


The Washington Post

Phillip Hall

MAY 28, 1989

Magazine



VIETNAM
FLASHBACK

Memories of heroism and the murderous agony of war

By George C. Wilson



LUCIAN PERKINS

24

Merle Mills' racing pigs, hungry for another meal, await the prerecorded bugle call for an 11-second dash around a 150-foot oval.

FEATURES

16

It was Easter evening 1966, 40 miles east of Saigon, when Johnny Libs, Marty Kroah, Phil Hall and the rest of Charlie Company got their marching orders from the general: Smoke out the Viet Cong so we can destroy them. Eighteen hours later, they were in a fight so bloody they'll never be able to forget it

By George C. Wilson

24

You might not expect racing pigs to teach you much about life. But then you haven't met Merle Mills . . . yet

By Jeanne Marie Laskas

DEPARTMENTS

20071

Mail call: Gun lovers on the firing line 4

CRITIC AT LARGE / BY RICHARD COHEN

Lessons from Duke 7

J STREET

Selected short subjects: A houseful of ammo • For whom the bells toll • Three flights of fancy 9

DREAM MACHINES / BY BROCK YATES

A coast-to-coast road test 29

DINING / BY PHYLLIS C. RICHMAN

The Restaurant's multifaceted appeal 31

THE WASHINGTON POST MAGAZINE PUZZLE / BY WILLIAM LUTWINIAK

" . . . An American Soldier Known . . ." 38

WIT'S END / BY DAVE BARRY

Captioned for the humor impaired 44

COVER PHOTOGRAPH OF 1ST LT. JOHNNY LIBS: COVER DESIGN BY MICHAEL WALSH

Solution to last week's puzzle on page 32

ON THE PERIMETER OF HELL

FOR JOHNNY LIBS AND THE OTHER SURVIVORS OF CHARLIE COMPANY, ALL THE HORROR OF WAR WAS CONCENTRATED IN ONE DAY—APRIL 11, 1966—IN A SMALL SPOT THAT NONE OF THEM HAD EVER HEARD OF OR CARED ABOUT BEFORE

BY GEORGE C. WILSON

In April 1966 a troop of American soldiers known as Charlie Company was perched near the village of Xa Cam My, 40 miles east of Saigon. The company, consisting of four platoons of infantry, was poised to engage in Operation Abilene, a strategic move in the escalating Vietnam war that involved sending small units of American soldiers to search out and destroy Viet Cong units. Although Charlie Company was usually 291 men strong, 157 men were in the rear or out of action; the remaining 134 soldiers prepared to snake through the dense jungle in search of D-800, a powerful Viet Cong battalion triple the size of the pared-down Charlie Company.

Washington Post staff writer George C. Wilson reconstructed Charlie Company's ill-fated mission as part of his new book, Mud Soldiers. As we pick up the action, it is dusk on April 10, Easter Sunday, in a jungle clearing.

THE THWACKA-THWACKA OF A HUEY HELICOPTER ANNOUNCED THE ARRIVAL OF Maj. Gen. William E. DePuy, the new, aggressive commander of the 1st Infantry Division. DePuy's two stars were painted on the helicopter's nose.

"Here comes the old son of a bitch Willy DePuy who loves to fight," said 1st Lt. John Wells Libs, 23, leader of 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment within the 1st Infantry Division, known as the Big Red One. As the chopper landed, Libs remembered with a smile how, right after taking command, DePuy had gathered all the 1st Infantry Division officers together and decreed:



A survivor of Charlie Company's battle with the Viet Cong watches over the bodies of his fellow soldiers on April 12, 1966.

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

"I will never, ever hear again over the radio, 'I'm pinned down. I'm breaking contact.' I hear it, that officer is relieved immediately. You're never pinned down. Period."

DePuy wanted to win this war in a hurry. Period. Libs cheered the aggressiveness. Like DePuy, he believed in the war and wanted to win it or die trying. He was eager to hear what Old Willy had to say about Charlie Company's part the next day in a big push called Operation Abilene.

The plan was for the 2nd and 3rd brigades of the 1st Infantry Division to send small units through Phuoc Tuy and Long Khanh provinces to search out and destroy Viet Cong. So far, Abilene had turned out to be mostly search, not much destroy. DePuy hoped Charlie Company would find the big prize, the Viet Cong's D-800 Battalion.

As Libs saw it, DePuy was sending Charlie Company in hopes of catching the elusive, first-line Viet Cong battalion of 400 troops and a backup force of women and children. Simple but perhaps fatal. Charlie Company would be kept far enough away from other companies in the battalion to persuade D-800 commanders that they had caught an isolated American unit.

DePuy would deny after the battle that he had sent out Charlie Company as bait. He assumed that Charlie Company, like every outfit he sent out, could be reinforced if it ran into heavy trouble. Another company, Bravo, was supposed to be close enough to come to Charlie's rescue. And although the jungle was too thick to reinforce the company by helicopter, DePuy promised that artillery would protect the men.

"You guys are out here alone," DePuy told the officers of Charlie Company. "By all intelligence, D-800 is nearby." Then the big man got in the helicopter and flew away.

Libs fretted: DePuy's helicopter arrival and departure probably had enabled D-800 to know their general location. He dared not sleep. He walked around his platoon hour after hour, checking with his men and staring out into the black clearing, looking for movement.

"How ya doing?" Libs asked at every stop on his ceaseless rounds. "Anything going on out there? Hear any talk at all? Smell anything?"

"Sir, it's quiet as hell out here," was the universal response.

"Get as many z's as you can. This is going to be a long night."

In his rounds, Libs ran into Lt. Martin L. Kroah Jr., 30, 3rd Platoon's leader, doing the same thing. Libs and Kroah had foxhole adoration for each other. They had watched each other under the pressure of battle. Libs saw in Kroah a wild former sergeant who knew how to fight and win. Kroah saw in Libs "a cocky little bastard" who was all soldier in the field and all hell-raiser in the rear, like himself.

"To hell with this, I'm going infantry," Libs had said to himself after a few months in the finance school at Fort Benjamin Harrison near Indianapolis, where the Army had sent him after graduation from his ROTC college program. Libs' superiors had looked at the well-rounded college graduate from Evansville, Ind., and decided he would make an excellent finance officer.

Libs had been athletic, bright and popular in high



In 1964, John Libs was a student at Loyola University in New Orleans, playing electric guitar in a band.

school. Even though he was only 5 feet 9 inches tall and 160 pounds, he was fast and agile. He captained the Memorial High School football team, ran the 100- and 220-yard dashes, was vice president of his class, earned high grades, dated lots of pretty girls.

He graduated in 1960, went to St. Louis University and then transferred to Loyola University in New Orleans, where the males had to join Army ROTC whether they liked it or not. He was definitely an "or not" until he went through infantry training at Fort Sill, Okla., in the summer before his senior year at Loyola. At Sill he discovered a way to live his boyhood dreams of playing John Wayne in the jungle without

looking juvenile. Advancing through the woods to knock out an enemy machine gun without getting gunned down took skill and daring. And it was fun! Flirting with death made him feel more alive than ever before.

Libs outmaneuvered his superiors who wanted him to stay in business school, transferred to infantry and volunteered for Vietnam, where he arrived in June 1965.

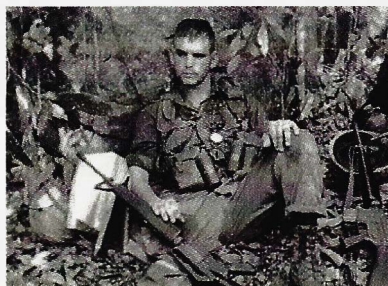
Marty Kroah's life before joining the Army had been as hard as Libs' had been easy. His parents were divorced. His mother worked as a waitress. Kroah bagged groceries for 35 cents an hour at Montessor's Market in his hometown of Brockway, Pa. A tall, stringy kid standing 6 feet and weighing 137 pounds, Kroah had a job that left no time for after-school sports. He did play the trumpet in the marching band. Montessor's would let him leave the market 30 minutes before the half of football games so he could go home, put on his band uniform and march up and down the field with his trumpet. He could not stay to watch the second half of the game; he had to be back at the market.

