

## After The Battle

The dustoff hugged the tops of the trees as it sped full throttle to the 27<sup>th</sup> Evac Hospital in Chu Lai. There were six of us on the bird. We sat there saying nothing, just staring off into some distant place. An infantryman learns to become detached. It is a form of protection. It is protection from pain, hardship and death. The alternative to detachment is weakness, and weakness creates indecision, and indecision bears the fruit of defeat. The victory at Tam Ky had taken a lot out of us, and the feelings attached to this pain were many years away. We had survived, and to continue to survive we became detached and that's all that mattered for now. And the now is all that matters in combat.

Finally, the dustoff settled on a helipad, and medics rushed out of a building with gurneys to wheel us into surgery. I refused to be put on a gurney and walked into the surgical prep area. After surgery, I was sent to a room with about 12 beds. I was the only patient in the room. It was very lonely, but very, very peaceful. The surgery I had was far more painful than being hit by the grenade. Without giving me any anesthetic, the surgeon pulled many grenade fragments of different sizes from my body. The pain was agonizing and I let the surgeon know exactly how I felt about having my legs and butt ripped apart by his instruments. Now lying in a clean bed for the first time in months, I closed my eyes.

A day or two passed and a general came in and pinned a Purple Heart to my pillow. We exchanged a few words and he left. I felt extremely proud for having served my country. Even more so, I had proved to myself that in the face of combat and death, I had not cowered in fear, that I had given more than I had taken, and no one could ever take that away from me. I had lived the dream from my boyhood days of playing soldier in the park.

The next morning the orderly of the ward that I occupied came in and sarcastically asked if I was going to have him bring me my breakfast again or if I were going to get up and get my own food. I told him I could get my own food. As I was walking to the mess hall, I met a couple of guys from C Company who had also been wounded at Tam Ky. We sat together and had breakfast. While we were talking and eating, I felt a strange sensation. The chair I was sitting in felt wet. I looked down between my legs at the chair and saw that it was full of blood. The pressure of my sitting and moving around had opened my wounds. I didn't say anything about it to the other guys. However, after I got up, the guy sitting next to me looked down at my chair and then at me. He said, "Poz, you okay." I said yes. To which he replied, "You don't look so good." I made it back to my room with the aid of two of my friends. The same orderly was sitting there when I walked in. He looked at the seat of my hospital gown, grabbed my arm and assisted me to my bed. He told me he was going to change the dressings on my wounds. I told him to go away and leave me alone. Shortly after that, I fell asleep.

I woke up a few hours later. The pain in my backside was bad. I was looking at the entrance to the ward when two short soldiers walked in smiling. As they approached me, their smiles faded. A look of concern appeared on the face of one of them. It was Dak. He stared at my bloodied backside.

Dak was a Kit Carson with C Company. He was 19 years old, and stood a little over five feet. The other soldier was also a Kit Carson, but I didn't know him. A Kit Carson was an interpreter for the U.S. military. Prior to becoming a Kit Carson, Dak had been a North Vietnamese soldier. The U.S. military along with the South Vietnam government had a program that allowed enemy personnel to defect and work for our side. This program was called Chu Hoi. Leaflets would be dropped in the bush and along the borders of South Vietnam explaining to possible defectors the terms of the Chu Hoi program.



Dak



A typical Chu Hoi leaflet used by the Americal Division

The person who surrendered as a Chu Hoi was promised to be treated well. They would be retrained, taught the English language, and given a job working for the military. Many of the Kit Carsons were not trusted by the Americans. This was not the case between Dak and me.

My first memory of Dak was in late March. I had been walking point and as I crossed a small clearing, I heard noise and talking behind some bushes. I held up my hand for the column to stop. I knelt down and motioned for Sgt. Lawson, my squad leader, to come over to me. We listened to the Vietnamese talking for a short time. Then Lawson went back to his RTO and when he returned he had SP4 Freeman with him. Using hand signals he explained to us that on the count of three we would fire into the bushes and then run back to join the rest of the platoon. The platoon had been set up in a firing line position. One, two, three. We opened up on full automatic. For some reason, the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon opened up ahead of schedule. About half way, in the middle of the clearing, there was a lone foxhole. The three of us ran to and jumped into this foxhole. We could almost see the rounds passing over our position in both directions. We didn't know what to do. So we just hunkered down and listened to the firefight, hoping nobody would lob a grenade in on top of us. After about five minutes, a voice could be heard yelling in Vietnamese. It was Dak. Then a voice in English shouted, "Cease Fire". Dak came running up to our hole and looked in on us. Laughing he said BooKoo Dinky Dow (a mixture of French and Vietnamese meaning, very dumb). As it turned out, the Vietnamese were ARVNs (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Nobody had told the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon that the ARVNs were in the area and they didn't know we were in the area. When Dak told the three of us that we had been shooting at ARVNs, we all broke out in laughter. Luckily, no one on either side had been hit. There was some mighty fine shooting done that day on both sides.



