

## SHOPPING SPREE GONE BAD

### BY DICK DETRA

From June 1967 through March 1968, the company had already been a part of some of the heaviest fighting of the Vietnam War. Places we will never forget...Phu Hiep, the Horseshoe, Iron Triangle, Song Be, the Rung Sat Special Zone with Seal Team One, Fire Support Base Burt close to being overrun, the Tet'68 Communist Offensive, Ap Cho, Cu Chi City and FOB Tay Ninh East with Project Rapid Fire's B-36 along the Cambodian border. The good news...if you could believe it, was that the company was in the process of a Permanent Change of Station move north to LZ Sally...seven miles north of Hue. The siege of Hue and Khe Sahn was over and the 188<sup>th</sup> would soon be supporting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, commanded by LTC John Cushman.

On March 13, 1967 Spider crew chief, Sp/5 Tom "Black Bart" Bartleson was in charge of a work detail loading pallets on Air Force C-130 aircraft for the 450 mile flight north to I Corps. He worked us late and by the time we finally finished up Black Bart, Sp/4's Bill Sondey, Joe Boyd, Dennis "Point" Pierpoint and Dick "Cherry Boy" Detra were tired, hot, thirsty and hungry. Bart invited us over to his hooch to drink some beer and to feast on some C's he had stashed. We were feeling no pain by the time we finished up all the beer but still hungry.

Even though it was late Point and Bill Sondey said they knew where we could get some beer and C rations. We piled into the gun platoon's ¾ ton truck with Bart behind the wheel and drove across the active runway towards the north end of Camp Rainier. Little did we know that on several previous trips Point and Bill had appropriated over thirty cases of C's from this same motor pool and there hadn't been any guards. That would not be the case tonight. We bought two cases of warm beer from a friend at the artillery company and drank a few more before heading over to the motor pool.

Around 11:00 pm Black Bart drove into the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division S&T motor pool and backed the ¾ ton up to the pallets of C rations. Everyone except Point, who was sitting in the front seat, jumped out of the truck. We were watching Bart as he tore away the protective cardboard covering on the cases when out of nowhere a security guard yelled, "HALT!" Bart immediately bolted as the guard fired two warning shots into the air, in hopes of getting him to halt. Bill Sondey, Joe Boyd and I froze...extending our arms over our heads. Point, who hadn't been spotted by the guard, slouched down flat on the front seat and waited. We pleaded with the guard not to arrest us...that we only wanted some C's to eat, but he wasn't going for it. He marched us over to the motor pool office and turned us over to the officer in charge who then called the 188<sup>th</sup> orderly room.

Rising up off the seat, Point watched as his buddies entered the motor pool office. As soon as we were out of sight, he fired up the truck and with the headlights off drove slowly out of the motor pool. Hoping that his buddies wouldn't give him up, he drove back across the active runway to the company area. Trying not to draw any attention Point parked the truck down the road from the orderly room and made his way back through the company area to his hooch, got under the covers where he waited and finally passed out.

Black Bart never stopped running. Wearing a blue sweatshirt with Panama written across the front, checkered shorts and tennis shoes, he charged through the motor pool's perimeter concertina wire like it wasn't there. Cut up and bleeding from his encounter in

the wire he kept running back along the road. As he crossed to the other side of the active runway he looked back just in time to see a C-130 touching down on the runway close to where he had just been. As he staggered through the shadows in the company area he tripped over some piss tubes (round plastic tubes driven deep into the ground at an angle and used by the soldiers to urinate in) cutting up both of his shins. He picked himself up off the urine soaked ground and moved on. As he neared his hooch Bart heard the voice of our gun platoon leader, who was talking very loudly as he made his way to the orderly room, "I can't believe men from my platoon were stealing." Bart thought to himself, "Where was this guy when his men came looking for food because they were hungry...after working all day in 95 degree heat like hired hands." Bart figured he'd be loosing a stripe for sure. He made it back to his hooch without being seen and waited...hoping his buddies wouldn't give him up.

A truck from the S&T motor pool pulled up in front of the 188<sup>th</sup> orderly room where Bill Sondey, Joe Boyd and I were handed over to our gun platoon leader. Captain McMillan read us the riot act and ordered us to stand at attention until our Commander, Major Jack O. Johnson arrived. We knew that we were in deep shit now. After getting our young asses chewed on by our platoon leader we were sent before Black Widow 6. It wasn't pretty; Jack chewed on our asses some more, he wanted to know the name of the guy who had last been seen fleeing from the motor pool. We decided amongst us that we would not give up our brothers. Since Jack hadn't mentioned anything about a fifth man, we new Point had slipped away clean. Jack must have thought that whoever ran away must have returned for the truck. Black Widow 6 was not happy with his gunnies..."Why tonight when we are in the process of a major move". He told us we were damn lucky that the guard hadn't mistaken us for VC and shot us. We were given non judicial punishment, an article 15 and forfeiture of \$75.00...for unlawfully entering the 25<sup>th</sup> S&T motor pool with the intent to commit a criminal offense, to wit: depredation of C rations. He then ordered us to report to our motor pool where we spent the rest of the night cutting pipe as part of our punishment. It turned out to be a very long and sobering night.

The next morning as we headed slowly back to our hooch for some much needed sleep, Bart was on his way to the 154<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment to get his wounds from the night before treated by our medics. When he entered the dispensary, Bart looked like he had been wounded in a fire fight or mortar attack...dried bloody cuts from his encounter in the wire covered both of his arms and legs, plus the gashes on both shins from the piss tubes. The medics couldn't believe their eyes and wanted to put him in for a purple heart. He said "It wasn't anything like that". When they kept pressing him about what had happened and why he was so cut up; He got pissed off and said "I don't want to talk about it!" Without another word being said they bandaged him up and he left.

Point came by my hooch the next morning and I filled him in on what had happened and told him that he was in the clear, but we wanted Bart to cover our fines. Later Bill, Joe and I stopped by Bart's hooch to find out what had happened to him. We told him that because we hadn't given him up to Black Widow 6 he should pay our \$75 fines. He refused to pay our fines because he felt that he had already suffered enough after his charge through the wire and his encounter with the piss tubes.

Bart, it's not too late to make things right old buddy. Get out your check book and send me a check for \$75. Just so everyone knows that there were never any bad

feelings between us I'd like to say that in 1997 Bart was my best man when my wife Karma and I were married in his swimming pool in Fort Meyers, Florida.

Looking back I know it was a stupid thing to do...but hey we were young, in a combat zone and people were trying to kill us...we did a lot of stupid and crazy stuff to take the edge off. One thing I know for sure is that the thirty-two guys who made up the gun platoon were a wild bunch who always hung together. I will always be proud of the fact that I had the opportunity to fly with the Spiders...guns up!

Moral: The 25<sup>th</sup> is a  
"leg" ("laig") unit.

The Airborne would have  
given your guys the C's  
and some "cold" beer.

Semper Fi!

A stylized, handwritten signature consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes.