

BATTLE SUMMARY - July 12, 1967 Bravo Company

Copyright 2014

RED WARRIOR MISSION STATEMENT FOR VIETNAM

“To close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver in order to destroy or capture him, or to repel his assault by fire, close combat and counterattack.”

The Battle at (YA 185-132) Map Sheet 6536-III
Bravo Co., 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division Province, Republic of
Vietnam

Written by the late **Col. Harold B. Birch** (1929-2012) – US Army - retired
Battalion Commander 1/12th Infantry 1967



LTC Harold Birch

Years ago the late Harold Birch (1929-2012) wrote his analysis of the July 12, 1967 battle, a battle that resulted in the costliest amount of casualties that the Red Warriors sustained while in Vietnam. 32 men from Bravo company lost their lives, and it was the only time Red Warrior POWs were taken by the enemy. LTC Birch assumed command of the battalion shortly after this incident, and as he states, “ *The events of July 12 overshadowed all else that preceded my arrival.*”

He and his staff take months to piece together what happened that day. The following is the result of these efforts, and unlike other Battle Reports on this website, we use LTC Birch’s narrative to tell the story as he sees it.

Editor: October 2015 (*Thanks to Kevin Watson for providing this document*)

FORWARD

The Ia Drang River Valley, Vietnam, July 1967

In July of 1967, not far to the northwest of the 1965 site of the very first major engagement between the American and North Vietnamese Armies, elements of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment (Red Warriors) fought against a desperate battle against heavy odds (1). It took place in the shadow of the Chu Pong mountains that straddle the Vietnamese/Cambodian border as I was reroute to Vietnam and although I had not yet joined the battalion it was to color my early months in command. This account of events is drawn from the battalion’s after-action report, my discussions with participants within two weeks of the battle, contemporary letters home from enlisted soldiers from the three rifle companies who fought there and recent correspondence and diaries of those who lived to tell about it. It is a natural beginning to the story of my tour of duty as commander of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment.

Harold Birch

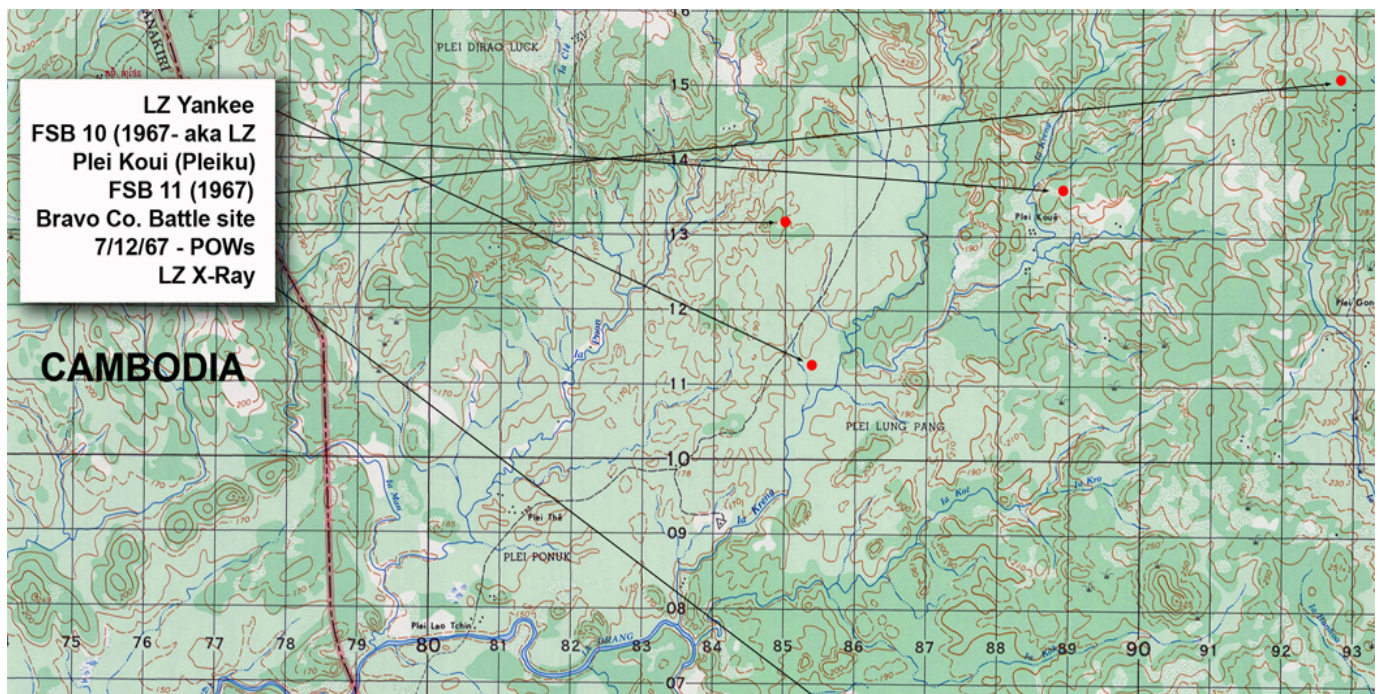
(1) For a detailed account of that first battle see, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* by LTC Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and Joseph L. Galloway

OVERVIEW

Its mission set the pattern of activities of the 4th Infantry Division in the Central Highlands of Vietnam during that period of the war. The Division was ordered to interdict and destroy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) efforts to resupply and reinforce enemy forces in South Vietnam. One of the major terminals of the Ho Chi Minh trail was situated just inside the Cambodian border, east of the Division's area of operations. Two NVA Regiments, the 66th and 88th, protected the base and operated out of it in South Vietnam against U.S. forces in the area.

