



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive


Mighty Pen Project

2020

JC III

David Aldridge

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Terrorism Studies Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/117

This 1961-1980 Army is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

JC III David Aldridge

On 30 November 1968, we moved three companies plus the headquarters group of Second Battalion, Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment from Fire Support Base (FSB) Cantigny, ten kilometers west to the Saigon River. Our orders were to establish a new FSB to be called Junction City III, in the heart of the notorious Iron Triangle. Just knowing we were headed to another part of the Iron Triangle made a lot of bowels start fluttering. When I heard Delta Company was to take the point for the battalion, I didn't wait for an invitation.

I walked by our CO and told him, "I'll take point, Captain."

I wasn't about to let anyone else walk point in such a treacherous place. Not after what happened eleven days before at FSB Cantigny. That's where the first and second platoon went off into the jungle from the landing zone on 19 November 1968, and Jasper and Figueroa were killed and a bunch of other guys wounded. If we were walking into trouble, I wanted to be at point.

"Third Platoon, fall in behind me! We've got point!" Within two minutes, I was a hundred meters into the triple canopy jungle. Everyone else followed. Four hours later, I broke out of the jungle onto a cleared area that led downward to the Saigon River. I scouted further north along the wood line to see what was there. Just as I rounded some bushes that concealed me, I spied dozens of North Vietnamese soldiers 300 meters away. Praying they hadn't seen me, I pulled back and set up a hasty ambush with two machine guns. I immediately radioed the discovery to my company commander. I had both gunners link up 300 rounds. We held our breath waiting for them to advance toward us. After thirty minutes, I was ordered to pull everyone back, and we continued into the area for our FSB.

Bravo Company was ordered to start digging foxholes on the southern portion of the circular FSB, Delta was given the northern half. Charlie Company started digging a few bunkers.

JC III David Aldridge

Only one platoon of Alpha Company was with us, and they were tasked with a few bunkers on the west side of the FSB. We plotted where our bunkers should be dug immediately. I had our entire third platoon set to work. Time was of the essence. I reminded everyone:

“They’re coming. We’ve got to be ready.”

We worked furiously all day. At dusk, when I heard the listening post (LP) guys were headed out, I told them all, “Don’t go too far out. I think we’re going to get hit tonight, and you want to be able to get back in. Don’t forget where the gates are in the wire.”

We finished digging the bunkers and filling sandbags for overhead cover. I insisted we take the extra measure of filling sufficient sandbags for a large sleeping position behind our bunkers. Everyone bitched because they were already exhausted, but they did what I said. I had a 2’ x 3’ American flag I had bought in the Lai Khe Plaza during a stand down. I liked it because it had golden fringe all around the edging, and it had flown over my bunkers at Cantigny. I went into the woods and chopped down a twelve-foot-tall sapling. Tying the flag to the top of the sapling, I planted it in our sandbags.

As soon as I hoisted the flag on the pole, our company commander, CPT Zap, saw it and rushed over. He ordered me to take it down. “It gives away your position.” I guess he thought the forty other bunkers in the FSB were invisible.

“Yes, sir. Will do.” He scurried back to his bunker. CPT Zap was someone who needed to pick his battles with me more carefully. *Fuck him*. The flag remained. His name wasn’t Zap. That was a nickname I had given him as his *nom de guerre*. It seemed to fit. In early 1968, an underground counterculture, anti-establishment Comic was started in San Francisco called *Zap Comics*. Robert Crumb was the founder. The Artists and Illustrators were far-out radical anti-war hippies, whose story lines were irreverent and raunchy. It was just what we needed in Vietnam,

JC III David Aldridge

where most soldiers were draftees whose favorite by-line was “FTA;” and no, that doesn’t mean: fun, travel, and adventure.

In the late afternoon, Charlie Company was ordered to move out on a company-sized ambush just north and west of our new fire support base. They took off at dusk.

I fell asleep at 2230 hours while looking at the clear starry sky and listening to the jungle. Hyper-vigilant even in my sleep, I heard the unmistakable sound of mortars sliding down into the NVA mortar tubes. I knew instantly that those were not our mortars. I shot bolt upright.

“Ground attack! Ground attack! All LPs come in NOW!”

The dreams I had a year ago in California came back in a flash. The attack began with twenty enemy mortar teams firing 60-mm and 82-mm mortars into our positions. Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) teams fired dozens of RPGs into our bunkers while enemy machine gunners raked our FSB with a murderous hail of green tracers. Not one of our positions escaped being hit. It was an extremely well-executed ground attack designed to keep us in our bunkers seeking cover. The first wave of NVA soldiers should have easily penetrated our concertina wire on the perimeter, but they hesitated too long, a costly mistake.

