

## The Battle of Angel's Wing

**March 8 – March 9, 1969**

**By Spec 4 Robert Michalik**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon**

I am not much of a writer but my memory of that terrible night in South Vietnam stays with me even today. It was very traumatic even though I had been in other firefights with North Vietnamese soldiers.

I came into Vietnam on December 10, 1968 as a draftee with an MOS of 11B. This is listed as a Light Weapons Infantry soldier. Spent 9 weeks of Basic training at Fort Jackson and 8 weeks of AIT at Fort Jackson. I did not choose this occupation but as a draftee the Army assigned that job to me. Previously, I had finished 3 years of college at Lowell Tech Institute and was drafted after my Junior year. Previously to entering college, I had worked for GE at their Steam Turbine plant and graduated with honors as a Machinist / Toolmaker from their 6800 hour apprentice program. I had 3 ½ years of deferments and wanted to be an Engineer. I left GE and enrolled as a full time student at Lowell Tech. But the Vietnam War wanted more soldiers and my days of deferments was up. I was not able to get into the National Guard or any reserve as there was a one year waiting period due to the amount of men signing up for the reserve.

So for 3 months of being in Vietnam and living out in the jungle with all of it's terrible living conditions, long 15 day missions, crossing swamps, digging fox holes, eating out of a can, and going on night ambushes. Night ambushes were always terrifying as we usually moved out after darkness had set in and usually had no idea of where we were going or where we would set up the ambush. Since I carried the M60 machine gun, I walked to end of the file behind my squad. The idea was that it afforded more protection for the machine gun and it could always be brought up to the front of the file when the situation called for it. Our area of patrols was Northwest of Saigon along the Cambodia border. Closest towns were Cu Chi and Tayh Ninh.

Our battalion operated out of Firebases that were carved out in the jungle surrounded by concertina wire, mine fields and sandbagged bunkers. These fire bases were built within artillery range of another fire base so that artillery support could be had if sappers would try to over-run a fire base and a barrage of explosives could be placed around and into a firebase if needed.

Around early March 1969, our battalion was operating out of LZ Rita. With 5 companies working out of a fire base, 4 companies would be out on search and destroy missions while one company would be on guard duty at the fire base. So after 15 days of a search and destroy mission, our company would be rotated back to the firebase that supplied our artillery support. In short, it was 15 days out and 5 days in.

On March 8, 1969 we were already out on one of our 15-day missions. Our company was informed that we had a mission near the Cambodian border. We were picked up by six Huey UH-1 helicopters, flown to a distant location and dropped in a

large clearing. Three sorties were required to bring the whole company from one location to another.

We landed around 5PM without incidence and then commenced to move out on patrol. The weather felt like a spring evening back in New England. It was warm and air had a distinct scent of new growth emerging in the vegetation. We stopped, rested, broke for supper. As always we were tired but the C-rations renewed our strength and the talk turned to our lives that we left back in the States.

Word came down to our platoon leader that 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon was to go out on a platoon size night ambush along with 1<sup>st</sup> platoon. My basic recollection is that we marched out with approximately 17 men on a Southwesterly route while 1<sup>st</sup> platoon with Lt. Jesse Stevens, marched out on a Northwesterly route. We gathered up our weapons and started to march in single file. Being the machine gunner for my squad, I was last in the file.

The light was quickly starting to fade and before long we disappeared into a dark flat terrain that appeared to be a dried out rice patty. As we moved, all remained quiet and alert. Finally after walking for about 20 minutes, we stopped and our platoon leader had us set up our claymore mines and the firing positions that we would take. I noticed that we setup about 100 feet from a ditch that ran almost the length of the rice patty in a North to South direction. The ditch was about 1 – 2 feet deep and was a dried out water irrigation ditch. The width of the ditch was about 4- 5 feet.

After setting up our fields of fire, my squad leader handed out the guard duty hours and mine was to be around 2 AM – 3 AM. I lay down on the flat ground and due to long day, I easily fell asleep in probably less than 5 minutes.

At approximately 10:00 PM, I was awakened by a lot of noise and a brilliant white light, which was due to a trip flare thrown out about 100 feet in front of our position. The soldier on guard duty said that he noticed 2 men coming and thought they might be GI's from another outfit but at the last second he decided they were NVA and wanted to illuminate their positions. The NVA soldiers fled without any shots fired and soon after the trip flare burned itself, guards were doubled and all remained quite and alert. Some of the platoon went back to sleep because of their exhaustion and knowledge that we would have a long patrol for tomorrow. Around 12:30 AM, I was awoken by the thump of mortar tubes. Everyone was awakened and someone yelled to run to the ditch. I grabbed my gear and ran as fast as I could to the ditch. Just as I hit the ditch the mortar rounds were exploding around our position and I heard some cries go out. Next we were getting small arms fire into our position. I quickly turned to look towards the wood line which was an estimated ¼ mile from our position, and started counting 6 mortar tubes flashing as they launched more rounds at our position. More mortar rounds kept raining in and our platoon sergeant took over command as our platoon leader was wounded in the head by shrapnel.