The normal 4th Infantry Division method of operating in those early years of combat, unit involvement was for the infantry battalions and their direct support artillery battery to occupy temporary "fire-bases" at intervals several miles removed from the international border. The battalions then dispatched their rifle companies into the jungle just short of that border to search for and destroy enemy units attempting to move into South Vietnam. Heavily fortified US Special Forces camps in fixed locations and aerial operations helped in these efforts.

This modus operandi of the 4th Division's infantry battalions was in distinct contrast to the American combat units operating around Saigon. There, battalions could count on the entire unit returning to its divisional basecamp after a period of active operations. The upshot of this pattern of the 4th Division's operations was that men assigned in the division's forward infantry and artillery units stayed in constant operations in the jungle unless; sick or wounded, going on R&R (a 5 day vacation given each soldier about midway through a normal one year tour) or preparing at the end of a tour to return to "the world."



In early summer of 1967, the 1st Battalion, 12 Infantry was operating out of a fire base (1.1) in the Ia Drang River Valley.

(1.1) Probably LZ X Ray

The terrain in the la Drang river watershed was, in places, heavily forested by huge trees, a dense undergrowth of shrubs, bamboo, and steep hills and ridges. In other places it had more rolling hills with tall grass, widely dispersed trees, and occasional copses of heavy forest...perfect locations for an ambush. The la Drang River was behind the area in which the infantry companies operated and was passable, with difficulty, to foot troops. Just to the north of the battalion area of operations was Highway 19, the dirt road from Pleiku to the Duc Co Special Forces Camp. The battalion's area of operation was, however largely inaccessible to American armor, and natural landing sites for choppers often very small or non-existent.

(Maps for the areas described above include Map 6536-II and Map 6536-IV. See Red Warriors Map Page <http://www.redwarriors.us/NEWS_Maps_Main.htm> to view complete maps of the areas mentioned)

In early July (1967) the soldiers in the rifle companies of the "Red Warriors" were plagued by intermittent rain and dense morning fogs. (It was the fall of 1967 before the fourth rifle company [D] was added to the Infantry Battalions of the 4th Division.) As was standard in the Division, one of the three rifle companies remained for about one week out of every three at the battalion firebase as a reserve force. In this role it was also used to defend the perimeter of the firebase that included an artillery battery whose weapons were dedicated to the infantry battalion, the battalion's 4.2 inch mortars, the battalion operations center and a medical aid station. (2)

The infantrymen in those forward companies often referred mockingly to this duty as providing the "palace guard."

But, irrespective of their seeming cynicism, this duty provided a welcome respite for the men, as they had regular hot meals and occupied positions in a base that shifted much less frequently than the company-sized patrol bases in the forward area...this translated in having to dig fewer foxholes and getting more rest. While there was some responsibility for patrolling around the firebase and a need for continuous vigil around the perimeter, there was relatively less chance of an encounter with enemy soldiers and those in the firebase were a bit more relaxed.

The soldiers in the companies on patrol moved to designated locations and dug-in to create a patrol base. Typically they remained in that location for three or so days. Daily patrols and nighttime ambush sites were provided from these patrol bases. The soldiers in the companies on patrol operated in physically taxing terrain. They were burdened with heavy rucksacks, ammunition, 3 to 4 canteens, machetes, weapons and other paraphernalia of soldiering. They were sustained by periodic helicopter-borne resupply into the patrol base. Contacts with the enemy were normally fleeting and infrequent in this deadly game of "hide and seek." It was a pattern of behavior that GIs described, with a touch of irony, as comprised of "Weeks of boredom and seconds of sheer terror."

That pattern changed perceptively in the days before the clash in the la Drang valley, as the battalion's combat elements and the three-man, (2.1) long-range reconnaissance patrols (the official abbreviation was LRRPs, but were universally called "lurps.") from Division made repeated sightings of NVA patrols.

(2) *The Vietnam era battalion aid station was a much less important facility than its WWII and Korean War counterpart. Evacuation helicopters flew casualties directly from the battlefield to more sophisticated medical facilities.*

(2.1) *The 4th Division SOP was for 6 man lurps, not 3 as Col. Birch mentions*

A RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) in the weapons platoon of C Company, Specialist 4th Class (a rank widely called “speck four”) **Charles “Rob” Laing** of Andes, NY, kept a diary during the period that captures the foot soldiers perspective. (I have attempted to translate his diary’s shorthand by parenthetically interpreting or clarifying points in his narrative.) On the 11th of July, with chilling prescience, he wrote:

“We moved today into the la Drang (River Valley) and the flanks are reporting (enemy) movement all day. B Co. also reports movement. B Co. is about 1 click (kilometer) away. We set up a patrol base. Report of NVA Regiment in area. I think they are after us.”

A BAD DAY

On the 12th of July, poor early morning visibility caused the Battalion operations officer, Major **Larry Gardner**, to hold B Company in its patrol base. B and C companies were operating in the more open and rolling terrain of the Battalion’s area of operations. Around 8 a.m., the haze having partially lifted, the C Company Commander, Captain **Brian Ruston**, sent out an understrengthened platoon out on patrol and it promptly clashed with 12 NVA. The platoon killed three of the enemy. B Company was then ordered to send out patrols and establish contact with C Company. In the meantime C Company sighted 30 more NVA, and friendly artillery and mortar fires were delivered on the area. Poor visibility kept Air Force jets and Army helicopter gun ships from being used.