After graduating from high school in 1953, Kroah saw his options as working at Montessor's or at the local glass factory. The Army looked like a way out. He joined, became a paratrooper to get the extra \$50-a-month jump pay—sending it home to his mother—rose quickly to staff sergeant, was selected for the non-commissioned officers' academy, the Army's Little West Point, and was commissioned a second lieutenant at Fort Benning's Officer Candidate School in 1962 after nine years of enlisted service. Kroah joined Charlie Company as 3rd Platoon leader in October 1965.

Libs and Kroah realized this Easter night that they had allowed themselves to grow too close to each other. The loss of one would devastate the other. Kroah discarded his tough demeanor long enough to put his right arm around Libs' shoulders and speak about dying in the code of mud soldiers: "Well, we're going to get our asses kicked tomorrow."

The commander of Charlie Company, Capt. William R. Nolen, was brand-new in Vietnam. The sandy-haired, religious, unassuming Nolen had never been in a big firefight, but Libs liked Nolen's quiet manner. Bluster often covered weakness and incompetence in combat; quietness usually meant strength. Still, Nolen was so green. This Citadel graduate, Libs wondered: Is he going to do something that will get us all killed?

Libs also fretted about how Lt. George C. Stein-



Libs was eager to be in the infantry and to go to Vietnam. By 1965, both of his wishes had come true.

berg, 4th Platoon commander, an intellectual but not a jungle fighter, and 2nd Lt. Smith A. Devoe, 1st Platoon leader, newly arrived in country, would stand up against the 3-to-1 odds Charlie Company would confront if D-800 struck. "Oh well," Libs consoled himself, "I'll have Marty."

DAWN OF APRIL 11, 1966, BROKE WITHOUT THE VIET CONG attacking Charlie Company. The men roused themselves at 5:30 a.m., taking fighting positions in case the enemy launched a pre-dawn attack.

"Marty," Nolen said to Kroah, "I want you to be point."

Kroah thought this unfair. His 3rd Platoon had done more than its share of spearheading the company, but he didn't protest. He figured Nolen wanted one experienced platoon leader out front and the other one, Libs, bringing up the rear. Nolen himself would stay in the middle of the formation. Steinberg's 4th Platoon would follow Kroah's; Devoe's 1st Platoon would be third.

"Today is not just another walk in the woods," Kroah told himself as his platoon pushed off due north at 7:30 a.m.

An American rifle company pushing through thick jungle is like four tiny, independent armies connected to one another only by radio. Vietnam's triple-canopy jungle, plus tree trunks, vines and brush, all conspired to block vision not only between the four platoons but between the men in one platoon. A trooper pushing through dense undergrowth and thick trees often lost sight of the man nearest him, making his advance toward hidden enemy troops all the more unnerving.

At 11 a.m., Kroah's platoon swung west. Eleven minutes later it discovered a well-used trail running east and west. Nolen ordered patrols to fan out to probe for Viet Cong. The troopers stayed off the trail itself to avoid ambushes and booby traps.

Snap! Snap!

Kroah heard one of his troopers firing off two rounds. He rushed to the man, learned he had seen two Viet Cong but missed them. It was 12:15 p.m.

Kroah's men stopped for lunch, keeping their eyes on the trail where the Viet Cong had been sighted. They finished their C-rations and began moving again. A shot rang out; one of Kroah's soldiers fell. Kroah's radioman, Pfc. Jasper Carpenter, fired his M16.

"What are you shooting at?" Kroah asked.

"I saw three VC going into the ground!"

Kroah figured the Viet Cong had slipped into a bunker. He grabbed the telephone-shaped handset off the PRC 25 radio carried by Carpenter. Nolen's radio call sign was Charlie Six, and Kroah's was November Six.

"Charlie Six. This is November Six. We had sighting of three VC."

"November Six. This is Charlie Six. Kill your three Charlies?"

"Charlie Six. This is November Six. No, but they saw us."

"November Six. Charlie Six. What do you think we should do?"

"Charlie Six. November Six. Find out where they're going."

"November Six. Charlie Six. That's affirm."

Had the Viet Cong sent out a few elusive snipers to draw Charlie Company deeper into the jungle and closer to the base camp of D-800? Should Charlie Company stop right there and call for reinforcements? Or should it try to locate the enemy? An infantry commander in combat is damned if he is not aggressive enough and damned if he is too aggressive. Nolen decided to probe deeper.

Libs, bringing up the rear of Charlie Company, was probing, too. Pfc. Phil Hall was out on the left flank of the 2nd Platoon, feeling very vulnerable. Hall, 21, a husky six-footer, was carrying a pump-action 12-gauge shotgun, which the Army used early in the war, and the ammunition for the platoon's M60 machine gun. His buddy, Spec. 4 John Noyce, had the M60 itself.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Somebody was shooting at Hall. Hall fell to the jungle floor, put his shotgun across his knees and strained to see who was out there in the thick underbrush.

Libs heard the shots. Kroah had radioed earlier that he was taking sporadic fire from hit-and-run snipers. Libs knew now that the Viet Cong had riflemen deployed at the front and rear of the company. The Viet Cong could be trying to surround the company and draw it into a prepared killing zone.

To reinforce Kroah's men, Nolen ordered Steinberg's 4th Platoon to move forward. As they did, the Viet Cong opened fire, killing one soldier and wounding a second. The 1st Platoon, behind them both, radioed that it was receiving fire. Then the firing stopped.

Libs feared the Viet Cong were using the time to surround each of the scattered elements of Charlie Company. This would make it easy for them to annihilate each small group. To save itself from piecemeal destruction, the company would have to form a circle and cover the area outside it with interlocking fire.

"Charlie Six," Libs radioed to Nolen. "This is Mike Six. Roll up the wagons now!"

The long, twisting snake that is an American rifle company searching for an enemy cannot coil up quickly. Libs ran from man to man, pushing each one into his firing position on the slowly forming circle.

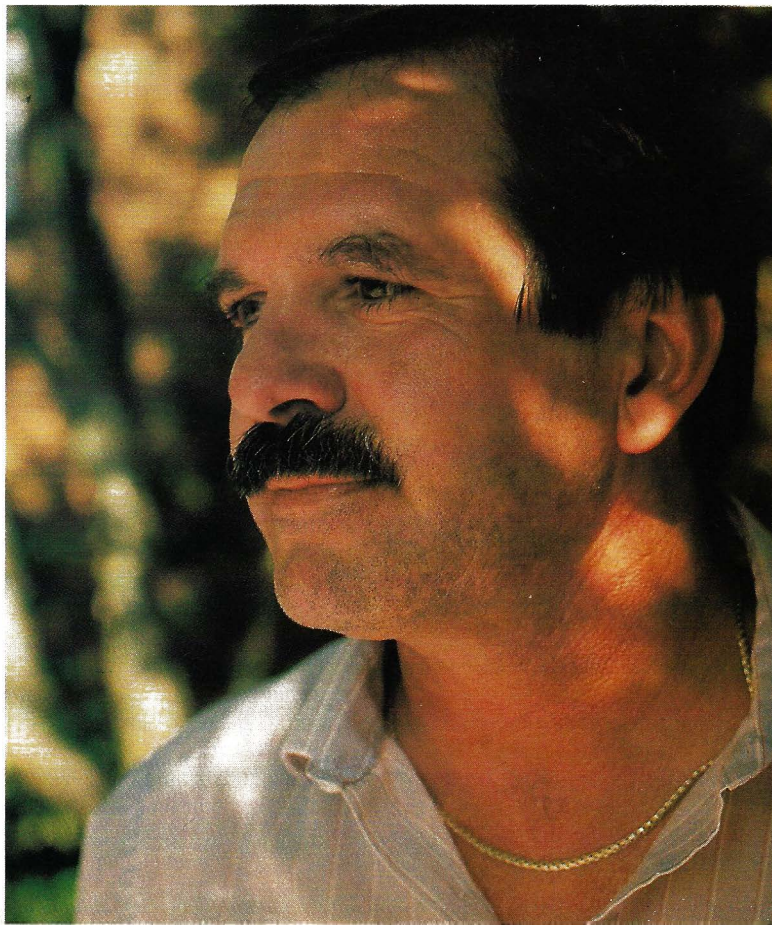
"Shoot anything that moves," he ordered, "but watch your ammunition."

