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e.

- a. River Crossing
- b. Jap Position
- c. Moment of Death
- d. Stare
- e. Landing at the Canal (Guadalcanal)

Front Cover Image  
Americal Soldier



## An Army of One

By Harold R. Sargent

*(Editors note: This is part I of Harold Sargent's WWII memoirs which will run over the next several issues of the Americal Journal. Harold would like any vets from E Company, 132nd regiment to contact him at: 1139 Foxwood Drive, Hermitage, PA 16148)*

### Harold Sargent

(Source: David Taylor)

Most of the men who fought in the early years of World War II enlisted in the National Guard to escape the Great Depression. Such was the case for the Guards that composed the Americal. Being born between 1920 and 1926 automatically made you a member of that cohort. Before they graduated most of the men in my graduating class had enlisted. In the depression a dollar a day was big money but no one could find a job.

Pearl Harbor changed all of that. By 1942, anybody who could breath real deep found employment. I was one of those. At sixteen, I signed on as a "Gandy Dancer" on the Erie railroad. Holding on to a Chicago Pneumatic Hammer that first day I lost the skin off my hands and the soles of my shoes.

But I wouldn't quit. At eighty-five cents an hour, I was making twice as much as my teachers were making.

My goal was to get in the service as soon as I graduated from High School. September rolled around and the draft board had not called me. I presented myself at the board and told them to call me. Coming from a dysfunctional family I knew what I had to do. A week later I took the Greyhound to the armory in Erie, PA., for a physical examination. I chose the Marines first and was rejected. The Navy next. Rejected. The Army Air Corps had an attraction for men at that time. Each time the exam was the same, I was rejected. I knew it was high blood pressure. Rejection did not deter me. The doctor looked at me quizzically and asked if I wanted the Army. Sure. Apparently acceptance for the Army had lower requirements. A rigorous exam brought the same results. "What do we do now?" the doctor said. I had no bones about it. "I don't even have a way home." I knew what he was thinking. My pressure was up because of the stress.

"Tell ya what I'm gonna do. Here's a chit. You can stay

all weekend at the hotel down the block. Come in Monday morning at nine-thirty and we'll start over again."

On Monday they put me through the Army exam again. Rejected. He knew I was an odd ball because all the other men wanted rejection.

"You still want in?"

"I have no other choice."

"Lie on this table for fifteen minutes and don't move. I'll be back."

All kinds of thoughts went through my mind. He had left. I knew he had a quota to fill. Why couldn't I be the one? There was still a chance.

A half hour later he reappeared and went through the same routine. Negative. I was despondent and he knew it.

"OK. Lay there another half hour." When he returned, he stood staring at me and shook his head in disbelief.

"You really want in?"

"Yes Sir!"

"Well son, as they say nowadays, you're in the Army now."

I loaded on the train and the next morning I was in Indian-town Gap, the Army center. In two more days I was at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. Fourteen weeks later, I had a ten day leave en route to Fort Ord, California. Many of us shaved our heads with a razor. Inching along the rail to the troopship, girls lined the route to wave goodbye to the troops. You should have seen their faces when we doffed our helmets.

The troopship USS

Butner waited for us. It was ninety days before we got off that ship again. There was no air conditioning as we made our way across the equator to Hollandia, New Guinea.

I had trouble sleeping because my eyes stung at night. We were four bunks high with two feet between bunks. I discovered that the trooper above me threw his arm over the side and sweat from his body trickled down his arm and dropped from the end of his fingers onto my eyes. The deck was too hot to walk on.

We stopped two days at Hollandia, then pulled anchor and sailed for Leyte.

The USS Butner with over 20,000 troops aboard sailed slowly up the east coast of Leyte in the Philippine Islands until sundown. Existing in a world of top secrecy, no information had trickled down to me since sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge in January 1945. It had been two and a half months since any of us had a shower. This was before air conditioning. Below the Deck, on the USS Butner, the av-



USS Butner (Source: Seaweed Ships Histories)

erage temperature was around ninety.

We landed at Tacloban on the island of Leyte, which had just been secured from the Japanese. It was 10 March 1945, my nineteenth birthday.

