

"The 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1969"

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The 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1969 started out differently for my platoon because the rest of Charlie Troop left very early that morning for "stand down" in Cu Chi, the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division basecamp. Stand downs were the monthly maintenance break to refit and repair the tracks for another month of pounding in the bush of III Corps west of Cu Chi out to the Cambodian border. This was to be my first stand down since joining Charlie Troop at the beginning of the month. I was looking forward to having 4 days to take care of the vehicles and enjoy the respite of a few days in the Division basecamp. We expected a fairly quiet day, until we were to be relieved, except that our proximity to the geographic area called the Boi Loi Woods (FN 1, or Boi Loi's, required that we needed to stay vigilant while we guarded the static launch bridge site. We continuously manned the .50 Caliber Browning, Mod 2 machineguns in the turrets on the top of all of our tracks. Our vehicles consisted of the venerable M-113A-1 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) and M-551 General Sheridan Airborne Armored Reconnaissance Vehicles (AARV, aka Sheridan) that had replaced the M-48A3 tanks earlier in 1969.

To further complicate things that day, our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon was understrength with our three Sheridan's sent in for maintenance with the rest of the troop that day. In their place we borrowed a Sheridan from 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon with the crew to fill out a partial, composite Armored Cavalry Platoon of only seven vehicles. We were at significantly less than full strength and operating with several guys from First Platoon that we did not usually work with. I was the newest Lieutenant in Charlie Troop, so the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon guys did not really know me that well. LT Dave Carraway, a 1968, West Point Classmate was their Platoon Leader and had arrived at C Troop a few weeks before me. I took over 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon 3 weeks earlier, and while relatively comfortable as the Second Platoon Leader, we had operated mostly as part of Charlie Troop, under the able command of CPT Don Appler, West Point Class of 1965 on his second Vietnam tour with the 3/4 Cav.

Around 1000 hours on the 24<sup>th</sup>, we were joined at the bridge site by Second Platoon from A Company, 2-12<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Warriors). My West Point Classmate, LT David Sackett, was the Platoon Leader. Dave was a natural leader, with a laconic manner and a quick sense of humor. He was well thought of by his men and all of our West Point Classmates, who knew him to be a very professional and dedicated young infantry officer. I invited Dave to join me in my APC (C-20) where we shared a cold can of Coca Cola from our ammo box, Styrofoam-lined cooler. For about an hour in the confined space of my vehicle we spoke about the difficulties of leading men in combat and shared stories about home, our young wives and what it was like being a Lieutenant in Vietnam. The Coke and the shade of being inside my APC were the only things that eased the stultifying heat that was with us every day.

Vietnam was a very dangerous place to be for Infantry and Armor Lieutenants. Somehow the stories we had heard as Cadets from the Staff and Faculty at West Point returning from Southeast Asia had a much greater impact now than when we first heard them in the safety of a classroom or briefing. We had both heard the statistics of the life expectancy of Lieutenants in Vietnam, but that was neither of our concerns. It was easier to discuss combat in a theoretical sense, but even as serious minded cadets you do not get the same reality as you do when suddenly you are "the man in charge" of the lives of 40 to 50 men in combat. We both understood that our current troop

responsibilities were our absolute first priority and that our primary job was to try to get all of our men home while still accomplishing the mission. There was no talk of valor or bravery in the face of the enemy, but we shared a determination to complete the work we had been assigned and return to the land of air conditioned peace.

After an hour or so inside my APC, Dave's radioman (RTO) shouted that they had a radio call from his company commander. Dave returned to tell me that they were to be picked up by helicopters to respond to some sort of intelligence report in the Boi Loi's just a few clicks west of the bridge site. There was no particular sense of alarm because the intel was pretty vague, but fairly close to our current position. They barely had time to pack up their gear before the flight of four Huey's arrived. I wished Dave "Good Luck" and waved good bye. Then I alerted CPT Appler on the Troop push that the infantry platoon currently at our bridge site was being picked up for an insertion in the Boi Loi's, maybe as close as 10 clicks to our west.

CPT Appler and the majority of C Troop were then closing on Cu Chi Base Camp to begin stand down after the road march back. He instructed me to keep him posted on our situation, but he had heard nothing about the infantry intelligence report from Squadron Headquarters. He promised to let me know if Squadron had anything to report. As it turned out the only information that our Squadron had was coming from us about the Warriors in contact that day.

The helicopter insertion of Dave's platoon was so quick that they seemed to be on the ground again almost instantaneously, which heightened our tension about the emerging situation. Immediately we heard intense RPG and AK-47 fire erupt. Dave's platoon had seemingly entered into a major fire fight and were under fire from the moment they jumped off the helicopters. I gave a warning order to our Platoon Sergeant to pack up and be prepared to move out as I was pretty certain we would be sent in with our heavy firepower to support the infantry and my West Point Classmate.

"Packing up" for us meant to take down the chain link RPG fence screens from in front of our tracks and pick up the sandbags and M-60 machine guns dismounted between the tracks. All of our tracks carried several thousand rounds of .50 caliber and 7.62 mm machine gun ammo, assorted explosive demolitions (20 and 40 pound shape charges), C-4 explosives and blasting caps, claymore anti-personnel mines and assorted other boxes of ammo for our personal weapons including our individual M-16s and any side arms.