Hall was still sitting with the shotgun on his knees, scanning the thick weave of jungle. He spotted 12 Viet Cong. Some wore black pajamas; others, khaki uniforms. The khaki was ominous. It indicated first-line officers were directing the farmer-soldiers in black pajamas.

"Lieutenant!" Hall shouted to Libs. "I got people out here with khaki uniforms on!"

The Viet Cong blasted at the patch of jungle where the voice had come from. Hall saw bullets hitting the ground all around him. He could not see the enemy unless he raised his head above the bushes hiding

Today Libs has returned to his hometown of Evansville, Ind., where he runs a candy business.



him. Every time he did that, more fire came at him.

"Withdraw!" Libs yelled to Hall. "Withdraw! Get back here inside the perimeter!"

At the front of the column, Kroah and his 3rd Platoon kept getting fire. Kroah and Sgt. Rolf Schoolman moved ahead of their men to determine where most of the firing was coming from. When Kroah thought he had located the hot spot, he radioed for artillery, directing where it should be fired.

"That's good enough," he said after the ranging rounds hit the right patch of jungle. "Fire for effect."

Ten rounds, two from each of the five 105 mm artillery pieces in the rear, came whooshing in.

Kroah heard screams from his own men behind him. At the same time, Libs saw men being cut down in his area in the rear of the company. One report estimated five were killed and another dozen wounded, but nobody would ever know for certain who killed them because the combination of sniper and "friendly" artillery fire created sudden chaos.

After the artillery stopped, Viet Cong snipers opened fire on Kroah's platoon, wounding several men. He answered a nervous call from Nolen on the radio.

"November Six. Charlie Six," Nolen began. "We're going to pull back."

"Charlie Six. November Six. I can't do that. I've got more wounded than effectives."

"November Six. Charlie Six. Better figure something out. We're pulling out."

Nolen hoped to avoid encirclement of the whole company even if he had to lose Kroah's point platoon. But it was too late. Every time a soldier tried to go into a low crawl, snipers in the trees would spot the movement and shoot.

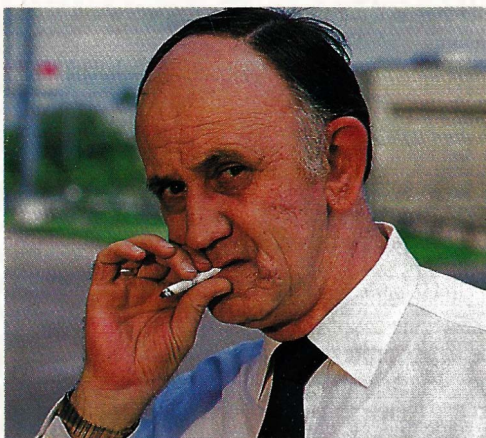
"November Six. Charlie Six. Looks like they've got us encircled. We're not going anywhere."

TWO AIR FORCE HUSKIE HELICOPTERS ARRIVED at 3 p.m. to evacuate the men who had been killed or wounded by sniper fire and the misdirected rounds of artillery. Troopers cut a hole in the treetops so the choppers could lower a bullet-shaped jungle penetrator down to the jungle floor. Air Force Capt. Harold D. Salem maneuvered his helicopter over the hole in the trees and hovered. Airman 1st Class William H. (Pits) Pitsenbarger, 21, signaled Sgt. Gerald Hammond to release the steel cable that would lower him down to the smoking battleground 200 feet below.

Lt. Kenneth Alderson, second in command of Charlie Company, was astonished at the sight of an airman dressed in freshly pressed fatigues and a flak jacket and carrying two .38-caliber pistols voluntarily lowering himself into the mud soldiers' smoking hell. "This Saigon cowboy doesn't know what he's getting into," Alderson said to himself.

Libs, seeing the young man riding down the sky through a hail of enemy bullets, said, "I'd like to shake that man's hand."

Once Pitsenbarger was on the ground, Hammond reeled up the hoist cable, attached a litter basket



Marty Kroah, one of Charlie Company's four platoon leaders, lives in Houston, where he is employed by a technical school.

and relowered the cable to the airman.

Pitsenbarger patched up several wounded men and lifted one of them into the litter. Hammond hoisted the wounded man and lowered the litter again to pick up another. The helicopter left the spot over the hole in the trees so it could fly the wounded to the first-aid station at Bien Hoa. The second Huskie found the same hole in the trees and took on two more wounded. Each Huskie made three trips, rescuing 12 of the wounded before the Viet Cong opened up on one of the hovering Huskies, ripping holes in its fuel and hydraulic lines. Hammond motioned Pitsenbarger to climb into the litter basket so he could be pulled back into the helicopter before it left the battleground. Pitsenbarger waved off the chopper. The Huskie struggled away under heavy fire.

Left by his own choice with the men of Charlie Company, Pits Pitsenbarger joined the fight. He gathered rifles and ammunition off the killed and wounded and distributed them to the men still fighting. He used up all his dressings, picked up an M16 and started shooting.

An Army helicopter hovered over the company to kick cases of ammunition out the side door. But the helicopter pilot radioed down that the fire was so heavy he was going to leave without dropping all the ammunition. Kroah radioed back: "If we don't get it, you don't leave." The pilot could not be sure whether the beleaguered lieutenant would make good on his threat to shoot him down. He stayed until all the ammunition was kicked out. It was an accurate drop, the cases landing only 20 yards from Nolen and Alderson.

"We gotta get out of here," Nolen told Alderson. He told him to find a platoon and try to break out of the Viet Cong's tightening circle. Nolen was wounded shortly after giving that order.

AT 4 P.M., THE VIET CONG BEGAN MARCHING 60 MM MORTAR fire across the company. Lying flat, the troopers were protected against mortar fragments but not against the Viet Cong snipers high in the trees. They kept getting shot in the back as they lay prone. The Viet Cong would send one of their soldiers running across a clear spot between trees to draw Charlie Company's fire. This would help pinpoint targets for the snipers.

Libs concluded the company had been drawn into a carefully prepared kill sack. He knew they had to break out to survive. Kroah could break the Viet Cong's choke ring if anybody could. Libs decided to ask him to try.

"We've got to break it, Marty," he told his buddy over the radio.

"Right!" Kroah and his platoon made a stab through the northwest end of the perimeter. The Viet Cong stopped them with a killing curtain of fire.

"Sorry, John, couldn't break it," Kroah radioed back.

Libs and a group of riflemen then tried to break the noose in their southeast sector. They ran into another curtain of fire. Viet Cong riflemen under covering fire from the trees assaulted the lines of the 3rd and 4th platoons. The Americans fought back, and U.S. artillery kept crashing down and preventing the Viet Cong from staying massed against any one position.



The James W. Robinson Jr. Secondary School in Fairfax was named for one of the heroes of Charlie Company, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. He died knocking out an enemy machine gun with two grenades.

At 5:45 p.m., Libs and others heard the heart-sinking *chung, chung* of two .50-caliber machine guns and *pat, pat* of eight .30-caliber machine guns from outside the company perimeter.

D-800 had moved its heavy weapons out of the nearby base camp and placed them all around Charlie Company's steadily shrinking circle. Machine-gun bullets, especially .50 caliber, are lethal not only because they come in streams but also because they cut through brush and branches without losing accuracy or killing power. Two .30-caliber guns and one .50-caliber were slamming rounds into the 3rd and 4th platoons on the company's northwest point; a second .50-caliber and a .30-caliber were firing into the 2nd Platoon, which was holding the northeast quadrant of the perimeter; and two .30-calibers were raking the 1st Platoon in the southeast quadrant.

Maj. Bibb Underwood, battalion executive officer, who was 1,000 feet above the raging battle, was calling in artillery from the back of a Huey helicopter.

"Damage Five. Mike Six," Libs radioed. "Get something more in here. They're all over the place. Up in the trees. The sons of bitches have got .50s. We've lost a lot of people already. Where the hell is Bravo Company?"

"Mike Six. Damage Five. Hang in here. We'll give you everything we've got. Bravo Company is still 1,000 meters away."