I stood and roared again to the whole Battalion, “All LPs come in! All LPs come in NOW!” I fired over the bunkers between us and Bravo’s bunkers as the enemy massed for an assault. Firing into their midst, I saw some drop.

Incredibly, the first volley of enemy mortars landed directly in the middle of our ammunition supply bunker behind the second platoon’s positions. A huge secondary explosion shook the earth. The sky massively illuminated as everything inside blew up and the aerial flares were ignited. White, green, and red star-burst flares exploded one after the other, casting an eerie glow over the FSB.

JC III David Aldridge

I yelled, "Get down!"

Unexploded ordinance rained all over the entire FSB. The burning flares illuminated the entire battlefield. I saw more than 200 NVA soldiers on Bravo Company's side of the perimeter. They were just standing there mesmerized, staring at the colored flares bursting in the air like it was a fireworks display. I continued shooting them one after another. They acted as if they were zombies. I aimed at 'center of mass,' but as I shot them, they flinched, remaining upright, staring into the heavens. After shooting as many NVA as I could, a hail of green tracers like a mad swarm of bees finally drove me to take cover again. I heard nothing but enemy fire over on Bravo's side which told me our guys were not firing at our attackers. I resolved that if this was my time to die, then, so be it.

The cacophony of explosions and gunfire was deafening. Shrapnel and small arms tore into the sandbags of our bunker and sleeping positions WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! Enemy RPGs swooshed loudly over our heads and exploded to our sides and behind us. Dirt and sand rained on us. NVA soldiers were bunched at the concertina wire in front of Bravo Company's bunkers. I screamed at them, "Bravo Company, get up out of your fucking bunkers! The gooks are at the wire!"

I grabbed Renner's M-79 and stood to fire across the FSB at the NVA on Bravo's side, point-blank. Swarms of green tracers whizzed by my head.

We were taking too many rounds for me to stand up each time I fired, so I shouted, "Feed me HE rounds, Renner!"

He started handing me rounds as fast as I could load and fire them. I used the M-79 like a mortar tube, firing the high explosive rounds almost straight up. My aim was to drop the rounds into the midst of the mass of enemy soldiers to inflict the maximum possible damage. One of the

JC III David Aldridge

M-79 rounds landed directly on an enemy RPG team, causing a huge secondary explosion that wiped out the entire team. I had as many as five rounds in the air simultaneously before the first round landed and exploded. In minutes, I had gone through an entire bag of fifty HE rounds.

Next to my bunker was one of our Delta Company mortar pits. I saw a lone mortarman braving the intense fire the NVA directed at us; it was Cleo Sears. Cleo was an affable, hard-working black mortarman who had jumped into the pit without any thought for his own safety as he fired illumination rounds for us to help identify enemy positions. Without those rounds, I would have been unable to see the hundreds of enemies at the wire and to start killing them. Cleo was shirtless, and throughout the entire battle sweat glistened on his broad ebony back as he stripped propellant packs off the mortar rounds and shoved them down the tube. He worked tirelessly. After the first few minutes, he began to intersperse High Explosive rounds with the Illumination rounds. Another mortarman, Dave Foster, joined Cleo. They began increasing their rate of fire. They stayed in that pit working the mortars tubes all night long. I hollered at Cleo once in a while to let him know how much we appreciated the illumination rounds.

“Thanks for the flares, Cleo. We’re killing the bastards as fast as we can. How you doing down there?”

“We’re doing just fine, Dave. We’re working on ZERO charge and MAX Elevation.” That meant that he was stripping all the propellant charges from the high explosive mortars, using the shotgun charge to fire the shell. That way the mortars wouldn’t overshoot the enemy.

I continued to exhort Bravo to get up out of their bunkers and engage the enemy, but I was not as nice as I was before. “Bravo! Get your fucking asses out of those bunkers and start killing these goddam gooks!” When I thought that Renner could follow my example well enough

JC III David Aldridge

to not kill any of our guys with a short round, I handed him his M-79. He stayed right with me and did a splendid job under heavy fire, placing rounds in the middle of large groups of NVA.

I continued using my M-16 to shoot over the bunkers separating us and Bravo. Finally, I resorted to outright insults to motivate them. “Bravo, you lazy cocksuckers need to get out of your fucking bunkers and start killing these bastards! If you don’t, they’re going to drop a fucking hand grenade on your ass, and we’re going to get overrun!”