We felt certain that our job would be to get to the fire fight and our platoon worked with urgent alarm knowing that the Warrior platoon that was with us only a few minutes before that day was in serious trouble. Within minutes, all seven tracks were manned and running, weapons loaded and safed and radios checked. We were prepared to move to the area of the fight. I reported our situation to CPT Appler, now safely ensconced at Cu Chi Basecamp and then we waited for the expected call to reinforce the infantry.

Since we were less than 10 clicks from the active contact, we could watch the additional reinforcements from the rest of A Company being inserted into the contact area. The volume of fire coming from the Boi Loi's was sufficient to assure me that Dave's Platoon had kicked a hornet's nest of VC or perhaps NVA fighters in spider holes. I worried that the enemy soldiers would probably be in holes that provided all the advantages to the covered and concealed defenders and no benefits to the exposed infantrymen of A

Company or anyone being sent to their rescue. We got no reports through our own chain of command of the contact, so all we could do was watch the C&C helicopters flying race track patterns overhead and the convoys of Huey's ferrying in the rest of A Company for the next hour or so. The distinctive AK-47 fire continued heavily for what seemed like an eternity.

The wait to be called only contributed to my anxiety and the rest of the platoon. My anxiety level rose palpably as I felt the adrenalin pumping just like in High School before a big basketball game or some final exam at West Point, but this test was different than any before it. The difference was that I was now responsible for the lives of the men of my platoon and nothing quite prepares you for that responsibility. During the wait I began to assess my fears. For whatever the reason, perhaps feelings of youthful invincibility or a sense that I had studied and been trained by experts for what was about to happen, I did not consider my personal safety a big concern. My biggest fear was that something I might do, or worse fail to do, could cause the death of one of those men in my platoon. Truly hoping not to screw up badly was the driving emotion for me at 23 years of age as I approached my first fire fight.

My mind raced through checklists that we had learned in Ranger School or been taught at West Point, one of which was to keep your boss informed. So I radio'd our preparations to CPT Appler miles away at Cu Chi Basecamp, half hoping he would order us to return to Cu Chi. No such order was given with his usual terse reply, "Roger, Out!" Shortly after the terse call to Appler, I recalled the George S. Patton statue sitting in front of the Cadet Library at West Point standing next to the tennis courts looking at the Library. Patton's proximity to the Cadet Library was always a source of comedic relief to passersby, but I had seen Patton's imposing figure with his field glasses at the ready every day going to class for four years. I had even made it a point to show General Patton's statue to my parents when they visited the Academy. The quotation on the statue read "Never take counsel of your fears" had always encouraged me that I could overcome any self-doubt or fear of personal limitations. Just as he had done in WWII and for me every day I was a Cadet, "Old Blood and Guts" shook me back to reality that day and helped me move my fears properly to the back of my mind.

Since I was getting no information from CPT Appler or Squadron, I switched our troop net radio over to the Battalion Net of the 2-12 Infantry so I could get some idea what was going on at the fight. The next radio call that I heard was a conversation between the 2-12th Battalion Commander and the Brigade S-3 both overhead in C&C birds. The Warriors' C.O. asked the Brigade what other resources were available to commit to the fight. "We have that cav platoon sitting on the bridge site just a few clicks away," replied the S-3. Recognizing the Brigade S-3 had just called for us, I reported directly into their conversation as Polka Knuckles 35 Lima, my memorable call sign that day, on the 2-12<sup>th</sup> Battalion push that we were ready to move when requested.

After speaking with the Brigade S-3, I radio'd back to CPT Appler that we were moving to the contact in support of the Warriors. I also mentioned that I would have to switch to their Battalion push during our movement to contact and afterwards. Again, I received a "Roger, out!" from Appler. Then I directed our Platoon Sergeant in the borrowed Sheridan and its 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon crew to lead us out of the bridge site to the contact. We moved out in single file in the general direction of the firing with weapons ready and

everyone on full alert. Within a few minutes we found ourselves in an area which had been pounded by an ArcLight (B-52) strike some time before and were forced to begin to dodge huge bomb craters. These B-52 strikes devastated everything in the area leaving trees splintered and huge bomb craters large enough for our tracks to slide into should we get too close. These craters had sufficiently regrown with vegetation that they were not readily apparent from the helicopters overhead. The chance of a vehicle slipping into a bomb crater or throwing a track in the strike area was simply too great to continue the straight ahead approach with our understrength platoon.

Someone in one of the helicopters noticed that we seemed to be "wandering around" rather than proceeding directly to the contact. I received a sarcastic radio call with some insulting comment about our inability to drive in a straight line. That may be a metaphor of the entire Vietnam War, where the guys in charge did not know what the poor grunts on the ground were dealing with. With deference to military discretion, I replied that we were "dodging bomb craters down here" and requested a compass azimuth heading that we could use to guide on as I did not want to bungle in to the contact. The azimuth I was given was 270 degrees, due west from our current position. I also requested a face to face meeting with the Commander of A Company when we arrived at the contact site so I could get a quick "Sit Rep" (Situation Report) and coordinate our attack before proceeding.