"Damage Five. Mike Six. They'll be too late. We'll be rotting in the jungle by the time Bravo gets here."

Bravo Company was out on Charlie Company's far left flank. The jungle was so thick that Bravo could only move 100 yards an hour by hacking out a single-file trail. There was no open area anywhere near Charlie Company for helicopters with reinforcements to land.

At 6:30 p.m. soldiers from the 4th Platoon under Steinberg charged the .50-caliber position on the northwest flank while their comrades shot up into the trees to suppress the deadly fire of the Viet Cong snipers. The troopers who were not cut down knocked out the .50 with hand grenades.

The wounded, if they had the strength, crawled from the outer edge of the oval-shaped defensive ring to its center. When a man was killed, his buddies left their firing positions long enough to carry him to the center of the oval to lie with the wounded. Throughout the battle, the wounded moaned and cried out with pleas like: "Somebody shoot me." "Water! Christ, somebody give me some water!" "Mother, I'm dying." "Help me!" "Somebody help me!"

The casualties were leaving big holes in Charlie Company's perimeter. Libs feared the Viet Cong would charge through one of these gaps at any moment.

"Mike Six," Kroah radioed to Libs. "November Six. I'm hit." The Viet Cong had been concentrating fire on Kroah and the two soldiers beside him, a medic on his left and a radioman on his right. Bullets from snipers in the trees had slammed into Kroah's right shoulder, calf and ankle. His medic had received a burst in his back and lay helpless and bleeding. One slug had slammed through the radioman's helmet and gone out the back without hitting his head. A third had hit him in the shoulder.

"Help me!" the radioman cried to Kroah. "Help me! I've got a wife and kids. I want to go home and see them. I don't want to die here!"

"Shut up," Kroah rebuked. "Just lie still and you'll be all right."

Kroah heard a shout from 1st Lt. Steinberg, commander of the 4th Platoon. "I need some help over here!"

"George, I can't help you," Kroah shouted back. "I've been hit five times."

"I've been hit seven," Steinberg replied.

"Always the bullshitter, huh, George!"

"No bullshit, man."

And it wasn't. Steinberg died with those words.

His platoon fought on, hurling tear gas and smoke canisters

at the attackers after ammunition ran out and even grappling with the charging Viet Cong with bare hands.

Sgt. James W. Robinson Jr., 25, of Annandale, was fighting with the same abandon in 1st Platoon's southeast sector. Robinson had chafed during his years of ceremonial duty as a Marine, left the military for a while, switched to the Army and was now undergoing the test by fire he had always sought. He picked up an M79 grenade launcher and fired into the trees where the snipers were.

Just outside the perimeter, he saw a medic and a sergeant, both wounded and pinned down by enemy fire. Running through bullets, he locked one man in each arm, dragged them inside the perimeter, dressed their wounds, gave them shots of morphine and then assessed his fire team's situation. It was desperate. The pile of wounded and dead behind the platoon's defensive line was growing. Robinson collected all the serviceable rifles and ammunition, redistributing them among survivors. He kept the leftover rifles and grenades for his own one-man stand. He hosed through the trees again, killing more snipers.

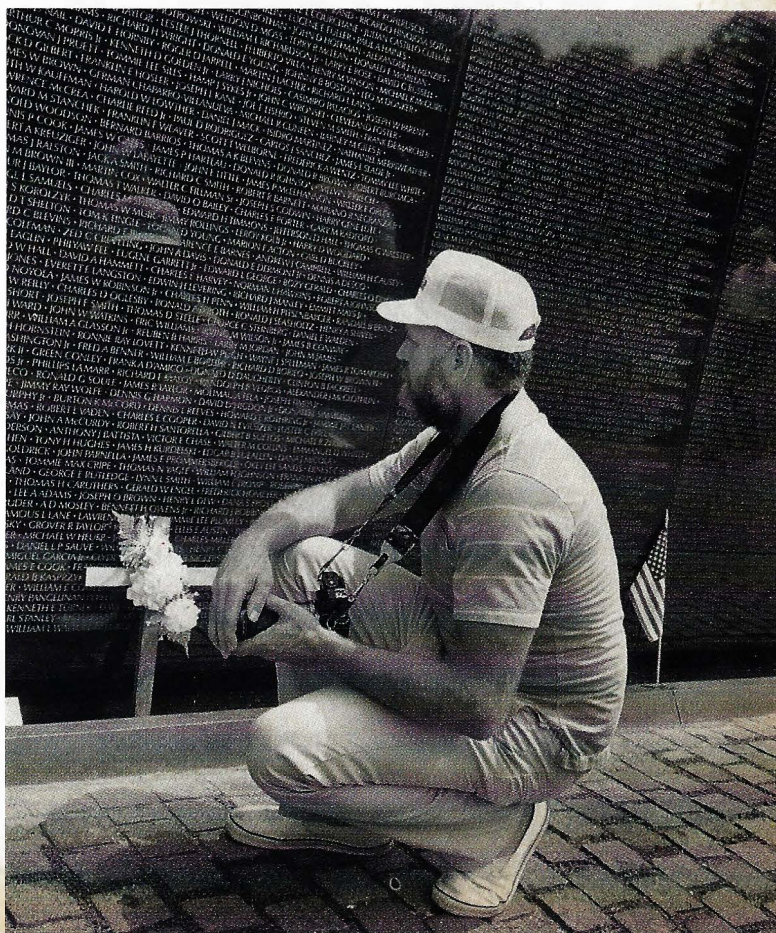
One of his buddies had been cut down by machine-gun fire. Robinson ran to him. The same machine gun hit Robinson's leg as he ran. He reached his comrade, pushed him behind a tree, tied bandages around the worst wounds and patched himself as best as he could under cover of the tree.

"I see the .50!" Robinson shouted to his men. "I'm going for it! Cover me!"

Robinson by this time had no ammunition left for his M16. Sitting beside the wounded man, he pulled two grenades off his web belt. He yanked out the pins so they were ready to go off once he let his fingers off the firing mechanism. With a Marine growl, he ran toward the machine gun, one grenade in each hand.

A tracer round hit him in the leg, setting his trousers on fire. He staggered to within 10 yards of the gun and lofted the grenades expertly into the position. They went off in one giant blast, killing the crew and silencing the .50 for the rest of the battle.

At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Phil Hall found the names of his Charlie Company friends, still clustered together.



Robinson fell dead, his body riddled with the last burst from the machine gun. He would be awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award.

TWILIGHT APPROACHED. THE VIET Cong firing stopped except for a few shots here and there. D-800 was holding its fire to give its women time to shoot any American wounded outside the perimeter, strip the bodies and report where the biggest gaps seemed to be in the company's ragged oval.

With the firing stilled, Libs could hear Viet Cong all around him, both in the trees and on the ground. He knew it was only a matter of time before the Viet Cong mounted their final charge and raced through one of the gaps. He also knew he was going to die. He could not think of anything he had not tried except one last do-or-die breakout attempt.

He was puzzling over how best to make this suicide drive when he saw a green-yellow cloud of gas rolling toward him. He thought the Viet Cong had launched a gas attack before moving in, but actually it was gas that had been blown from the point where the 3rd and 4th platoons had fired canisters in their valiant stands against the Viet Cong.

"Gas!" Libs shouted, remembering his Fort Benning training.

He instinctively reached into his gas-mask pouch but found only catsup, mustard and an onion. He dug a little hole in the ground and put his head in it to escape the tear gas choking him. "They're going to find my head in this hole with a bullet through it," he told himself, "and say, 'Libs was a coward.'" He allowed himself a giggle, telling himself, "Who gives a damn?"

The wind blew the gas away. The Viet Cong had not made their final assault. Breakout was now or never. Libs gathered up the few men still firing and capable of running. They included his big horse with the shotgun, Phil Hall.

"Let's go, you guys! We're going to break through here. We're going to assault! Move! Move! Get your ass out from behind that anthill," he commanded Hall, who was lying behind it firing.

They raced forward a few yards before a Viet Cong fusillade forced them to drop to the jungle floor. A grenade exploded between Hall and Pfc. Jackie K. Lancaster. The hot fragments missed Hall but hit Lancaster. One fragment went clean through Lancaster's helmet without hitting his head.

