

“Our Finest Young Men”

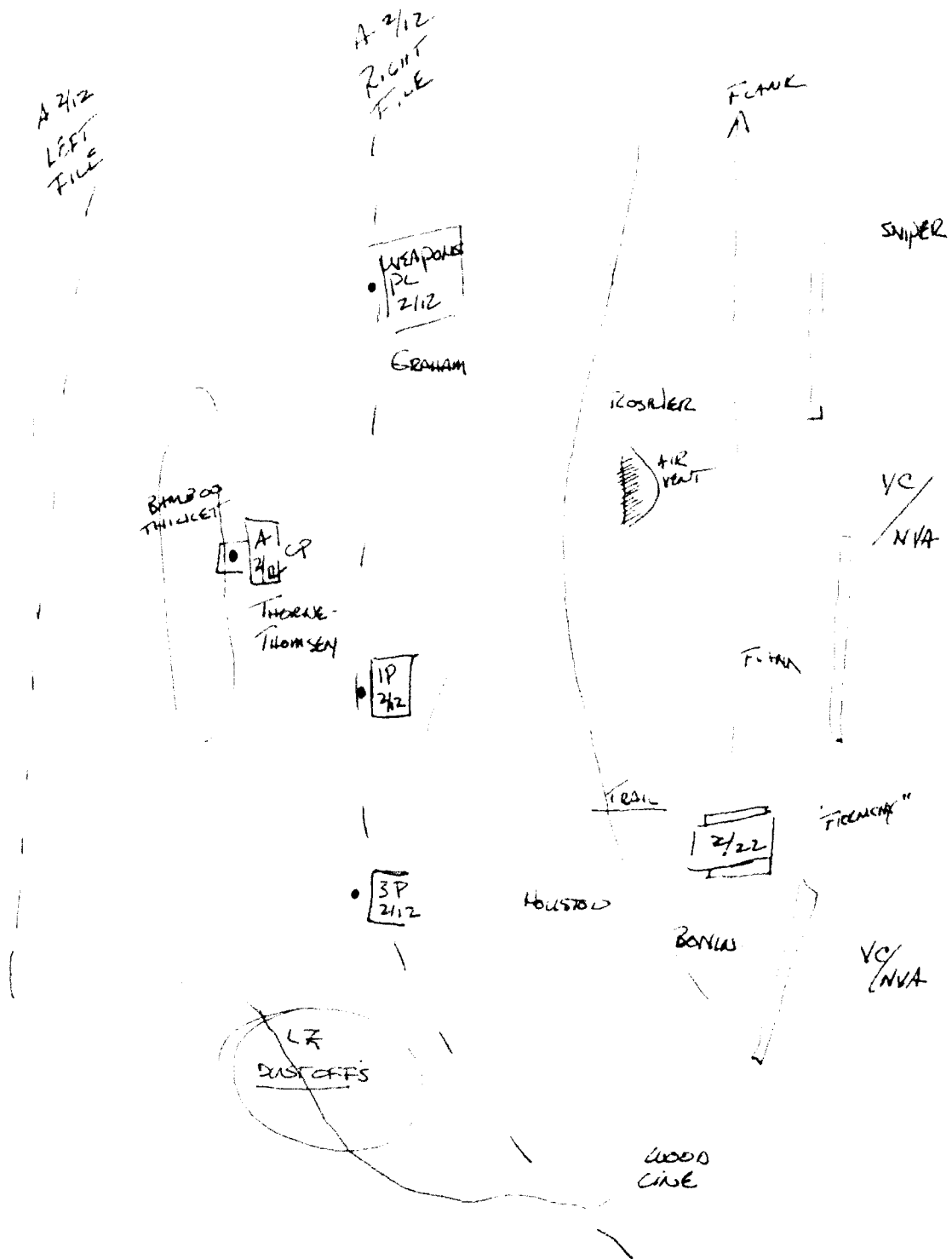
By

Andy Farris,

A/2/12

Weapons Platoon Leader

September-December, 1967



AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Andy Farris, Alpha Company, 2/12, SEP - DEC 67

The e-mail seemed like any other, until I opened it and read a listing of dates and casualties suffered by Alpha Company on 25 OCT 67. Listed after the dates were names I had not seen in years- names I had looked for whenever I visited The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. But, something about the context of the date and the names stuck with me.