Private **Melvin D. Perttunen** of Calumet, WI, was a member of the 1st Platoon of Company B and was armed with the M-79 Grenade Launcher and a 45 caliber pistol. He recalls that he and his fellow soldiers were apprehensive about their new Company Commander who had been “in the bush” for only two weeks and was untested in a fight. They missed their old commander whom they had grown to trust. Rain and mud added to their problems. On the 12th of July, **Perttunen’s** platoon was ordered to patrol in an arc around the south half of the B Company patrol base while the 2nd platoon took the north half. **Perttunen** said the other platoon was very quickly “Nailed down” by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers.

Specialist **Rob Laing** wrote in his diary of his unit activity and that first contact:

“Our patrol runs into NVA Unit. B Company also reports contact. BuKu (GI slang for the French word, beaucoup, and meaning ‘a lot’) firing from both platoons. 2.6 (a rifle platoon from Company C) is surrounded, and B Co. 3.6 (a rifle platoon from B Company) is surrounded. Movement outside our perimeter. Many NVA regulars. LT Nurth (a new lieutenant and Laing’s weapons platoon leader) is with 2.6. He wanted CIB (Combat Infantry Badge awarded for ground combat with the enemy) Will get it. Our platoon can’t move, receiving mortar fire.”*

**Editors note: Could actually refer to Lt Gaylord (Mike) Nootz – there are no records of a LT Nurth*

By about 9:20 a.m. B Company had begun to report movement of enemy to its west. C Company reported it too was pinned down, and that the enemy had gotten between the two companies. Afterwards, there would be accusations that despite prodding by the Battalion operations officer, the C Company Commander had been less that aggressive in his efforts to reach B Company. **Perttunen** adds some details about events in B Company after the B Company’s 2nd platoon was pinned down by enemy fire. The B Company Commander sent the 3rd platoon, under Lieutenant **Gary Rassser**, to their help and called on **Perttunen’s** platoon to return post haste to the company patrol base.

Meanwhile, the battalion operations officer alerted the A Company Commander, Captain **Tom Borland**, that his unit on the firebase perimeter was to “saddle up” and move by helicopter to an area close to the developing battle. By now, the weather had cleared somewhat and after landing, Alpha Company was to be prepared to mount an attack to outflank the enemy and eventually to reinforce the endangered companies. The battalion’s reconnaissance platoon was recalled from its patrol to protect the perimeter of the battalions’ firebase.

Private first Class **Harry Dilkes** of Edison, NJ, a platoon RTO in Alpha Company was eavesdropping on the radio traffic between B and C Company. He wrote in a letter home after the fight that his company was alerted to move as soon as hastily assembled Battalion soldiers from the Division base-amp, including unit cooks, arrived to lend added manpower. **Dilks** said that he “*swallowed hard, checked his M-16 and ammunition and prepared to move out to the scene of the battle.*”

Meanwhile, Company C was ordered to attempt to relieve the isolated platoons. In his diary, **Laing** writes:

*“B Company moves out another platoon to help 3.6 (the original B Company platoon) and they are pinned down. Captain (C Company Commander) orders (his unit to) leave everything except weapons, ammo and canteens. The Company moves out and are about 200 meters from 2.6 (the C Company platoon) and 500 from 5.6 (The B Company platoon). Many NVA in the area. Heavy firing. Some snipers in trees. Mortars (enemy). Lots of duds. Captain calls me 4.6 (weapons platoon) and wants to return to (Patrol base) perimeter (still occupied by weapons platoon). Calls 2.6 (trapped C Company platoon) and told them to try and make it in, that we (C Company) were going into a trap. Choppers getting shot up even though we have a wall of fire into wood lines. Now **Maurice Belknap** (a Specialist 4th class, with the Mortar section gets blown off the bunker. Hit in shoulder. Got out on next chopper. PFC **Sweska**, company medic, gets him to the chopper and should get a medal for doing it in this.)*

Private **Tom Heston** of Columbus, OH, a rifleman in the 2nd Platoon of C Company recalls the events described by **Laing**. He was part of the three-man point, the advance element of his platoon on the move to “*Marry up*” with the B Company Unit. As a point man, he was given a most dangerous assignment, he would be among the first to see the enemy or be fired upon by hidden NVA. He remembers the unit being recalled as the C Company Commander felt they were being drawn into a “trap.” As the platoon returned to the unit defensive position he was then one of the several men left to cover the (rear) withdrawal of the platoon. Etched in his memory were his feelings of danger and loneliness as he followed by some 50 meters, the other men in the platoon.

By about 11:45 a.m. the B Company patrol position was drawing enemy fire but the B Commander, CPT **Ruston**, moved to try to relieve pressure on his two trapped platoons. PVT **Perttunen** says all of the men in the patrol base were told to “Saddle up” and leave all of their heavier equipment, including mortars, behind. What was left of B Company, whose original “Field strength” had been just 85 of the authorized 200 or so men, attempted to move in three parallel columns to join the two platoons who were in the thick of a fight for their lives.

Pertthen’s squad leader, a Sergeant **Byron Thompson**, told him to take the point, but as the squad was a bit disoriented **Thompson** thrust at a soldier named **Henoc Gomez** to the front. Shortly thereafter they stumbled across an American M-60 machine gun team from **Rasser’s** 3rd platoon hunkered down under cover. **Perttunen** thought the machine gun crewmembers were in shock from the ferocity of the fighting that had transpired, but **Thompson** made them

move forward with his squad. Shortly after encountering the machine gunners, **Perttunen's** squad had its first contact with NVA soldiers, whom in retrospect **Perttunen** now thinks were part of an enemy outpost. At this point, in **Perttunen's** words, "*all hell broke loose*" as they were hit from three sides by enemy B-40 rockets, mortars and machine guns firing green tracers.