"Now hear this," the squawk box boomed. "All troops go below and prepare to embark." Hardened soldiers, fresh from basic training, were now weak as kittens. After a meal of baked beans and wieners, we returned to our bunks and fidgeted nervously, stuffing our duffle bag and clutching our M1's, web belt and steel helmet; the only security we knew or would know for weeks ahead. It's odd how you grow accustomed to the stench of a few hundred men sweating 24 hours a day.

The loudspeaker squawked again. "Now hear this, the smoking lamp is out. Above board there will be silence. Prepare to debark." With the duffel on my left shoulder and the M1 on the other, I inched slowly up the gangway. Top deck was pitch black. I could barely discern objects as we inched down the accommodation ladder to the sweet earth below. As he touched earth the GI ahead of me said, "I'm scared. Are You?" "Hell no!" I replied, with all the bravado I could muster. Twenty of us held on with white knuckles, as our truck sped south to what was referred to as the "repple depple", three hundred yards from Leyte Gulf. A corporal, full of importance, motioned us toward a large tent, with no bunks. "Bed down there", he pointed to the earth. "In the morning you'll get your orders."

We smoothed out our blankets, took off our helmets, laid down and went to sleep. At three in the morning the force of rain from a tropical storm washed us outside the tent. Torrents of rain swept off the flopping tents. Mushing around in the mud, we crept back to the tent and slept on our wet blankets.

We were classified for our assignments to an infantry unit and three days later I boarded an LCT with the hold loaded with food supplies instead of a tank. The next two days were the best I had spent in three months. I slept on deck with the cool air streaming across my face. We sailed around the southern coast of Leyte to become part of the relentless program to drive the Japanese from the Philippines. We moored between Mactan Island (where Magellan was killed) and the island of Cebu, which is one hundred and fifty miles long and twenty miles wide with a ridge running down the center. In the morning a thunderous explosion got my attention. A destroyer, three hundred yards from us, was shelling what looked like a mountain peak. Fifteen minutes later a shell exploded this side of the peak and the side of Mount Lanibga cascaded, burying part of the 132nd Infantry that was attacking the ridge. The peak had been honeycombed with tunnels big enough for cannon which were rolled out at night to fire down on the advancing troops. To the right dive bombers and flame throwers could be seen working away at bunkers. That afternoon, we docked and the following morning a jeep appeared. The sergeant behind the wheel yelled, "Which one of you is Private Sargent?" I held up my hand. "Hop in", he said, "I'm taking you up the hill." We jolted up a ridge which had been blasted by bombs, artillery, strafing and tanks. The infantry had followed the tank to the top of the hill, using steel for protection.

Within minutes we had reached a ridge where I could see several soldiers with no insignia or rank talking quietly and kneeling in foxholes. A soldier raised his arm and the jeep stopped. "Are you the replacement?" I nodded my head. "Private Sargent?" I nodded again. "I'm Lt. Goss, your platoon leader." He was a handsome officer, thin to the point of emaciation, with several days' growth on his face. "This is what's left of Company E." We walked to the foxholes set along a ridge facing a huge valley. "This is Bill Davidson, he'll tell you what to do." Bill was no blabbermouth, but he did offer some information. "We captured this hill yesterday behind a couple of tanks. My partner was killed and you're his replacement. I've been working on this hole all day; solid rock. Find some coral to build up our space above our hole. That black stuff is old lava." The improvised fort offered little protection. The sides were no more than two feet high, and the hole itself was nine feet long, just big enough for a six-foot soldier to stretch out in to rest when not on guard. There were ten foxholes rimming the hill to the right and about twenty bending to the left. Behind us were the mortars and machine gun, and behind them was what you might call headquarters.

My foxhole buddy continued, "We don't get too friendly. This outfit has been through Guadalcanal, Bougainville and Leyte. There are few left from the original Americal formed on New Caledonia from the National Guards of Chicago, North Dakota and Massachusetts. It rips you apart when you lose a buddy. We came ashore taking Cebu City on the 27th of March. Stay close to your hole. It's time to prepare for the night; two hours on and two hours off." That was my total training for combat on Cebu. At one-thirty, an explosion caved in the rock piled up around us. Davidson seemed calm, "Probably a grenade." I came to the conclusion that some combat-weary soldier had dropped or thrown it, which did nothing to bolster my confidence in the warriors around me. It was a "friendly fire accident."