Two of the men, Arthur Roesler and Gordon Graham, had been in my Platoon. The October ambush was my first firefight and they were the first men I lost during my tour. The three other men: Bobby Joe Bonin, Alex Houston and Carl Thorne-Thomsen were all men whose names I had heard but had not known, as I had only joined Alpha around the first of October, having arrived in-country on 27 September 67.

Over the next few days I re-read the e-mail over and over, and then wrote Bill asking if anyone had ever written about the ambush. Bill responded saying, "...it is an important piece of [Alpha] company history, albeit a devastating episode...[it] should be recognized in the Association Archives."

This article is not meant to be an "after action report", although it will give you details of what happened, as best as the facts can be pieced together after thirty-six years and it will try to give you the chronology of the firefight.

But above all, the article is being written as a remembrance and a tribute to the men we lost on that horrible day and to acknowledge the heroism of every man involved.

My hope is that in remembering the men we lost some measure of healing will be experienced by the men who survived, especially by the men closest to those we still mourn.

"We can never fathom the soldier's grief if we do not know the human attachment which battle nourishes...combat calls forth a passion of care among men - who fight beside each other, that is comparable to the earliest and most deeply felt family relationships."

Dr. Jonathan Shay, MD, Ph.
Achilles in Vietnam, 1995.

Often, when someone learns that I am a Vietnam Veteran they invariably ask, "What was it like in Vietnam?" To them, this is a seemingly simple question.

They are usually surprised when I answer by saying, "It all depends which day you want to know about." "Weren't all your days in Viet Nam pretty much alike?" is their usual response.

"Well, actually, I'll say, there were one or two days in Officer Candidate School that were worse than one or two days in Viet Nam, but there were countless days in Vietnam that were beyond anything you can imagine."

With this exchange they either drift away, or say, "Well, tell me about one of the worst days you had in Vietnam."

This is when I take a hard look at the person asking the question and decide whether or not I really want to try and tell them what it's like to be ambushed - to watch young men killed right in front of you, what it's like to be in the middle of a firefight with AK 47's, machine guns, grenades and rocket-powered-grenades exploding all around you as you try to figure out where the fire's coming from and what you've got to do to return effective fire in the chaos, so that you can pull your wounded buddies out of danger, call-in air support or artillery, call for a medivac, clear and secure a landing area, get the wounded loaded on the chopper on a hot LZ, all the while trying to pin-point the enemy's positions to gain control of the fire-fight. What lingers most in my mind, and makes telling war stories to those who have never experienced its intensity, is the images of the dead and wounded... Even today, I can see Sergeant Bell's shattered and shrapnel-torn face as I held him in my arms, desperately trying to talk a chopper into a tight, hot LZ following an ambush with Delta Company in April of 68. Sometimes I can even sense the smell of dried blood, the way you noticed it after it dried on your fatigues.

Writing this article became a more painful, emotional experience that I had envisioned when I first volunteered to write it.

So, usually when I am asked that simple question, "What was it like in Vietnam?" - I very seldom decide it's worth the effort to try and give them an answer. I realize I truly can't convey what it was like, they wouldn't understand.

No one who has never experienced war, can ever fully comprehend the noise, the heat, the smell of explosives, the screams of pain, the calls for "MEDIC", the horrific sounds of battle that ring in your ears for a lifetime, or the pain of losing a buddy - a pain that never leaves you.

"For we would not brethren have you ignorant of the affliction that came upon us in Asia."

St. Paul, Second Epistle to the Corinthians.

THE RESEARCH

To help understand how such a deadly ambush could occur in an area we had moved through often, I have conducted historical research to help us understand the role played by the North Vietnamese Army, in our AO, where principally we had only faced local VC units. Understanding what the North Vietnamese were planning can help us picture the type of combined-military unit Alpha engaged on 25 OCT.

Jim Bisson found the first meaningful research in a Brigade report for 25 October 67, which he has summarized:

"Thirteen of 28 entries in the 3rd Brigade Daily Staff Journal for 25 October 1967 reported enemy activity such as contact with the VC, freshly built bunkers, base camps, rice, weapons, body counts, mines and etc. These reports were made by elements of the 2/12 Infantry, 2/22 Infantry and the 3/22 Infantry. The entries report enemy activity approximately two kilometers east of the ambush site. (These reports were from D 2/12 and related to spotting four VC; finding a battalion-size VC base camp with 50 two-man bunkers; and, finding related equipment and ammunition.) All other reports showed enemy activity within five to six kilometers north of the ambush site. Two other Journal entries show how close A/2/12 was to VC activity throughout the day of 25 October 1967, prior to being ambushed by VC/NVA. The first entry is a report by A 2/12 at 0900 hours '...of finding freshly built bunkers with new camouflage, 6 feet x 3 feet at XT 585431.' "The second entry is a report by A/ 2/12 at 1430 hours '...found 1,000 LBS. polished rice, will destroy at XT584436. Both of these reports indicated VC activity extremely close to the ambush site XT583344."

