

Viet Nam 1969, Hill 102 “Million Dollar Hill”



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In May of 1969, C-3rd/21st-196th LIB was involved in a major battle near Tam Ky. “Charlie Company” suffered heavy casualties in this operation. I was one of the wounded. After this, I was treated at the military surgical hospital in Chu Lai, and then was sent to Nha Trang for treatment of infections. Finally I was sent to Cam Ranh Bay, to a recuperation center for additional treatment and time to heal. After about 6 weeks of treatment and recuperation, (around July 1st), I rejoined our company to continue my tour. By now Lt. Gordon, who had been our platoon leader, had become our Company Commander, after a few days back, he arranged for me to become an RTO,

(Radio Telephone Operator) Some guys did not like carrying radios because it did identify you as a target, but, I was happy about being an RTO because that meant I would not have to walk point anymore, even though it did mean I had to carry an additional 28 pound radio plus a few extra pounds for the spare batteries you had to have. All included, the weight of the pack was well over 70 pounds.

It seemed we were always having trouble with the radios. They were very sensitive to the connections of the radio to the handset and speaker, as well as the battery connections. These radios used one 90 volt battery and one 6 volt battery, all of the connections tended to corrode in the heat, humidity, sweat, dirt and the general demands placed on equipment in a combat environment. We also had problems with reception in the hilly terrain and in some areas of heavy canopy of the jungle.

On July 21st, the lead unit of our patrol encountered a booby trap along the trail. Typically these devices would be set with a fairly long fuse so that when tripped, more people would be within range of the explosive device. As soon as I heard the explosion, I knew it was going to be bad news for someone in our company. Unfortunately, Mike Finn, a friend of mine, was walking third in the line and was hurt badly. I had to call for a medevac helicopter to get him evacuated. Of course because of the terrain, or the radio itself, I had a lot of trouble maintaining contact with the



Three RTO's of Charlie

medevac. I can remember cussing at the radio, the Viet Cong, and everything else that I could think of to blame for this predicament. I put up as much antenna as I had with me, and was able to get enough contact to guide the evacuation chopper in to land. The protocol in such a situation called for the RTO to pop a smoke bomb (M-18 Smoke grenade) and notify the chopper that smoke was deployed. The crew would then confirm the color of the smoke before landing. It was a real challenge given the poor reception I was getting, but somehow managed to get enough communication to get the helicopter in to get Mike evacuated. Of course through all of this, I was feeling very frustrated, like I had failed somehow because of the bad radio reception. When this was over, Lieutenant Gordon, our Company Commander at the time came to me and said; "You did a really fine job in getting the medevac contacted and brought in". That made me feel so much better, that I remember it to this day. Unfortunately, Mike Finn didn't make it, we thought we had him saved, but on the flight, he went into shock and died.

After that incident, I cleaned every contact on the radio, with a pencil eraser, every day to at least do what I could, to keep my radio in good working condition. One of the advantages of carrying the radio is you heard all of the radio transmissions so you had more knowledge as to what was going on. The company commander had two RTO's near him, one was tuned to the company frequency, and the other was tuned to the battalion frequency. If you had this radio you heard all of the radio transmissions from the other companies as well as, battalion headquarters and the battalion commander. One day when at least 3 of the companies (including ours) were encountering heavy resistance, I heard the following series of transmissions concerning one of the other companies in the battalion:

Company Commander: "Sir we are pinned down by enemy fire, request permission to pull back."

Battalion Commander: "You've got to flank those dudes; do you have any kilo (killed)?"

Company Commander: "Not yet."

Battalion Commander: "Then you are not trying hard enough- keep moving."

Company Commander a few minutes later: "Sir, I have two kilo now".

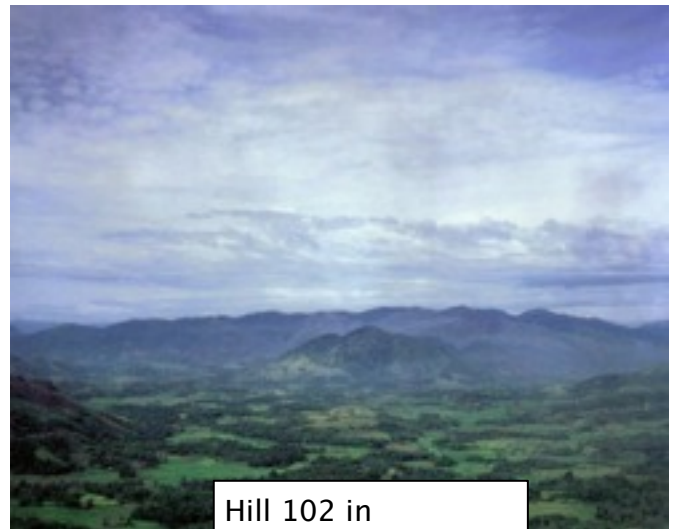
Battalion Commander: "OK you can pull back now."