On that first night in the foxhole, we came under intense rifle fire on our left. For fifteen minutes the assault continued. In the morning, a dozen bodies lay to the front of the foxholes. A Filipino officer surveyed the damage. Davidson and I approached the lifeless bodies wanting to know what dead Japanese looked like. The soldiers ignored the scene. They had been through it before.

A valley stretched out before us to another ridge; most of the time we stood guard and watched for activity on the further ridge. Each morning just before noon, a machine gun opened up on us. They described him as "Chow Time Charlie."

On the fourth day, we lolled under the tropical heat until Lt. Goss came by. "Sargent, you and Davidson come with me. We're going back to burn those huts we bypassed to prevent anyone from hiding in them to ambush us." Six of us in battle dress ranged out along the hill to raze and kill. I circled a thatched hut with my finger on the trigger. Two infants playing on wiry grass, alive with bugs and flies. An old man perched upon a stool, and flies sucked on his festered leg, distended like a log. In his eyes, the only fear I saw was the fear I would not shoot. Goss came around the hut with eyes so blue it made me shudder. "Elephantiasis," was all he said.

**ELEPHANTIASIS**

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*Harold R. Sargent*

**Down that lonely mountain on Cebu,  
We scouted out in combat gear  
To torch the native, bamboo huts,  
That perchance could shield a foe.**

**Cisco had his Zippo tucked,  
Ready to raze a few.  
We circled to the shaded side  
Where infants played in wiry grass,  
Flies buzzing around their heads.**

**An old man sat upon a stool,  
Whose leg protruded larger than his life;  
A fattened log, diseased and gross.  
I glanced into oceans of his eyes,  
To islands where I have never returned.**

**My M-1 rifle, inches from his face,  
Held him in casual jeopardy.  
His gaze of borrowed yesterdays  
Cast me in the image of a brute.**

**We left them there in safety and I  
Returned to the suburbs of my mind  
Where that naked fear still clings.  
My God! The fear! Behind his eyes  
The fear that perhaps I would not shoot.**

Days ran into each other. A sergeant came to our foxhole and said flatly, "Fall in. We're leaving this hill." On a beach next to the bay, we stopped and found a shady spot under a coconut tree, stretched out on the grass and slept an hour. Goss came along grinning. "Take all you clothes off except your boots." We stripped. "Form a single file and follow me." We marched along chortling, and tossed our soiled fatigues onto a pile that looked to be ten feet high. At the next station hundreds of new fatigues lay on the ground. I picked up what was close to my size and dressed again for battle. Two soldiers came with big drums of gasoline, poured all of it on the discarded GI issue, lighted it, and we cheered as the worn fatigues went up in a tower of flames.

Goss appeared again. "Check your rifle, ammunition, and water. We're moving out tomorrow morning." I made conversation with Scarduzzio, an Italian exactly my age from Philadelphia. His story intrigued me. Stories about "Polish" filled the air. "She's blond, the opposite of me. I love her. She's in my graduating class. Same church too. If I ever get back to Philadelphia I'm gonna marry her."

Just before we fell asleep, he leaned toward me.

"Sarge, you know we're slated for battle tomorrow."

"Sure. That's what I think."

"Are you scared?"

"No." I replied. "No bullet has been made with my name on it."

I had made up my mind that I would never succumb to fear. I meant to go home a hero – the Silver Star or the Congressional Medal. That was in my teenage mind. If I couldn't go home alive, at least I would go home a hero.

"You mean you don't think you're going to die?"

"Hell no!" I answered. At nineteen, I hadn't yet conceived that death was permanent. We were all a bunch of kids, less than 21.

"Sargent, I'm gonna be killed tomorrow, just as sure as the sun comes up. When I die, write my mother and tell her how it happened."

What could I say? "Go to sleep. Be ready for tomorrow. You'll probably marry "Polish" and have five kids."

"No," he added. "I'm gittin it tomorrow."