To further illustrate the size of the enemy build-up, in Alpha Company's, 3rd Brigade's AO, the 1st Infantry Division suffered a total of 134 casualties with 57 KIA, in a single day, on October 17, 1967. This battle is recounted by Brigadier General James E. Shelton, USA (Ret.) in, "The Beast Was Out There", (Cantigny Military History series, Cantigny First Division Foundation, Chicago, 2002).

"The Battle of Ong Thanh, fought on October 17, 1967...was a confrontation between two formidable adversaries, the 2-28 Infantry (Black Lions) of the 1st Infantry Division and the 271st Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division. It took place in a remote jungle tract just west of Highway 13 near Chon Thanh, *an area that had never been penetrated by U.S. Army forces.*'

'The Black Lions fought valiantly that day, but their valor proved unavailing. Traditional notions of what constituted success and failure in battle are not easily applied to the conflict in Vietnam..."

The Black Lions battle was fought just 8 days prior to Alpha Company's ambush, and that battle was waged at coordinates XT684579 – our battle took place at coordinates XT584433 less than 20 clicks away, in the same VC/NVA Area of Operations.

HISTORICAL REFERENCE

"Five months after the mid-summer [1967] meeting in Hanoi, a Provincial Party Committee in South Vietnam summarized for its trusted cadre the meaning of the coming battle... The Binh Dinh Province Committee wrote in a secret report:

'In July 1967 a Resolution for a General Offensive and Uprising was adopted at the Political Bureau Congress. It was adopted after a lengthy assessment of the current political and military situation and with the realization that we possessed the capability for success...

The General Offensive will occur only once every 1,000 years.

It will decide the fate of the country.

It will end the war.'

"The military leaders of the Struggle in the South were summoned to a meeting in late July [1967] at the Headquarters of the Military Affairs Section of COSVN (the Central Office for South Vietnam)...located in a large huts-and-bunkers complex in the Fishhook section of Cambodia...

Among those called to the meeting...was Colonel Tran Van Dac, the Deputy Political Chief for Military Region 4 (the Saigon area)...Dac and the other leaders [learned] that detailed preparations were to begin at once for the General Offensive and General Uprising. It was to be an ambitious engagement, requiring extensive and coordinated attacks, new cadres and troops, new weapons and frontal attacks tactics.

'...a program of preparation for new cadres and troops. Previously, men had been taken from guerrilla squads and local force units to fill out the Viet Cong main force battalions and regiments. Now the flow was to be reversed: replacements from the regular forces, including many from North Vietnam, were to fill gaps in the local units...'

'...reorganization was to be established from the Cambodian border to Saigon Relay stations every four to eight hours' walk along the infiltration routes. Soldiers, liaison men and a chief of station would be posted at each stop. New rockets, small arms, ammunition, men and orders would pour across these routes."

TET!, The Turning Point in the Vietnam War, Don Oberdorfer, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971

Jim Bisson, was on flank security on the 25th of October as Alpha moved through the jungle, and after rounding a curve of the tree-line that opened to a small clearing, he noticed, "what appeared to be a small VC complex and saw a concealed tunnel opening, barely visible."

THE TUNNELS OF CU CHI

"The underground tunnels of Cu Chi were the most complex part of a network that stretched from the gates of Saigon to the border with Cambodia. The Tet offensive of 1968 [on Saigon and other towns] was prepared -- the necessary troops and supplies assembled -- in the Cu Chi tunnels."

"For the thousands who were to live and die in them, the tunnels' paramount importance was to maintain the fight against the enemy. Captured VC documents

carry a refrain, an exhortation to cadres to remind the people that combat had absolute priority; shelter came only second.

Entrances to the tunnels were carefully and precisely engineered to cater to various contingencies. The Communists' tunnels manual explained:

‘Because the activities of the militia and guerrillas require appearing and disappearing quickly, the entrances to the underground tunnel must be located like the corners of a triangle, so that each can support the other in combat. Our troops must also be able to escape from the underground tunnel through a secret opening so they can continue to fight.’