This pointed out to me that to the Battalion Commander, this was some kind of game, with the score kept in terms of numbers of dead and wounded soldiers. I became more determined to watch out for my personal safety, after all, I was just a number.

One day, we found a reinforced bunker complex built and used by the NVA. It was complete with a large command post bunker. I was assigned a couple bunkers to blow up with 2 pounds of C-4 plastic explosive. Unfortunately the fuse cord they sent us

was old and damp and would not stay lit. I took a small wad of C-4 and put it on the end of the fuse to get it going. I lit this fuse and ran for cover. I waited and waited and nothing happened. I waited two more minutes and still nothing. I decided there was some problem and started back to the explosive charge. I had second thoughts , turned around headed back to where I had cover, determined to wait another 5 minutes. Just as I got back the whole thing blew up in a spectacular fashion. I don't know what or who told me to go back but it obviously saved my life.

During July and early August of 1969 we encountered a fair amount of Viet Cong activity—mostly booby traps and general harassment. However, ominous signs (like the bunkers mentioned above) started to appear with evidence of NVA troops in large numbers were moving through and into the area. We could see that many of the trails appeared to be very well used; local civilians were coming to us asking to be evacuated to one of the secure villages in our area of operation (AO). We began to spot more uniformed enemy soldiers, some carrying heavy weapons. (We captured some of these weapons). All of these signs were adding up to a very uneasy feeling of what was to come.



Then on August 19th, a helicopter was shot down near Hill 102, which became known as Million Dollar Hill. On the helicopter was, our Battalion Commander, LTC Eli Howard, our Sergeant Major, Franklin Rowell, The Battalion RTO, Richard Doria, who previously was with our company, The door gunner, Stephen Martino, The pilot, Gerald Silverstein, the co-pilot, John Plummer and crewman, Stewart Lavigne, also onboard was AP reporter Oliver Noonan.

This touched off an all-out effort to recover the bodies and retake Hill 102 which was a rocky knob. The 2nd Division of NVA had dug into the hill with bunkers, some heavy weapons, 51 caliber machine guns, mortars, as well as light machine guns and a lot of soldiers, with all of their weapons. (Note that it had been the 2nd Division of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) That Charlie Company and other 3rd/21st units had battled at Tam Ky).

Alpha company, of our battalion, was in the area at the time, they began to move in the direction of Hill 102. Immediately, they met heavy resistance and suffered some heavy losses. Meanwhile Charlie Company (our company) was on LZ Center, which was our Fire Support Base (FSB). The Tactical Operations Center (TOC) passed down direction that we were to go on a daytime Search and Destroy mission. As we were getting

ready to leave, Our Company Commander (Lt Gordon) passed down the word, to get only our entrenching tools and all of our ammo as we would be out overnight. Fortunately I took my poncho and liner. We moved South and West and started to dig in a night defensive position on, or near, Nui Lon hill. Soon, I heard the pop of a mortar tube followed by the unmistakable hiss of an incoming mortar shell. I yelled "incoming" and dove for cover. Fortunately, none of these hit close enough to hurt anyone. This incident gave us, in our Company, a very uneasy feeling because we knew that our position was now known and targeted for future bombardment.

Normally our company did not stay in one location for more than one night. But , in this case we were told to hold our position to have a place for us and the other companies ,of the 3rd/21st, to pull back to as we fought our way toward Hill 102, and the site of the helicopter crash, in the following days.

On the afternoon of August 21st, we were again hit by mortar fire. The battalion record states that we were hit by Recoilless Rifle rounds, but I think they were mortar rounds. There are a number of sounds that are terrifying to an infantry soldier, the crack of a rifle round as it passes near you, the sound of an AK 47, the sound of machine gun fire, the whoosh of a RPG round passing over you and the hollow pop of a mortar tube followed by the terrifying hiss of an incoming mortar round. The terrifying thing about an incoming mortar round is the fact that you hear it coming and all you can do is take cover and hope for the best.

One of these rounds was a direct hit on three of our guys in their fox-hole. Killed were William Miranda, Robert Jones and one of our medics, Luis Quintano-Sota. We were shelled by 20 or more rounds; I did suffer a cut on one of my hands from one of the rounds, or from the rocks and debris that the mortars kicked up. (A few days later, our medic asked if I wanted to get submitted for another Purple Heart for that. I replied that I already had one and did not want to "cheapen" the award when we had so many seriously wounded soldiers.) Later that afternoon one of our patrols encountered heavy small arms, rifle fire. This resulted in one more KIA. (I think this was Rudolph Parrish) We also had 10 WIA in this encounter.