Around noon, the B Company Commander, **Brian Ruston**, was badly wounded, and the Artillery Forward Observer, a young artillery lieutenant, **Fred Bragg**, assumed temporary Command. He was simultaneously trying to coordinate the infantrymen's actions on the ground, delivery of artillery fire and the efforts on an Air Force forward air controller (FAC) who had arrived overhead in a small single engine plane to direct air strikes. Now the situation in B Company was disintegrating quickly.

My predecessor, Lieutenant Colonel **Corey J. Wright**, was attempting to control battalion units and coordinate assistance to the beleaguered men on the ground from a "Huey" helicopter over the scene. He sent his 4.2 inch mortar platoon leader, First Lieutenant **David Jennings**, via a small 2-man, unarmed observations Helicopter (LOH) to replace the badly wounded B Company Commander. The pilot of the slow moving, little two seat helicopter with its bubble-like Plexiglas canopy was suddenly wounded seriously from ground fire. And although untrained as a pilot, **Jennings** managed to land the damaged chopper at Duc Co Special Forces Camp a few miles to the North of the fight. Efforts to insert him on the scene never succeeded.

During this period the B Company Commander, CPT **Rushton**, was again wounded, this time fatally. It appears from the after-action report that at this point the Artillery Forward Observer, LT **Fred Bragg**, was also seriously wounded. The battalion command chopper was forced to move off for refueling, and the Air Force FAC asked for a "check fire" on supporting artillery in order to deliver his ordnance without endangering his pilots. In a controversial move, artillery fire was totally stopped, consistent with the check fire procedure. On the ground the wounded artillery Lieutenant, **Fred Bragg**, was unable to fine-tune the FAC's effort at delivering air strikes. Attempts to mark the B Company location with smoke grenades were met with a deluge of enemy mortar and rocket rounds and further confused as the NVA soldiers also "Popped" smoke grenades.

The 2nd Brigade Commander, Colonel **Charles (Pete) Sniffin**, who had also been overhead in his command helicopter, lifted the "check fire" on the artillery. Guardedly, Major **Lawrence A. Gardner**, my S-3 in the early days of my command of the battalion, told me with some rancor that he considered Brigade's interference in stopping artillery fire as unwarranted and a likely reason that the unit had been overrun. I could see no proof that his opinion was necessarily accurate, but I understood his bitterness at what he considered interference from a higher headquarters and his own frustrations about the battalion's inability to protect its men in the fight.

Specialist **Laing** with C Company, by benefit of his radio, had been privy to some of the efforts to coordinate supporting mortar and artillery fire and picked up the narrative in his diary at about this point. He wrote:

"I'm on the radio. 3.6 (Trapped B Company platoon) has tried to move out and is in trouble. 3.6 is calling for help but we can't help. Radio goes dead (Trapped platoon radio?) Buku firing. They got over run. 2.6 (trapped C Company platoon) makes it in. We move again toward B Co. Find 3//6 (Trapped B Company platoon). All KIA. Form perimeter (and) dust off (Medical evacuation choppers) KIAs."

Meanwhile, Private **Perttunen** amidst what was left of B Company was fighting for his life. C Company halt to evacuate the dead seems now to have been an unnecessary delay in the efforts to help those still alive in B Company. (But that observation is made with the 20-20 hindsight common to armchair soldiers.) B Company platoon leader, Lieutenant **Rasser**, and several others from his platoon had worked their way back to his machine gun team and some of Sergeant **Thompson's** squad in firing positions behind a rock pile. Disorganized, suffering from shock, and many of them wounded. The remnants of the two platoons began to work their way back to the defensive positions at the abandoned patrol base. Some Huey choppers were now overhead using their door guns to suppress enemy fire. **Perttunen** says they spotted him on the ground and quit firing long enough for him and others to work their way back to the prepared defensive positions in their original patrol base. As they withdrew, **Perttunen** helping some of the wounded, encountered his squad leader, Sergeant **Thompson**, who was going back to the area of the fighting searching for more survivors.

PFC **Dilkes**, back with Alpha Company at the Battalion firebase, had continued to monitor radio traffic and he says that during his time he heard;

“...the B Company radio goes dead, (and) after a moment of silence, a ‘gook’ started talking on the radio, then static, and then nothing.”

The after-action report confirms that by 1:30 p.m. all radio contact with B Company had been lost, and C Company reported they no longer heard enemy fire from the B Company locale. What they could not know at the time was the at sole surviving officer from B Company, LT **Gary Rasser**, was organizing a defense with about 25 men who had made their way out of the enemy killing fields. He had no radio and was unable to report his circumstances. (**Rasser** was later awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts)

But **Perttunen**, remembers it differently. In his view, his squad leader, Sergeant **Thompson**, was the real hero. After he had left the retreating survivors, he had worked his way back toward the enemy in search of other American soldiers. He had, he said, run into two NVA, taken cover behind a log and been stunned by their grenades. Thompsons had recovered in time to find them at close quarters attempting to bayonet him. He had killed both with the bayonet taken from one. **Perttunen** believed **Thompson's** story as he had stumbled into the patrol base, the last man to escape from the battle-area. He arrived covered in enemy blood and grasping an enemy bayonet in his hand. I recalled, after reading **Perttunen's**, account, similar stories from others about Sergeant **Thompson's** bravery that terrible day. He, too, was among those decorated for their bravery.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Brigade Commander had formed a task force of mechanized forces, the 3 Battalion, 8th Infantry, and the 1st Battalion, 10 Cavalry. During this period, the Division's helicopters were largely tied up supporting the Red Warriors and the armored forces were moved by road to be in a position where some of their troops might be moved on foot to secure position from which to reinforce the 1st battalion, 12 infantry.

