

# The Battle of Tam Ky

May 13-15 1969

My perspective



I have had countless nightmares about the events described in this story. For a long time I pushed the memories out of my consciousness. So it has taken me forty years to be able to even talk about the events of this story. It is told from my perspective from a letter that I sent home and one written but never sent. But the real heroes, who gave all can't tell their stories so I hope to honor and preserve the memory of those who fell.

This action started on May 13 1969, when Charlie Company 3/21 196th LIB was dropped into a Hot LZ near Tam Ky, where NVA troops had over-run an ARVN fire support base. I was in the 1st squad of the first platoon so we were the first to be taken in by Huey helicopter with two more choppers close behind. As soon as we approached our Landing Zone we began taking rifle fire. Infantrymen do not like being a big target so typically you jump out as soon as the bird gets within about 6 feet of the ground. The door gunner started to lay down fire for cover as we got out and fanned out. We secured the area the best we could as the rest of the company was delivered to the area. There were many NVA troops in the area, so each time a bird came in, it was fired upon. Two of the helicopters got shot down coming in. One of these was salvaged but the other one had to be blown up in place to keep any of it from getting into enemy hands.

We started to dig in but it was so hot, dry and rocky that digging was extremely slow and difficult. I dug as far as I could then piled the rocks that were dug up around the perimeter of the foxhole for as much protection as

possible. It was well over 100 degrees and in the process of trying to dig I ended up with heat stroke. The whole world was spinning around. Our medic got fluids into me. I don't remember what else he did for me, but eventually I was OK.

Later that afternoon, the 3rd platoon went out to recon the area. Not long after they left our perimeter you could hear the sickening sounds of an extended firefight, which could only be very bad news. As time passed the platoon came dragging back with at least 5 KIA and many more wounded, as well as some MIA.

We spent a restless night with all kinds of commotion and noise in the distance as well as gunfire and some probing of our perimeter but no full-scale assault.

The next day, the afternoon of May 14, 1969 we got the order to move out. I was to be point man with Joe Freeman a few yards back and off to my right. My squad leader, Tom Pozdol, was behind me about 15 yards and slightly off to my left. We got across the first rice paddy to a lightly wooded area. We crossed this area and stepped into the next rice paddy. We got about halfway across when we spotted enemy movement at the next tree line, we started to fire at them and they fired back at us. We were told to pull back and call in artillery but none could reach this particular area so they called in an air strike. They dropped a few bombs but it was obvious to us that had been upfront that they had missed the area where the fire had been coming from. In any case we were ordered to move out again. Being point man, I felt like I was being sent out to a certain death but somehow you don't think about that, It's kind of hard to explain but you have a job to do so you put the risks out of your mind and just go about doing what is required of you.

We got about 3/4th of the way across the rice paddy and all hell broke loose with at least two machine guns and many rifles firing at us. Finally they ordered us to pull back, I tried crawling but we were sitting ducks out in the open. Finally Tom Pozdol said "On the count of three let's all make a run for it" On three we got up and ran. Green tracers were hitting all around

us including some between my legs. (It is still chilling to me to this day to think that only one in 5 rounds is a tracer) I am convinced that the decision to run for it at the same time saved some of our lives. Joe Freeman and the RTO never made it back.

We got back to the small trench that surrounded the wooded area, that we had come through earlier, and dove into it, thinking we were now safe. As soon as we got there, Chicom grenades started to come in at us, one of them hit Tom. We also started taking rifle fire. I saw where some of it was coming from. I took aim and pulled the trigger but nothing happened. I looked into the chamber and noticed a jammed double feed where two shells try to enter the chamber at the same time and jams the gun. I think I said "OH SHUCKS"---only in much stronger words. The NVA soldier had seen me and aimed at me, fortunately one of our guys got him with an M79 grenade launcher just in time.

I started banging my rifle on the ground desperately trying to un-jam it. Finally about the time I thought I would break it, the shells fell out and I slammed another magazine in and tried to provide some cover as we tried to get to the rest of the company.

We headed for our left flank, where there was an open area with a small dike around it that would provide at least some cover. We encountered two of our guys on our way, one of them started to say something just as a bullet got him though the neck. I led into the diked area and the whole company poured in. We set up a hasty defensive perimeter and settled in for what felt like the longest night in history. By now we were low on ammunition so we were told to fire only on sight. I think I had less than 3 of the 21 magazines that I carried left. It was just getting dark now and we were continually being fired upon. Aircraft Gun ships that we called "Puff the Magic Dragon" were called in to fire around our perimeter to help try to protect us, but they left around 2:00AM, things quieted down some during this time. At about 3:00 they started to hit us with mortars we could distinctly hear the hollow popping noise of the mortars being fired followed by the sickening hiss of the mortar rounds coming down near us. They were also firing RPG's (Rocket Propelled Grenades) at us. They fired a

couple of heavy volleys of this combination but these missed us. Before the smoke cleared, The NVA started a ground attack.

Some of our guys to my left were still taking cover when I happened to glance in their direction. I saw an enemy soldier coming over the bank less than 10 feet away from them. I yelled at our guys to stay down and I opened up with my rifle. It probably saved a couple of our guy's lives. The NVA kept hitting us with everything they had, including a lot of hand grenades. One of these grenades landed just inches from me, I was able to crawl far enough away to avoid the worst of it. I can remember the hot blast and being rolled by the explosion. In my mind, I was thinking, "So this is what it feels like to die". When I came to, the first thing I remember was feeling my leg to see if it was still there. Fortunately my wounds were not life threatening, but I had over 110 pieces of shrapnel, of various sizes, in me. Our medic patched me up as best he could to stop the bleeding and any of us that could still move, stayed and continued the fight until dawn.

Eventually dawn arrived and it was finally quiet. Bodies were strewn all around our perimeter. We hoped that the remaining NVA had pulled out but we could not be sure. At last a Medevac helicopter came to begin to take the wounded out for care at a MASH unit. As I was helped onto the chopper and it took off, I was afraid that we would get shot down, but as we gained altitude, I was thankful that the ordeal was over I had survived! Unfortunately, many of my friends and squad members did not.  
War is hell!

Ronald Kociba