The Tunnels of Cu Chi; Tom Mangold and John Penycate; The Berkley Publishing Group, New York, 1986.

Frank Castaneda was a Rifleman with the Weapons Platoon on the 25th of October 1967, in an interview he recalled, “We were on a patrol, coming in from a sweep, two squads ahead and one flank ran into an air vent from a tunnel complex, the trail we were on led to the vent... I saw Graham open fire.”

“I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men, into battle. I have seen them in a thousand streets, in a hundred towns, in every State in this Union working and laughing and building, filled with hope and life.”

President Lyndon Baines Johnson
Address to Department of Defense
July 1965

THE AMBUSH

On 25 October 1967, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, operating in Binh Duong Province, War Zone C, III Corps, awoke in the jungles of South Vietnam and began what seemed like any other day, each man going about his own practiced routines – bringing-in the night's trip flares and claymores, moving by two's outside the perimeter to relieve themselves, one covering the other, breaking-down fox holes and overhead cover, folding sand bags, rolling-up poncho's, cleaning weapons, and “cooking” breakfast in C-ration cans over C-4, making the most god-awful coffee, which always left me with the taste of the C-ration tin in my mouth.

The Company was under the command of 1st Lieutenant Bobby Bates, the Company's Executive Officer, an experienced Platoon Leader who was well trained by Alpha's C.O. Burnie Quick, who was on R&R. Bobby had a true command presence, and sure belief in his capabilities, an inner belief that was undoubtedly buttressed by his success as a football player back in Alabama, at a time when it was not easy for a black athlete to play at high levels.

The Orders of the Day, as I can recall them, (and as others have provided from their memories and journals) was for three platoons, the 1st, 3rd and Weapons, to move into a daylight ambush or blocking position, while 2nd platoon moved out and away from the main body, then pushed back toward the ambush position driving the enemy into the three-platoon ambush site.

No one I talked with (*) remembers moving-out that morning, apparently it was just another day like so many before, and so many yet to come, there was nothing about the morning's movement that caused us to remember any specifics. Yet, 36 years later, everyone would remember the ambush, each remembering what he saw and experienced. What follows is their oral battle-narrative, tied together with my own recollections that are as vivid as videotape.

*(* Acknowledgement: The men I talked with, and received e-mails from include: Jim Bisson, Sam Bustamante, Bill Carle, Frank Castaneda, Pete Cullen, Ernie Jarvis, Larry May, Charlie Page, Burnie Quick, "Doc" Jerry Swilley, Dan Schlichter, John Stone, Jerry Virzi, Dean Walker; plus Bill Smith (C 3/22), Denny Head (A 2/22 medic) and Roger Cote (A/2/22).*

As best we can piece the day's events together, the line of march began with 3rd Platoon in the lead, followed by 1st Platoon, with Lt. Harris as its new Platoon leader, then the CO's team, with Weapons Platoon in the rear. However, when we left the blocking position (the ambush took place upon our return) the order was reversed, with Weapons Platoon leading, followed by the Company CP Group, then 1st Platoon and 3rd Platoon taking up the rear. We also remember that the Company was under-manned, with perhaps no more than 80 to 90 men in strength. It must also be noted that 2nd Platoon never rejoined the Company during the firefight. I tried all afternoon to guide them to our position, but they did not arrive until after the 2/22 Mech. Therefore, three under-manned Platoons fought against a heavily armed and entrenched enemy force. The battle-narrative is based on my interviews.

"I can remember we were hit late in the day...we moved all day through the woods...after we got hit the battle lasted about an hour and a half, then we got organized and called for dust-offs...I remember the second helicopter I brought in with a lit C-4 so he could home in on it because it was dark." (Page)

BATTLE NARRATIVE

"I think we might have moved through part of the area (by pure chance) on our way to setting-up the blocking positions. It was after we left the blocking positions, sometime in the afternoon, that we moved fast and walked into the ambush site. As you recall we left without the Second Platoon." (Bisson)

In relation to Bisson's comment that we "moved fast", several men I spoke to expressed similar thoughts, such as "[we] moved too quick that day ...[I] don't want to talk about it". Since I have not located Bobby Bates, and because he alone was acting on orders from Battalion, I thought it would be best to talk with Bernie Quick, about the company's movement since he debriefed Bobby about the ambush.

