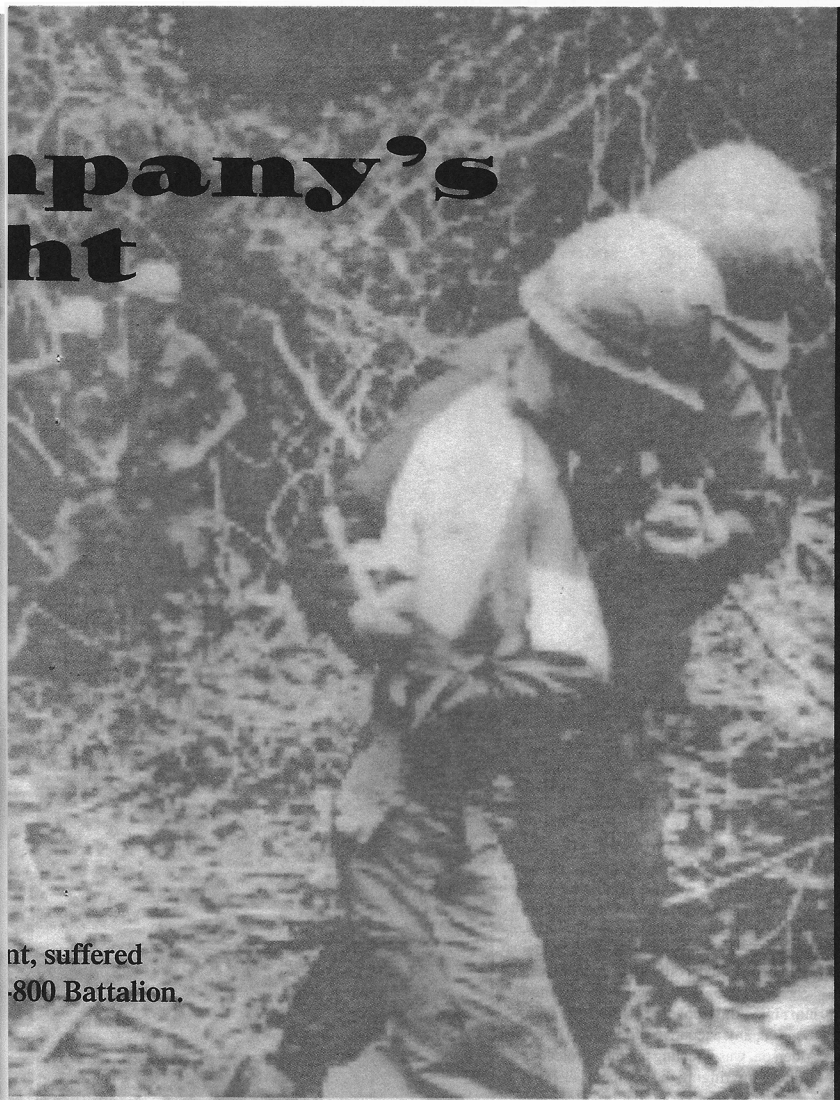


XA CAM MY

# Charlie Company's Longest Night



In April 1966, a company of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, suffered nearly 80 percent casualties in a fierce nighttime fight with the VC 800 Battalion.

BY TRACY L. DERKS

“Someone stepped on me,” recalled Sergeant Harold Hunter. “I had passed out after being shot in the thigh and then having a Claymore go off right in front of me. When I got stepped on I woke up, but something in that split second before opening my eyes told me to keep ’em closed, not to react.”

It was the night of April 11, 1966, and Hunter, of Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment (2-16), had already seen the 4th Platoon ripped apart by VC machine gun and rifle fire. The hail of gun-

fire tearing into the platoon pinned him down. The NCO listened helplessly as his friend, a sergeant wounded multiple times, cried out first for help and then for someone to kill him to stop the pain. Hunter had been shot by a VC in the trees. Now, as he lay in a jungle near Xa Cam My village in Phouc Tuy province, some flash of self-preservation said, “Play dead.”

“A second later whoever it was moved away from me,” remembered Hunter. “I opened my eyes just a fraction. I could see it was night, and I could make out a woman moving toward my friend. He was sitting with

his back against a tree. I saw the woman bend down to look in his face, and then shoot him in the head.”