During the night I called those boys every name in the book. I never wanted to insult anyone like that, but this was life or death. It was the most expedient way to get their attention as the situation was getting more and more dire. I didn’t see any other way to get them up out of the bunkers to where they could see the enemy and start killing them.

The second platoon had an LP out on the north side of the FSB consisting of PFCs Steve Stone, Johnny Rader, and Thomas R. Stutts. They were fifty meters outside of the defensive wire which consisted of one roll of concertina wire only one strand high (2 ½ to 3 feet high). I heard a radio transmission from Delta 6 (CPT Zap) ordering all LPs to remain in place. That would have doomed them all.

Afraid they might follow the order, I hollered again, “All LPs come in!!” Fortunately, my own third platoon LPs heeded me and came in to take cover in their bunkers. The three soldiers from the Bravo Company LP came running in from outside the wire, but once inside the wire, they plopped their asses down right in front of my bunker for some reason!

I yelled, “What the fuck are you guys doing? Get your asses in here, or you’re going to die!”

JC III David Aldridge

They were five meters in front of my bunker. I tried all night to get those boys to crawl backwards to my bunker, but they were just too scared to move. Frozen in place, they stayed right where they were.

I hollered repeatedly over the noise of battle, "It's your choice, boys, but I'm telling you right now, if one of you gets hit, I am not coming out to get you. So if that pisses you off, then I suggest you get your asses in here right now."

They answered meekly, "We're staying right here."

The NVA mortars continued to rain on us. They exploded all over the FSB. Dozens of AK-47s fired, their distinctive rounds POP POP POP like hundreds of firecrackers exploding on Chinese New Year. The AK rounds and rounds from the many Chinese sub-machine guns slammed into the sandbags on our sleeping positions and bunkers throwing up so much dirt that in the white light from the glowing flares, I could see clouds of dust. With the cordite smoke from gunfire, artillery rounds, the dust, and the unending explosions, it was as if a fog had descended on the FSB.

Cleo hollered, "Dave, we're taking a lot of fire here. How about sending me someone to give us some cover fire?" Louie Ragusa volunteered to go, climbing into the pit to give Cleo and Foster supporting fire.

I told Louie, "Just don't shoot any of Bravo's LPs."

"Nah, I know where they are."

Enemy RPG Teams fired simultaneously in a coordinated attack, the distinctive swoosh of their rockets sounding briefly before they exploded against bunkers surrounding us. Friendly artillery rounds began pounding the jungle and were then walked up to the wire. The enemy

JC III David Aldridge

never stopped. Renner got some satisfying secondary explosions with his M-79 and yelled joyfully each time, “Yeah, motherfuckers, yeah!”

I cursed Bravo mercilessly for the next ten minutes. To me, it seemed as if the leaders of Bravo had been swallowed by the earth. Finally, one of Bravo’s machine gunners, Specialist Four David Thomas, got on top of one of their bunkers and started mowing down the NVA at the wire. The sound of his M-60 chattering away was sweet music to our ears. Our radio had the loudspeaker squawk box turned on, and I heard Delta 2-6 (2LT C. T. Davis) trying to calm his men. They were surrounded by 400 enemy soldiers. The barrage of artillery that rained around their position was truly unbelievable. It could not have been worse at Gettysburg. I didn’t see how anyone could survive that. At different times I heard the call signs of four batteries firing in support of us: DESTROYER (1ST BN, 5TH ARTY), DETONATE (1ST BN, 7TH ARTY), DEADLY (6TH BN, 15TH ARTY), DUNGEON (2ND BN, 33RD ARTY) and DYNAMITE ALPHA (8TH BN, 6TH ARTY). We received fire from 105-mm guns, 155-mm guns, 8-inch Howitzers, and occasionally the really big 175-mm guns. I lost track of who was firing what, but the really big, 175-mm guns fired sporadically. There was never any doubt when they were firing as the entire grid square would shudder with each impact of the big boys. Each round made a ten-foot-wide crater in the earth. The shrapnel sounded like a small car flying through the air. Someone hollered, “Please, God, don’t let them fire a short round!”

Renner told me he was running short of HE rounds for his M-79, and I was down to my last couple of magazines for my rifle. I told Schenone, Renner, and Ragusa that I would go get more ammo from the Ammo Storage Bunker behind us.

I added, “Don’t shoot me when I come back!”