Burnie was emphatic in his response, "Bobby was a very good officer; I don't believe he was pushing the company, but I do know [Battalion Command]...could really push a company, a C.O. hard... they [the S-1, the S-3]

could be [brutal]. Alpha Company was the best unit in 2/12; best [body counts] lowest KIAs...it was the model of the Air Assault Company. They [Battalion Command] could be demanding on timelines. I'd disregard the pressure and let safety of the unit to be my biggest consideration...that's what I taught my officers too. I trained [everyone] not to compromise safety for speed."

Based on his debriefing with Bobby, Burnie further indicated, "[the only] thing I didn't understand from Bates...he talked about going up-front and found someone not shooting...and separation between platoons."

Since the line of march had Weapons Platoon on point, leaving the blocking position, I can tell you that I was third in the file, just 10 to 15 meters from the tree-line, walking in high elephant grass. Castaneda and Roesler were to my right on flank. I'd estimate that the lead platoon and the CO's team had entered the clearing, while 1st Platoon and Third Platoon were still coming out of the tree-line.

"We got hit first, Bobby Bonin was out on flank...[he] was hit first." (Walker)

Just as I turned to look behind me I saw Graham get hit in the head, and heard heavy fire, VC and Alpha, coming from the rear. The VC had set-up a hasty horseshoe ambush in the shape of a comma, with AK-47's, machine guns and RPG's hitting the rear, while small arms and a sniper hit the front of the column. Bobby, being in the middle, would have gone back to see what he could do for the 3rd Platoon, probably taking some of the 1st Platoon with him."

That action and the Company being spread-out, flat to the ground, in the elephant grass probably caused the separation. That and the fact that we were in two files, with half the Company to the left of the line of march, some 20 meters from the tree-line where the VC were.

"I was right next to Rosie...and was hit with the same grenade...then I saw Gordy [Graham] hit in the head...all hell broke loose." (Castaneda)

"[The] guy [Graham] in front of me got hit in the forehead...his brains came out, I was scared to death...we were in the elephant grass... 'Charlie' had a sniper in a tree, he had a carbine. Even today if I hear a carbine I get sick to my stomach." (Carle)

About this time, while Weapons and 3rd Platoons fully engaged in heavy returning fire, the VC hit the CP with grenades or an RPG or both. The CP was still located in the middle of the file closest to the tree-line. It was a devastating blast. It shattered RTO Thorne-Thomsen's radio, he had just been assigned to the RTO position in the CP by Burnie, right before Burnie left for R&R. Burnie was very affected by his loss.

"The FO was torn-up with shrapnel." (Swilley)

Bobby told me the next day that the F.O. was literally sliced open from his shoulder to his thigh. (Note: Burnie told me he lived, and I am sorry I have not been able to secure his name.)

"The Company XO [Bates] was also hit, he was peppered from head to toe...nothing big... but there wasn't a part of him that wasn't hit... I always guarded my morphine... but throughout the firefight I gave three [shots] to Bobby Bates. He did not have anything life-threatening, but he was just in pain and agony." (Swilley)

My memory is very clear about Bobby and the CP being hit, I had moved toward them after the RPG blast. It was the RPG that killed Carl Thorne-Thomsen. Bodies were stacked everywhere. When I got there Bobby was standing up, facing heavy fire from the tree-line, he shouted, "Move in, we have to hit their strong point and break through" He was aiming his .45 toward the tree-line.

"I remember 'puff', gunships and can recall the fire and cordite smell... Bobby called in arty." (Cullen)

"Rosie and I had been hit by the same grenade... I moved over toward him, about 5 feet into the tree-line... [we] were on the edge of the trail in front of an opening, a huge opening in the bamboo, the VC came out and shot at us and threw a grenade... Rosie went for the grenade, we had been throwing them back at the VC... he took the full impact... it lifted him into the air... fragments hit me in the testicles, then I laid down fire." (Castaneda)

I was now moving into the tree-line, and went down when I heard the blast, then I heard the cry "Medic" from Castaneda... Swilley ran past me and went to Roesler... the fire fight was now full scale with firing everywhere... Swilley came back to my position... "Lieutenant, his heart fluttered... I couldn't do anything."