Each night we would experience some probing of our perimeter with sporadic gunfire, mortars, and grenades. It all added up to very uneasy nights because you never knew what was going to happen next. On some of these nights, the gunships we called "spooky" would be called in to help protect us. These originally were AC47's but later were replaced by AC130 gunships which were quite a bit larger and carried more firepower. They were capable of firing 12,000 rounds per minute from the Gatling guns that were mounted in it. We would put out an upward facing strobe light to mark our position and "spooky" would fire around our perimeter to protect us. Of course, accidents happen and on at least two occasions our own people were hit by rounds from these gunships. Even with these risks, we were always comforted, when spooky was out there helping us out.

August 22nd we moved about 1km to the west. That night we were hit by a heavy barrage of Chi-Com grenades, fortunately we only had one wounded as a result. It could have been much worse!

August 23rd, at 4:00 AM we were again hit by a very heavy barrage of mortars, as well as Chi-Com grenades and automatic weapons fire. We of course responded with hand grenades and M-16 as well as machine gun fire. Again we had one wounded in this incident. By this time, all of us were wondering when this nightly "hell on earth" was going to end.

Because AP reporter, Oliver Noonan, was killed in the helicopter, there was a lot of press interest in this operation. A reporter joined us in the field expecting to be part of the recovery (I think his name was Horst Faas). He showed up in new fatigues and one canteen. He was totally unprepared for conditions in the field with the heat and the "humping through the bush". He was somewhat overweight and definitely out of shape. Within an hour, he was sweating profusely and had run out of water. I took pity on him and gave him two of my canteens. That really wasn't a problem because we were used to drinking whatever water we found. The reporter was with us when we heard the transmission from "A" company. Alpha Company's Commanding officer reported that his men refused to move out. If the reporter had not been there, this would not have even been raised as an issue. What it sounded like to more seasoned troops, was a bunch of Alpha Company soldiers grumbling about having to move out again after losing a lot of men. The Company Commander, Lt Shurtz, was a recent ROTC graduate and had just been assigned to The Commanding Officer position. He hadn't had time to gain the respect of his men; he just let the thing get out of hand. Because of the press presence with us, and the other companies of our battalion, this incident was widely reported with the headline "Company Refuses to Fight".

August 24th, we found the body of our Lieutenant Colonel by himself. He either fell from the chopper when it was hit, or else he jumped. We will never know which. About 1 km further we reached the site of the crashed helicopter which had burned. A couple bodies had been dragged into a brushy area but most of them were with the chopper. It was a horrible sight. The bodies had not only been partially burned in the crash but they had lain there for 5 days in the 120 degree heat. They assigned 5 or 6 of us to put the bodies in bags and carry them to a place where they could be picked up by helicopter. We would try to hold our breath while we bagged them up. Then we would throw up and proceed to carry them away. I think the worst was the knowledge that one of those we were carrying was the RTO because he had been with our company and some of us had known him. In the past, all of us had seen dead soldiers, but none of them affected us as much as this event. There was such an empty feeling, knowing that we had fought for 5 days, incurring some heavy losses just to get to this place.

Over the next few days, we patrolled the area around Hill 102. Each day we made enemy contact of some kind. We were hit by recoilless rifle artillery fire, mortared

several times, grenade attacks and of course AK 47 rifle fire and machine gun fire. We got hit by something virtually every night. During the day we encountered several ambushes and grenade attacks. We Responded with artillery, M-26 grenades, M-16 rifles, M-79 grenade launchers, M 60 machine guns, spooky gunships, and of course several bombing airstrikes. We had about 5 more seriously wounded during these encounters. In spite of all of our losses; we were causing significantly higher losses for the NVA and Viet Cong soldiers during this period. The fact that their effectiveness was declining showed that we had successfully dislodged them from their organized, fortified positions. However; the continuous action over a period of 16 days was taking a heavy toll on all of us. Battle fatigue was setting in. The whole experience was made worse by the fact that our packs with all of our personal gear and extra food etc. was left on LZ Center when we left on our mission that was "supposed to be overnight". We were resupplied with ammunition and food rations about every other day but without our packs, it was difficult to carry much of anything other than our ammunition and some food, (and in my case my radio).

Finally, on September 6th, we made our way back up LZ Center. It had been 16 grueling days of fighting. Between the KIA, WIA, and other casualties due to heat and environment, we had just over half of the troops that we had started with.

Charlie Company would have a few days to recharge, regroup, resupply, heal, and get prepared to fight another day.

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