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Cantigny

David Aldridge

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ZIPF! PING!! A bullet whizzed by my head and struck the ceiling of the chopper. I quit sitting on my helmet and quickly put it on my head. I hollered to everyone,

“Hot LZ!”

All the grunts on the Huey followed suit. I got as close to the floor as I could. Another hot Landing Zone. Bullets were zinging and pinging every which way; everybody’s nightmare. *Does one of those have my fucking name on it?*

Pilots, co-pilots, and door gunners were all screaming at us, “Hot LZ! Get OFF! Get off the chopper!”

I hollered right back at them, “Set this motherfucker down!”

I edged closer to the door so I could hang my legs out and stand on the skids. We were still twenty feet off the ground. We all carried seventy-five pounds of equipment, with extra water and ammo. To jump would guarantee a broken leg. The squelch was breaking on our radios like someone was trying to send out morse code. All radios were set on the battalion frequency for the insertion. Panicky officers of three different companies of infantry were vying to be heard on the radio:

“Hot LZ! Oh, God! Oh, fuck!”

“Return fire when you get ...” SQUELCH! ...

“Need a Medic!”... SQUELCH!

Then the calm, sonorous voice of our battalion commander, LTC Vernon C. Coffee, Jr. came over the air ways. “This is Dauntless 6. Use proper radio procedures, OUT.”

The Huey door gunner facing the wood line fired his M-60 machine gun steadily at the unseen enemy. RAT-TA-TAT-TAT. His red tracer rounds set off small fires in the jungle. The Cobra gun ships made run after run fifty meters deeper into the jungle from the wood line their

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miniguns blazing. The minigun sounded like a foghorn on a lighthouse. The jungle was being shredded.

It was 19 November 1968 and we were being choppered in from Fire Support Base Julie. Another bad place to be. Very bad. I was in the first "Lift" of five helicopters. They carried my platoon. I was the Third Platoon Leader and had been since May. I had a lieutenant assigned to me, but I was still the leader. Five more Hueys were right behind us with our second platoon. The first platoon was five minutes behind us. The pilots finally got some balls and set us down. We un-assed that chopper in three seconds flat and it took off. I knelt where I had gotten off the Huey and had everyone else get down. The noise of the choppers masked the enemy weapons fire for a few seconds. I couldn't hear where they were firing from. Finally, I moved my men from the grassy plains up to the jungle wood line in front of us. I got them ready to do an on-line assault as we waited for the Hueys to get out of earshot. I had my machine gunner link up another 200 rounds. All the firing was coming from our far left where the second platoon was landing. I said a short prayer, thanking heaven that we wouldn't have to do an on-line assault. They are the hardest things for an infantryman to do in war and the triple canopy jungle would have made it twice as difficult. I got my men up and we moved along the wood line to the right, just as we had planned with our company commander.

After fifteen minutes the rest of the company landed. I heard over the radio our commanding officer ordered the first platoon to move into the jungle where we had received fire. Lifts of five helicopters each were landing behind us with regularity. It looked like this fire support base was going to be a big one. Chinooks were bringing in sling loads of engineer's stakes, and concertina wire. Fifty meters behind me the grass had been trampled down and I could see the medics working over one of our soldiers. I couldn't tell who got hit. More

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automatic weapons fire flared up where first platoon went into the jungle. My radio transmitter operator (RTO), Louie Ragusa, came running over to me and said, "Dave, the first platoon got hit. They have three guys wounded."

"Let me know if we have to go in and get them."

"Roger that."

I waved at my machine gunner, Ray Schenone, to come to me. His assistant gunner, Dave Ackenbrack, followed him, carrying the extra ammo already linked to the M-60.

"Ray, stay here with me and stay ready. We may have to go in for the first platoon. I don't know yet. They are trying to get their wounded guys out now."

A photographer from the First Infantry Division headquarters walked up behind me and said, "Hey, look this way." Staring into the jungle for signs of enemy movement, I ignored him. He took a picture anyway. Louie was trying to hear the air traffic over the sounds of arriving and departing Hueys. He crouched with his radio five meters behind me. I looked around and saw the photographer start taking pictures of Louie. We should have just bombed the hell out of the enemy after we got the first platoon out. But it wasn't my call.

The CO ordered the second platoon to go in exactly where the first platoon had gotten hit. PFC Dave Jasper was walking point for them. Within minutes Jasper was hit and there was total chaos on the radio frequency as a huge firefight erupted in the thick jungle. When no one was able to get Jasper back to safety, Specialist Five Albert Figueroa jumped up and tried to pull him back. He, too, was hit and now there were two wounded out front. PFCs Greene and Taylor from the second platoon rushed forward despite orders to stay put and pulled Fig back. They couldn't get Jasper.

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I offered to take a machine gun crew and flank the enemy from behind. The company commander threatened me with court-martial over the radio if I tried to come in and help. After a frustrating fifteen minutes, we were all ordered to pull back. By then it was late afternoon and LTC Coffee ordered everyone to start digging in. Bravo Company was in the bunker to my left. My platoon had eight bunkers stretching out over the northeast section of the fire base. I showed everyone where to start digging their bunkers and how to face their firing ports. The firing ports always had to cover the bunkers in front of you. The ground was hard where we had to dig and we began right away. I decided to stay in the bunker nearest Bravo Company. There was no more discussion of retrieving Jasper from the jungle. I saw Taylor and Greene; they were both weeping. I walked over.

They told me, "We tried to get him back, Dave. We tried our best."

I put my hands on both of their shoulders and told them, "I know, Brother. I know. I heard it all on the radio. Thanks for getting Fig back."

My heart ached for Jasper and the men of the second platoon. I knew that the promises all infantrymen made to each other were solemnly made. One of those promises was long standing and considered sacred: we all swore to never leave another soldier behind. We had all failed that oath.