JC III David Aldridge

It was just twenty-five meters from us, but it seemed like 200. I took Schenone's .45 caliber pistol and a flashlight. I put hand grenades in each of my fatigue pants pockets and low-crawled slowly, waiting for explosions to illuminate the sky. With each explosion, I could see the way clear for the next five meters, and I would quickly crawl there and wait. Finally at the bunker, I slipped inside and turned on the flashlight with a red lens cover. A hail of green tracers streaked past me. I couldn't get any lower than I already was, so I worked quickly. I pulled out a case of M-16 rifle ammo and another case of the HE rounds for the M-79. I slowly crawled back, dragging both cases at my sides.

As I crawled past one of the other bunkers, I heard voices coming from it and hollered, "This is Dave Aldridge, who the fuck is down here in this bunker?" It was our cooks from the mess hall.

"Two of you get your weapons and ammo and follow me to my bunker, NOW!"

"Do we need our steel pots?"

"Only if you value your good looks. FUCK YES! Put on your steel pots!"

The cooks were terrified but eager to be of service, so I put them down in our bunker where they loaded all our empty magazines with fresh ammo. I praised them every time they handed us more magazines. They got very good at it.

The ground attack had been raging for an hour, and we had wounded soldiers in the FSB. I heard a helicopter approaching and thought it must be a Cobra gunship. *They're going to have a goddam field day! This is every fucking Cobra Pilot's dream!* Suddenly the helicopter turned on its light and descended like a majestic angel. *What the fuck are you doing, man?* But it wasn't a Cobra, it was a Huey Medevac! A cloud of green tracers engulfed the bird as it came down. I stood up and tried to give the chopper covering fire on Bravo's side. It was only on the ground

JC III David Aldridge

long enough to pick up a load of wounded soldiers, and then it began to rise. I laid out more suppressive fire, praying they would make it. Another swarm of green tracers enveloped the entire chopper, but it still rose. I don't know how they did it, but the helicopter lifted off, continuing back towards Lai Khe and the MASH units of the Big Red One.

We were running low on ammo again, so Schenone volunteered to make a trip to the bunker. Cleo launched another illumination flare, and I stood to shoot more enemy in front of Bravo. I saw teams of NVA dragging and carrying wounded and dead NVA soldiers back from the battlefield. I shot as many as I could, but more teams popped up to take their place. The whiffs of air around my head warned me to get back down. The 175-mm guns resumed firing for us and the rounds caused mini-earthquakes with each salvo. The problem with the really big guns was that you couldn't call them in too close. One short round would wipe out an entire platoon. I felt reassured when the 105s started pounding the perimeter once again. With 105s you could call them in really close, especially if you had a bunker to hide behind. In the jungle, I have called 105s in as close as twenty-five meters. The night of 30 Nov.–1 Dec. we called them in to fifteen meters and sometimes ten. The concertina wire around the FSB was shredded. Thank God we didn't have any short rounds.

The next one to crawl to the ammo bunker for re-supply was Ragusa. Then around 0400 hours, Costanzo made a trip for even more ammo. We ran through our basic load of ammo five times during the battle. Cleo Sears and Dave Foster had crawled over to the other mortar pit to retrieve more rounds, and guys from the fourth platoon helped hump them to Cleo's pit. Tension began building when there was a noticeable lapse in artillery rounds landing around the FSB. After a few minutes, the air force joined the fight. F-4 Phantom jets began strafing the perimeter with their 30-mm cannons. After multiple strafing runs, they dropped a series of napalm canisters

JC III David Aldridge

and 250-pound bombs, setting fire to the nearby wood-line. The artillery resumed, but at a more relaxed tempo. DYNAMITE ALPHA ceased firing for us at 0500 hours. The first light of dawn streaked over the eastern horizon. Bravo's LPs finally stood and ran the five meters back to our perimeter, then moved on toward their unit.

When they ran by me, I shouted, "You're **NOT** fucking welcome!"

One of them asked, "What do ya' mean?"

"We had to shoot around you ALL fucking night to make sure we didn't shoot you in the ass and you can't even say thanks?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, man." They hunkered down and diddy-bopped back over to Bravo's area.

By 0545 hours the ground attack was over, and the battlefield in its ghoulish reality was being slowly revealed. The trees along the wood line were no longer majestic and soaring, but charred smoking splinters of their former beauty. The firing had stopped. The grass outside our perimeter was scorched to the earth. The smell of burned flesh and cordite was heavy in the air. It was sickening. Guys who were non-smokers asked me for cigarettes so they could mask the fetid smell in the air. The two cooks climbed out of the bunker, and we shook their hands and thanked them profusely for helping us during the ground attack. I told them,

"You are now fucking Combat Infantry Cooks!" They both beamed with pride and said they were going to make us the best breakfast we ever had. They jogged back toward where the mess tent once stood.

I stepped outside the line of bunkers towards the former perimeter and looked back. My flag was shredded, punched full of holes but still recognizable as an American flag. It flapped and flopped in the gentle breeze. My heart swelled with emotion. I stood staring at it for a

JC III David Aldridge

minute. Every sandbag on our bunker and sleeping position was shredded. They were no longer identifiable as sandbags. The olive drab plastic bags had been destroyed. We would have to rebuild the entire bunker. I pushed my hand into one sandbag and ran my fingers through the dirt. From just that one sandbag I pulled out twenty projectiles from AK-47s and the Chinese submachine guns.

“Louie, Schenone! Look at this shit!” I let the projectiles slip through my fingers.

“They’re all AK rounds! That’s just from one fucking sandbag!”

Using the lull in the attack, Ray Schenone took the opportunity to disassemble his machine gun to clean it. He had fired over 2,000 rounds during the night. His right hand was swathed in a gauze bandage. Every machine gun comes with two barrels. We had to switch barrels half a dozen times on Ray’s gun because the barrel had glowed red in the dark, and we were afraid of the gun blowing up. As a result, Schenone had a nasty burn from switching out a super-hot barrel in the middle of the ground attack.

I climbed on top of our bunker, sat on my helmet and lit a cigarette. Using a chunk of C-4, I warmed water for coffee. I found a bag of C-ration cocoa and some sugar to mix with it and soon had a steaming canteen cup full of Mocha Coffee. I heard a commotion to my left; SP4 Dave Evasco and CPT Zap, our CO, ran from one bunker to the next, where they dived to the earth and rolled John Wayne-style. Then, they stood and repeated this farcical maneuver at the next bunker as they made their way to the perimeter.

I hollered over to some guys who were also sitting on some nearby bunkers, “Just what the fuck are they doing over there?”

“Don’t know, Dave. Your guess is as good as mine.”

JC III David Aldridge

They finally jumped up and ran to what remained of the perimeter concertina wire. Firing a quick burst of rounds with their rifles, they seized the piece of wire and pulled it back closer to our bunker line. Dropping the wire, they ran to the first bunker they could make it to and did the John Wayne-style dive and roll again. I turned my attention to Cleo Sears in the mortar pit. He stood ready holding a mortar round in each hand.

“Cleo, I think you deserve a good cup of coffee, brother. You did a magnificent job all night long. If it hadn’t been for you, we might have been overrun over on Bravo’s side.” We both turned in their direction.

“Can you see those bodies stacked up at the wire over there, Cleo?”

“Yeah, I see them. We sure took a lot of fire from that direction last night.”

“Yeah, I estimate there were over 300 NVA trying to join our little night club over on that side.” I heard a commotion over on Bravo’s side of the FSB.

Someone yelled, “He’s still moving! Kill him!” A burst of rounds sputtered from an M-16. Pow Pow Pow!

In a rage, I immediately ran over, yelling loud enough for all of Bravo to hear me, “Cease fire! Cease fire! Would you fucking control yourself? Put your weapons away! These are unarmed noncombatants. You get them medical attention, for God’s sakes! Have you all lost your fucking minds? You shoot one more of these guys, and I will see to it that you get court-martialed. And just where the fuck are your officers and NCOs? You officers and NCOs get busy and do your fucking job.”

I turned around, and as I was walking back to my bunker someone from our second platoon hollered, “Dave, there is a wounded guy over here, and one of the officers wants to kill him.”

JC III David Aldridge

I passed back through Delta's bunkers on my way to where the wounded guy lay. On my way out of the perimeter, CPT Zap hollered at me, "If you find any pistols, they're mine." I was stunned at the level of selfishness this denoted. As a leader, you don't order someone to go fetch you a war souvenir.

"If you want a pistol, then you can come out and look for one." That surely endeared me to CPT Zap. I had to walk by the second platoon area on my way out, where PFC Steve Stone sat on a bunker looking dazed and forlorn.

My Inner Voice said, "Go talk with him."

I stopped in front of him and asked, "Were you out on LP?" Steve was from West Virginia, and I always liked to talk with him and the other guys from the second platoon. It was always a joy for me to hear his West Virginian accent.