Moving as carefully, but quickly as we could, we arrived in the contact area in about 30-40 minutes. Our Platoon radios were quiet as everyone was very anxious and unsure what we were getting into with an infantry company already taking intense fire and we guessed friendlies down. Of course the continuing fire was like a lode stone magnet for us so we could not go too far astray.

Arriving in the area, we halted some 100 meters short of the main contact when I spotted the Infantry Company Commander, a smallish Captain with a surprisingly clean set of jungle fatigues for an infantryman. At least they were cleaner than Dave's when we met earlier in the day. I deployed our Platoon in a line to give us maximum firepower forward and told my Platoon Sergeant to sit tight. Then I dismounted my track and was quickly greeted by the Captain who predictably said, "We're glad you're here!" We crouched down so we would not present ourselves as targets and could understand each other under the din of fire both incoming and outgoing.

With a wave of his hands the he showed me the extent of the enemy locations to our front. It seemed that the fire was coming from a line of maybe 10 spider holes at least 100 meters wide directly to our front. We were right in the middle of them with fire coming from the front and left and right sides of the infantry position. Tactically A Company, 2-12th Infantry was pinned down with multiple casualties lying exposed where they fell in amongst the spider holes and in front of them, between our line of vehicles and the enemy positions. The Captain did caution me again that there were still dead and wounded friendlies in amongst the holes where we were taking fire. It was clear that our mission was to silence the enemy fire so that we could evacuate our casualties. I decided to use our heavy weapons to suppress or kill the enemy and maneuver as best we could while not causing more casualties for the Warriors.

Leaving the Captain, I remounted my track and explained the situation to my platoon over the radio. Just before we moved forward I noticed that our 4.2

inch mortar track (C-29) was on the extreme left outside of our line. Fearing RPG fire from our flanks, given that the enemy holes extended beyond our line of tracks on both sides, I switched SSG Billy Wark's APC (C-23) with the mortar track. Unlike the other APCs, the mortar track carried a basic load of 4.2 inch mortar rounds, which if struck by an RPG probably would have blown my entire platoon away, not to mention the infantry company we were sent to rescue

With all seven of our tracks now facing the enemy in a relatively straight line, I gave the order to advance trying to keep a straight front so none of our suppressive fires would be masked by another vehicle during the movement to contact. Unfortunately during the advance, the Platoon Sergeant's Sheridan track to my left managed to creep approximately 10 meters ahead of the rest of line. Just as I radio'd to him to wait for the rest of us to catch up, all hell broke loose. Nearly simultaneously the Platoon Sergeant's track (C-15) was hit with AK-47 fire upward from an enemy hole at the right rear side of his vehicle. The fire was aimed at the exposed crewmen on the back deck of the Sheridan. The initial volley hit Specialist Bob Aday on the back deck and he tumbled over the vehicle's right rear track sprocket. SSG Henry Lambert, the vehicle's usual Track Commander moved quickly from the loader position on the turret to check on his friend and was immediately shot himself. He fell to the ground in the exact the same spot as Aday. Both men were borrowed crew from the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Sheridan, then under the command of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon Sergeant.

At the sudden loss of two men from his vehicle, my Platoon Sergeant "lost it!" He began screaming at me over the radio, which completely tied up our Platoon FM net with his hysterical raving, sobbing and uncontrolled panic at his situation. My Platoon Sergeant, an E-7, the most experienced person in the platoon and supposedly my most trusted advisor, cracked at this crucial moment and was absolutely inconsolable. The moment he stopped screaming at me, I furiously ordered him to get off the net and stay off it until I told him to speak! Fortunately he did as ordered, but did not say another word to me or anyone else for several hours! Besides the hysterical Platoon Sergeant, the remaining crew member was the vehicle driver, Specialist Merv Sanders. While aware of the situation from his track radio, Merv had no access to any of the Sheridan's crew served weapons and was fearful of backing up because he had no idea where his fellow crew members had fallen. Furthermore, he could get no help from the Platoon Sergeant so they just sat there with their Sheridan vehicle blocking our fire.

As if the Platoon Sergeant situation was not enough, at nearly the same moment the C-23 APC, on our outside left flank, took an RPG from one of the right flank enemy holes about 30 meters to our left. Recall that only a few minutes before we had switched SSG Wark's track to that position. I saw the enemy soldier emerge with the RPG and launcher straight up from the spider hole, which he quickly leveled in our direction. I noticed the smoke from firing and saw the RPG track toward Billy's vehicle. While I saw it happen in slow motion, the entire incident took only seconds. The RPG entered the thin aluminum skinned M-113A-1 through the left side under the driver's seat and passed through the corner of the engine compartment and emerged again into the fighting compartment setting off a flash fire when it hit a can of PL Special 50 oil in the vehicle. The burning oil splashed the entire crew, including the Track Commander, SSG Wark, who jumped from the vehicle to escape the fire. I remember the driver in particular leaping from his hatch with jungle fatigues on fire, trying to smother the flames with his hands. Had the RPG been a couple of inches higher he most certainly would have been

killed. As it was the driver's seat gave him enough protection from the spauling of the aluminum skin inside the vehicle as the RPG penetrated.