In the morning, from our location up to the summit there was nothing but devastation. Small trees had been shorn into small, ragged limbs stuck up from coral. We crawled foot by foot up the hill. Each of us had two canteens, one on each hip. Suffering from thirst, I reached for the canteen on my right hip. Empty! In a panic, I reached for the canteen on my left. Empty! I had committed the unforgivable. In an hour I began to feel weak and my buddies started to dance around my eyes. There was no way I would tell them that I had forgotten to fill my canteens, and for sure I wasn't going to ask for theirs. I inquired where I could find water. No one knew. I asked the sergeant. "It's back there somewhere." He pointed to a bombed out, devastated area to the rear. "It's not secure and you could be picked off by the snipers." I never told them, ever that I had not filled my canteens as ordered. Still, my decision to act right then created a reputation of heroic proportions that was to cling to me as long as I stayed with the Americal Division.

"I'll go and get some water!" I said quietly.

"Sure! I'm not ordering you to go back there. I don't even know where it is."

"I'll go! I'll find it!" It was that or die of dehydration.

"OK, but if you're goin, git some water for the rest of us. Take two long sticks and thread the chains over the rod, that way you can carry ten on each rod."

I looped the M1 over my shoulder which left my hands free to hold the rods and wormed my way back to the rear, each minute with more stars in my eyes. Walking toward the bay, a good 400 yards, I looked for Japanese wandering around the devastation of war. In a low gully there was something that looked like a dirty swamp. On the side of the swamp stood a contraption that had a long hose sticking into the warm, swamp water. That was the supply of chlorinated water for the whole company. Two huge bags of water hung from a support used to create drinking water.

I drank until my belly was so distended that I looked pregnant. Only then did I fill my two canteens, and after that filled the twenty canteens and threaded them back onto two poles. Looking over the desolate hillside, I decided to hide behind the water bags until my stomach adjusted. I lay safely under the contraption for at least five minutes enjoying the apparent safety at the location. Then, taking my good time, I inched up the slope where I sighted my squad under a



**132nd Regiment Soldiers on Cebu  
(US Army Photo – Harold Sargent)**

poncho stretched between four sticks they had found in the rubble. That device provided some shade from the relentless sun. Needless to say, I was welcomed heartily. In my brief journey, I had not seen one other person.

The following day, April 12, my squad came under intense mortar fire as we shuffled from one abandoned foxhole to another trying to find an easy way to attack the hill. It began to rain. Someone came along and said, "President Roosevelt is dead. Truman is now President." Grousing for a while, we decided that didn't change our situation any. We still had to take that hill ahead. I crawled into a foxhole with three inches of water and mud. Mortars landed all around. Lt. Goss loomed over me. "Scarduzzio has been killed with a knee mortar. It landed right on top of his helmet. Go up there with your buddies and carry him to the rear. We've got him wrapped in a poncho."

"I can't do it sir." He looked at me and understood. That's the only order I ever refused in this man's army. I sat there in the mud and thought of "Polish", Scarduzzio, and of his mother. Five minutes later, four men carried the loaded poncho past my hole. It sagged in the middle along the mud. They laid it out like cord wood along the others already laid out to our rear.

Scarduzzio's death caused a problem. Someone had to carry the BAR. At twenty-five pounds, some couldn't carry it and some wouldn't, even if they were to be court-martialed. Goss walked off a few yards, returned with the weapon and shoved it at me.

"Do you know how to use this weapon, Sargent?"

"Only what I learned in Basic." All I need to know is how to ram the cartridge in, aim, and pull the trigger."

"You're the biggest and strongest man in the platoon. It's yours." From the tone in his voice, I knew this was no request. "I'll bring you Scarduzzio's ammunition."

We moved up the scarred hill a few feet at a time. Howie Fiscus, from out of the hollers of Tennessee was in our platoon. Usually these soldiers from out of the hills were the best shots and best warriors we had. Howie was not one of them and should never have been drafted in the first place. He couldn't read or write so we had to read the "Dear John"

letter to him. As darkness came on, I found an abandoned foxhole. Howie stumbled over and announced that he was "afeered" and that he had been told to get in the same hole with me. I knew that was no happenstance.

After midnight, the Japanese rolled out their howitzers and began firing straight down on us. Every fourth shell was a tracer. Howie screamed and bawled like a baby. "I'm gonna get it," he blubbered. "Can't take it Sarge, it's the tracers." I yanked him down. "If you lay flat they can't hit you." Every once in a while he jumped up, but the shells missed him.