When the order came down at dusk to send out LPs, I first wanted to talk to them face to face. I didn't want the soldiers assigned to our platoon's listening post to go too far out as we seemed to be on the edge of a large enemy base camp. If the enemy were going to attack us it would probably begin with mortar rounds and the LPs needed to be able to get up and run back to the safety of our bunkers. If the LPs went too far out they could easily get cut off from us. I didn't want to lose any more men that night. Louie Ragusa was on one of the LPs.

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I had a new guy assigned to my platoon for the operation; his name was John Costanzo. He was from New York. He had the accent and I knew he would fit in right away. We already had five other guys from New York. I told him he could stay in the bunker with my machine gunner and me. We didn't make a lot of progress on digging, so by 10:00 p.m. we only had a foxhole that was three and a half feet deep. We widened it a little to accommodate all three of us, but we had no overhead cover.

Schenone complained, "Our fucking bunker isn't big enough!"

I said, "If we have to go hand-to-hand with Charlie a shallow foxhole makes it easier to get out of." Costanzo laughed, but Schenone didn't get the joke. He was not placated. He started digging again furiously. "Here, fill a few sandbags. That'll make you feel better." I held the sandbags while he shoveled it full. Soon we had ten sandbags. We got them tied off and placed in front of the foxhole, two high and five across. They afforded little protection. Just as we got the sandbags in place, three RPGs swooshed through the air and exploded behind us. SWOOSH! BLAM BLAM BLAM!

I screamed as loud as I could, "All LPs come in now! Ground attack!" Automatic weapons fire raked the entire fire support base. I screamed at those in the perimeter foxholes, "Hold your fire! Don't shoot the LPs!! Friendlies coming in!"

Explosions ripped the night from hand grenades and Chinese Claymore mines. Louie and the other LPs ran past me to the bunker on our right. When I was sure my LPs had made it back in, I said to the surrounding bunkers, "OK, open fire. Make sure you fire low. They may be crawling. Everyone take the pin out of one grenade and get ready to throw it."

After a pause of thirty seconds I said, "OK. Now throw it into the jungle as far as you can. Get down!"

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Fifteen hand grenades went off in the jungle in front of us and the noise from the enemy machine guns subsided momentarily. After a minute there was a new surge of firing from out in the jungle. I told Schenone to sweep his machine gun from left to right and then to take cover to see what happened. The North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong always trained their soldiers to go for our machine guns. In answer to Schenone's sweep of the area we received green tracers from our left front. I hollered at our M-79 man, Renner, to fire in that direction with some H.E. rounds. The sound of his M-79 was immediate: BLOOP! Pause. BLAM!! as the High Explosive round exploded twenty meters into the jungle. It had a killing radius of five meters.

“Great job, Renner! Fire a few more over there!”

Suddenly, between machine gun bursts, Schenone screamed, “We're all going to die! We're going to get overrun, and we're all going to die!”

I said very calmly, “Schenone, you're such an alarmist.”

“What the fuck is an alarmist?”

“Okay, everyone get a hand grenade ready to throw. An alarmist is a guy who always overreacts to situations. He is always setting off fire alarms at the first sign of smoke. Okay, everybody throw your grenade and take cover!”

Costanzo said over and over, “Holy fuck! Holy fuck!”

We all got down. Twenty grenades went off with a thunderous explosion in the jungle.

I continued with Schenone, “You're just thinking of the worst-case scenario, which will not be happening because we're going to kill them before they can overrun us.” In the light of descending artillery flares Costanzo's eyes were as wide as saucers. I never saw him blink.

I hollered out, “Everybody fire one magazine on semi-automatic and make sure you fire low.” They responded, BAM BAM BAM!

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“OK, everyone get down.”

Somehow, my senses were heightened to such an extent that I was in perfect tune with the noise and chaos of the battle. I seemed to know when the enemy was going to fire their sub-machine guns and automatic weapons fire. I somehow knew when they were going to fire their RPG's at us.

When I thought the RPG's were coming, I would holler, “Take cover!”

Sure enough, RPG's lit up the sky and swooshed overhead exploding behind us.

This continued for the next three hours. I could hear the moaning of the enemy wounded out in the jungle. There would be no sleep this night. The enemy wounded and dead were being carried off the battlefield. As the sun began to rise, a scene of carnage was revealed in front of us. Bodies and pieces of bodies were everywhere. Where there had been large healthy trees before there was now just splintered and charred tree stumps. The gunfire had removed all the bark from the trees that were left. The leaves from the bushes and trees were shredded and sap dripped heavily onto the jungle floor. Amazingly, some of the sap was blood red. The few dozen rounds of artillery we had received in support had cut some of the trees in half. It was absolutely still. No sounds issued from the surrounding jungle. Normally birds and monkeys were chattering to greet the morning sun. The fuck-you lizards, which normally called back and forth, were conspicuously absent. As I lit a cigarette I looked over at PFC Costanzo and told him,

“You did great for your first ground attack. Stick with Louie, my RTO, today. We are going to walk point to get Jasper's body back.”

The grisly task of separating bodies and body parts began. Thirteen bodies lay between Bravo Company's last bunker and my bunker. There were body parts for another ten soldiers, but I don't think anyone really cared about the body count. Bravo Company had lost four of their

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soldiers. Three of them had been out on listening post together for Charlie Company. They didn't make it back in when the attack began. They were PFCs Benny Sapp, Thomas J. Burton, and Raymond L. Brown. SGT Jeffrey L. Hicks from Charlie Company was also killed. From Alpha Company, PFC Leonard Beatty was also killed. This was no victory to be celebrated; only mourned. It was time to go get David Jasper's body back. God help the son of a bitch who got in my way.