With 2 of our 7 vehicles out of action, I sensed that we were rapidly losing the initiative, had been stopped by enemy fire and were vulnerably exposed with the infantry company we were sent to support. I knew we had to do something, but was not certain what to do. With AK fire cracking around us, I dropped into the open fighting compartment of my APC and said a prayer asking God to help me. When I emerged, less than 30 seconds later, I felt a calmness that is absolutely unexplainable and unseen assistance at that critical moment. Suddenly I could clearly see nearly all the enemy firing positions to our left and right in a fairly straight line. Sensing where the left and right flank spider holes had to be, I knew the only course of action was to attack one of their flanks and in succession roll up their entire position one spider hole at a time from the side not the front. The clarity with which I could see or sense the entire battlefield was remarkable and it gave me confidence to try to regain the initiative, but first we had some housekeeping to take care of.

The Platoon Sergeant's Sheridan was blocking our suppressive fire and had to be moved back before anything else could happen. I bypassed the Platoon Sergeant and radio'd directly Merv Sanders to see what his situation was. Merv was holding on, but was afraid to move his vehicle because of the casualties lying close behind his present position. Acting as his ground guide from my track radio, I asked him to do a series of maneuvers as though I was his Track Commander. Being as reassuring as I could be, I asked Merv to pull forward a few feet, which took him closer to the enemy position, which he did very cautiously. Then in a series of maneuvers we directed him around the casualties and back into line with the platoon. With no rear view mirror and his Track Commander out of action this was a remarkable feat of courage and driving skill for a large tracked vehicle under these circumstances. With the Sheridan back in line, we established the base of fire with the remaining 4 tracks with all the remaining platoon machine guns across the front.

Then we took our command track and backed out of the line at least 30 meters to the rear. Once clear of our platoon line we turned to the right, presenting our vehicle's left side to the enemy fire. Moving as quickly as we dared, we proceeded to our right in a wide arc out around to the outside left flank of the enemy position, which I had spotted before we backed up. The enemy left side had been less troublesome and that was where I felt we should start if we were to begin to roll up all of the enemy positions. We took no fire while we were moving. The entrenched enemy may not have realized we were approaching because our platoon suppressive fire was keeping their heads down. Once we were abeam of the line of holes, we turned directly toward them exposing only the front of the APC. The Vehicle Commander, SGT Randy Valleri, fired a burst of .50 caliber fire as we approached the first enemy spider hole. We could make out a few positions because red dirt outlined the tops of their holes from all the close in fire that had proceeded our maneuver. Our casualties were on the far side of line of holes because of the way the battle had unfolded, leaving us a pretty clear path behind the line of spider holes to maneuver our track where we wanted to without endangering any friendlies. From our vantage point on top of C-20, I could see the first few spider holes generally in a straight line.

With the remnants of our platoon now effectively engaging the enemy with suppressing fire, I told our driver to proceed forward toward the first hole, but to keep each successive one 3 feet off our left side as he maneuvered us along. Since the driver's hatch on the M-113 is on the front left side of the vehicle, he could guide easily on the holes without exposing himself as we slowly crossed the entire enemy position. That distance kept us close enough to drop or throw grenades very accurately and also to reach over the side and fire my M-16 directly down into the hole from the top of the APC. As we went from hole to hole, we shifted the suppressive fire from the platoon to the left to avoid hitting us. At each hole, we would toss in a grenade or two waiting for any secondary explosions. Once we were close enough to see partially down into the hole, we followed the grenades with a full magazine or two of M-16 fire directly down into the position. When we took fire back up from the hole, as we did several times, we redoubled the process until the firing ceased.

Most of the casualties of the 24<sup>th</sup> had been head shots because the exposed infantry became targets by virtue of the enemy soldiers waiting down in the holes until they saw a target; in our case they observed our cav troopers on the top of our vehicles before they were noticed by the friendlies. We were very wary of looking directly down into any spider hole, and seeing an AK47 barrel sticking back up at us, so we used our height advantage from the top of the APC to see part way down into a hole from a safer side angle. The technique worked as the return fire was erratically upward when we received it.

And so it went for the better part of 2 plus hours, one hole at a time as we proceeded across the entire enemy position. Within our track, Sergeant Villari began to straighten the grenade pins with pliers and handed me the grenades to drop or toss. By doing so he allowed me to keep my eyes on each hole. At least one enemy grenade went off on our left side as we crossed the position. Despite wearing my flak jacket, the unfortunate "V" zipper cut out at the bottom front of the jacket, left me vulnerable to ricochet pieces of steel which bounced off the C-20's gun turret. When I turned away from the blast in the direction of the turret, two small fragments struck me in the belly. Other than the burning sensation I felt when it hit me, I forgot about it until much later. Our Platoon Medic, Doc Jordan, kept handing me M-16 magazines so that we could sustain the fire and finish off each hole in turn.