Laing again picked up the narrative in his diary as follows;

*“Move on to B Co. pick-up wounded (B Company men on the battlefield. Leave KIA. Take (dog) tags. Reach B Co. perimeter. Both Co's (Total strength) app. 135 men. Wait for NVA. A Co. comes in about dark. Have approximately 250 men for the night. My friend **Floyd Williams** is KIA. (He was a M-60 gunner with 3.6 9trapped B Co. platoon).*

As **Laing** says, Alpha Company was now on the ground and moving to help the remainder of the two Red Warrior rifle companies. In a letter home, written days after the fight, **Dilkes** with A Company said:

“When we reached the location (Site of the B Company patrol base), C Company was already there. The battle was over 30 minutes before we got there but C Company and the remainder of B Company still reported sniper fire as we closed in on the location.”

Perttunen, the B Company survivor, erroneously recalled no help arriving until the following day after he had spent a harrowing night on the perimeter in a water-filled foxhole.

Perttunen is undoubtedly wrong as the Battalion’s after-action report tells of the Battalion Commander and his staff establishing, just before dark, a forward command post with the units on the ground. They made preparations to repulse further enemy attacks that night, plans to continue friendly operations to pursue enemy still on the battlefield the next morning, and efforts to retrieve American dead. Choppers had brought ammunitions, equipment, and food. **Perttunen** undoubtedly recalls this night as he remembers friendly artillery fire ringing their position all night long – a precaution that LTC **Wright** is likely to have instituted to prevent the NVA from organizing an assault on the position.

AFTERMATH

The battalion after-action report said thirty-two American’s KIAs and one WIA were evacuated by air in the course of the day. Other wounded were evacuated from the old B Company patrol base, but no figure is available on total American WIAs. The small number of American WIAs from the battlefield proper, suggest that those wounded during the fight were killed as the NVA soldiers swept the area. **Laing** seems to confirm this as he mention as a large number of head wounds among the dead, and the muttering, I heard, from among his fellow soldiers who were present that day, as to the fate of any future NVA prisoners. (3)

A later count would reveal that there were seven MIA’s (Missing in Actions) from the overrun Company B platoons. And, miraculously, six years later in the spring of 1973 some of these men were among the POWs released in Hanoi along with downed American pilots. Their story has either never been told publically or, at worst, no one was listening. (3.1)

At first light on the 13th of July, the Battalion moved in hope of finding enemy units still in the area. **Laing** writes:

*“We move out in 2 Co. formation, A, C and what is left of B Co. Sweep battle area for 500 meters. Find a Chi-Com advisor wounded. (Allegedly a Chinese Communist officer or NCO, he is much taller and heavier than the North Vietnamese. Persistent rumors existed after my arrival that a tall Chinese soldier was seen on the battlefield, but no confirmations of this existed. Laing orally said that this enemy soldier had raised a weapon to fire as they approached and Sgt. **Felipe Mojica-Agosto** shot him) Find more NVA bodies, graves. Some NVA and GIs in them. Buku equipment. Still missing 8 GIs (sic). Some (enemy) movement but no contact.”*

(3) *Hal Moore in writing of the earlier 1965 battle in the Ia Drang also provides evidence of NVA battlefield executions of American wounded.*

(3.1) POW's taken that day included SP4 Martin Frank; PFC Nathan B. Henry; SGT Cordine McMurray; PFC Richard R. Perricone; PFC Stanley Newell; SP4 James F. Schiele; PFC James L. VanBendegom. Schiele and VanBendegom died of their wounds in captivity. VanBendegom's remains were identified in 2014 and returned to the US for burial. More information on these Red Warriors can be found on the Red Warriors webpage.



Left: The only known photo of Red Warriors in Captivity. Shown, Female NVA guards hold ropes that are tied around the necks of four of our Red Warriors. PFC's **Van Bendegom** and **Schiele** died in captivity. *Schiele's* remains have never been recovered and are still classified as MIA. *Jim VanBendegom* Remains were identified in 2014. The remaining five POWs were released in March of 1973.

Dilkes wrote that only A and C Companies made the sweep. He wrote that: "...we had to leave B Company behind to get choppered out to the fire support base." **Laing** was probably mistaken about participation in this sweep by B Company survivors as **Perttunen** himself writes of being taken to the battalion firebase for treatment of minor wounds. Evacuation them would be consistent

With their likely emotional instability given the intensity of their experience the preceding day. **Perttunen** recalls that the 4th Division Commander General **Pierce** (sic) met and talked with them about the severity of the confrontation and wished them well. (**Perttunen's** mistake as to the Commanding General's name is a natural one. The 4th Division Commander was Major General **William Peers**.)

There were no further contacts with organized NVA units in the immediate days that followed as the battalion swept the area and counted the enemy dead on the battlefield. One hundred fifty-two enemy bodies (or about five times the U.S. Army losses) were found, and it seems likely others had either been carried from the area or died of wounds after their evacuation back to their Cambodian Base camp while the NVA still controlled the site of the battle. Given the usual five to one ratio of WIAs to KIAs, the enemy is likely to have had another three to four hundred casualties.

The 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry's after-action report expresses the opinion that better than two battalions of NVA troops had come across the international border and descended upon B and C Companies of the Red Warriors in this July, 1967, battle in the Ia Drang Valley. If so, they paid a high price for their bold action.