The murder of American wounded was common along Charlie Company’s perimeter during that April night. That afternoon, as the company had recoiled from a VC onslaught, GI wounded had been stranded outside the American lines, left in the no man’s land between the combatants. As the perimeter continued to contract, the guerrillas pushed in. When night covered the battlefield, the VC moved among the U.S. casualties, looting the dead and finishing off the wounded.

There was nothing Hunter could do for his friend, and little the survivors of Charlie Company could do for the injured outside the lines. The men of C Company were too busy tending to the men inside the perimeter. They were too frightened, too low on ammunition and too sure of their own impending deaths to attempt to rescue those they already counted as dead.

The wounded company commander, Captain William Nolen, offered encouragement to those around him, but otherwise was knocked out of action. The 3rd Platoon’s Lieutenant Martin Kroah lay hurt outside the

Survivors from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry, leave Xa Cam My after their fateful encounter with the VC’s D-800 Battalion on April 11, 1966 (Courtesy of Tracy L. Derks).

**Above:** Charlie Company personnel and equipment are loaded onto Boeing-Vertol CH-47 Chinook helicopters for airlift to the Xa Cam My area prior to Operation Abilene, a search-and-destroy operation against the VC. **Right:** Once on the ground, Charlie Company proceeds by truck to take part in Abilene.

perimeter, a heap of American dead around him. Lieutenant George Steinberg, the 4th Platoon's leader, was one of the dead, lost somewhere in the darkness. Lieutenant John Libs was with the remnants of his 2nd Platoon, while Lieutenant Smith Devoe of the 1st Platoon found it difficult to do more than keep himself and the few soldiers around him alive. And from the 2nd Platoon's area, the company executive officer (XO), Ken Alderson, was directing the final protective artillery fire ringing the company.

Scattered throughout that blood-soaked position, soldiers clung to cover—cement-like anthills, deadfall, blasted trees or hastily scratched out mounds of earth—while bracing for the assault they knew would end their lives. The men listened to the cries of their dying comrades calling out for their mothers, calling out to their deity, calling out to a friend for help; but the living could do nothing for the dying. These GIs, as individuals much more than as a military unit, were making a stand in the jungle 35 miles east of Saigon against an enemy that outnumbered them 4-to-1.



Things had been going according to American plans. Part of the search-and-destroy tactics of Maj. Gen. William DePuy's 1st Infantry Division was to dangle a unit in an exposed position, daring the VC to attack. Once the enemy took the bait (and official U.S. Army accounts of the war do list the tactics as "creating tempting targets") and attacked the seemingly isolated American unit, DePuy expected artillery and air support to "stomp [the enemy] to death."

DePuy did not expect an infantry company to survive unaided against the attacking guerrillas. He expected the GIs to maintain contact until the big guns could pile on, and then the infantry was supposed to crawl under any and every rock in the vicinity. According to medic Bob Fisher, the grunts of Company C, shattered and bleeding on that patch of dark ground, would have taken small comfort in knowing things were going more or less according to plan.

The day before—Easter Sunday, April 10, 1966—DePuy had come in by helicopter to reemphasize to Charlie Company's officers the need to come to grips with the enemy, specifically the VC Main Force D-800 Battalion. The general reasoned that the bodies of two VC scouts killed by C Company's 2nd Platoon were proof of the D-800's proximity. He urged Captain Nolen to seek out that unit.

The spring of 1966 was a time of promise for American war aims in South Vietnam. General William Westmoreland, commander of American forces in Vietnam, was optimistic that the war had entered a new phase. Westmoreland believed that 1966 would see U.S. forces begin "...their first forays into the enemy's previously sacrosanct base areas." American troops were going on the offensive in operations radiating out from Saigon.

Westmoreland counted on the commander of the 1st Infantry Division—General DePuy—as the man to ensure that the enemy was annihilated. DePuy, the architect of "search and destroy," was a proponent of the war of attrition and a believer in American firepower. "The solution in Vietnam," he had said, "is more bombs, more shells, more napalm...until the other side cracks and gives up." He was the kind of bold and resourceful officer Westmoreland believed was needed to take the war to the enemy in Vietnam.

