

# Soldiers In War <sup>8/25/69</sup> Balk Temporarily

SONG CHANG VALLEY, Vietnam (AP) — "I am sorry, sir, but my men refused to go—we cannot move out," Lt. Eugene Shurtz Jr. reported to his battalion commander over a crackling field telephone.

"A" Company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade's battle-worn 3rd Battalion had been ordered at dawn Sunday to move once more down the jungled rocky slope of Nui Lon Mountain into a deadly labyrinth of North Vietnamese bunkers and trench lines.

For five days they had obeyed orders to make this push. Each time they had been thrown back by the invisible enemy who waited through the rain of bombs and artillery shells for the Americans to come close, then picked them off with deadly crossfire.

The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon, had been waiting impatiently for A Company to move out. Bacon had taken over the battalion after Lt. Eli P. Howard was killed in a helicopter crash with Associated Press photographer Oliver Noonan and six other men. Ever since the crash Tuesday, the battalion had been trying to get to the wreckage.

Sunday morning, Bacon was personally leading three of his companies in the assault. He paled as Shurtz matter-of-factly told him that the soldiers of A Company would not follow his orders.

"Repeat that please," the colonel asked without raising his voice. "Have you told them what it means to disobey orders under fire?"

"I think they understand," the lieutenant replied, "but some of them simply had enough—they are broken. There are boys here who have only 90 days left in Vietnam. They want to go home in one piece. The situation is psychic here."

"Are you talking about enlisted men or are the NCO's also involved?" the colonel asked.

"That's the difficulty here," Shurtz said. "We've got a leadership problem. Most of our squad and platoon leaders have been killed or wounded."

A Company at one point in the fight was down to 60 men—half its assigned combat strength.

Quietly the colonel told Shurtz: "Go talk to them again and tell them that to the best of our knowledge the bunkers are now empty—the enemy has withdrawn. The mission of A Company today is to recover their dead. They have no reason to be afraid. Please take a hand count of how many really do not want to go."

The lieutenant came back a few minutes later: "They won't go, colonel, and I did not ask for the hand count because I am afraid that they all stick together even though some might prefer to go."

The colonel told him: "Leave these men on the hill and take your CP—command post—element and move to the objective."

The lieutenant said he was preparing to move and asked: "What do we do with the ammunition supplies. Shall we destroy them?"

"Leave it with them," the colonel ordered.

Then Bacon told his executive officer, Maj. Richard Waite, and one of his seasoned Vietnam veterans, Sgt. Okey Blakenship of Panther, W.Va., to fly from the battalion base "LZ Center" across the valley to talk with the reluctant troops of A Company.

They found the men bearded and exhausted in the tall blackened elephant grass, their uniforms ripped and caked with dirt.

"One of them was crying," said Blakenship.

Then the soldiers told why they would not move.

"It poured out of them," the sergeant said.

They said they were sick of the endless battling in torrid heat, the constant danger of sudden firefights by day and the mortaring and enemy probing at night. They said they had not enough sleep and that they were being pushed too hard. They hadn't had mail. They hadn't had hot food. They hadn't had the little things that made the

war bearable. Helicopters brought in the basic needs of ammunition, food and water at a tremendous risk because of the heavy enemy ground fire. But this was not enough for these men. They believed that they were in danger of annihilation and would go no farther.

Maj. Waite and Sgt. Blakenship heard them out, looking at the soldiers, most of them a generation apart, draftees 19 and 20 with fear in their eyes.

Blakenship, a quick-tempered man, began arguing.

"One of them yelled to me that his company had suffered too much and that it should not have to go on," Blakenship said. "I answered him that another company was down to 15 men still on the move—and I lied to him—and he asked me, 'Why did they do it?'"

"Maybe they have got something a little more than what you have got," the sergeant replied.

"Don't call us cowards, we are not cowards," the soldier howled, running toward Blakenship with his fists raised.

Blakenship turned his back and walked down the bomb-scarred ridge line to where the company commander waited.

The sergeant looked back and saw that the men of A Company were stirring. They picked up their rifles, fell into a loose formation and followed him down the cratered slope.

A Company went back to the war.