**Dak while on patrol**

A few weeks later, I had replaced Lawson as the squad leader of the 1<sup>st</sup> squad and the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon of C Company had bunker guard duty on LZ East (a small fire support base), aka Hill 488. My squad, the 1<sup>st</sup> squad, was assigned the responsibility of covering two bunkers. However, I had only five men including myself. After a month long operation near the village of Tien Phouc all of Charlie Company was short of men due to casualties and personnel rotating back to the States. Also men were in the rear area on R & R (rest and recuperation) or for medical purposes. Guard duty consisted of two hours on guard and four hours of sleep. Then two hours back on guard again if needed. This is with three men in each bunker. The math doesn't work with only two men to stand guard. I went to the platoon leader, Lt. Gordon, and asked for another man. He had no one else to spare. We were spread too thin. He offered me Dak, but it was up to Dak. A Kit Carson did not have to stand guard. To my relief Dak agreed. I assigned Dak to the bunker I was in along with the 1<sup>st</sup> squad's M-79'er SP-4 John Kwazniak. No one else in the squad wanted to be alone in a bunker with Dak. It was feared he might kill them in their sleep. That's why he was put in my bunker and I put SP-4 Kwazniak on first guard. Dak would stand guard second and I promised Kwazniak that I would keep an eye on the bunker as I stood guard.

The first hour after dark was uneventful. Dak and I didn't go to sleep but started up a conversation. We talked about our lives before the war, about our families and friends. Dak told me that at the age of about 15 or 16 he was taken into the North Vietnam Army. He was trained to be a soldier. After his training, he was sent down to South Viet Nam along its border with Laos (The Ho Chi Minh Trail). He was ordered to carry mortar rounds on his back. The journey took months. The conditions were Spartan and he was tired and hungry all the time. As they approached South Viet Nam they were bombed by U.S planes. Dak was sick of it. He hated the North Viet Nam government for taking him from his home. One day he saw a Chu Hoi leaflet and knew he had to join the Americans.

I had never heard a story like this before. I was entranced by what Dak was telling me. I was listening to his story intensely, when all of a sudden, trip flares started going off outside our bunker. Dak yelled, "VC". We grabbed our M-16's and ran from the bunker. Grenades were being thrown over the barbed wire to the outside of our perimeter and a few claymore mines exploded. Kwazniak, Dak and I stood together in the trench line outside the bunker, our eyes straining to find any movement on the other side of the wire. The bunker to our left, also assigned to the first squad, had the same situation. I got on the radio and requested illumination rounds. The CP asked for a SITREP (situation report). No movement could be seen outside the wire. We waited. The artillery rounds lit up the night sky. Still there was no movement. Dak and I walked over to the other bunker. Sitrep. No movement. Dak and I stood there together, side by side ready to fight the unseen enemy. After a few minutes had passed, Dak said that there were no VC. The illuminations rounds faded. Darkness engulfed the perimeter. I got on the horn, called the

CP, and reported that there was no movement outside the wire. We were told to stand down.



LZ EAST

By now, it was Dak's turn to stand guard. I stayed with him for the two hours. In return, he stood my guard with me. We talked for four hours. His English was not that good, but I understood everything he had said. We stood there, two young men from two different cultures, from two different worlds and we formed a bond that night. It was a special bond of friendship, a bond that knew no borders. It was the bond of the warrior.

Now he was standing next to my bed, concerned about my well being. I assured him that it looked worse that it was. He introduced me to the other Kit Carson. He was the same height as Dak, but was a little older. We talked and laughed. Dak liked to laugh. He made me feel much better. Then the surprise came. He thanked me for saving his life at Tam Ky. At the time, I wasn't sure what he had meant, so I just nodded my head and said no problem. Finally, the orderly came and told Dak he had to go. We gave each other the thumbs up sign as he left. I would not see Dak again for a couple of months.