Lieutenant Colonel **Wright** wrote in his after-action report of his justifiable pride in the tenacity of his Red Warriors who fought against overwhelming odds. Shortly after the battle, **Wright** returned to the United States at the end of a yearlong tour.

On August 2, 1967, I assumed command of the 1st Battalion 12th Infantry Regiment from **Wright** in the Ia Drang Valley and the events described here overshadowed all else that preceded my arrival. I instituted a number of changes in the standard operating procedures of the battalion growing out of experiences in this fight and my interpretations of the steps needed to avoid a recurrence. But, restoring confidence in a reconstituted B Company seemed to me to be an immediate and, in some ways, an overwhelming task. Fortunately, a fine West Point graduate, Captain **David Dluzyn**, newly assigned to the 4th Division and the Red Warriors, was instrumental in breathing life into the demoralized B Company survivors, and under his adept leadership it very quickly became one of the most competent and aggressive in the battalion.

Lieutenant **Gary Rasser**, the surviving officer from B Company, returned in early September from the hospital and it was clear that he was still suffering from the emotional after-effects of his brush with death. I convinced him to lend his experience as executive officer for the newly assigned Company D that had just arrived as a “packaged unit” from Fort Lewis, Washington. Our basic organization had been changed in September to provide a fourth rifle company. I was employing the new unit around the Battalion’s firebase until they could get their bearings and gain some confidence in them selves. **Rasser** seemed pleased with his new job and enthusiastically took on the assignment. It was, however, to be a short lived job as one of the 4th Division Assistant Division Commanders reached down and took **Rasser** out of the unit to be his Aide-de-Camp. **Rasser** deserved the break and I was pleased to have the battalion represented in the division headquarters by such a fine young man.

As I said at the outset, this costly fight put an indelible mark on my early months in-command. With its Captain dead, letters from the families of the deceased B Company men often came to me. The families were asking about the specific circumstances of their sons’ death, or about the whereabouts of personal belongings. One father, in a heart-wrenching letter, inquired about his son’s wristwatch – a special gift before he left home. A mother asked about a valuable camera her son had always carried in his rucksack. A new widow asked what had happened to her \$500 husband and saved toward their now cancelled “R&R” vacation to Hawaii.

In my letters to families, I tried to be truthful in my responses, but at the same time, I struggled to shield them from some of the savagery of the battlefield where enemy and, to often, “Friendly” soldiers went through the pockets and packs of the dead and dying. What other savageries beyond battlefield executions, were practiced by the NVA on those poor dead or dying men, I care not to imagine. No one who lives in a sane and ordered society can quite understand the tenuous hold that social order has on the battle-field until they have seen it first hand!

In any event, in my letters written to families, I didn’t want to be hasty in remarks about what had happened on the battlefield, as later information might point to other explanations. I was working strictly from hearsay and often circumstantial evidence.

Further, the pace of operations and my need to learn more about the terrain, the enemy, and my subordinates prevented a full-scale study of what had transpired. I could not stop. I need to focus on preventing a reoccurrence for the sake of the living. To my new executive officer, Major **George Long**, who joined me just one month after I assumed command of the battalion, fell most of the real work of unscrambling the tangled records and personal property of the dead soldiers in the decimated company. Battles do not end for a unit with the evacuation of its dead and wounded. I suspect efforts to document this long ago fight now grow from the necessity, at the time, to give short shrift to events in the Ia Drang as I looked to on-going events.

I also tell the story of the aftermath of the July 12th, 1967 battle of the Ia Drang because I swore to myself that I would not repeat the moves that had led to this bloodletting. I remember a few days into my command tour that I privately asked the Battalion’s Chaplain, Captain **Huel May**, to pray that I might have the strength and the wisdom to do the right things to protect my men. Events in the Ia Drang on the 12th of July 1967 established my frame of mind for my six months command of some 1200 men in combat. I felt responsibility for their lives, a heavy burden, and I meant to the best of my ability to conserve those lives even as we did our duty.



Harold Birch (1929-2012) Editors Note: Retired Col. Harold Birch passed away Dec. 3, 2012 in Columbia, SC.)

KIAs JULY 12, 1967



Fred Bragg Jr. - 1LT



Ronald King - PFC



Milford McKee - PFC



Robert Strange - PFC



Pernell Claud - SP4



John Harlan - PFC



Joseph Miller - PFC



Jim VanBendegom SGT**



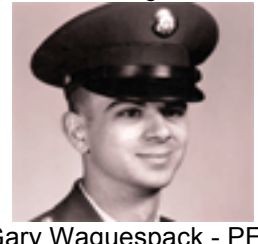
Gary Coleman - PFC



Wandle Hickman - PFC



Owen Montgomery - SGT



Gary Waguespack - PFC



Robert Echols - PFC



David Horn - PFC



Gaylord Nootz - 2LT



Floyd Williams - SGT*



Gerald Fox - PFC



Jerry Hughes - SGT



Salvatore Polizzi -



Tyrone Combs - SP5*



Willie Fullilove - PFC



Rockwell Jamison - SGT



Brian Ruston - CPT



Ronald Crain - SP4*



Eddie Gibson - PFC



Charles Judge Jr - SP4



James Schiele - SGT **



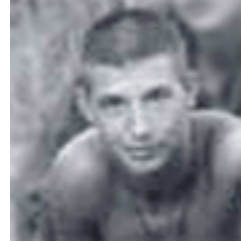
Floyd Noe - PFC*



Stephen Groth - SP4



Jerry Lanier - SP4



Troy Sexton - PFC



SGT Moses Williams

* Medic

** POW/MIA

POWs/MIAs



Cordine McMurray



James Van Bendegom



Stanley Newell



Nathan Henry



Martin S. Frank



James Schiele



Richard Perricone

James Schiele is still listed as MIA.