Our guess that there were about 10 spider holes turned out to be pretty close. The woods went deadly silent when we knocked out the last hole. After the intensity of the action for most of the day, the silence of the afternoon was profound. It had been at least 3 hours since we had arrived at the contact and probably 6 hours since Dave's platoon had been inserted. The day was getting late and we had casualties, both dead and wounded, to get out of there and we still needed a secure place to stay for the night. Fortunately other elements of the 2-12th Infantry were already at work preparing a Night Defensive Position (NDP) to our East in the direction of our old bridge site, but we had much to finish up in the Boi Loi's before we could begin to move out.

The damaged C-23 APC of SSG Billy Wark was sitting all by itself abandoned on our left flank, where her crew had to leave her. The fire had quickly extinguished itself after the oil was burned up in the flash fire, but we had no idea at that moment what condition she was in. Pointing to the lonely APC, SSG Wark asked me what to do with C-23? I replied, "We cannot leave her

here in the Boi Lois!" He understood that meant we either had to drive her out, which we thought was unlikely, or tow her out, which we thought was the more likely option. To everyone's surprise, C-23 was still idling in neutral when the crew got back to her. The driver was still so shaken after barely escaping the RPG beneath his seat that SSG Wark drove the vehicle himself the rest of the day.

We decided to use C-23 to carry the dead back, since it was a possible combat loss and was available. Unfortunately the RPG had severed the hydraulic line that controlled the rear ramp, so she indignantly had to drag her heavy rear ramp banging along the ground as she moved. Then we spread ponchos on the floor of the damaged APC and used the vehicle to haul out the 7 dead infantrymen and our 2 cav troopers. As the inside of a combat loaded APC is already cramped, SSG Wark described moving the dead as trying to load cordwood on a small pickup. SSG Wark and his entire crew suffered various second degree burns, depending on their proximity to the fire inside their track, but refused medevac and assisted with loading the dead. Billy had severe burns all the way up to his knees because of his position in the Track Commander's cupola, but never complained. We left no one behind.

After a careful head count, we loaded the entire infantry company and their walking wounded on our other 6 tracks ensuring we got everyone. I swept the entire area one last time for any friendlies that might have been missed. It had been a horrific scene of carnage, but it was almost dark at the contact point. I switched my radio back to CPT Appler's push not knowing what he knew about the action. It turned out that he had monitored enough of the Brigade traffic from our Cu Chi Headquarters to understand the situation. I reported our battle casualties to him, but I emphasized that our Platoon Sergeant was catatonic and that he would have to be replaced when we returned. I grouped the Platoon Sergeant with the other casualties because he had completely withdrawn into himself from the trauma of the day and would not speak to anyone. It simply was not possible for anyone to have any confidence in this senior NCO anymore. Any soldier who could hear a radio heard his rant, so his reputation was ruined within the Troop.

I reported that my other E-6 NCO's, Wark and Higginbotham, were carrying the Platoon at that point without him. Captain Appler asked me about my frag wound and I told him that Doc Jordan had put a Band-Aid on it and I would be fine. The best news we heard was that we would road march back to Cu Chi the next morning for stand down once released by the infantry.

The time went faster than anyone realized at the contact site, so when we started East to the NDP it was pitch black dark. To direct our march the 2-12<sup>th</sup> Infantry arranged for a helicopter to drop parachute flares in front of us from the contact point to the night position. I can still see the line of helicopter dropped, parachute flares that guided us back to the nighttime perimeter. The tunnel of burning illumination, hanging there like chandeliers, eerily lit the night sky over the dark Boi Loi Woods providing us a lighted path as we moved slowly over the rough terrain fully loaded with an entire infantry company on our 6 tracks and C-23 dragging her ramp behind. Our slow speed and the hushed darkness all around us was reminiscent of a funeral cortege. However, the burning flares reassured us of the American presence and the infantry's nighttime perimeter awaiting our arrival.

As we approached the NDP, we were directed to occupy a portion of the nearside perimeter with our tracks. Our track positions had been dug out for



us by the infantry with dirt berms in front for each track to pull behind, while other units from 2-12<sup>th</sup> Infantry secured the remainder of the perimeter. Moving tracks at night was difficult enough, but with infantry already in place and dug in we could not safely move haphazardly in their midst in the dark. The Infantry guys got the NDP right, including digging out our locations so that only the cupolas stuck out above the berms, and we were grateful for all their preparations. Medevac Huey's and Chinook helicopters flew in and out most of the night ferrying the casualties and bringing replacements and resupplies for the next day.

Back in Cu Chi basecamp CPT Appler, LT Dave Carraway (1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Leader) and SFC John Weiss (1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Sergeant) decided to send a NCO back to the field to help us out for the night. SSG Dave Skiba of the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon volunteered for the assignment and flew out to us that night to assist 2nd Platoon and to keep tabs on the remnants of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon in our midst. He was an NCO that you could trust and as we were short NCOs in the field we were pleased to see him. Warily I had checked on all members of the platoon and their vehicles before returning to my own track when SSG Skiba arrived. Dave could see that I was completely spent from the exertions of the day. He told me to go ahead and get some sleep. I immediately fell asleep on the .50 caliber ammo boxes inside our APC and did not wake until early the next morning.

