

Ambush Patrol - Fire Support Base Burt...by Mike Balser

Page 166 of the book, "Red Thunder Tropic Lightning", says that the action at FSB Burt, 1-2 January 1968, inspired the battle scene at the conclusion of the movie, "Platoon". I suggest...that the movie is an insult to the honor of United States Infantrymen, and...it got the story all wrong as well. Especially the part about the ambush patrol that left the main perimeter that fateful night. I know...I led the patrol.

We "chopped" into Fire Support Base Burt (FSB), on the morning of 1 January 1968. I had been the 2nd Platoon Leader, Charlie Company, 3/22 Infantry for all of ten days. But even I could sense the tension in the air surrounding Burt. We knew we were going to get hit and hit soon. Entrenching tools became a premium item; men who hated to dig became bona-fide gophers. Every fighting position sported overhead cover and a rear berm to protect against the canister rounds that we all expected from the artillery's depressed gun tubes. We networked so many trip flares and Claymore mines to the front that we ran out of them.

I was feeling pretty good about our defensive preparations when the Company Commander summoned me to the CP. I was ordered to prepare an ambush along a road that ran roughly north and south through the perimeter. The site was approximately 3/4 of a kilometer south of our positions. My first stop in preparing the ambush was with our supporting 105mm howitzer battery. The Artillery Executive Officer plotted defensive fires and I returned to my CP to talk over the situation with Platoon Sergeant Bill Barbrow and together, we made final preparations.

Sixteen of us left the perimeter at dusk; I walked point. Navigating was easy, we just had to stay covered by the jungle foliage and guide along the



Lt. Michael Balser 2nd Platoon

road. The planned artillery concentrations demanded an accurate pace count, yet we moved to the ambush locale quickly and without incident. On site, we were pleased to find a long shallow depression running parallel to the east side of the road. We set up in three positions using the cavity for cover. About five yards to the rear we established a Command Post with Doc. Jimmy Marcum, the platoon medic, RTO Bobby Winkler, and myself. Claymore mines were placed just as a pitch black night enveloped us and we settled in...waiting.

It had been completely dark for some time when we sensed movement all around our location. I began crawling up to the three forward positions when a pistol cracked back at the CP. Returning, Doc Marcum told me that a lone North Vietnamese Army (NVA), soldier walked up on them and he had shot him with his .45 automatic. Crawling a few feet outward, I bumped my nose on Ho Chi Minh sandals, their toes pointing at the stars...I was convinced.

Tossing a grenade out in the direction of the dead NVA's approach, I heard screams and a great deal of talking in Vietnamese. Suddenly, like a wild buffalo stampede, an estimated NVA Regiment came running straight through us toward FSB Burt. They rolled up our left flank. I got stepped



Combat Infantryman Badge, Third Award

on twice. It lasted maybe three minutes and then that wave was gone. Checking our positions I found American dead, wounded, and some miraculously untouched. About eight NVA had fallen and a few were still moving. I shot them and moved back to our CP.

Collecting my thoughts, I radioed the Company Commander. His RTO reported that the entire FSB was under heavy attack. I requested final defensive fires from the artillery Forward Observer, explaining that I had perhaps six casualties and was low on ammunition. He promised to forward my report, but nothing else.

Moments later our position became exposed as illumination rounds began to pop over the embattled base. Moving forward, I instructed that the wounded be pulled back into the concealment of heavier jungle. The perimeter at Burt had opened up now, and the ballistic crack of rounds passing low overhead sounded like a continuous rip. There was an awesome explosion near the patrol CP. Hurrying over, I found Bobby Winkler dead and Doc. Marcum with a terrible wound to his arm and shoulder.

Somehow we managed to form a circle of both the wounded and uninjured. Someone began distributing the weapons and ammo from our dead. We reminded each other not to fire unless actually seen

Fire Support Base Burt... continued

by the enemy and the need for silence was stressed...the wounded understood.

We periodically exchanged shots and grenades with the NVA still moving toward the main perimeter. They wanted the fire support base and were willing to bypass us...for later. My first thought as I struggled to think clearly was of our now useless radio. Unable to contact us, commanders at the FSB would assume we had been wiped out. We all knew what was coming...and it came at once.