"Yeah, me, Johnny Rader, and Stutts was out there. I heard you holler to come in, but it was too late, Dave. They already had us surrounded. Stutts was killed in the first few minutes of the attack. All we could do was hide the whole night and pray."

"Well, Steve, I'd say your prayers were answered, brother. I'm glad you made it." I placed my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about Stutts. He was a good guy. There was nothing else for you to do, man."

I approached where the wounded enemy soldier lay and ordered everyone to back away from him. From his uniform, I could see he was an NVA officer, and he was deathly pale. One of our officers, a first lieutenant, stood ready to shoot the NVA. I saw immediately that the enemy was severely wounded and would offer no resistance.

"Y'all back away from him. Lower your weapons and put 'em on **safe!** I don't want anybody **accidentally** shooting the guy." I stood between our officer and the wounded enemy. I

JC III David Aldridge

asked my lieutenant, who was poised to shoot the NVA, “Did you sleep through the entire Geneva Conventions class, sir? You don’t shoot someone who is unarmed and wounded. If you do, the penalty is death.” I was on my second tour in Vietnam and my Vietnamese was better than average.

After everyone cleared the area, I spoke Vietnamese, telling him gently, “Don’t shoot, đại úy! (Captain) Don’t move. The fight is over. I want to get you to a doctor. Surrender arms. Do you have any weapons?” I could tell he was in excruciating pain. He raised up from his back a little and pointed underneath him. I looked into his eyes to see if this might be a ruse and perhaps there was a hand grenade under him. I saw no deception or guile in those eyes. He was pleading with his eyes. I reached under him and pulled out a brand-new K-54 Chinese pistol in its own holster, and a large plastic baggy of ammunition.

I told him, “Thank you, brother. My name is Anh Hai. I am sorry. We will fly you to a hospital. Maybe you will see your family again one day. Good luck. Medic!”

Our head medic, SP5 Dennis Inverso, from Philadelphia, came running. This NVA captain would soon be on his way to the Twenty-Fourth EVAC Hospital in Long Binh.

“Give him some morphine, Doc. He looks like he’s been hit about ten times.”

“Okay. We’ll take good care of him.”

There was nothing else to do. I was exhausted. I went back to finish my mocha coffee. When our cooks said chow was ready, I loaded up a plate with scrambled eggs, cheese, bacon, and sausage.

One of the heroic cooks asked me, “You want some pancakes too?”

“Yeah, what the fuck, brother. Bring on the pancakes. I feel like we earned ourselves a feast today.” With a heavily laden paper plate, I went back to our bunker to eat in peace.

JC III David Aldridge

By 0900 hours, the stench of death already surrounded the FSB. There were bodies and pieces of bodies scattered everywhere. Many of the enemy had simply been vaporized or shredded by the incoming artillery and secondary explosions. There were 47 bodies still intact, with another 100 lying in the surrounding jungle, where they had crawled off during the battle. Another 100 blood trails led off into the thick jungle, but no one was motivated enough to do a sweep to ante up the body count. Fortunately, we were not ordered to do any extra sweeps where the napalm had incinerated the enemy in the jungle, and no one volunteered to go out there. Unexploded ordnance was always dangerous on dead bodies.

Rome plows were airlifted in by sky cranes to begin digging huge trenches to bury the gruesome remains of this NVA unit. We would let the Rome plows bury all that carnage. Not one infantryman was interested in piecing together the odd limbs and torsos to get a more accurate body count either.

Infantrymen were never all that fond of 'body counts' in the first place. Going through a dead man's pockets and belongings always seemed disrespectful. Only the boys down in Saigon and reporters seemed to get all feverish about the exact number of dead enemies. Fuck the body count. As was always the case in Vietnam, the awards and decorations were few and far between for those who really earned them. Quite a few Silver Stars were awarded to the wrong people, and Cleo Sears, who had saved everyone's ass, was awarded an Army Commendation Medal with "V" Device. It was hardly indicative of what he had done to help 400 Americans survive the battle.

The soldiers of Bravo never again mentioned me cussing them out that night. They probably still hate my guts, but they all survived the ground attack, didn't they? Cleo helped to save most of us, but he couldn't save all of us. Our more immediate problem was that we had a

JC III David Aldridge

dead soldier and his family down in Rienzi, Mississippi was going to be handed a crushing shitload of grief over the coming days. God bless them all and give them comfort.