The next morning, we were told by our Squadron Headquarters S-3, CPT John Wells that several news reporters were flying out from Saigon to meet with us. I had worked for Wells as an Assistant S-3 for several weeks before moving to C Troop and we had a difficult history. He was very dismissive of anyone who had not been in the field and held a particularly unjustified prejudice for West Pointers. Later after I had "earned my spurs" in the field, which is an old cavalry tradition for new members, Wells treated me with more respect. I have always felt that Wells or the Squadron Commander should have stopped this press intrusion, but our Commander lacked the intestinal fortitude to say no to a higher headquarters or whomever was looking to trumpet a large action in their Area of Operations. In truth the Squadron Commander was a weak sister and was relieved within days following our big contact. He was not involved whatsoever with the events of October 24 nor did he ever ask me about it. I resisted Wells' press call and complained to CPT Appler in Cu Chi, but was told to at least meet with the press.

Unlike embedded reporters, such as Ernie Pyle from WWII, or Joe Galloway in Vietnam with General Hal Moore in the book, "We Were Soldiers Once and Young", my only experience with the American Press in Vietnam was with the opportunistic Saigon press corps visiting us after the fact. They arrived the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of October in a polished Huey, a sure sign that someone had too much time on their hands in a combat zone, in a gaggle of 4 or 5. They were dressed in camouflaged jungle fatigues, the kind we could not get in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. In hindsight, I believe that my interview was a diversion so that others could get the real story. During my questioning, I tried to minimize my responses, but comply with the directive from Squadron to be interviewed.

I abruptly ended the interview when I heard the crackle of M-16 fire from the infantry perimeter, thinking we were under attack again. I quickly found that one of the reporters had taken it upon himself to set a few infantrymen in a skirmish line and have them fire into the bush behind him so that he could appear to be giving his report under fire. In words that are not

printable, I told the reporters to get back on their helicopter before I turned my M-16 on them. I was furious that they would have someone initiate fire under these circumstances given what we had just gone through. I saw no 2-12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Officers at all that morning particularly with the press in our midst. It was a small group of the 2-12<sup>th</sup> soldiers that did the firing, but it took me to stop it. Having those reporters fake a report, while our dead were still alive in our minds, just galled me. It cheapened what had happened on the 24<sup>th</sup>. I know they felt my threat was serious and they quickly ran to their shiny Huey to escape one very angry Lieutenant brandishing a well-used M-16.

I had only learned that Dave Sackett had been killed just before the reporters arrived. The Battalion Commander of the 2-12<sup>th</sup> had used his C&C helicopter to medevac my West Point Classmate early in the fight. He had given an order to Dave's Platoon to pull back from the initial contact, but they refused because they would not leave their Lieutenant behind. While I cannot say for sure, I expect that Dave was on the first helicopter to land that morning before anyone had any idea what was there. They had no inkling that they were walking into a fully prepared enemy strong point. The Battalion Commander reported 47 enemy KIA in the action. Between the infantry and our casualties there were 10 American KIA, including Specialist Bob Aday and SSG Henry Lambert from C Troop, 8 infantrymen from A Company including my Classmate, Dave Sackett. C Troop had 6 WIA primarily from the flash fire in A-23 and 1 combat stress casualty.

We departed the 2-12<sup>th</sup> NDP at about 1000 hours in the morning on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October for the march back to Cu Chi basecamp. We moved as quickly as we could out of the Boi Loi's to the familiar roads northwest of Cu Chi and closed into basecamp two hours later. I regularly reported our positions to C Troop Headquarters as we made our way back. Both Appler and Carraway, met us at the gate of the motor pool and walked us into position with all of our still operational 7 vehicles, somewhat worse for wear. During the night SSG Wark had managed to get the heavy C-23 ramp up with help and wired it shut for the march back. With the RPG hole very evident next to the driver, the vehicle limped into the motor pool with the rest of us. CPT Appler greeted us warmly and welcomed us back. Chokingly and filled with emotion, I expressed my sorrow to Dave Carraway over the loss of Lambert and Aday. It was then that I felt the crushing weight of responsibility for our men's lives having to tell my West Point Classmate that I did everything I possibly could to deal with a terrible situation, not of our making; it was just not enough to protect everyone.

Later that day I briefed CPT Appler what had happened particularly with my Platoon Sergeant's breakdown. He simply told me that the Platoon Sergeant was gone and he would get me a new one before we went back to the field.

CPT Appler also mentioned that I was to be interviewed in the morning by an officer from USARV (US Army Vietnam) Headquarters about the action of the 24<sup>th</sup>. I asked him what I was supposed to say. Earlier I had shared with him that the fight was a "screwed up mess" from the start. We were handed a terrible situation and told to make something good out of it. He told me to "Tell the truth. You know what really happened. Don't sugar coat it!" It was a typical Appler response - brief, honest and to the point. I trusted his insight and respected him as my Troop Commander, a genuine mentor and someone I always admired.

The USARV Major arrived the next morning and told me that our action on the 24th was the largest fight in Vietnam that day. As expected the Major did ask me the body count question, noting the 2-12<sup>th</sup> had reported 47 enemy KIA. As we were involved in the middle of this action, I could not say how many enemy were killed. I described how we had accomplished the mission to methodically silence the enemy firing and felt very fortunate to get our casualties out. However, I could not attest to the actual enemy body count and it really was not my concern to do so. In fact, I told him that I could not say that I actually saw any enemy dead that day and no one was closer to the action than me. After about an hour, the Major thanked me for my candor, complimented my actions that day and left. What happened to his report I never knew.