"Get back in!" Libs shouted.

With painful effort, Lancaster got his arm over Hall's left shoulder as they lay on the ground. Kicking with knees and

digging with elbows, the two crawled back toward the perimeter together.

Libs knew Charlie Company could not hold the Viet Cong at bay much longer with the small amount of firepower it had left. He had to call in artillery and keep it exploding right next to the few survivors. He called Hall away from the M60.

"I've got to have a radio to call in artillery or we're dead. Find me one!"

Hall ran and crawled among the dead and wounded lying in the smoke. He found a dying radioman from another platoon and told him, "Sorry. I've got to take this."

"No problem," the soldier rasped. He was lying on his back, bleeding to death.

Libs radioed up to Underwood, who was still directing the artillery from the helicopter overhead, flying over the battle hour after hour, taking time out only to switch into a fully fueled helicopter when his own ran low. "I wanted to let them know they had somebody up there in touch with the world," Underwood said later.

"Damage Five. This is Libs. I've taken command. We've got to have artillery all night long."

Underwood noticed that Libs' voice had gone from frenzy to resignation. "You've got it," he answered in as reassuring a voice as he could.



Stoli. For the purist.

Not just smooth, silky smooth. Not just vodka, Stolichnaya.

Libs went from one cluster of Charlie Company survivors to another to say goodbye. Night was falling fast. Muzzle flashes showed up against the dark from all around the perimeter. The Viet Cong seemed to have riflemen everywhere. Libs heard the Viet Cong women and children moving from body to body on the perimeter. He knew what they were doing and grimaced. His message to his men was brief. "Hey, we ain't gonna make it. So whatever you see, kill it. Whatever moves, kill it."

Libs figured light would help keep the Viet Cong away from some of his dead and wounded and also make the attackers better targets. "We've got to have flares," he radioed to Underwood. "It's black down here."

Meanwhile, Kroah, his radioman, Jasper Carpenter, and the medic—all three of them grievously wounded—lay helpless in that blackness outside the tightened perimeter. Kroah saw bobbing dots of light off in the distant darkness. They were moving toward him. He realized the Viet Cong were walking with candles inserted in cans held out in front of them with long poles. The poles were to keep the people holding them from being hit by bullets fired at the lights. Kroah heard the high-pitched voices of Vietnamese women.

"Our only chance is to play dead when

they get near us," Kroah told his medic and radioman. The three bleeding men reached for each other's hands, clasped them tight and said the Lord's Prayer in a whisper. Then they lay down as dead as they could manage.

Kroah heard the footsteps of somebody approaching, then heavy breathing. He felt his rifle being pulled away from his body so gently that he thought it must be a woman standing over him. His mind shouted this out while he struggled to lie quiet as a corpse. He felt Carpenter's body being rolled on top of him and could hear the scavengers pulling out the clips of M16 bullets. The medic lying next to Kroah was stripped next but apparently made a movement. Kroah heard the deafening explosion of the medic's own .45.

The Viet Cong moved on to other bodies. Kroah and Carpenter opened their eyes. Carpenter slowly lifted his head in the inky darkness to look around. It was about 9 p.m.

"See any lights?" Kroah asked.

"No," Carpenter replied.

"Got a cigarette?"

"Christ, man, you're not going to light a cigarette, are you?"

"Give me a cigarette and then go back inside the perimeter and see if you can find me a radio."

Kroah never saw Carpenter again.

UNDERWOOD, IN HIS HELICOPTER, passed on Libs' request for Air Force flares. Soon they were drifting down from the sky, taking some of the terror out of the night.

Viet Cong commanders were shouting through megaphones, and snipers were climbing down from the trees. They massed troops for a final charge. Libs knew most of his defenders were dead. It would take the Viet Cong only a few minutes to kill them all.

In the eerie quiet before the charge, Libs called up to Underwood to bring the artillery in even closer.

"I'm going to lay down this barrage," Underwood radioed back. "Tell me if that's where you want it."

A volley of shells came crashing down about 50 yards outside Charlie Company's perimeter.

"Bibb! Bring it in closer! It's our only chance!"

Underwood, reading the map full of numbers on his lap in the chopper, radioed back new coordinates to the artillery battery. In less than 30 seconds, it sounded to Charlie Company survivors as if freight trains were coming down on them from the sky. The artillery shells hurtling in whizzed, hissed and whooshed before plunging into the ground with

continued on page 33



**Hey
Washington...**
look for Stoli's
passport to
D.C.'s Hot Spots
at participating
bars and
liquor stores.

FOR GIFT DELIVERY ANYWHERE* CALL 1 (800) 238-4373. *EXCEPT WHERE PROHIBITED. MAJOR CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED.
STOLICHNAYA VODKA 80 AND 100 PROOF, DISTILLED FROM GRAIN. IMPORTED BY MONSIEUR HENRI WINES, LTD., WHITE PLAINS, NY 10604 © 1989

CHARLIE COMPANY

continued from page 23

explosions so powerful it seemed as if they would split the earth in two. Chunks of hot metal, branches and dirt filled the air. In the seconds of quiet between bursts, Libs and the rest of the men heard screaming and crying from the Viet Cong. Artillery was wiping out the massed attackers. Whole minutes went by, and still there was no charge.

"Closer! Closer!" Libs yelled up to Underwood.

"You've got it! You're on the ground. You're in control."

Soldiers hugged the vibrating ground. When a shell hit really close, the ground came up and punched them in the gut. The shells kept coming, coming, coming. The ripping explosions turned the Viet Cong's ground into a moonscape. Alderson found a radio and got back in contact with Underwood as well. The Army would say later that 1,100 artillery shells were fired to help save the company.

"God bless you, Bibb Underwood," Libs said into the earth bouncing into his face. Air Force aircraft kept dropping flares.

Acting Platoon Sgt. Charlie Urconis of the 2nd Platoon kept crawling from man to man, distributing ammunition. He winced at the cries of wounded he heard in the dark. The company had run out of bandages, water, morphine—everything that could have eased the pain of the dying.

No further fire came from the Viet Cong. Libs suspended the artillery but told Underwood to be ready to resume it in a hurry.

Kroah, still lying outside the perimeter, was covered by branches that had been shot off trees. He heard a soldier call out, "Anybody here?"

Kroah answered and asked him to find a radio. "Mike Six. November Six here. Are you there?"

"Marty?" answered Libs incredulously, having dispensed with call signs long ago. It no longer mattered what the enemy heard.

"Yeah."

"I thought you were dead. I've been calling you for two hours."

"I'm out here."

"Hang on, buddy. I'll send somebody out for you."

"Sergeant," Libs ordered Urconis about 1 a.m., "go out in the 3rd Platoon area and get November Six. He's lying outside the perimeter."

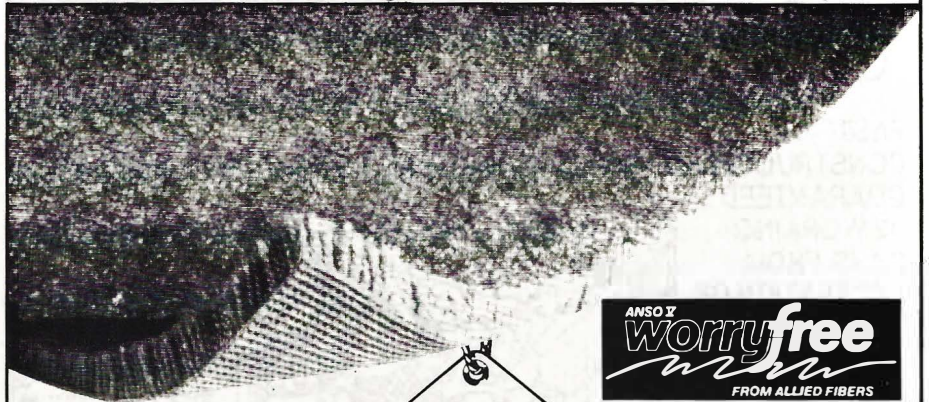
Urconis crawled out and started calling softly for Kroah.

"November Six. This is Oscar Five. Where you at?"