The scarred battlefield indicated that other units of the 132nd had fought over the same territory. Foxholes looked like they had been used several times before. It could be that we now had no more than the reserve. We continued to advance until we came to an elaborate system of trenches about five feet deep that the Japanese had built over the last several months. An officer, with a cloth eagle on his shoulders, stalked up through the trench maze with binoculars in his fist. After surveying the front, he lowered his binoculars and asked, "Have you men seen any life on that hill?" We all agreed we hadn't. He grunted, "That's what I figure." With that he didn't look either way and walked down the entrenchment.

One of the older veterans said, "That was Colonel Franco, commander of our regiment. He's been with the outfit since it was formed on New Caledonia." A warrior led our regiment.

"Sargent", someone yelled, "Come out here and look at this." As many as twenty dead Japanese lay in various positions in khaki uniforms. Heat had swollen their bodies until their flesh stretched through their tunics. The awful stench of decaying flesh left an odd, sweet aroma which could be described as unique. With my bayonet, I opened a soldier's tunic and a photo of his wife and children popped out.

As dusk approached, Lt. Goss came to our squad. "Sargent after dark I'm sending you and two other soldiers beyond our position." He pointed to a row of old foxholes. "Take your BAR and get in that one on the right. Olmstead and Oporto will anchor you on the left." My previous dumb heroics had caught up with me. Around nine o'clock, Goss threw his arm forward and the three of us crawled to our designated positions which were about 15 feet apart. I sat alone with my BAR and did not move. I figured total stillness would be my best defense.

Stones began to rain in on me. "Sarge! Wake Up!" I had fooled them. Picking up the biggest rock I could find, I heaved it in their foxhole. "Shut up, you idiots. You're giving our position away." It was quiet the rest of the night.

The next morning the company commander, Captain Stewart, and Lt. Goss, our platoon leader, were in a huddle. A single file of twenty men formed and started up the hill. Apparently, Company E had been given the honor of being the first to reach the peak. We looked down on the land we had secured over the last three days. When the enemy was on the hill, they could see our every move, even those of us going to the slit trench.



*To be Continued*

## Jungle Hammocks

By Leonard M. Owczarzak  
746th AAA Gun Battalion

I came across an ad for jungle hammocks from a war surplus catalogue and the picture brought back a lot of memories.



We landed with the Marines in Bougainville on December 4, 1943, a few weeks before the Americal came in. We finally got the LST unloaded about 4:30 in the afternoon and the LST officer wanted to get the hell out “because the Jap Air Force from Rabaul came over about 5 or 6 O’clock”.

The engineers had made a new road through the jungle for a couple of miles from the beach. We had a lot of heavy equipment with our 90MM guns, machine guns and radar sets. We just went up the road a mile or so and went off the road to park and camp for the night. We hacked our way into the jungle. We had been issued these jungle hammocks on Guadalcanal so we could keep dry until our tents came in.

While we were hacking away trying to find trees to tie our hammocks to, a Marine patrol was passing by on the road. The Marine in charge of the patrol came into the clearing asking, “What the hell are you doing?” We told him we were setting up for the night. He said, “Are you crazy? Those hammocks are death traps! We don’t use them anymore after the Japs snuck into our area, put their arms around the guys in the hammocks and stabbed them to death because when you’re in the hammock you are like a bug in the rug” We stopped using them right then!

## The Luck of the Draw

By Bill Chisholm  
B/221 Artillery Battalion

By the end of spring, 1944 “The Second Battle of Bougainville”, the Marines had successfully fought the “first”, was, for all intents and purposes, over.

During the month of March, we – the Americal Division along with the 37th Division – repulsed numerous maniacal Bonsai attacks on our Empress Augustus Bay perimeter. Their avowed intent was – I paraphrase – “To avenge their mortification since Guadalcanal” and drive us into the sea.



Their efforts were, to say the least, a miserable failure. Literally thousands of them were annihilated by our overwhelming fire power. Their bodies were piled up like cord wood before our heavily barbed wire defensive positions. (Later, on one of the bodies was found a precisely diagramed map of the exact locations where ceremonies would be conducted to accept our surrender!).