I know the major was a combat arms officer (Infantry or Armor) because I did ask him about positioning infantry when they are working closely with armor. The question was pertinent to me as I had already begun to rehearse in my mind how I could do better in a future firefight like the 24<sup>th</sup>. Recall that the infantry did not accompany us as we initially moved to contact and then maneuvered to the enemy's left flank. In both cases we were left with only our own cavalry resources to eliminate the threat. The Major answered that the best place for the infantry was between the tracks in the middle at the rangefinder for a tank type vehicle. This made sense to me as if we had we had infantry with us then Aday and Lambert might not have been picked off the back deck of the Sheridan on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

After the interview CPT Appler sought me out, not even asking how the after action review had gone. His only concern was that I receive medical attention for the frag wound I had next to my belly button. I again told him it was nothing emphasizing Doc Jordan's Band-Aid was just the right medicine. I fruitlessly told him that I needed to get back to my platoon since there was no Platoon Sergeant to see that the tracks were properly taken care of and that everyone got the break that they needed. He told me that he would see to the platoon vehicles and the men, but I was "ordered" to report to the Cu Chi Evac Hospital to be checked out.

Reluctantly I was driven the mile across the sprawling 25<sup>th</sup> Division Basecamp to the Evac Hospital since my M-113 was not allowed in that portion of the installation. I fantasized that if I showed up at the hospital in my M-113 with a .50 caliber machine gun and its 2, 7.62mm M-60 machine guns at the ready, they would have to let me go. When I finally got to the hospital, Dr. Samuel Massa, the Surgeon, told me that if I had been medevac'd on the day I was wounded, as I should have been, that they would have operated immediately to remove the grenade fragments. Since this was now a three day old frag wound they would keep me for observation for a few days. Again I tried in vain to disagree, but the Surgeon would hear nothing of it and told me I had to stay. While the clean sheets and attention from the nurses was great after a month in the field, I was still very upset about not being with my platoon for the first stand down.

Later that evening, with me in bed in the hospital, Don Appler showed up with a folded Pacific Stars and Stripes Newspaper in his hand, so "I could keep up with the news". Beneath the paper was a concealed glass of Jack Daniels Whiskey and water. He visited me each night that I was hospitalized to be sure "I kept up with the news." That was Don Appler and we all respected him and loved him immensely. The character of his leadership and the care for his men was demonstrated by the way he treated all of us. He

never claimed to be perfect, but he was an officer's officer, without pretense.

So what were the lessons of October 24<sup>th</sup> for me? I can say for certain that there were at least three lessons that I learned that day that stayed with me not only in Vietnam, but for the rest of my life. The first had to do with our soldiers and when push comes to shove "who will fight". The landmark WWII study by SLA Marshall, "Why Men Fight", highlighted that the informal group at the small unit level was the key organizationally. At the individual level, it was loyalty to a combat buddy, who looked after my 6:00 and I reciprocated by taking care of his back. The second lesson had to do with "how to fight" at the small unit level in Vietnam. Certainly the fight on October 24<sup>th</sup> did not go nearly as well as it could have. What could we have done better that day is the troubling reality of my memory from long ago? The third lesson had to do with leadership, where we had examples both good and bad.

The "who will fight" lesson is still an enigma to me. Seniority or time in service with the additional military experience should have been a good indicator, but it was not necessarily so. As we saw with my Platoon Sergeant, it was his job as Track Commander to maintain the position of his Sheridan with the line of other tracks and then to provide whatever assistance he could to his platoon leader. He did neither and in fact his lack of awareness of where his vehicle was relative to the enemy and the rest of us certainly was a direct factor in the death of 2 men. What about Spec 4 Merv Sanders, the driver of the Sheridan, who patiently awaited instructions to move the vehicle back into line from its very exposed position and did so when asked? What about SSG Billy Wark, who despite serious burns up to his knees, refused to be medevac'd and stayed to load the casualties onto his track and drove C-23 back to basecamp the next morning because his driver was so shaken by the RPG that nearly killed him?

What about my Classmate, Dave Sackett, who clearly led his platoon from the front, did not question to order to "check out the intel site in the Boi Loi's" and was killed? I have come to believe that you cannot know for certain who will fight and who will not until you see finally them in action. Talk or bragging about fighting is generally cheap and in fact I have found quiet introspective types to be among the best soldiers I ever knew. I believe the partial answer to the "who will fight" question lies with the fact that soldiers will fight for leaders they respect.

The "how to fight" lesson applied to the tactics of small units in contact or moving to contact in Vietnam. For me the next most important lesson of the fight on the 24<sup>th</sup> was to remember what the cavalry is good at, like finding and fixing the enemy. When we got in amongst the enemy holes anything could happen and it usually was not good when we did for cavalry units. By maintaining our ability to maneuver and bring overwhelming fire to the enemy, we could control the situation and not lose our freedom to maneuver. Controlling the situation allowed us to use our heavy weapons, bring in helicopter gunships, use close air support, or artillery without the unnecessary expenditure of lives. Only after sufficiently pounding the enemy position, I learned would I expose infantry or my cav troopers as the very last element for any similar action. This is how I learned to fight in Vietnam after the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1969.