Carpet Sale

OPEN SUNDAY 12-6

Save 33% To 50% During Our Fantastic Memorial Day Sale



IT'S MORE THAN JUST STAIN RESISTANT. IT'S TOTALLY WORRY FREE.

Sale \$10⁹⁹ Nylon carpet for offices or rec rooms.
Sq. Yd. Installed

Sale \$12⁹⁹ Nylon plush pile carpet. Ideal for bedrooms.
Sq. Yd. Installed

Sale \$14⁹⁹ Texture plush pile, the designers choice for classic settings.
Sq. Yd. Installed

Sale \$18⁹⁹ Luxurious texture plush that resists stains and footprints.
Sq. Yd. Installed

Sale \$22⁹⁹ Beautiful cut pile plush stylish texture in today's colors.
Sq. Yd. Installed



Special \$7⁹⁹ Sq. Yd. Installed

Reg. \$16.99 100% Nylon loop carpet. Ideal for offices and rec rooms.

Special \$9⁹⁹ Sq. Yd. Installed

Reg. \$21.99. Nylon plush pile carpet. Great for living rooms or bedrooms.

REMNANTS 50% OFF
9'x12' 12'x15' 12'x18' 12'x21'

Oriental Rugs 50% Off.

Save on our Classic Oriental rugs offering Luxury, Style and Subtle Elegance. Our Memorial Day Sale Continues. Find fantastic savings on our dazzling assortment of luxurious handmade Oriental and Oriental design rugs... with patterns as exotic as their port of call. Come into your nearest Georgetown Carpet Showroom during our Memorial Day Oriental Rug Sale and we'll lay the world at your feet. Here are some examples.



Shahistan Rugs

100% Wool pile rugs imported from Belgium by Couristan. Choose Kerman ivory, red or green. Heriz in red or ivory.

4'x6' Reg. \$200. Sale \$ 99.
6'x9' Reg. \$370. Sale \$179.
9'x12' Reg. \$600. Sale \$299.

Also find a large selection of other Couristan rugs including Kashimar, Gem and Topaz.

Handmade Kashan Rugs

The Spirit of Persia is magnificently realized in this imported plush wool pile rug that is hand-knotted according to ancient Persian tradition. The Kashan pattern is available in red or blue backgrounds.

6'x9' Reg. \$2000. Sale \$1199.
8'x10' Reg. \$4000. Sale \$1999.
9'x12' Reg. \$4600. Sale \$2290.

georgetown carpet

MAKING HOMES BEAUTIFUL SINCE 1969

- Alexandria 4349 Duke St. (1 1/2 miles east of Landmark Ctr. Next to Pier 1) 461-8400
- Bailey's X Rds 5928 Leesburg Pike (1 Mile East of 7 Corners on Rt. 7) 931-0900
- Tysons Corner 8344 Leesburg Pike Rt. 7 & 123 (Across from JKY Chevrolet) 761-3033
- Bethesda 7845 Wisconsin Ave. (1 mile South Beltway) Ample Free Parking 951-8700
- Washington 2208 Wisconsin Ave. (Upper Georgetown at W. Place) 342-2262

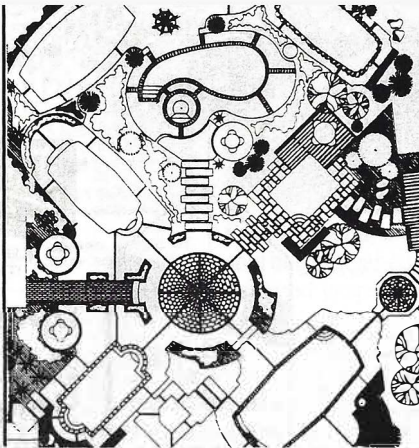
SEARS

A Name You can Trust

A SEA OF POOLS VISIT

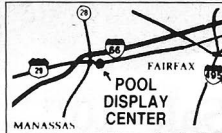
THE WORLD'S LARGEST POOL DISPLAY CENTER

FAST CONSTRUCTION GUARANTEED... 12 WORKING DAYS FROM EXCAVATION OR WE'LL PAY YOU A \$100 PENALTY FOR EACH ADDITIONAL DAY (Under normal conditions and weather permitting)
CALL TODAY FOR FREE IN-HOME ESTIMATE: 1-800-777-6657



ON DISPLAY

**9 IN-GROUND POOLS
4 IN-GROUND SPAS
PLUS
PORTABLE SPAS**



**13617 Lee Highway
Centreville, Virginia;
1/2 mile east of 28
on Lee Hwy., (Rt. 29)**

Sold, furnished and installed by Mid Atlantic Inc. A Sears Authorized Contractor. M.H.I.C. #30083 and 321.

SEARS
Your money's worth
and a whole lot more.

© Sears, Roebuck & Co., 1989

- Please send me more information
- Have a SEARS POOL DESIGNER call me

Mail to: Sears In-Ground Pools
13617 Lee Highway
Centreville, VA 22008

NAME _____
PHONE: (HOME) _____ (WORK) _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

COMPLETION IN 30 WORKING DAYS GUARANTEED!



- Since 1967
- Owner Supervised Construction
- Automatic Cover & Spa Specialists
- Transferrable Structural Warranty
- Residential Craftsmanship
- Commercial Strength
- Designers & Architects on Staff

MBC POOLS & SPAS

3166 Campbell Drive, Fairfax, VA 22031
MHIC 14095 VA CLASS A 23337

NAME _____
PHONE _____
STREET _____
CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

MBC Carecraft POOLS

VA (703) 591-7997 MD (301) 585-6226



**Get In The Swim
From Just
\$9,995**

The World's Largest.
We Build More Pools Each Year
Than Any Other Builder!



100% Financing
Owner Approved Credit

Open 7 Days A Week! Call Today...
VA, Call (703) 818-0227
MD, Call (301) 279-7555

MHIC #22989 VA Class A #026146 DCHIC #676

**Factory Direct
Electropedic®
Adjustable Beds
Sale From \$399**

exp. 6-30-89

7634 Lee Highway
Falls Church, Va.
(1/2 mile East of 495 exit)
Open Mon-Sat 10-4,
Sunday 11-4
703-573-1818
SERVING ALL AREAS
1(800) 733-1818

**Electropedic®
Adjustable
Beds Since 1964**

"We're over here," replied Kroah's new radioman.

Urconis crawled toward the voice. He found Kroah and his radioman lying side by side. The lieutenant was obviously bad off.

"Crawl back and get a tarp and some sticks so we can carry him out of here," Urconis told the radioman. The radioman was frozen with fright.

Urconis could not prod the man to action. The sergeant crawled back to the perimeter, got Spec. 4 Noyce to help him, collected sticks and a tarpaulin and crawled back with his helper to Kroah and his radioman. With great difficulty they rigged the tarp and sticks into a stretcher and slid it under Kroah.

"I'm only going to tell you this once, Private," Urconis warned the radioman. "You either crawl out of here with us now or we're going to leave you out here to die. Now get your ass moving, soldier, now!"

The wide-eyed radioman got moving. Urconis and Noyce slid Kroah along the jungle floor as gently as they could. Once within the company perimeter, Kroah lit a cigarette. All of Kroah's clothes had been torn off except his undershorts and boots. Blood was all over his tattooed body. Libs walked over to see his old friend.

"How ya doing?" Libs asked.

"Great, now."

"Marty, you're some looking sight."

"Yeah, well, we're all going to die anyhow."

"I know, Marty. But we'll take 'em one more time, because they're going to bring one more in on us."

"Do your thing, Johnny. Get the job done. Tie me up to a tree."

Libs pulled his friend over to a tree so he could lean against it while looking out into the dark. He placed Marty's rifle beside him and was about to say some final words, but Kroah passed out.

Libs counted the able-bodied men he had left in his sector. Nine. The oval-shaped perimeter by now was only 40 yards across, half its original width.

Alderson, whom Libs and Underwood had thought was dead, reunited with Libs. Alderson, Libs, Urconis, Hall and Noyce established a command post for their pathetically small force of survivors behind a big log that artillery had knocked to the jungle floor. They deployed their M60 machine guns to cover as many avenues of approach as they could. Alderson asked for a quick refresher course in firing the M60.