In 2014 remains of James VanBendegom were identified and he had a full military honor burial on Veterans Day, Nov. 2014 in his hometown of Kenosha, WI.

See RedWarriors.us website for more information on our POWs/MIAs

ADDENDUM

*Jim Daniels, Sept. 2008 - St. Louis Red Warriors Reunion that honored our POW's, read the following Narrative. Condensed from the extensive and detailed Battle Report written by **Roger Hill***

In early July 1967, elements of the 66th and 88th North Vietnamese Army Regiments (NVA), whose sanctuaries were in Cambodian territory, begin noticeable activity across the border into the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. They focus their concentration at the northern end of the Ia Drang Valley, Pleiku Province. Fourth Division monitors their movement through radio intercepts, actual sightings, and electronic sensors. Everything indicates that the NVA are grouping... and up to something. American forces' response... call in the B-52s.

After all B-52 strikes, it is SOP for American troops to be sent back through the strike area in order to conduct a "Bomb Damage Assessment." Its purpose, of course, is to determine if the air strikes are effective. What we didn't know until much later was that the NVA had figured out this simple tactic and strategy. This July... this July in 1967, they would purposely make a showing... and knowing that it would take 1 to 2 days for a B-52 strike to occur, would quietly slip back into Cambodia before the air strikes rained down their horrific power. After the air strikes, the NVA plan to rush back into the area, wait for the American sweeps to take place... and then spring their trap. Their goal, to wipe out an entire American Army infantry unit.

And so, during the few days before July 12, 1967, the NVA enact their plan. It is a perfect scenario to spring a trap.

On the morning of July 12, Charlie and Bravo Companies from our battalion have the mission of conducting the Bomb Damage Assessment sweeps. Both companies are under-strength. Instead of about 120 personnel, Bravo Company has 69 men in the field; Charlie Company, about 75.

It had rained during the night... the morning brings a heavy damp mist. Aircraft are grounded until the weather improves... and both companies are told to remain in place and simply conduct security sweeps around their perimeters. Charlie Company is 1000 meters to the north of Bravo, and both are 6000 meters from the Cambodian border.

The time, 0749 hours.

Charlie Company is the first to send out a patrol. It's their 2nd Platoon. They first venture west of their perimeter, then swing south in the direction of Bravo Company. As they do so, they suddenly make contact with twelve NVA, killing three of them. Battalion is alerted. They, in turn, alert Bravo Company and instruct them to establish radio contact with the 2nd Platoon of C Company.

It is now 0845 hours.

A Charlie Company observation post sights 30 NVA moving west of their position, moving to the northwest. No action is taken, but by this time everyone's nerves are getting on edge.

At the same time this is happening, Bravo Company, under the command of Captain **Brian Rushton**, sends out their first security sweep. 1st Platoon has the mission. Ten minutes later they report NVA moving to the south of the perimeter... No contact is made and 1st Platoon closes back into their company perimeter. 3rd Platoon, under the command of Lieutenant **Gaylord Nootz** and his Platoon Sergeant, **Cordine McMurray**, now depart with the task of sweeping the west side of Bravo's perimeter.

It is now 0920 hours.

Charlie Company suddenly reports enemy movement to their north and directs mortar fire at the area. Twenty minutes later, Captain **Rushton** of Bravo Company orders his 3rd Platoon to break off their perimeter sweep and head northward to link up with C Company's 1st Platoon. 3rd Platoon leader **Nootz** is told to change radio frequencies to Charlie Company and to communicate with them directly. In essence, he's now under Charlie Company operational command.

To summarize:

In less than two hours, Charlie Company has briefly engaged the NVA just **South** of their perimeter, killing three. They have seen 30 NVA to their **West**. And to their **North**, they are lobbing mortar rounds at enemy movement. Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon is headed northward to link up with Charlie Company's 1st Platoon, which is still on their original sweep and pinned down. The day is not looking good.

Back at Bravo Company's perimeter, all is quiet but Captain **Rushton** and his RTO, PFC **Nathan Henry**, are closely monitoring battalion and Charlie Company radio traffic.

It is 1052 hours

Weather has improved and the Battalion Commander, LTC **Corey Wright**, finally is airborne and departs for the battle area.

Four minutes later, at 1056 hours, the NVA begin to close their trap.

Charlie Company's 1st Platoon and Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon are suddenly under attack. Heavy attack!

LTC Wright immediately orders both Charlie and Bravo Companies to move out and link up with their embattled platoons.

Bravo's commander, CPT **Rushton**, gives the order to move out. Weapons Platoon will stay behind to provide mortar support... But they only have 41 rounds.

Lieutenant **Roger Howse**, who has been in country for only a few weeks, leads the way northward with his 1st Platoon. Lieutenant **Gary Rasser** follows with his 2nd Platoon. The CO, RTO, senior medic, and a Weapons Platoon Forward Observer follow. Also in the latter group are four engineers from the 4th Engineers, and a three-man Forward Observer team from the 4/42nd Artillery. Shortly after they leave the perimeter, enemy forces are sighted south and southwest of their location, and artillery and mortar fire from battalion are brought in against this force.

The time is 1108 hours.

Things now begin to happen quickly.

LT **Nootz's** 3rd Platoon comes under a major assault from the west and southwest. Realizing he's in trouble, **Nootz** re-establishes radio contact with his own commander, Captain **Rushton**, and requests immediate help. **Rushton** responds they are coming as fast as they can. Artillery fire is redirected so that 1st and 2nd Platoons can link up with 3rd Platoon.