The 2-12<sup>th</sup> situation was bad from the start, including Dave Sackett having to react to extremely vague intelligence. Before he left on that final

mission, Dave again told me they had no idea what the intelligence report was about or the size of the force they might encounter. Once Dave was down and his platoon and company were fixed in place by enemy fire, then the Company and Battalion Commander seemed able to only reinforce the initial failure, just as we almost did. They may have felt they had no option, realizing the way the battle evolved; but there was no real plan to regain the initiative, which nearly cost us more lives. For certain, these lessons stuck with me for the rest of my time in Vietnam, and fortunately I was able to use them in later fights again in the Boi Loi's, particularly on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969 with much different results.

The final lesson for me from the fight of October 24th had to do with the subject of leadership. As Plebes (freshmen) at West Point during Beast Barracks in 1964, we were forced to memorize a huge amount of information, some useful and some not so useful. One of the more useful quotes was MG John M. Schofield's "Definition of Discipline" which was originally presented in an address to the Corps of Cadets on August 11, 1897.

The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instruction and to give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself, while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.

Major General John M. Schofield

We always substituted the word "subordinates" for Schofield's concluding use of the word "inferiors" in the application of his theory to real life situations. At the heart of Schofield's theory is that one who feels the respect due others generates a corresponding feeling of respect from those for whom the leader is responsible. Without mutual respect, there can be no reciprocity in the proper execution of mutual responsibilities for the leader and the follower particularly at the small unit level with American soldiers. In execution in Vietnam in 1969 this meant that the Platoon Leader and Troop Commander led by example and from the front, just where Dave Sackett was when he was killed. It was that kind of war with mostly small unit actions and close in contact with the enemy. While some units struggled with drugs and fragging incidents, we in Charlie Troop had an unwritten understanding with our Enlisted Men and NCOs regarding marijuana use. If a drug abuser arrived in the Troop, the men would turn in his cache of drugs to the Platoon Leader or Company Commander as soon as it was found. All we had to do was call Squadron and the individual was sent to the rear and a replacement would be sent out on the next resupply helicopter. Such situations occurred twice during my tenure in Charlie Troop.

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Post Script to Oct 24th and Dec 9th, 1969 Fights

We mentioned the Brigade S-3 in the story of our involvement in the 24th of October fight. He was overhead that day, recommended that 2-12th Infantry Battalion Commander bring my armored cavalry platoon to the contact and observed most of the subsequent action. He was also overhead during a similar fight we had in the Boi Loi Woods on December 9th, 1969 when the results were much different. I met the Brigade Operations Officer in person at 2nd Brigade Headquarters in Cu Chi probably in January 1970. I was invited by the Brigade Commander, COL Enos Whitehead, to attend his evening briefing and have dinner during a later stand down in Cu Chi.

Whitehead was a real professional, no nonsense soldier who later became LTG Whitehead, Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army. COL Whitehead introduced me to his staff as the "Commander of C Troop and one of the best small unit commanders in the 25th Division." During our introduction, the S-3 acknowledged our actions to relieve A Company, 2-12th on the 24th of October, a fight which was not of our making. But he saw that I applied the lessons learned in that fight to the way we managed the December 9th fight also in the Boi Loi Woods. This was an unsolicited comment from the Major, in COL Whitehead's presence, who had direct access to the details of both fire fights through personal observation from above and monitoring our radio traffic. I was surprised by his perceptive understanding of my combat experience. I smiled at him and acknowledged there was a very definite connection between these 2 fights and agreed with his assessment of my lessons learned.

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FN 1. The Boi Loi's were located to the northwest of the Hobo Woods, which were next to the Fihol Woods which were closest to Cu Chi. In the later part of 1969 the center of enemy activity for the 3/4 Cav was the Boi Loi Woods in Western III Corps. Large tracks of these woods had been subjected to systematic Agent Orange defoliation in 1966 and 1967 and in later years heavy 100 foot long chains were dragged by pairs of heavy bulldozers, called Rome plows. The shearing off of all heavy vegetation created fairly large loosely called "cleared" areas.

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Don Appler, West Point Class of 1965

His nickname for fellow West Pointers was "Nose pickers", because of the tendency of some graduates to try to use their West Point class rings to advance their careers instead of taking care of their people. He could be tough when toughness was called for. He had a low tolerance for B.S. and people without a lot of substance were not tolerated in positions of responsibility. He could be impatient. One day on a gravel trail he became impatient with the slow pace of the mine sweep going on at the head of our column and he directed his driver to veer off the gravel onto the shoulder. His track was ahead of us with a couple of vehicles in between, but we could see clearly what he was doing. Within a few seconds his APC (C-6) struck a land mine and it blew off one of the road wheels and broke the track on the same side. CPT Appler and the rest of his crew were shaken from the

concussion, but no one was seriously hurt. Immediately assembling all three of the Platoon Leaders, he confessed that he should not have done that and reminded us to not be stupid and risk men's lives.