Operation Abilene, built on DePuy's confidence that American firepower would crush enemy units reckless enough to hit the targets he was offering, commenced on March 30, 1966. The operation's after-action report states that "except for occasional small arms fire...U.S. forces operated almost without opposition throughout the province." But there was one exception, as the report concedes: "There was one large encounter with elements of a main force unit during the operation. On 11 April 1966...C Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry made contact with elements of the D-800 Battalion...."

Charlie Company had been undergoing a turnover as Abilene progressed. Although the unit had been in Vietnam since June 1965—less than a year—seasoned troops were being shipped home as they reached the end of their terms of enlistment, regardless of how much time they had spent in Vietnam. They were being replaced by green GIs. Those who remained, men like Spc. 4s Randall "Peanuts" Prinz and Charlie "Preacherman" Epperson, tried to bring the new soldiers up to speed, but there were simply too many new troops to prep them all.

The remaining C Company veterans were worn out as well. Westmoreland had mandated that U.S. troops get out into the country and confront the enemy. And following those orders, C Company had been in the

field so persistently that they called their base camp "Camp Stranger" instead of Camp Ranger. By April 11, uniforms were tattered, senses dulled and bodies weary. According to Epperson: "Everyone was tired and slow...too many days in the bush without a break. We were done in."

When the company moved out on April 11, Captain Nolen ordered the 3rd Platoon to take the point, followed by the 4th Platoon, 1st Platoon and finally the 2nd Platoon. The platoons moved out in three columns, with pointmen at the lead. Veterans and green soldiers alike, the men noted that the jungle they were moving through was dry, the undergrowth sparse and the day generally mild.

The GIs discovered a well-traveled path shortly after 1100 hours. Lieutenant Kroah of the 3rd Platoon sent out patrols to probe the trail. The reactions of two seasoned NCOs, Sergeants Everett "Round Man" Langston of the 3rd Platoon and Hugh Sutterfield, were immediate and troubled. The trail had signs of the enemy all over it. Sutterfield approached Captain Nolen and cautioned him against moving farther into the area. Nolen, determined to come to grips with D-800, decided to keep moving.

Noon came and the company stopped for chow. Minutes later, Pfc Dave Burris—sitting at a listening post—spotted a VC trail watcher. He fired but the enemy soldier disappeared. Soon another GI fired at a shadowy figure. Kroah, at the front of the column, reported the contact back to Nolen, who ordered the 3rd Platoon to move ahead. The 2nd Platoon, at the back of the column, reported small-arms fire. More ominously, Lieutenant Libs of the 2nd Platoon received reports from one of his flankers, Pfc Phil Hall, that the enemy troops were wearing uniforms. Charlie Company had found the D-800.

Nolen ordered Lieutenant Steinberg and his 4th Platoon to cover Kroah's right flank. Steinberg swung his platoon out from behind Kroah's men, coming on line as a VC heavy machine gun opened up on the GIs. Private First Class Marion Acton, walking point for the platoon, charged the enemy position and was cut down. The initial blast from the machine gun shattered Steinberg's arm. Hunter dove to the ground as the 4th Platoon was pinned down.

The VC attempted to cut the company in two, slamming into the 1st Platoon in the center of the column. Epperson and his green M-60 machine gun crew hit the dirt. Epperson recalled: "I only remember the dust

**Scattered  
throughout that  
blood-soaked  
position,  
soldiers clung  
to cover while  
bracing for the  
assault they  
knew would  
end their lives.**

kickin' up as the bullets were hitting around us. Tracers jumping toward the sky after hitting the ground—scared the hell out of me. To my left was Sergeant George Manning. George's weapon was hit. Then he fell forward as a bullet shot off his left elbow.

"We were firing the M-60 at full speed...knocked down eight or more VC, then I got hit," said Epperson, who lost two fingers from his left hand that day. He continued: "I asked [Leroy] Tousant," who was feeding the M-60 ammo, "to take the gun. He said he was shot also. Hit below the neck."