1140 hours

The embattled 3rd Platoon is now under enemy mortar fire... each blast coming closer and becoming more and more effective. They need help now! Ammo is just about gone.

1st and 2nd Platoons continue to rush forward and walk into waiting NVA gun sights. Using the 3rd Platoon as bait, the main force of the NVA has been patiently waiting for the 1st and 2nd Platoons. 1st Platoon is the first to engage the enemy. They shift to the right so that 2nd Platoon can come along side, but things will not go well. 2nd Platoon is several minutes behind them... Help won't come immediately. There is intense fire, so loud it drowns out everything but shouting. 1st Platoon Leader LT **Howse** is hit in the leg. Medic **John Stroud** comes to his aid. **Howse** realizes he must withdraw, and gives orders to his men to break contact. With a few of his men and medic **Stroud**, **Howse** makes it back to the company patrol base. **Stroud** goes back into the contact area and repeatedly rescues more men.

While this is unfolding, 2nd Platoon is faring no better. As they approach the west side of the 1st Platoon, they walk into a wall of enemy fire. Losses mount quickly and LT **Rasser** comes to the same conclusion as LT **Howse**... break contact and fall back. But the enemy back now blocks his way. He and his remaining men begin an escape and evasion maneuver that is miraculous and he manages to get the few survivors of his tattered platoon past 3 lines of enemy troops.

Since the very first engagement of 1st and 2nd Platoons, Captain **Rushton** knows he must move forward with his command group. But he doesn't realize that the NVA has now assaulted the entire company. Enemy 82mm mortars begin to rain down the entire length of the company line.

At 1206, RTO **Nathan Henry** reports to battalion that Captain **Rushton** is dead, felled by mortar fire. Immediate command goes to 1st Lieutenant **Fred Bragg**, the 4/42nd Forward Observer. He immediately begins to adjust friendly fire. Moments later RTO Henry reports again to battalion: **LT Bragg** and his RTO are dead, victims of yet another incoming mortar round. The Battalion Commander then orders the battalion's mortar platoon leader, 1st LT **Brian Jennings**, who is back at the battalion Fire Support Base, to use the brigade observation helicopter and attempt to fly into Bravo Company's location and assume command.

24 minutes later, the chopper is hit by a volley of small arms fire. The pilot is severely wounded but LT **Jennings**, who has never flown an aircraft before in his life, grabs the controls and manages to fly the chopper away and land safely.

While all this is going on, 3rd platoon is quickly whittled down to but a few men. They are out of ammo. The dead and wounded are scattered throughout the small defensive position. Platoon SGT **Cordine McMurray** urges those who are left to fight to the very end. But with no ammo

left, the end comes soon enough. SGT **McMurray** is brought down and taken captive. Some meters away wounded SP4 **Marty Frank** and PFC **Stanley Newell** are found by the enemy and taken prisoner as well. PFC **Richard Perricone** remembers resisting hard and fighting hand to hand with his enemy, but eventually also ends up a prisoner. **Perricone** vividly remembers the enemy looking for other wounded Americans to take as prisoners. Now with his arms bound, **Perricone** is brought to one of his wounded buddies alive, but in bad shape... and is forced to watch as he is executed with a single shot to the head.

Bravo's Headquarters Platoon no longer exists... RTO **Henry** now believes he's the only one alive in the command group. He doesn't know what's happening with 1st, 2nd or 3rd Platoons. Mortars are landing around him. Things go black.

The next thing **Henry** remembers is waking up. His hands and feet are bound. He's suspended from a pole and being carried away by two female NVA soldiers.

Charlie Company reports to battalion that their 2nd Platoon has re-entered their perimeter; they are no longer engaged with the enemy. LTC **Wright** orders Charlie Company to go to the aid of Bravo Company, but as they do so, the NVA again engage contact, and their progress is slowed.

Little do they know that at this very moment, the NVA are policing the battlefield of Bravo Company. The NVA recover their own dead and wounded, pick up Bravo Company's weapons and equipment, and triage Bravo Company wounded who may be fit enough to be taken prisoner. Those who are too badly wounded... are executed with a shot to the head.

1300 hours

The jungle is quiet. Charlie Company reports that all enemy contact has been broken. There are no more shots being fired... There is no radio contact with anyone in Bravo Company.

In just over an hour-and-a-half, elements of the 7th Battalion, 66th NVA regiment, have all but destroyed Bravo Company. Third platoon is wiped out.

The NVA are headed back to Cambodia. With them are **seven** American soldiers, **seven** of our own Red Warriors. All are wounded, some more seriously than others. But as hellish as the past hours have been, their ordeal is just beginning. Some have six more years of harsh captivity. Others didn't make it.

Captured from 2nd Platoon is PFC **James Van Bendegom**. He reportedly dies from his wounds at an NVA field hospital in Cambodia a short time after his capture.

Also from 2nd Platoon is SP4 **James Schiele**. Later NVA reports reveal that he died on his way to their field hospital and he was buried along a trail.

From the headquarters platoon, Company RTO PFC **Nathan Henry** survived his imprisonment.

3rd Platoon, the decimated platoon, has 4 men captured:

PFC **Stanley Newell**, who survived his imprisonment

PFC **Richard Perricone**, who survived his imprisonment

Platoon SGT **Cordine McMurray**, who survived his imprisonment

SP4 **Martin Frank**, who survived his imprisonment.

These men were held in North Vietnamese captivity from July 12, 1967, until their release in March of 1973, nearly six long years later. Only they know the brutality and deprivation they endured.