After about a week or ten days in Chu Lai and Nha Trang, I was sent to the 6<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Center in Cam Rahn Bay. After a couple of days there, I noticed a small bump about three inches above my left ankle. One frag from the last grenade that landed near me had bounced off my ankle and worked its way up my leg. Now it had worked its way almost to the surface, but wouldn't pop out. I told the medics about it and x-rays showed that there was one frag just under the skin. The next day I was on a gurney in a small operating room. A young man walked in and introduced himself. He told me he was going to take the frag out of my leg. He handed me a vial and stuck a syringe in it. He extracted some liquid from the vial and told me he was going to give me a local anesthetic. He took the vial from me, put it on a table and stuck the syringe in my lower left leg. He picked up a pair of forceps and started digging, and digging, and digging. I could hear a squishing noise coming from my leg and after a bit the local anesthetic started to wear off. I told him it was starting to hurt and that I wanted another shot. Finally, I lost patience with the guy and told him to do something or I was going to bust his head open, to which he replied, "Wait, I'll go get a doctor. Then he left the room. I sat there for about five minutes with my mouth hanging open when another slightly older man walked in and introduced himself as a doctor. I asked who the other guy had been to which he replied, "What other guy?"

I could have stretched the hospital stay longer, but one day while at the 6<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Center I was told to fill sandbags. The idea didn't appeal to me and I told the NCO in charge where to put his sandbags. The next day, I was on a flight back to Chu Lai and C Company. Once I got back, I went to see Lt. Gordon (Gordon and Dak photo below). Lt Gordon was now the Company XO (executive officer).





**Lt. Gordon with CAR -15  
SFC Ikeda in background**

I had a lot of respect for his abilities as an officer and a leader. We had survived the operation at Tien Phouc. I told him I wanted to get out of the bush. I explained to him that I had been trained in mortars (11C20). He said he would see what he could do. I trusted him. From Chu Lai, I hopped on a huey to get to LZ Center. LZ Center was the main fire support base in C Company's area AO (area of operation). I was there waiting for a flight out to C Company when my orders to join the 81 mm mortars came through. Lt. Gordon always took care of his people.



**The central part of LZ CENTER. The tent at the bottom of the is the mess hall. Above that is the cooking area and to the right of that is the trash shoot. Above the mess hall are the 4.2 mortar pits. At the top is a helipad.**

A few weeks later C Company was on LZ Center to pull bunker guard duty. While they were on The Hill (LZCenter) I ran into Dak. We shook hands and he invited me to the Kit Carson bunker later that day for a beer. I had first guard duty that night, and after I was finished, I went to visit Dak. There were three other Kit Carsons in the bunker. Dak

introduced me to them. Then, Dak told them about Tam Ky. We had a few beers and they lit up a joint. I refused to join them, and they didn't seem to mind. However, I got high just sitting in the confined bunker with their smoke all around me. We joked and laughed for several hours. We talked about women and politics. We told war stories. We agreed that America was Number One and the Communists were Number Ten. Finally, around midnight, I staggered out of their bunker and went back to the mortar pit. It had been good to see Dak again, but he had changed. He still had the same smile, but his eyes were different. He seemed tired and older.

A couple of months later, I was napping in a bunker when two guys from C Company came running in. They had known me in the bush and knew that Dak and I were close. They were in a frenzy and told me that Dak and a greenhead (a new guy) were standing toe to toe ready to go at it. I ran up to the day center/chapel where Dak and the new guy were. The place was filled with G.I.s. Standing in the middle of the room I saw Dak and a young U.S. soldier. They were about three feet apart. They were pointing their M-16s at each and yelling obscenities. I got between them and grabbed the barrels of their weapons. I told them that they were supposed to be fighting for the same side and not each other. I finally got them to calm down and shake hands. I walked outside with Dak. We talked a little while. I told him he was Number One, and to keep his butt out of trouble. He laughed and walked away. I would never see Dak again. Later I heard he had been hit in the stomach and was in bad shape. Then I heard he had recovered, left the army and gotten married. By then, it was time for me to leave country. I will never forget Dak. At a young age he had seen more of life and death than most people will ever see. Even though we had known one another for only a short time, he was a good and trusted friend. Sadly, somehow I feel his life was far too short, that the communists in Vietnam had sent him to an early grave. Regardless, of his fate, Dak will always have a special place in my memories.



23<sup>rd</sup> Division (Americal)