I noticed a line of NVA troops moving along a distant dike about 150 yards from our position. They were moving in an Easterly direction. A rough count showed about 25 – 30 men. Our platoon sergeant called in for artillery support but was told we could

only get parachute illumination rounds. No high explosive rounds would be sent as supposedly we were near a village. I remember that I did not personally see any village. Some of our men on the most northerly end of our position started firing at the vague outline of NVA troops. Soon the artillery illumination rounds started to arrive. They exploded in mid-air deploying an illumination flare that floated down slowly under a parachute. With several of these flares coming down, the night battlefield had an eerie pale look, which would help one spot enemy troops. Those flares helped us observe the line of NVA troops that were slowly starting to encircle our position. I could see NVA troops traveling in an Easterly direction and then progress to start to turn the corner and move in a Southerly direction. My estimate is there were another 15 moving in the Southerly direction. It looked to me that the NVA soldiers were encircling our position.

Knowing that this force was larger than ours, I knew we were in for the fight of our lives. I set the M-60 machine gun on the top of the ditch and fired at least 50 rounds into the troops moving in the Southerly direction. The dim lighting from the flares made it difficult to see where my rounds were hitting. In the mean time, the north end of our position was firing at the NVA moving in the Easterly direction. At this time, we started to take in RPG's from both the Easterly side and Westerly side of the ditch. I noticed that some of the RPG's were shot too high and went clear over our position. This overshoot would probably have some of their RPG's explode over into the NVA positions on the opposite side of the ditch. In short, their plan of attack put their own men in jeopardy. due to this over shooting.

By now the battle was in full swing. I knew we were outnumbered and they were surrounding our position. The fighting was intense. Have you ever been in a near car accident and felt the adrenaline shoot up in your body. Those brief seconds can really make your heart pound. Now, picture this adrenaline shooting through your body for hours on end while you are in the fight of your life to stay alive. I had so much fear in my body that my stomach had already moved up to where my heart was. This caused an excessive amount of stomach acid to burn my throat. I started praying Hail Mary's while firing my machine gun. To make matters worse, my carrying sling that wraps around the front sight of the M-60 machine gun started to catch on fire. This was due to the large amount of heat generated in the barrel and raising the barrel temperature high enough to cause the fire. I would have used my canteen to put out the fire but all that personal gear was out about 50 feet in front of our position. There would be no water for fire fighting or for drinking.

Suddenly, I heard an explosion on the North end of the ditch and a large cry of pain arose from several men. I knew that our platoon had taken a direct hit with an RPG. Knowing the NVA would try to knock out my machine gun, I collapsed the tripod legs and rested it on the bare soil of the top of the ditch. Now I aimed at the NVA that were on the Easterly side of our position. Upon starting to fire the M-60, a cloud of dust arose from under the flash suppressor and obliterated my target. I could not see where my tracer rounds were going. I stopped firing and tried to figure out how I could keep a low profile with my machine gun and yet not raise a cloud of dust that obliterated my target. I also felt that it would be more beneficial to my safety if I moved my position. I quickly

started low crawling down toward the north end of the ditch about 20 feet and set up my gun on the top of the ditch. I ran into the same problem with the dust but I fired to where I thought waist high target zone out at the enemy position.

I did this routine a number of times and finally, my tactic fell apart when I reset up on a new position and found that my M-60 machine gun would not fire. I attempted to clear the gun by opening the cover and blow air into the chamber but this had no affect. My gun was jammed. Now I knew that I was in deep shit with only a .45 caliber pistol as my last weapon.

As I pondered what to do next, I noticed that my friend from Brooklyn, NY was lying on the ground with his whole head bandaged. Apparently, the medic had just gave him medical care but it appeared to me that he was dead. My thoughts of how peaceful he looked and how he was oblivious to all the carnage that was taking place. In my mind, I almost envied his death as here he was without a care and oblivious to all the chaos and death that was surrounding us.

So, here I was facing the grim reaper with an M-60 that was jammed. I decided to field dress the weapon in the dark. I opened the top cover and removed the bolt. Next I wiped off every part within the receiver and due to the darkness could not see if my efforts to clean or clear the gun were going to be successful. I remember saying a lot of prayers while I cleaned the gun in the dark hoping that I was successful. My throat burned severely of stomach acid and my pulse was off the scale. As I was cleaning my gun, I heard our platoon sergeant on the radio talking to our Captain Parker who was probably about a mile away. My platoon sergeant was yelling into the radio saying that if Captain Parker wanted a platoon in the morning, then we needed re-enforcement's as our ammunition was running low. My platoon sergeant then yelled out that everyone was to conserve our ammo and shoot only when a target was acquired. Also he wanted everyone to shoot at the smoke cloud that was emitted by the NVA's firing of their RPG's. When an RPG is fired, it leaves a cloud of smoke from its launch site and in the dim light of parachute flares, these clouds of smoke identify their location. If one starts firing a multitude of rounds into that smoke then that person or persons standing there is going to get killed especially where there isn't any cover for 100 yards in any direction.