"[We] dropped into a trench [inside the tree-line], Bates called us out when the Mech arrived... then we went back in... 'Charlie' was running back and forth in the trench throwing grenades." (Castaneda)

"I was in the trenches with the VC/NVA... shooting my way out of the bamboo... amazing trench work... hospital... must have been part of the Tet build-up." (Walker)

"Carson Culleton was shooting his M-16 on full auto... the shell casings were going down my shirt... one guy was shot in the foot with a tracer round... his foot was on fire... another guy was shot in the chest... put a whole in his heart... a kid from New York [Alex Houston]... a big blonde headed guy... then the Mech came in." (Carle)

"[A] track almost ran over him... I pointed my rifle at the track... there were only four guys left in my Platoon the next morning." (Carle)

"The Mech saved us." (Swilley)

The Mech came from the rear, from Alpha's rear, behind the 3rd Platoon.

"Sometimes there's humor in [war]... I remember being within ear shot of the APC and a Lieutenant in the hatch shouted, 'Where are they?' One of the Alpha guys pointed [the direction]. The VC had RPG's, one hit the track and in 30 seconds they ran back without [their] track." (Swilley)

"That afternoon [25 OCT 67] A/2/12 was returning from a sweep of the area and walked into a bamboo thicket that was a VC base camp, they immediately took heavy casualties and requested help. A/2/22 responded with PC's... arriving... we drove right in with 50s blazing. [Within] seconds we were so entangled in bamboo the 50s couldn't even be pointed forward. About 10 seconds after that we were hit by an RPG that came straight through the front of the track and exploded." (Denny Head, A/2/22)

Denny continues, "Everyone left the track to advance on foot...that prompted 2/12 to pick-up the fight...but we were forward of them...rounds were flying everywhere...Beaupre ("Frenchy") was hit by friendly fire...As I crawled out to Frenchy everyone pulled back...it was getting dark. He was hit in the upper right shoulder...exited the lower side...involving both lungs. It seemed an eternity out there, both 2/12 and 2/22 were firing at the VC, and the VC were returning fire...they finally realized we were alone between them. They stopped firing and crawled out to help me get Frenchy."

Dean Walker, 3rd Platoon Leader, "We... the Company column [were] making a turn and we had the VC base camp flanked... we could have fired on each other."

"A dust-off was already landing for the 2/12 and we loaded Frenchy... but it was too late.

That night I told my squad... they could depend on me... but if they ever pulled back and abandoned me with wounded again I might not be there when they need me. From that day forward they looked out for me." (Denny Head, A/2/22, Medic)

"We got organized and called for dust-offs... I remember the second helicopter I brought in with a lit C-4 so he could home in on it because it was dark." (Page)

"Our platoon was moving in a swinging motion which we were successful at... it was very dark... the enemy decided it was best to 'Di Di Mow'... We cleared the area and secured it while the dust-off's [were] taking place." (Roger Cote, A/2/22)

When we got the last KIA's on the dust-off, the Mech led the way past the ambush site, moving in the direction Alpha had been moving before being hit. It was pitch dark, and hard to keep contact with each other, the noise of the tracks helped. After helping police the area I was near the rear of the column

when I nearly stumbled over Lt. Harris, Alpha's 1st Platoon Leader, he was dazed, maybe in shock, and I helped him into the perimeter set-up by the 2/22.

The last thing I remember, after counting heads, was being invited into a track, its interior lights were on, which coming out of the dark jungle seemed surreal. A very large, black E-7 asked softly "a chocolate bar, Lieutenant?" I had trouble focusing on his offer I was still caught in the emotional aftermath of the ambush. I quietly declined and stepped out of the track. The cooling night-air and the darkness enveloped me and I stared into the blackness.

"It was a hell-of-a-fight." (Walker)

"The next day Schlichter threw a KIA's helmet, the one with the big hole in it, at [Colonel] Tice and said, 'There's your f----- body count.' " (Bisson)

THE MEN WE LOST

*"And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun-
and hold you in the palm of his hand.*

*And hold you...
and hold you, hold you in the palm of His hand."*

ON EAGLES WINGS
Adapted from the 91st Psalm

Bobby Joe Bonin	Panel 28E - - Line 64
Gordon J. Graham	Panel 28E - - Line 66
Alex Ray Houston	Panel 28E - - Line 68
Arthur Cleon Roesler	Panel 28E - - Line 71
Carl Spaul Thorne-Thomsen	Panel 28E - - Line 70

When I first called Burnie Quick to tell him that I was writing this article we talked for more than an hour, with Burnie expressing a number of emotions, notably that, "[even today] I feel guilty not being there, [I] had never lost that many men at one time". He also remembered that when he got back, "[Alpha Company] was [saddened] like a family member had passed...I was emotional...shocked at the loss of men...I'm an emotional guy, I cried."

