

Memories

GARY WIEDLE in Vietnam

ARRIVAL IN VIETNAM

I arrived in Long Binh Vietnam on December 23, 1969 as a Infantry, Airborne, Special Forces 1st Lieutenant, (MOS 31542). The Army assigned me to Binh Hoa and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, (LIB). The Executive Officer for 5th Battalion drove me in a jeep out to Fire Support Base, (FSB), Libby and I was assigned to Company B, 5th Battalion, 12th Infantry, 199th LIB. Our area of operation was just south and north of War Zone D and along the Song Dong Nai River and often we deployed to the more forward FSB Gladys. The 199th was light and therefore capable of moving very quickly as it did later when we went to Xuan Loc and then eventually into Cambodia.

EARLY ASSIGNMENTS

I was assigned as a Platoon Leader in B Company and commanded the 4th Platoon (Mortar Platoon), and at times the 1st and 3rd Platoons. We would go out on reconnaissance and ambush patrols that would last from three days at the shortest to 14 days longest. Mostly we were inserted by helicopters in a Landing Zone, (LZ), which had been prepared by artillery bombardment and gun ship air assault prior to our insertion. A few times we were trucked to a drop off point in a village and from there we embarked on our mission. One of the surprises that I had was that the operational size of the Companies and Platoons were way under what I expected. A Platoon was supposed to be at least 40 men and we often had around 25 plus or minus for our missions. As soon as I arrived at FSB Libby and met the Battalion Commander, LTC Beckner; and my Company Commander CPT Gordon Lee, **my Company was air lifted to relieve FSB Gladys which sat on the banks of the Song Dong Nai River which was the southern border of War Zone D.**

On my first mission I had 4th Platoon on a reconnaissance and ambush mission north of the **Song Dong Nai River**. After several days we came across a trail and I had Squad Leaders put claymores at either end of the trail while we took a short break to orient and settle on directions of movement. At once there was a loud explosion and one Squad Leader had blown one of the claymores blasting away an NVA soldier who had been walking down the trail. If there were others with him, they escaped and the Squad Leader assaulted with his rifle to finish off the enemy who hardly needed finishing off. Suddenly it became all too apparent to me that I would

be placing the Infantrymen under my care in positions that could harm or kill them and I started to realize and feel the burdens of responsibility.

On one mission we were trucked to a moderate sized Village to embark across a large open area into the jungle. As I was walking at the edge of the Village with my Radioman, (RTO), I heard several pings in the dirt in front of me flared up as if a rock had been thrown to disturb the ground and create a dust ball. In a second I realized that a Sniper was shooting at us from several hundred meters away, which is why we could not hear the discharge of the rifle. As our column proceeded ahead, I took five men and started to roust the structures which were on the edge of the Village but to no avail. The rage that I felt was that the twenty or thirty Vietnamese that were visible knew what was happening and offered no help or consolation, in fact one of them was probably the shooter. I had to break off the pursuit as we had to rejoin the column which during this time and been proceeding forward without us.

Around Ash Wednesday that year my Platoon was trucked to a small Village. We were to conduct joint patrol operations with a Regional Popular Force, (Ruff Puff), unit. These are Vietnamese civilians with rifles charged with defending their Villages. We joined forces for a wide sweeping patrol in mostly light forested areas. Our troops were at the front and the Ruff Puffs were following in column behind us. As we started to sense signs of something and become alert, we heard firing to our rear. The Ruff Puffs were shooting in the air to warn any enemy to disburse, to avoid a combat action. I felt betrayed by the people that we were fighting to protect, it was my life on the line and to them it was just a game.

CONTINUED COMBAT ACTIVITY

We continued in our reconnaissance and ambush patrols. The pace was constant and we would be out for several days at a time and re-supplied from the air by helicopters that would drop bladders of water, C Rations and Ammunition. We would be picked up by helicopter and taken back to a Fire Support Base and man the perimeter for one or two days before going back out into the jungle. We almost always made contact with the enemy. There would be an exchange of gunfire, hand grenades, rocket propelled grenades and so forth and then the enemy would usually back off or evade.