The VC then charged in on the decimated group, and Epperson believes that only the timely arrival of an artillery barrage saved the company from being cut in two. Near Epperson's position, Spc. 4 Doug Blankenheim of the 1st Platoon methodically chose his targets and squeezed the trigger of his M-16. Behind him a sergeant lost control and started screaming that they were all going to die. Exposing himself to hostile fire, Blankenheim wrestled the man to the ground. While he was on top of the sergeant, fragments from the artillery barrage ripped into Blankenheim's thigh and buttocks. Blankenheim felt the man relax beneath him when the NCO realized Blankenheim was hit. An acute burning

sensation engulfed Blankenheim, but the wound did not keep him from returning to the firing line.

Elsewhere in the perimeter, the barrage created havoc. Lieutenant Kroah, at the head of the column, located an area to his front where the enemy was concentrated. He tried to shift the artillery, but poor coordinates, poor communications or just bad luck brought two rounds slamming into the trees above the company's position. Tree bursts sliced Kroah's men to pieces. One soldier was killed, several more wounded. As artillery FO 1st Lt. Francis Fox halted the errant fire,

VC riflemen opened up on Kroah's platoon.

Fearing his company would be surrounded, Nolen ordered the platoons to pull back. When Nolen told Kroah to fall back, the lieutenant reported that it was impossible for his troops to disengage without taking heavier casualties. "Better figure something out," Nolen replied. "We're pulling out."

The withdrawal was short lived. Kroah's platoon was pinned down; Steinberg's 4th Platoon was jumbled up to Kroah's right and under a VC machine gun's sights. The 1st Platoon (behind the 4th Platoon's position) was reeling from the VC's initial attempt to cut the company in two. Lieutenant Libs of the 2nd Platoon ad-

vised Captain Nolen to "roll up the wagons," and then had his men tie into the 4th Platoon's right flank, only to have his GIs pinned down by small-arms fire.

When the firing stopped—but not completely. Nolen ordered the dead and wounded carried to a recovery point within the perimeter. Lieutenant Devoe believed the battle was over. "We all did," he recalled. The 3rd Platoon's Sergeant Langston ordered Blankenheim to head to the recovery point. Langston took Blankenheim's weapon and ammunition for redistribution to the able-bodied. Epperson, too, was ordered to go to the dustoff area, where the company assembled 15 casualties, including two dead.

Division headquarters called in U.S. Air Force helicopters equipped with jungle penetrators to evacuate the wounded. With Company C's casualties hidden beneath 200 feet of vegetation, there was no room for a conventional LZ for Hueys. Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger volunteered to drop into the perimeter to better coordinate the evacuation. The way he took control impressed the 1st Platoon's medic, Bob Fisher. Pitsenbarger organized the wounded and had the ambulatory Epperson help load the severely wounded onto the litters suspended from the hovering choppers.

The aerial evacuation missions went smoothly at first, but the fourth mission ran into a buzz saw. Blankenheim was loaded onto the penetrator, along with another wounded soldier. According to Robert L. LaPointe in his book *PJ's in Vietnam*, one of those seats was supposed to have been Pitsenbarger's. "Pits" chose to stay with the wounded, giving up his ride to safety. As the chopper carrying Blankenheim moved off, a second helicopter moved in for more wounded, but it was engulfed in a screen of bullets, which damaged the throttle and sent the chopper careening forward. The empty litter went crashing through the trees, threatening to tangle the line and pivot the helicopter into the ground. The aircraft commander, Harold Salem, sheared the cable, and the damaged chopper limped back to its base. Epperson watched as the litter meant for him crashed into the trees.

The VC began a mortar barrage while training 10 machine guns on the American perimeter. Company XO Alderson could hear the mortar rounds leaving the tubes, the enemy was so close. Within moments of the renewed attack Captain Nolen was wounded. Epperson watched as a soldier from the 3rd Platoon, one of the walking wounded who had expected to be evacuated, started back toward his element, only to be hit by the incoming rounds. "He fell forward hard," recalled Epperson.

"All hell broke loose," Nolen's radio telephone operator, David Peters, remembered. "It was worse than before. The noise was unbelievable."

"There was a roar. And I knew we were stuck," related Pfc Dan Kirby of the 3rd Platoon.

When the VC's assault on C Company began anew Nolen had ordered the 3rd Platoon to break out to the northwest. It was a suicide mission. As a squad move

**As the chopper carrying Spc. 4 Doug Blankenheim moved off, a second helicopter moved in for more wounded, but it was engulfed in a screen of bullets.**



**Above:** A VC Main Force unit advances into battle in late 1966. **Left:** Medics crawl to help a badly wounded infantryman. In the desperate hours of April 11, Charlie Company suffered nearly 80 percent casualties, including 39 dead.