Charlie Page told me the same thing, he related that, "the next morning after sweeping the area, I sat down on a log and cried my eyes out."

Jerry Swilley had another view of the emotions that effected all of us, all Vietnam combat veterans, he said to me, "[It's] sad...we could see what

happened to guys, Vietnam veterans, [especially] a grunt...sole purpose to kill... [Just] think a guy on Monday morning is in the jungle scared to death, then [he's on a helicopter] into Dau Tieng, then onto Cu Chi, then Tan Son Nhut... and on Friday he's on the streets in the U.S. Everyone expects him to blend back into his routine...there's anger, psychological shock....in Vietnam guys understood, back in the U.S. no one understood [no one] cared."

In Jonathan Shay's book, 'ACHILLES IN VIETNAM', he says we never had time to grieve, that a buddy could be hit, killed and flown from the battlefield before his best buddy even knew he was gone. Shay wrote, "...uncommunalized grief is a major reason why there are so many severe, long-term psychological injuries from the Vietnam War."

Yet, I remember, and everyone I've talked with remembers, that Burnie held a memorial service in the Alpha Company area, under the shade of the rubber trees, late one afternoon when it was beginning to cool. I asked Bernie if he remembered what he said, he only remembers being emotional. But I remember the ceremony as comforting. There were 5 M-16's, their bayonets stuck in the ground, helmets on top and shined boots standing in front of the barrels. The chaplain spoke. It was quiet, peaceful. I've always carried a mental picture of that moment with me. I can see it still.

In an emotional voice, 36 years later, Larry May told me that, "Identifying the guys [Alpha's 5 KIA's] was the hardest thing I even had to do." Larry added that, "Things bothered me for a number of years, but since [I've] found Alpha Association and talked about things...I'm better now".

In this spirit of mutual healing I'd like to tell you about an experience of my own. Personally, I can tell you that for years I had flashbacks, picturing the torn, bloodied, shattered bodies of our finest young men, men whom I'd carried and placed on Medivac helicopters. Then one night I had a dream.

THE HEALING DREAM

My father was a Doctor who served in the Army during World War II, who later in his career, after leaving private practice, joined several of his Army buddies with the VA in St. Louis. I can remember when I got home from Vietnam he took me out for coffee one day and told me that he retired because the "...the wounds of your men are beyond my medical capacity to fix them." He cried as he told me this.

In my dream Dad and I are sitting on a grandstand looking out into a soft blue sky, we seem to be floating. From our left we can hear the sound of men marching - a sound that grows louder as they get closer to us, and sounds, cries of their pain are noticeable - as they near us they pass through a mist of clouds and become visible. They are all Vietnam soldiers, still looking like the day they were hit in Vietnam. Some, nearly all, helping each other to march. Then the uneven sound of their marching changed to a peaceful quiet and as they passed in review in front of Dad and I, they became whole again, just as they looked before the war; young, youthful, happy....filled with hope and life. As they passed us they became as bright as white-light, seemingly transparent and then faded out of our view.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON 1LT. BOBBY BATES AND HIS ROLE IN HOW THE AMBUSH PLAYED OUT:

The acting C.O. of Alpha during the ambush was 1Lt Bobby Bates, who at the time was the company's XO, and I know for a fact the "the company's retracing of its path" came from Battalion orders. As many may know we learned a couple of years ago that Bobby passed away.

Over the years, especially as I conducted interviews for my piece on the ambush, I heard some criticism of his actions that day, which are unfounded. Since the company CP was just behind me in the line of march, I can tell you first-hand that Bobby's actions during the ambush were valiant, especially after the CP group was hit by an RPG which killed Carl Thorne Thomsen and severely wounded our F.O. - who may have been Lt. Michael Bates - and left Bobby covered with shrapnel wounds.

During the ambush the company became spread-out, front to rear, by 50 to 75 meters+ with the rear platoon "snaked" around and actually firing in the direction toward the right front of the column. So, with a constant fire-fight of 2 hours (plus/minus) and without an RTO, I can tell you from my personal observation that 1Lt. Bobby Bates did everything possible a C.O. could have done for his company and its men.