While on a mission I felt a great deal of responsibility. I had to navigate and to deploy the men. I had to choose who would be exposed to the most danger and walk on the point and for how long. I had to give orders as to how men would move and deploy when we engaged in a fire fight. When

given the coordinates and objectives for a mission I would carefully plan how we would move so as to use as much stealth as possible and to create the least possible danger or threat for the men serving with me. This often meant taking a more rigorous course than the obvious to get from point A to point B. I had quickly developed the belief that I wanted to do everything that I could to preserve the lives of the men serving with me as the highest priority even higher than the priority of killing as many of the enemy as my higher commanders were always stressing a body count. It caused me some stress and anxiety that the higher commanders at times seemed less concerned about risk than about statistics and we were often given grandiose directions from a commander in a Loach Helicopter hovering above a fire fight who could not possibly see the obstacles and danger that we were facing in the ground assault.

FIRST DECORATION FOR HEROISM

In late January we deployed in a three Platoon hammer and anvil operation. My Platoon with another and the Company Commander and his echelon were in one party and 2nd Platoon was in another party moving concurrently a couple of thousand meters from us. My Platoon was at the lead and we came upon a trail. The Company Commander directed that we proceed down the trail, which is not something that I would have done, too risky. After a while the point man fired on and killed an armed Viet Cong. Captain Lee insisted that we form a perimeter and wait for a further enemy response. About an hour later another armed Viet Cong came from the other direction and walked into our ambush and was killed. At this point Captain Lee directed that we booby trap the bodies. He made us put grenades with pins pulled under the arm pits and crotch of the dead bodies. And then he had us hunker down to wait for the enemy to come and retrieve their dead. It was February 5, 1970 and just at dusk the enemy opened up with rocket propelled grenades, mortars and machine gun fire. The Command Post in the center of the perimeter consisted of Captain Lee and his echelon including his RTO and a Forward Artillery Observer and a couple of others along with myself, my RTO and my Platoon Sergeant. Everyone in the Command Post was hit by the initial barrage except for myself. My Platoon Sergeant, SSG Lonnie Bennett was sitting right next to me eating a can of peaches just as it was getting dark and one of his fingers was blown off and he took other shrapnel. I had to take charge and lead the defense and call in and supervise the Dust Off helicopters. As we fought, the wounded were evacuated in the darkness of night and all night long we were probed. It took several hours to evacuate the wounded and all through that we had to hold the enemy at bay. The next day 2nd Platoon joined us and we marched through the jungle to a Rhone Plow clearing and eventually to an improvised

LZ where we were extracted.

I was very grateful to have survived the assault without being wounded. Captain Lee, three Sergeants and two others had been wounded and by some miracle I had been spared. I started to fear that it could be very likely that I would die in combat. I was the first target that the enemy would always look for. I was the leader shouting directions and the radio antennae was always next to me and the send/receive handle was usually in my hand when we were in action. I almost always called in artillery support when we engaged the enemy. That was why we were able to survive even if we had less potential in size and maneuver, because we could bring in long range artillery and gun ships to even the odds. But the sniper earlier and now the whole Command Post wiped out, it was starting to become apparent that I was the primary target that the enemy was aiming at. It was becoming a real chore to deal with my fears. But I had to show confidence and I had the responsibility of leadership. If I showed any fear what would the men do, how could they fight aggressively if I luxuriated in my own human feelings.

After the action we rotated back to **FSB Libby**, the Battalion Headquarters. General Bond, the Commander of the 199th LIB visited FSB Libby and decorated me for valor, the citation read; distinguished himself by heroism in connection with military operations against an armed hostile force. I had been in Vietnam for 44 days and had led numerous patrols and had so far avoided becoming a statistic myself.

SECOND DECORATION FOR HEROISM

In mid March we were a Company holding FSB Gladys with the resident artillery unit. I was sent out on a patrol with two squads to go along the Song Dong Nai River to the east and look for enemy. We were one day out and at dusk we heard loud and continued blasting and firing and thought that FSB Gladys was under siege. We contacted them by radio and found that a white phosphorous grenade had gone off in the ammo storage area and artillery rounds were set off pretty much destroying the interior structure of FSB Gladys. All of the men were moved out of the perimeter to be on alert at this dangerous time and there were many un-spent rounds lying around. Demolition men had to come in to secure the area.