RIGHT: BETTMANN/CORBIS; ABOVE: XINHUA/SOVI/PHOTO

point. Yet no one questioned the squad leader's decision, or doubted Peanuts' bravery.

Dave Burris remembered how the VC had moved a mortar forward, targeting a log behind which he and others had sought shelter: "Peanuts took that mortar out with one shot from his M-79. I heard a plop from his position down to my right, and that was all we heard from that mortar."

Near Prinz were Pfc David A. Hammett, Sergeant Ronald Seasholtz and Spc. 4 Richard L. Garner. As a group of VC came surging toward the perimeter, Hammett went down wounded. Seasholtz was killed by small-arms fire. A sniper firing from a tree hit Garner, who then struggled to get back to the perimeter. Once he reached it, he was tormented by plaintive cries for help from Prinz, who lay wounded beyond reach.

Randall Prinz was found dead the next morning. Hammett managed to crawl to within sight of other GIs before they watched him shot down by the VC. Garner was hit again, the bullet passing through him and knocking Burris from behind a tree. Burris' wound was internal, the bullet only tearing off a thumb-sized chunk of skin, but causing damage that would later require the removal of a kidney.

out, Kirby watched from behind a downed log as the other squad progressed. "It was like slow motion," he recalled. "I didn't see any come back."

The 3rd Platoon's breakout attempt aborted quickly. Lieutenant Kroah was wounded, and Sergeant Langston, the platoon sergeant, was killed by mortar fire. The platoon medic—another of the new soldiers—lay frozen with fear, unable to assist the wounded around him.

At approximately this time, Spc. 4 Peanuts Prinz was living his last minutes on earth. Prinz was a likeable kid, 18 years old, and the unofficial mascot of the 3rd Platoon. His squad leader had even assigned him the M-79 grenade launcher, which meant he never walked

In the 2nd Platoon area Nolen ordered Alderson to organize a breakout. Alderson launched the attack with 12 men, but they hit a wall of fire. Private First Class Ted Piner of the 2nd Platoon saw the lead man go down with a ghastly head wound. The combination of machine guns and riflemen in the trees was too much. Piner, Hall and the others went to ground.

Then the VC charged the 4th Platoon's position. The official citation for Lieutenant Steinberg's posthumous Distinguished Service Cross reads in part, "...Steinberg moved from position to position...fighting savagely to beat back the...insurgents which closed in at pointblank range. When it appeared that they were...outnumbered...Steinberg charged straight into the oncoming force, tossing...grenades. The Viet Cong trained their fire on him, striking him again and again." Steinberg died among his men.

The attack on the 4th Platoon continued, and only the steadfast courage of the remaining men drove off the enemy. The GIs tried to stop the VC assault by tossing tear gas canisters, but the wind was against them

and white smoke drifted into their own lines. Fortunately the smoke did help to obscure the American positions, and probably saved Sergeant Hunter's life as he scrambled to reach a wounded GI. The VC bullet that tore into his thigh was likely meant for his head or chest.

Behind Steinberg's hard-pressed men, as the official Army narrative of the battle recounts, "...an element from the now reinforced 3rd Platoon charged the .50-caliber position with hand grenades, and succeeded in knocking out the...position." Those

reinforcements consisted of the 1st Platoon's Sergeant James Robinson Jr., Pfc Burt Heath and Pfc Daniel Walden. Robinson, as fire team leader, instructed his men to "be sure of your targets." Discovering a hole in the perimeter that the VC were rushing, Robinson, Heath, Walden and a GI from the 3rd Platoon, Pfc Thomas Steele, counterattacked. Muzzle flashes and red and green tracers zipped through the dusk and tear gas. For a moment the fighting was hand-to-hand. Then the VC broke. Robinson and Heath withdrew back to the perimeter, but Walden and Steele died in the melee. Together the soldiers had thrown back an onslaught that could have segmented the company for later piecemeal elimination.