"It's awful quiet," Libs told Urconis. "I don't hear them anymore."

"Yeah, even the monkeys aren't making any noise."

Nobody dared think they would live, that the Viet Cong had broken off the

attack. Alderson feared the Viet Cong were just waiting for Bravo Company to come to the rescue. Then they would surround the second American company and kill everyone.

The quiet persisted for more than three hours. Libs, Hall and Noyce agreed to take 15-minute catnaps in rotation. Each in turn lay face down behind the log. The desperation that had fueled their movements under heavy fire gave way to cold fear in the pre-dawn hours. The man resting did not want to look over the log because he was afraid he would see the Viet Cong coming out of the black shadows for the final attack.

Birds started chirping in the distance. The jungle lightened. Dawn was finally breaking over Charlie Company. Bang! A shot rang out 40 yards outside the perimeter.

"Here we go again," Hall said. "They're coming again."

Alderson, Libs, Hall and Noyce aimed two M60s in the direction of the shot. Jungle fatigues marched toward them from the bush—United States Army jungle fatigues! Bravo Company had hacked its way next to Charlie Company during the night. The troopers had guided themselves by the sound of exploding artillery shells to reach Charlie Company's perimeter before dawn. But William S. Hathaway, the battalion commander, had ordered them to stay outside the perimeter until first light, not wanting to risk Charlie Company defenders' mistakenly shooting Bravo soldiers in the dark.

AS THE DAY LIGHTENED, CHARLIE COMPANY survivors heard helicopters overhead. Air Force Huskies and Army Chinooks hovered over the battle area. There still was no place big enough to land. Air Force para-rescuemen rode cables down from their choppers to the jungle floor. Rope ladders tumbled out from the rear doors of the Chinooks. Engineers descended the swinging ladders. Chain saws and other gear were dropped. Soon trees were falling and helicopters were landing.

The men of Charlie Company said little. Bravo Company eyed them with awe. Nobody had to tell the relief troopers what the men hanging onto life had been through in the long afternoon and even longer night. The survivors rummaged for food, bandages and medicines. They looked for buddies. Many were dead.

Some Charlie Company survivors would remain embittered for the rest of their lives that Bravo Company did not come to their aid earlier. DePuy blamed himself and other top officers over-seeing the deployment for not putting Charlie and Bravo companies closer to-

SYLVAN Grand Opening POOLS Celebration!



WIN A FREE TRIP!

All Maryland and Virginia Sylvan Showrooms Celebrate the Grand Opening of Our New Rockville Location on June 4th with This Special FREE DRAWING!

No Purchase Necessary! Just come in today and register at any location listed below! Open to the entire public!

GRAND PRIZE: A WEEK IN ACAPULCO FOR 2

1st PRIZE: PORTABLE COLOR TV

2nd PRIZE: OUTDOOR GRILL

3rd PRIZE: POOL FLOAT

While They Last! Free T-Shirts & Balloons! Free Hot Dogs and Soda at All Locations! Everyone's Invited!

CALL NOW: VISIT ONE OF OUR POOL PARKS TODAY!
OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK • FINANCING AVAILABLE
SEE OUR ENERGY SAVER POOL ON DISPLAY!

Pasadena, MD • 8131 Governor Ritchie Hwy (301) 544-8600
INDOOR POOL ON DISPLAY

Perry Hall, Baltimore, MD • 9716 Belair Rd (301) 256-9100

Easton, MD (301) 822-2888

Laurel, MD • 10895 Annapolis Junction Road (301) 490-1919

Rockville, MD • 392 Hungerford Dr. (301) 294-9110

Fairfax, VA • 1mi. West of Fairfax Circle on Lee Highway (703) 591-3055

Fredericksburg, VA (703) 899-2916

* NO POOL ON DISPLAY.

FREE INFORMATION

SYLVAN POOLS • P.O. Box 159 • Laurel, MD 20707

Please send the FREE 24 pg. full color pool planning booklet.

Please have a representative call with information & estimate

Residential Pool
 Commercial Pool
 Spa

NAME _____

PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

CI TV _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____

WP/56/89

Baltimore Metro
(301) 256-9100

Annapolis-Laurel
(301) 544-8600

Eastern Shore
(301) 822-2888

Washington Metro
(703) 591-3055

SYLVAN POOLS

THE SWIMMING POOL PEOPLE SINCE 1946

M.H.I.C. No. 3107

A SUBSIDIARY OF KDI CORP.

AMERICA'S
#1 POOL
BUILDER!

LEADING THE WAY IN CREATIVE PLAY®

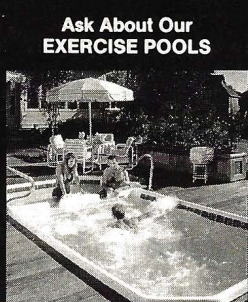
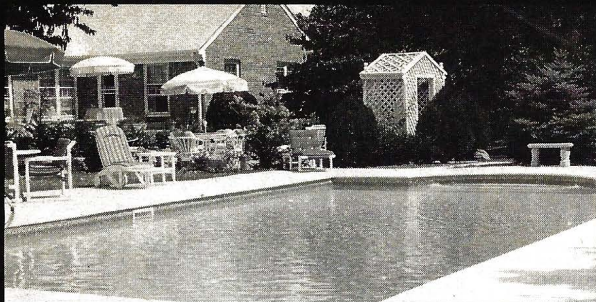


(301)
843-7767

WOODSET®

EXPANDABLE 4 x 4 BACKYARD PLAY STRUCTURES

BOX 2127 WALDORF, MD 20604



Ask About Our EXERCISE POOLS

Swim, Spa and SAVE!

Finally a better pool— FIBERGLASS!

- Free form & classic shapes, spas, lap pools
- Automatic cleaning & chlorinating
- No obligation site evaluation & survey
- Specialists in small yards and steep grades
- Tax deductible full financing at low rates

Other models with prices starting at **\$7950⁰⁰**
512 sq.ft., 8'd., instl.

Fiberglass • Polymer
Gunite • Aluminum • Steel

Carefree
Pools

... The people pleasers

Rockville (301) **424-5400** Fairfax (703) **591-1212**

D.C. HIC #1728

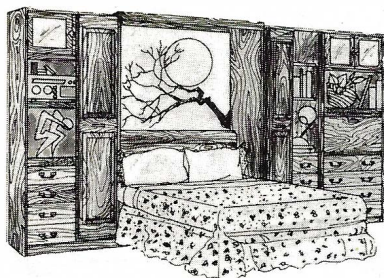
Think Ahead and Save!

MHIC #24594 VA Class A #27263

Yes... I'd like A Carefree Lifestyle.
Please send me a free brochure.

Mail to: **CAREFREE POOLS** POST
14650 Southlawn Lane, Rockville, MD 20850

NAME: _____
PHONE: (HOME) _____ (WORK) _____
ADDRESS: _____
CITY/STATE/ZIP: _____



The Original Murphy Bed

From a beautifully handcrafted wall system . . . to a bedroom in an instant. The durable featherlift mechanism provides the comfort and convenience of a regular bed in a minimum of space.

the **Loft** store
bed

Alexandria, VA. 3622 King St. 379-7299
Rockville, MD. 611 Hungerford Dr. 340-0998
Woodbridge, VA. 14880 Farm Creek Dr. 494-3999
Savage, MD. Savage Mill (10 Min. North of Laurel) 498-4575

Solid Hardwood Real Furniture



- We have competitors, but no competition.
- Nobody builds a better pool than a MASTER POOL builder.
- Nobody can top our guarantees!

WHEN YOU'RE
SERIOUS ABOUT
FUN

VA. OFF 631-7870
1-800-252-SWIM

MARYLAND POOLS

MHIC #6694 • Bank Financing Available

gether, given the thickness of the jungle.

Most of Charlie Company's survivors stood or sat in the now-secure perimeter and cried unashamedly. Urconis went from man to man looking for friends. He found a dead trooper in clean fatigues. He could not figure it out until he noticed the Air Force insignia. It was Pits Pitsenbarger.

Urconis had to get away from so many dead friends. He wandered outside the perimeter to where the Viet Cong had been. He noticed blood on the bushes and in the trees. They had paid a heavy price, too.