On March 16, 1970 we were sent by helicopter from FSB Gladys to Xuan Loc. This was outside of our normal area of operation. A Task Force was being put together to probe what was thought to be elements of the 33rd NVA who were assembling in that area for a major action. Late in the

day on March 17th we deployed in Platoon size, (less than 20 men) and my Platoon was dropped off on a forested mountain ledge where just one man at a time could step off of the hovering helicopter. We were three Platoons about three thousand meters apart sent out to probe and do reconnaissance in a heavily forested mountainous area. The first night we encamped in a perimeter on a slope so steep that you had to be careful not to slip. The next day we hit the bottom of a steep valley and moved up the next mountain. The next day we hit a ridge of the forested mountain. The third day we waited all morning for directions in a radio message as to the actions to take for the day. They made us wait too long. We were totally silent but I did not like to stay in any one place too long. At about noon a trip flare went off and I asked for a report. The Sergeant said it was nothing, must have been a deer. Finally we got the orders for the day by radio and were told to move out in the direction that the trip flare went off. Shortly we received automatic weapon fire and I halted the advance. I called for an artillery marking round. We were so far out that they had to use the long range guns from Xuan Loc. From the marking round I called in a pattern of fire and then we got up and proceeded forward. We moving up a slope and the enemy had the high ground in moderately dense forest area. In places you could see thirty or so yards. The enemy opened up again across a wide range of the upper ground. I stopped and called in more artillery and by this time helicopter gun ships had arrived and I was directing them. I gave orders to bring our rear up in a flanking wheel type action to confront the enemy with as much fire power as we could. At this point, two F-4 jets were flying over and heard the radio traffic and came on station to ask for directions to drop 500 pound bombs and napalm. I popped smoke and they identified color and I gave directions and distances and they dropped their loads. Concurrently we had the artillery pounding away and the helicopter gun ships were making passes. As the wheel started to turn and as we started to flank I looked down at my chest and saw blood. I felt nothing but saw blood. It was about 2:00 p.m. My RTO called the Medic up and he took my ruck sack off, laid me down and applied a field dressing and pressure. I had received a bullet through the chest, entering through two ribs on the front and exiting through two ribs in the back. I had shrapnel wounds in the side. The fighting was intense, bombs, artillery rounds, rocket grenades bursting all around. There was tracer fire from enemy machine guns coming in close by. One of my men, a southern boy, was conspicuously doing a rebel yell and the men were returning the fire and at least holding ground. Eventually the shooting tapered off. A Medivac helicopter was called and came on station over head at about 3:00 p.m. They dropped a cable with a tripod on the end and my men propped me on it. The helicopter was about 50 meters up and they started to reel me up when the enemy opened up with intense fire. The helicopter dropped me or cut me loose and I fell to the ground. I ordered my men to leave me with my M-16 and retreat as I thought that we were

seriously outnumbered and that my wound was fatal and that they could not save me. Them dealing with me would only slow them down. They did not leave me. The fire fight continued intermittently and by this time another Platoon had been able to forge through and join us. By this time I was about three hours into my wounded state and I was really starting to feel pain. They would not give me morphine because of the nature of my wound. At about 5:00 p.m. another Medivac helicopter came on station and dropped another cable. I was propped up on it. As they started to pull me up I was just waiting for the enemy bullets to rip me apart. Miraculously I held on and a man in the helicopter reached out and grabbed me and pulled me in. I was in total wretched pain by now. I was delivered to the 24th Evacuation Hospital and wheeled in and straight to the operating room where the relief of the anesthetic put me to sleep.

I awoke about 11:00 p.m. in the Intensive Care Unit with several tubes stuck into me and quite immobile. I had been in the field for three days and deprived of water and the wounds and operation augmented my thirst. I was not allowed to have any water in the ICU. The next day two Generals came to my bed and pinned a Purple Heart on my pillow. I said something stupid like, I am sorry that got this medal. I felt some amount of guilt for getting hit and leaving my men in a dangerous situation. Although I feared for my life I felt in some way that I was letting everybody down by being wounded. I was a burden rather than a help. Several days later I was not improving and I had to go in to the Operating Room for another operation. When I came out of the anesthesia I found that I could not talk and I had a tracheotomy tube poked through my throat. Later the Nurse told me that I almost died in the operation. I was feeling worse than when I had first been wounded and started to seriously wonder if I would live. Sometime in early April a Doctor accompanied me on an evacuation flight to Camp Zama Japan where I stayed in the ICU for several weeks. I did not improve and a third operation had to be performed. After the third operation Dr. Bascum told me that they thought that I had an abscess from the earlier operations, but that rather they found lots of adhesions instead. He said that they tried to scrape as many as they could away but that finally they just had to sew me up and hope for the best. An adhesion is scar tissue and this condition was preventing me from being able to eat and I was withering away. I was down to 110 pounds where I had been 190 pounds before. I asked for a prognosis and he could not say and said that we shall just have to wait and see. I had serious reservations that I would be able to live a normal life. By June I was put on a flight in pajamas and flown to Monterey where a van picked me up, I was the sole passenger, and driven to Fort Ord Hospital. I still had not been able to eat and at the same time I had dreams about hamburgers and as we drove through Monterey and the hamburger stands I had fantasies