Robinson was not through. He continued to risk the storm of enemy lead as he moved back among his own men, guiding them and directing them. Having taken multiple casualties, the 1st Platoon was in danger of

disintegrating. Armed with an M-79, Robinson dashed through the trees and tear gas, located a sniper and took him out with one round. As the VC closed in, Robinson noticed medic Fisher outside the perimeter assisting a wounded soldier. Disregarding his own safety, Robinson ran to Fisher's side, and together they carried the wounded man into the perimeter. Robinson then collected weapons and ammunition strewn about the battlefield and redistributed them to the remaining soldiers.

Another VC had Epperson in his sights and was peppering the ground around the wounded GI with AK-47 rounds. Only the intervention of 18-year-old Roger Harris, with some well-placed bursts from his M-16, stopped the VC from killing Epperson.

Along the blood-splattered, tear-gas drenched perimeter, American soldiers began to give up hope. They did not know that battalion headquarters had halted the relief effort by Company B as night fell, fearful that the two companies would engage each other in the darkness before linking up. The troops did know that the fire was too intense, casualties too high and ammunition too low to stop the VC. The GIs began to believe they were going to be wiped out. Some coped by continuing to do their jobs, firing their weapons, manning radios or assisting the wounded. Some coped by reaching deep within themselves, calling up sacrifice. Some few did not cope, remaining frozen in fear as their comrades fought and died.

The 2nd Platoon's Pfc Hall focused on staying alive and helping those around him. Surviving the aborted breakout attempt, he carried one wounded soldier back into the perimeter, and then shoved him unceremoniously over a log. Airman Pitsenbarger was constantly moving, darting into no man's land to snatch a downed soldier and then carrying him back to safety. Medic Fisher mechanically did his duty, and became frustrated only when he could not get a bandage to adhere to a blinded GI's helmet.

Epperson located a weapon and, despite his mangled hand, found a spot behind a tree and began firing into the jungle. Private First Class Kirby, crammed behind a tree with three wounded, continued firing though dusk was settling over the battlefield. As other Americans about him prayed, he said, "Pray for me too."

Nolen's RTO, Peters, had been in Vietnam less than two weeks, but kept communicating with the circling command helicopters. When his radio went down he braved the fire to search for an operating radio, finding one on the back of a dead GI. Company XO Alderson communicated with the airborne headquarters, keeping the supporting artillery in close, breaking up VC attempts to mass for another attack.

Two men demonstrated courage that descriptions fail. Airman Pitsenbarger never ceased his tireless activities to save lives. He went from soldier to soldier, passing out ammunition, checking on their condition and finally seizing a weapon himself and firing on the enemy. Pitsenbarger went down that night. When his body was found the next morning there was a bullet hole in his forehead.

**Muzzle flashes and red and green tracers zipped through the dusk and tear gas. For a moment the fighting was hand-to-hand. Then the VC broke.**

Sergeant Robinson seemed possessed of bloodlust, an angry man who hurled himself at the enemy with abandon. A heavy machine gun was chewing Robinson's men to pieces, as he rallied some GIs and charged the position. As the others laid down a base of fire, Robinson hurled grenades. The machine gun was destroyed, but not before its fire brought down Robinson and several others.