Phil Hall held off crying until he helped his buddies put their dead comrades in green rubberized body bags. Hall felt overcome with rage: "All these kids! All these guys! Dead! Dead! What a waste! What was this battle for? Why did everybody die? They're flying us out of here. What did we accomplish? Somebody explain this war to me."

Libs was also depressed. He did not cry. He sat inside the old perimeter. He felt bitterness, anger and sadness watching his kids who had fought so hard being zipped into body bags. "Bait. That's all we were. So many great kids. Who will ever know what they did? Nobody."

General DePuy's helicopter settled into the freshly cut landing zone. Libs made no attempt to get up and greet him. DePuy asked Alderson what had happened. "They trapped us. They ambushed us from the trees." Alderson was not bitter. He thought that DePuy's plan had been sound.

DePuy's aide, a captain in the pressed uniform of the safe rear area, strode up to Libs still slumped against a tree.

"Lieutenant! The general is here. Get up!"

Libs didn't move. DePuy took in the scene. He had been in enough battles to know exactly how Libs felt.

"You're excused, Captain!" DePuy snapped to his aide. The captain walked off. DePuy sat down on the ground next to Libs. "What happened?" the general asked quietly.

"You screwed us, General! You put us out there as bait."

Libs knew he had gotten through to the general. Libs wondered what the general would say. DePuy let silence be his answer. Then he said, "I want to know exactly what happened."

Libs wearily went through every phase of the battle as the general sat beside him listening. He ended his debrief by saying, "You walked us into a goddamn holocaust, General."

"Yeah, but there's no other way to get a goddamn fight going," DePuy replied.

"Well, you got one going here."

Word had spread through the press

corps in Saigon that the Big Red One had been in one hell of a fight. The Army flew a group of reporters and cameramen to the scene. A CBS cameraman spotted DePuy talking to Libs and walked toward them.

"Will you talk to these guys?" DePuy asked Libs.

The television man asked DePuy and Libs a few questions and then took his camera away to record the gore in the clearing. Libs hated the ghoul of the press. He learned later that one good thing came out of the televised interview when it was shown in his hometown of Evansville: Libs' mother learned he was alive at the very time she was reading that everybody in Charlie Company had been killed.

"Here's a good one over here," a cameraman said to one of his buddies. The "good one" was a particularly grotesque body that had been a real live loved soldier of Charlie Company the previous morning.

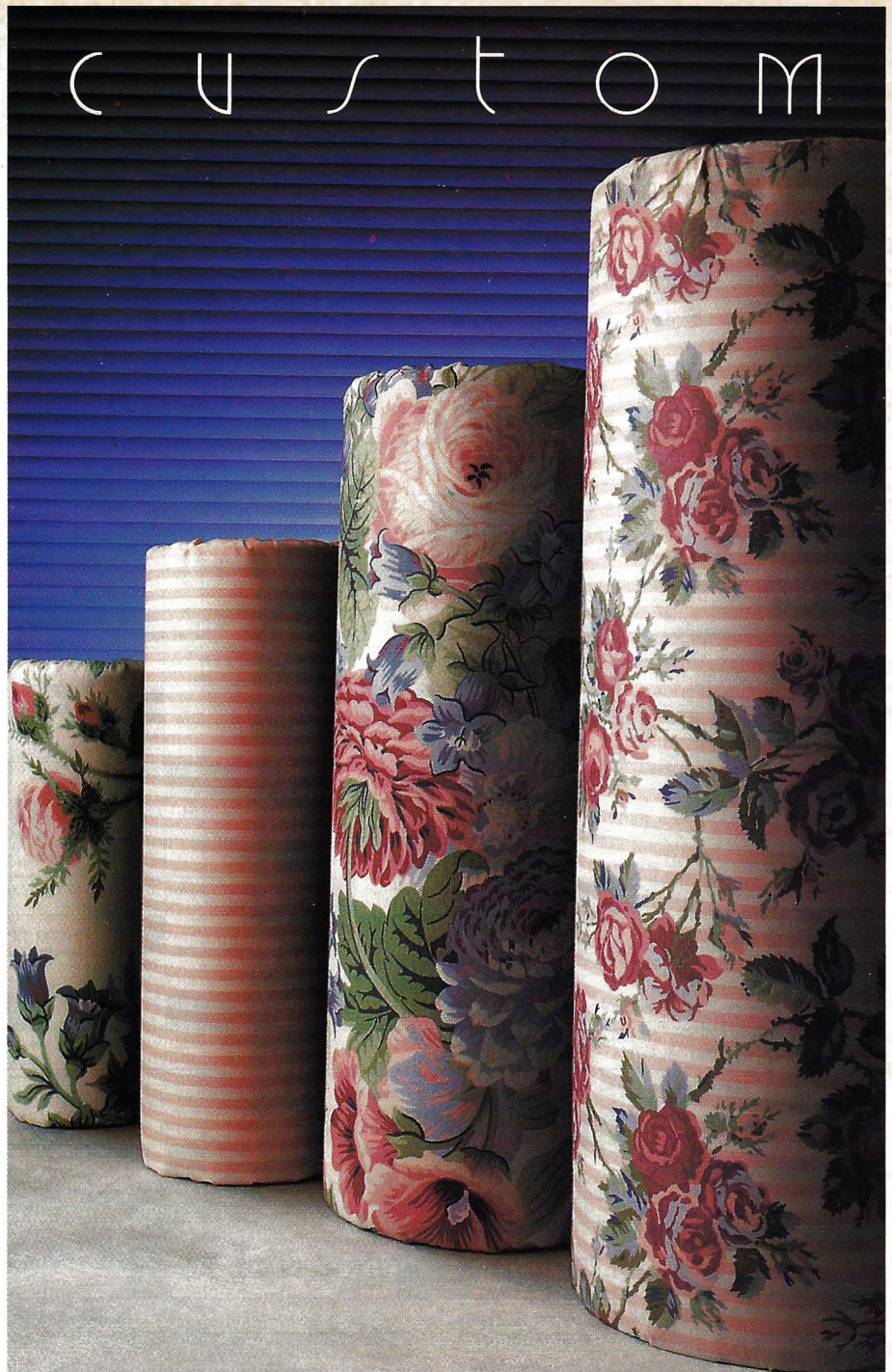
"Get outta here!" one of the survivors yelled.

Few of the Charlie Company survivors would say anything to the reporters and cameramen. They waited silently to get on the helicopters. Phil Hall was among the few who could still stand. He made a count of how many of the 134 members of Charlie Company who fought in the battle could make formation at the base in the rear where the helicopter set them down. He counted 28 men, including himself. With 106 out of 134 men killed or wounded, Charlie Company's casualty rate for the battle was 80 percent, a rate that top commanders considered unacceptably high even if more Viet Cong had been killed. (Battalion commander Hathaway estimated in his after-action report that at least 150 of the crack D-800 troops had been killed in the battle.)

Unwritten in any of the after-action reports were the wounds this battle and others like it in Vietnam would inflict on the men who fought them and on their families. Officers Nolen, Alderson, Libs, Kroah and Devoe all made it. But the nightmares for them and the rest of the survivors of that war go on and on.

Shortly after the battle, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson visited DePuy at his headquarters in Lai Khe. "You know," DePuy said Johnson warned him, "the American people won't support this war if we keep having the kind of casualties suffered by Charlie Company." ■

George C. Wilson covers the Pentagon for The Post. This article was adapted from his book Mud Soldiers, © 1989, Charles Scribner's Sons, to be published next month. Reprinted with permission.



Can you see the beautifully coordinated room in this picture?

Sears Custom Collections have fabrics that can be just about anything you want them to be. And each collection contains beautifully matched fabric, blinds and shades. With over 1700 fabrics and 5000 custom blinds and shades to choose from, our collections make it so easy for you to get the beautifully coordinated looks you want.

And, of course, you get Sears promise of Satisfaction Guaranteed Or Your Money Back. You can't make a mistake. To have one of our decorators come to your home for a free consultation, just call Sears In-Home Decorating Service at:

SEARS
Your money's worth
and a whole lot more.

1-800-4-CUSTOM Operator 241