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Young Lieutenant Loses Command

SAIGON (AP) — The young American lieutenant who couldn't get his men back into battle last Sunday has been relieved of his command.

His battalion commander, Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon of Falls Church, Va., said today that Lt. Eugene Shurtz Jr., 26, of Davenport, Iowa, had been relieved as commander of Alpha Company and would be given a new assignment with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

"I went out to relieve him personally," Bacon said in a telephone interview from his headquarters in the foothills southwest of Da Nang. "I wasn't satisfied with the progress the company was making."

Alpha Company suffered heavy casualties last week in five consecutive days of assaults on a labyrinth of North Vietnamese bunkers and trench lines on the slopes of Nui Lon Mountain. Ordered to move out again Sunday, Shurtz told Bacon over a field telephone: "I am sorry, sir, but my men refuse to go. We cannot move out."

Bacon sent his executive officer, Maj. Richard Waite of Reynoldsville, Pa., and Sgt. Okey Blankenship of Panther, W.Va., a Vietnam veteran, to the scene.

Blankenship finally persuaded the men to get moving. They ran into no opposition.

Bacon said that Capt. Bernard F. Wolpers, a native of Germany who is now a U.S. citizen, had replaced Shurtz as company commander.

The colonel said the company's refusal to follow Shurtz's orders "was certainly a contributing factor" in his decision to change commanders, but that the action "was not solely based on that."

"I made the decision for a lot of reasons," he said. "I don't think he had the experience to handle the job . . . The company wasn't responsive; it was dragging its feet."

"It was slow getting its gear together. I didn't think the company moved when I wanted it to. I would tell them to move out at 6 a.m. and they would move out at 6:30."

A spokesman for the Americal Division said five enlisted men had questioned Shurtz's orders to move out, but that all five had finally gone with the rest of the company "and the company completed its mission." Both Bacon and the spokesman said no charges are pending against anyone and no formal investigation is being conducted.

"The matter is not being further pursued," the spokesman said. "The men are still in the

company, and the company is still in the field."

Bacon said five enlisted men in the company had requested during the incident to see the Inspector General, but "they decided not to once they settled down and started moving. They decided they had no complaints at all."

He said the company is still operating in the field but has not been involved in any significant fighting since last Saturday.

Shurtz had been in Vietnam only a month and was commander of Alpha Company for three weeks. Bacon took command of the battalion last Thursday after his predecessor, Lt. Col. Eli P. Howard of Woodridge, Va., was killed in a helicopter crash.

Bacon said he did not consider the Alpha Company incident "a big problem."

"I've seen similar type things happen," he said.

Shurtz could not be reached for comment.