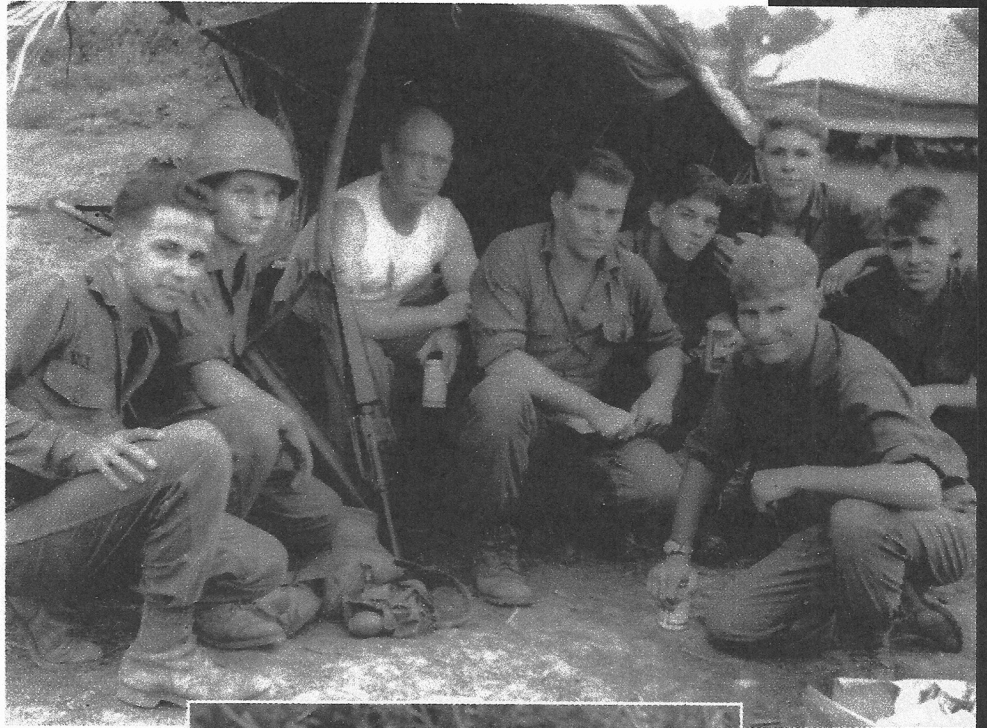
Lieutenant Kroah, who had been wounded and stranded outside the perimeter, remembered that some men "...just laid down—never fought, never fired their weapons." The sledgehammer blow of the VC assault as the helicopters came in for their fourth run, combined with the earlier confusion caused by friendly artillery rounds, was simply too much for many of the new men, and not a few of the old. The sergeant whom Blankenheim had tried to calm down at the cost of his own backside again folded under pressure. Clutching his weapon and ammunition, he lay down, refusing to fight. He also refused others' attempts to put his weapon and ammo to use.

Darkness enveloped Charlie Company. Bullhorns blared. The South Vietnamese interpreter attached to the company said that the VC commander was rallying the troops for a final attack. Men braced for the inevitable. Fisher continued to drag or carry men to safety. The Americans withdrew into a tighter perimeter.

VC slipped in behind the retreating GIs. Unable to attack—the artillery barrage kept the enemy from massing—they came individually to steal. The VC looted dead bodies, and where they found live men, they killed them. Lieutenant Kroah and two others listened as the VC drew closer. The three Americans held hands and quietly recited the Lord's Prayer. Kroah told the men to feign death. The VC came upon the three seemingly lifeless bodies. Kroah and his radio operator kept up the charade and lived. The third man, a new medic, struggled with an enemy soldier, and Kroah heard the deafening noise of a pistol shot just inches from him. The medic was dead.

The VC found the tree where Fisher had been taking the wounded, and they murdered the men there. Other American wounded called for help, which attracted the VC. Kroah kept quiet, except to send his radioman to look for help. Hours later Kroah was saved by a team of rescuers including Sergeant Charles Urconis, Fisher and Pfc Milton Lader.

The final VC assault never came. Instead, the night dragged on, and the artillery slammed hundreds of shells around shattered Charlie Company. As light filtered through the canopy the next morning, a single shot rang out beyond the perimeter. The survivors



RIGHT: PETE FABERSKI, ABOVE, COURTESY OF KEN MIZE

**Above:** Several members of Charlie Company gather later in 1966. From left: Frank Shadrick, Ken Mize, Billy Lamb, Ron Haley, Bob Holton, Clifford Frandle (front), Roger Harris (back) and Mike Swilley. Mize, Haley, Holton and Harris were Xa Cam My survivors. **Left:** First Platoon Sergeant Hugh Sutterfield was wounded at Xa Cam My.

tensed for the attack, but Company B finally arrived.

After the battle, DePuy claimed that the D-800 had been mauled and rendered ineffective. The toll on Charlie Company was nearly 80 percent casualties, including 39 dead. James Robinson later received the Medal of Honor posthumously. George Steinberg received a posthumous Distinguished Service Cross. Company C received the Valorous Unit Citation. And 34 years later, Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously when his previous Air Force Cross was upgraded. ☆

*Tracy L. Derks is a frequent contributor to Vietnam Magazine. In preparing this article, he interviewed 11 members of Company C, 2-16 Infantry, who survived the battle. For additional reading, see: John M. Carland's Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966; and George Wilson's Mud Soldiers.*