Finally, I had cleaned my gun and reassembled it. I placed the linked ammunition belt into the gun and closed the cover. When I pressed the trigger, the gun fired and a huge sigh of relief came over me. I thanked God for giving me the courage, and skill to be able to make that repair in the dark, and under fire.

During the firefight, I noticed helicopters possibly Cobra gunships were now over head as their blinking lights showed their positions in the darkened sky. They were flying over toward the tree line where the mortar tubes were located. The NVA started firing a .50 caliber machine gun with tracer rounds at the advancing helicopters. At the same time, the Cobra gun ships were firing down with their gattling gun and the NVA tracers going up would pass by the tracers going down. This gunfight between the Cobra gunships and the NVA continued for 15 minutes and then subsided.

The mortar rounds finally stop falling around us, as the NVA were now closer to our position. I noticed a lull in the action and moved my position to the North end of the

ditch. I passed a number of our men that appeared to be watching for enemy movement. I finally found my squad leader Jim, who told me that he was shot in the arm. As I was looking toward the North, a soldier next to me told me that he was saving his last grenade for himself. He did not want to be taken prisoner. He showed me his left arm and in the dim light it was laid open to the bone for about a foot long. The medic had given him morphine.

My platoon sergeant was on the radio asking for Cobra gunship support. The pilot said he could not identify our position. So my platoon sergeant had the other machinegun fire tracers in a Southerly direction. This enabled the pilot to pin point our position. I could see the Cobra gunship with his strobe lights flashing. It appeared he had located our position and was now turning toward our position. He was flying fairly low as I could make out a faint image of his silhouette against the dim light of the moon. I noticed he was now flying in a North to South direction paralleling the ditch. His tail started to rise and then he started launching rockets very close to the West side of the ditch. As his rockets started hitting the earth near our position. I quickly ducked my head into my sleeve and laid low into the side of the ditch. I heard the last explosion as it sprayed dirt over my body but the soldier next to me screamed in pain as he was hit by shrapnel from the last rocket. The wounded soldier next to me had picked up shrapnel in the back but was only slightly wounded.

The remainder of the night had us all on edge and the battle had started to end. Now with the early morning light starting to show a soft yellowing of the Easterly sky, I knew the enemy would retreat into the jungle for fear of helicopter attacks. I then rose from my position and started to walk down the ditch to see if I could locate the men in my squad. I noticed Leon Beard resting against the side of the ditch. His eyes were closed and even though I saw no blood on his body, I knew he was dead. Next, I found my friend, Michael O'Connor and he was lying on his back against the ditch. There was no doubt that he too had been killed. I next found my friend from Springfield, MA whose name was Steve Erbentrout. He appeared to be asleep and showed no wounds that I could easily see. But I knew that he too had been killed. The Medic was working on other wounded soldiers. As I was walking the ditch and seeing all of the dead and wounded soldiers, a strong sweet odor could be sensed. I guess that odor is due to the combined chemicals of gunpowder and blood.

I started to walk out of the ditch area and headed out about 30 yards to our East. I had noticed a body lying there and it was an NVA soldier lying face down. His outstretched hand was about 5 feet from one of our claymore mines. Apparently he wanted to either disable the mine or turn it around so it would be facing our position. I was about to turn the dead NVA soldier over but someone in my platoon yelled out that I was not to touch the dead soldier. At the same time, I heard a yell from the tree line that was about 100 yards to the South East. It was "A" company coming to our assistance. I then proceeded back to our position with "A" company men moving in and assisting the wounded and loading them on to Med-evac helicopters. I was told to get on a log bird which took me to our HQ company about a mile away. I was too much in shock since I don't remember who else survived that horrific night.

The first sergeant came over to me and started to read to me a list of names. He wanted to know their status. Every time he read the name of one of my squad members, I told him that he was dead. After that roll call with the first sergeant, it hit me hard that I had lost my best of friends from my squad. I started to cry as I could no longer hold back the loss of that night.

The company was picked up by Hueys and returned to base camp somewhere near Tay Ninh or Cu Chi. We were then taken to a mess hall where we were served a hot breakfast. I will never forget that night. It was my worse night and even to this day, I still remember all of the horrors of that battle.

It is difficult to express the horror of war especially the fear that arises in your body as it tries to deal with the extreme hazard of a violent death. If anyone states they were not afraid, they are either lying or are crazy. In the movies everything that you see on the screen is where it lies. It will not come out of the movie screen to harm you. This realization makes it easier for the mind and body to deal with the violence seen in the movies. But in real life, combat is very noisy, very chaotic, with cries of help and moaning of the wounded. You cannot step away from it and if you bury your head in the sand, then you have turned your fight for life into a death sentence. Despite all the overwhelming fear, one must put on a good defensive position by carrying the attack toward the enemy. You must overcome the fear and fight or die.

The real heroes of this war are the soldiers and pilots who lost their lives and those who tried to save them. Medics are the warriors of healing and their efforts to save the wounded. God bless all medics for they expose themselves to death without firing a weapon and maintain composure under extremely violent conditions.