about the taste of a hamburger and a glass of lemonade.

As I started to recover at the Fort Ord Hospital I found that my left foot would not work. I had a drop foot. Evidently the peroneal nerve in my left leg had been severed when my leg had been placed on a block during one or all of the three lengthy operations. I was sent to Letterman Hospital in San Francisco for extensive testing and the doctors were not able to say that I would ever regain full use of the left leg. I was put in to the Orthopedic Program at Fort Ord Hospital and they manufactured a metal leg brace fit on to my Class A uniform shoe. The brace forced my left foot so that I could walk with a limp. After a while I was issued a Bachelor Officer Quarters apartment and I started spending a couple of hours each day at the Post Gymnasium especially doing leg exercises with weights. After several months I was able to walk without the metal leg brace and after much more time I was able to walk without a limp. I continued to work with weights for many years.

I received my Citation for March 20, 1970 in the mail. It said that I had distinguished myself by exceptional heroism in connection with ground operations against an armed hostile force. It had been just 43 days since my first citation on February 5, 1970, however, this time I had become a statistic, WIA, Wounded in Action. But thankfully not KIA, Killed in Action. The prognosis was uncertain. I was not able to get any of the Army Doctors to tell me what to expect in the future. I was not recovering because of what was found to be multiple adhesions in my chest cavity and they were not able to remove all of the inner scar tissue. In fact on the last operation they had only clamped my skin together whereas after the first operation they had carefully stitched the long cut down my torso. That would have healed to a fine almost un-perceptible scar. After the third operation I had a wide gash with holes on either side where the wires held the skin together and this went from my breast plate to my groin. How would I ever be able to go to the beach. I had an ever present thought that I may still succumb to these wounds before I reached 30 years old.

I WAS MISSING THE CAMBODIA CAMPAIGN

While at Camp Zama Japan I kept in touch with the Executive Officer of my Company in Vietnam. We wrote to clear up property issues and such. He told me of the deployment into Cambodia. My Company B along with the rest of the 5th Battalion and D Battery, 2nd Battalion, 40th Artillery had been pulled out and put into a Task Force under operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division and moved into Cambodia under the direct orders of President Nixon. On May 12, 1970 my Company B was engaged in a significant battle with the NVA and their position was overrun. Over 50 NVA were killed in the

battle that lasted all night. When I heard of this while at Camp Zama Japan I developed an extreme sense of guilt that I was not able to be there to help the men that I had come to know so closely in combat. I was on the one hand happy to be alive I was painfully aware that my wound had been and absolute miracle. How many people can take an AK-47 bullet through the chest and then bleed for three hours on the battlefield, survive an aborted rescue and then make it to live. But there were pangs of guilt and feelings that I was not adequate because I was not there to help when my men were in danger and being overrun by the NVA. I have attached a copy of the June 2, 1970 issue of REDCATCHER!, Volume 2, No 11 which on the front page highlights A5/12 Warrior ❖??Crush Attacking NVA in Cambodia❖??. The article does not mention any friendly fatalities and only four friendly casualties. This was not true and our Brigade Newspaper had a way of avoiding bad news. I learned from one of my Sergeants that there had been several of our Company killed in action, (KIA). I have always felt guilt about missing the Cambodia Campaign.

RELEASE FROM ACTIVE DUTY DUE TO EARLY RETURN

On September 17, 1970 I was released from Active Duty and hobbled off into civilian life.

GARY WIEDLE