Artillery from another fire base began to impact in and around our tiny perimeter. Maybe it was 105mm; maybe it was 8 inch. Perhaps some of it was our own mortars: I know it was big...and it killed...and it didn't discriminate between green or brown uniforms. Doc Marcum, badly hurt, tried to help the wounded but he'd pass out when he moved. By feel, with bandages and morphine, I did what I could as shells continued to land and I waited my turn. I will never forget the acrid smell of cordite from the bursting projectiles; limbs, branches and even whole trees fell amongst us. Along with the trees came huge nests of fire ants. They seemed attracted to the heat of fresh blood. Still, our wounded stayed silent and did not move.

As abruptly as it had begun, the artillery ended, but green and red tracers continued to crisscross overhead. I wondered how much time had passed since the first shot from Doc's pistol. The rattle of rockets and mini guns from helicopter gunships snapped me out of my daydream. Horrifying streams of tracers appeared solid although only one in six rounds were red. This surging river of hot bullets would rush toward us and then suddenly veer away. Some of it came right through causing more dead, wounded, and more fire ants. Still...no screams from our men.

Their ordinance expended, the gunships were replaced with the screams of fighter bombers. On the third pass they dropped napalm close enough that we felt its heat wash over us. Then came the cluster bombs and real damage...one more dead. Strafing runs followed with a ballistic crack of the air, trailed by the 20mm shell detonations and then the report of the guns themselves. It created an odd and eerie combination of sound. This sanguine aerial battle--artillery, gun ships, fighter bombers--alternated all night long leaving us with more dead...more wounded.

Finally the dawn came, and with it absolute silence. The din of battle had slowed, then vanished. I could see clearly the wounds of my men and the grotesque postures of the dead. Instinctively I knew that I had to find help. The welcome sound of a chopper landing at the FSB proved who owned Burt. Until I heard that, I had no idea whether our troops or the NVA had won that fight. Of our sixteen man patrol only three could still walk. Two of us were miraculously untouched... myself and Sergeant Voltz.

Simultaneously tightening and reapplying dressings to the wounded, we checked weapons to find any that would still shoot. In the dim light of early morning, Sergeant Voltz and I moved off toward the FSB. I walked point--Sergeant Voltz protected the rear. Smoke hung thick in the air and small fires burned throughout. Evidence of the grim and terrible slaughter inflicted upon the enemy was everywhere. Every step taken in that short trip back to Burt disclosed numerous enemy bodies. There were too many to count as we passed and we watched closely for any sign of light left in them. None moved.

As we neared the FSB we were forced to hide just inside the jungle and we anxiously watched our U. S.



soldiers attending to their dreadful tasks. Time was running out...men were bleeding to death. We took a chance, put down our weapons, stood up and shouted: "Don't Shoot, GI's...don't shoot."...In twenty minutes I was leading a reaction force of infantry soldiers, and plenty of Medics with their stretchers.

On the scene, we established security and the Corpsmen went to work. I found Bobby Winkler's motionless body and noticed the radio hand set still gripped tightly in his right hand. Shrapnel or bullets had severed the cord; I gently took it from him and put it in my pocket.

Back at Burt I reported to the Company Commander and learned that Charlie Company was now under half strength. Third Platoon was badly hurt. Platoon Leader Lieutenant Adkins had been evacuated, Sergeant Dubose was dead. Platoon Sergeant Bill Barbrow of the Second Platoon had also been evacuated and the survivors of both platoons were merged. Danny Alvis became my new RTO and we became a team. We were all flown out of Burt later that day and finally found time to rest, to comfort one another and to cry.

I was twenty-two years old when these events took place, some twenty-six years ago. Is my memory tarnished by the passage of time; are these defensive or self serving reminiscences? Only God in His wisdom knows. Whenever I feel that my life is tough, I take out Bobby Winkler's handset and gaze at it. Realizing that there are levels of courage and dedication that I cannot even imagine, I am chastened... and I go on.



