreathed in yellow tendrils of smoke. Acknowledging our signal, Conrad made reassuring sounds over the radio.

"Six, this is Two-Six. You won't believe this! It's clear here. Repeat, clear all the way out." Mike's voice expressed joy first and then relief. If he'd fully understood the risk his platoon had just run, the sequence might have been reversed.

"Roger..." Was it possible that the enemy commander hadn't thought to impede our withdrawal? Were his forces insufficient to defend the bunker complex and hold us in the trap simultaneously? Was he hurt too badly to pursue? Or had he begun to move out toward Cambodia while we were preparing to return southward? Randomness too complex to contemplate just now...

But the first platoon was in the barrel again! Willie McNew reported that a recoilless rifle had opened up on him. One round slammed into the deserted turret of A-18 under tow and McNew dropped the line to return fire with his main gun.

"Six, this is One-Six. You've got a choice. Old 18's back there and it's going to cost plenty to go back and get it. It's stripped and there ain't nothing left on it. Can we leave it?"

The canny McNew was probably lying about completely stripping A-18. There had not been time. But he was unquestionably correct about the probable cost

of retrieving the hulk. Required decision: Did the 1st Squadron's tradition of salvaging every vehicle justify risking the first platoon? And how would we react if the first platoon and its cargo of infantry and casualties were surrounded while trying to retrieve A-18? Decisions were still very difficult to make. I hesitated.

"All right, One-Six. Dump it." No need to instruct the first platoon to hurry. The sounds of the racing engine in the background while Willie was on the air told me that they hadn't paused after their brief firefight. It occurred to me that our rear element may have encountered the anticipated ambush in a formative stage after we had slipped through the noose.

Overhead, LTC Conrad and his staff, with some help from me, directed the air cover on our flanks and attempted to destroy the two vehicles left on the field. Down among the trees it was growing difficult to see and the drivers soon would have to halt if aerial illumination were not forthcoming. But the first and third platoons did use what little sunlight was left to close on the lead element.

"Flange Two-Nine, this is Writer. Have we got any light yet?"

"Not yet, Writer. How many minutes can you move without illumination?"

"This is Writer. Not long. Let's see if our mortars can shoot some for us. We'll keep you advised." It would never do to shoot down the battalion commander with an errant illumination round.

"Roger, out."

With four kilometers of jungle to traverse we were dead in the water unless, and only unless, the remnant of the troop's shattered mortar section back at the night defensive position came through. Undoubtedly, they had at least a few parachute flare rounds remaining in the one undamaged mortar track salvaged from the flames the night before by the desperate driver. Whether the mortar crew could compute, arm and fire a mission after last night's debacle I didn't know.

"Writer Control, this is Six, did you monitor?" Seege was sure to be on all frequencies back at the night defensive position, and I was too tired to repeat all those words again. I assumed the night defensive position was still there because we hadn't heard about it or from it all afternoon.

"Roger," Seege answered at once on the troop frequency. "He's right here."

The raspy voice of Sergeant Smolich, the mortar section chief, came up. "Where are you, Six?"

"We're a little less than a quarter of the way home and hurting. Can you shoot some light?" It was now impossible to read a map so as to provide our current location by checkpoint. Besides, the map case was buried somewhere in the bowels of A-66.

"Yeah we can, Six. Sure."

"OK, do it ASAP. Post the air data from there." I flipped to the higher command frequency.

"Flange Two-Nine, this is Writer. Better get some altitude. They'll call in the air data, but your guess is as good as anyone's where they'll shoot."

"I'll take care of things up here, Writer." Godlike confidence.

The swaying interior of A-66 was a dark jumble of bodies, most of them quiet, but a few making noises that no one wished to notice. The upper deck of the track was covered with infantrymen, as crowded as a lifeboat at sea and just as defenseless. Only our constant companions in the jungle, discomfort and pain, kept me alert and on the radio. Morphine, so temptingly available from the medics, was never an option.

"This is Two-Six. We can't see a thing out front, Six. Do you want me to hold up?" Further seconds, then in very slow motion the back of Dennis' steel cupola hatch seemed somehow lighter. Within moments it was possible to distinguish the individual casualties lying below my legs in the shadows of the fighting compartment. The men littering the upper deck of A-66 stared overhead, their opened mouths expressing amazement at this unexpected miracle.

"This is Six. Drop 200 and fire for effect. Keep one up as long as it lasts. Drop 100 every three minutes or so. And stay on top of Flange Control for that light ship. Outstanding."

"Thanks. We've got about an hour of stuff, Six. Out." Nothing further was required between us.

But, the welcome illumination also revealed the desperation of our condition. Dennis and the worn out gunners slumped over their gunshields. The grunts looked worse. Only the less thoroughly beaten down Marty was in motion as he manhandled A-66 down the dim alleyway through the jungle. One thrown vehicular track on A-66 or any other vehicle on the narrow trail and the whole operation would grind to a halt.

If there exists a merciful providence for the helpless, then we must have qualified,

for we passed through the jungle unmo-
lested. With little warning, the troop
broke into the relative safety of the clear-
ing surrounding the night defensive posi-
tion. Jim and I stared at each other aboard
A-66. He shook his head. I couldn't un-
derstand how we had done it either. For a
few moments we sat together quietly,
then Alpha Company began to move into
the wood line to secure our position. Jim
lowered himself wordlessly to the ground
and, linked by the umbilical cord of the
communications handset leading to his
radioman, was swallowed up in the dusty
gloom.

The ACAVs discharged their grisly car-
goes as each vehicle exited from the last
of the forest. So long as the supply of
stretchers lasted, the injured were placed
upon them. After that, medics pressed
ponchos into service. The dead were seg-
regated to one side. More than an hour of
dusty relays would be necessary before
the medevacs were finished.

In the faint light provided by the aerial
illumination, the haggard crews returned
their vehicles to the well-worn defensive
perimeter and set about cleaning their
filthy tracks, replenishing basic loads and
breaking down weapons. Another testi-
monial to self-imposed discipline and
good sense. There may even have been
something to eat.

In its turn, A-66 dropped its rear ramp
near the choppers as the medical person-
nel rushed over to haul away our casual-
ties. The troop executive officer, 1LT
Paul Baerman, appeared to have the
evacuation well in hand, so I removed my
CVC helmet and, without thinking,
shoved myself over the side of the track.
The mortar section chief caught me be-
fore my legs completely collapsed and set
me back upon my feet. Guided only by
habit, I began to walk unsteadily through
the maze of struggling medics in the di-
rection of the M577. About halfway
there, Conrad emerged from the shadows.
As we approached each other, he held out
his arms and wrapped them around me.

Charlie Company was home.

Epilogue

The randomness inherent in war dealt
Team A and Alpha Troop a very poor
hand during the anonymous battle of 26
March 1970. Already exhausted by
weeks of continuous operations in War
Zone C, and brutalized by the tragedy of
the previous evening, the men were in no
condition to respond to the sudden de-
mand for a rescue mission. Yet, without
complaint and against unknown odds,
they saddled up and played out their un-
promising hand.

While Team A could not prevail on the
battlefield, due to the magnitude of the
enemy force and timing constraints, it
executed its assigned mission superbly.
Through many individual acts of heroism
and admirable technical competence, our
crewmen and grunts saved nearly 100
Americans from death or capture. Aside
from its spectacular horror, a defeat of
this proportion would have been one of
the largest single losses of the war. At the
end of the day, randomness intervened
again and permitted us to deliver our-
selves and our casualties safely.

Some superior authority calculated that
the enemy losses resulting from the
anonymous battle on 26 March 1970
were 88 men. The total for the three
American units that were engaged was
very sizeable as well. Captain Armer,
who took command of the night defen-
sive position that evening, Sergeant
Gutierrez and Sergeant First Class Fore-
man were awarded Silver Stars for gal-
lantry. Except for Purple Hearts there
probably were, as Spec. Four Pagan said
in *Into Cambodia*, no other decorations
for Alpha Troop. Dennis made it out
safely, but 1LT Henderson was killed in
Cambodia on June 19, 1970. 1LT Bill
Nash became MG William Nash (Ret.),
recently the Commanding General of the
1st Armored Division.

I discharged myself from the field hos-
pital a few days after the battle and re-
turned to Alpha Troop with a cast on my
left arm up to the elbow. Our life in the
jungle continued much as before. When
my tour of duty in Vietnam was com-
pleted, I, like most other OCS commis-
sioned officers, returned to civilian life
and an entrepreneurial career of some
success. Regardless of what I may ac-
complish in the years remaining to me,
however, I never again will reach the
level of responsibility entrusted to me at
25 years of age.

This is the challenge and the heritage
that each of you in the 11th Armored
Cavalry have the responsibility of shar-
ing. There is no doubt that your gener-
ation, like ours, will be prepared when our
country again needs the Regiment's
strong arms.

Allons!

Acknowledgments

The heroes of this account are the men
who fought the battles, the cavalry and
infantrymen with whom I had the honor
of sharing so much. To each of them I
repeat my heartfelt gratitude. And to the
officers and men of today's 11th Ar-
mored Cavalry Regiment, I express my

appreciation for causing me to experience
again memories long buried.

My single regret is that this account of
life and leadership in combat had to be
written in the first person, which placed
too much focus on me and not nearly
enough on the men of Alpha Troop. It is
these men and their families, and not the
troop's officers, who deserve the fullest
recognition for their loyal service and
personal sacrifices.

Among my benefactors is BG John
"Doc" Bahnsen (Ret.) who, after a brief
test with a platoon in Charlie Troop, of-
fered me the command of Headquarters
Troop, 1st Squadron. Doc allowed me to
operate Headquarters Troop in and
around Loc Ninh as a combat line unit
rather than in the usual sedentary mode.
The practical worth of this experience
was beyond any price.

COL John Norton (Ret.) gave me Alpha
Troop in late December, 1969. He was
both an understanding mentor and an
exacting task master. It was he who, as
the 1st Squadron Commander, selected
Alpha Troop to lead the way to War Zone
C for the entire Regiment.

And of MG Mike Conrad (Ret.), what
more can I say about the man who held
me close during the midnight flight to a
field hospital and who personally deliv-
ered me, insensible, to the surgeons?

But it is Sergeant First Class Foreman
whom I will never forget.

John Poindexter holds a BS degree in
Business Administration from the Uni-
versity of Arkansas, and a masters in
Business Administration from New York
University, which also granted him a
Ph.D. in Economics and Finance. He
taught economics and finance as an
Adjunct Associate Professor at Long Is-
land University in 1974 and 1975. In
1966, he volunteered for the U.S. Army
and for OCS, and was commissioned a
2LT in Armor. At his first assignment,
the 3rd ACR in Germany, he com-
manded L Troop. After airborne and
Ranger training, he volunteered for
service in Vietnam, assigned to the
11th ACR. He commanded HQ Troop,
1st Squadron, and Alpha Troop, suc-
cessively, between September, 1969
and May, 1970. In addition to two Pur-
ple Hearts, he was awarded the Silver
Star, the Soldiers Medal, two Bronze
Stars, the Air Medal, the Vietnamese
Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star, and
several other decorations.