The survivors – all that remained of the infamous Japanese 6th Division, notorious for their participation in the “Rape of Nanking” – retreated to the islands interior where, for the most part, they were effectively contained during the balance of the campaign.

Now, “fast forwarding” to the relative quiet if not completely serene “R&R” months, I found myself relaxing with other members of our gun crew in our tent. I was comfortably inclined on my cot reading one of those “pocket books” and allowing the tropical breezes wafting through our canvas shelter to lull me into a complete state of inertia.

All of a sudden, my reverie was abruptly interrupted by the appearance, seemingly out of nowhere, of a non-com I didn’t know from Adam. He had a not too subtle sadistic gleam in his eyes and was fanning a deck of cards. He then, without preamble, ordered each of us to “pick a card.”

While not too sure of just what was transpiring, we each, albeit most reluctantly, drew a card. Of course with my luck, I drew a low card, a two of hearts. The next thing I knew I was told I would accompany two other “low card” companions from our battery to “Dog Block”, an artillery observation post and infantry defense position located on one of the hills fronting our perimeter. Our mission: carry “fresh” radios up to Dog Block and exchange them for “dead” ones.

My two “low card” companions and I then “saddled up” with the radios and directed to follow a certain path until we reached a river. We would then ford the river and ascend the hill beyond, leading to Dog Block. The non-com advised it was essential that we accomplish the mission during day light hours before the river crested. If such a tidal situation occurred, we would be stranded for the night on the far side of the river, making us precariously vulnerable to infiltrating patrols. This was not good news, knowing the enemy’s penchant for inflicting horrifically unspeakable atrocities. After all, these would be remnants of the previously mentioned Japanese 6th Division.

With this, to say the least, ominous admonition, my two companions and I proceeded to fulfill our mission. “Companions” is not really the correct term for these two guys. In retrospect they were a casting directors dream come true for the movie “Deliverance”; they were both rangy, raw-boned Appalachian country types. The “vibes” were definitely not good. Neither of them said a word to me, nor I to them. They just stared at me with what can only be described as contemptuous jaundiced eyes. They obviously had nothing but disdain for this citified-looking skinny soldier!

We followed the path to the river – I believe it was the Laruma or one of its tributaries – and were confronted with

a stream already in a percolating state. There was a rope strung across to enable “safe” fording – just like the ones I used to see in those “jungle” movies when I was a kid in the 20’s and 30’s.

I grasped the rope and commenced fording the stream, albeit apprehensively, because of the under currents swirling aggressively around my legs. When I reached the far side, I immediately became aware my Appalachian pals were no longer in sight! Their mountain-seasoned legs were already carrying them well on the way to Dog Block!

Well, I couldn’t help but feel deserted. I was all alone and confronted with an almost perpendicular hill. It was heavily forested with dense brush and thickets, real jungle-like terrain. I began the climb having to literally hoist myself upwards by grasping vines and branches. This was a real effort for a non-athlete such as myself and certainly worse than any Army obstacle course I had ever experienced. In addition, I had to contend with a cumbersome radio and a carbine on my back!

Finally, I don’t know how, I reached the top of the hill. I thought my ordeal as over. No such luck. Before me was an almost barren plateau leading to yet another hill! It was also practically perpendicular with the same jungle-like terrain. Somehow I managed to negotiate the steep incline, but when I reached my Dog Block destination my strength was completely spent. I have never before or since experienced such a grueling physical ordeal! (I knew I had reached Dog Block because I saw artillery observers “scoping” the countryside and the infantry on alert in their dugouts just below the crest of the hill).

At first glance there was no sign of my “no man left behind” Appalachian buddies. And then I saw them; they were reclining in a shady area, laughing and joking and having a good ‘ol time. They didn’t appear to have a care in the world. Indeed, the hill climbing experience for these mountain bred guys was obviously a piece of cake!

Well, at that point in time I couldn’t have cared less. I was totally and completely exhausted. I just unsaddled my gear, radio and carbine and collapsed on the ground, dead to the world around me! I instantly fell asleep. However, my “nap” was short lived. I was nudged awake and told that we had to get moving “pronto!”

We were saddled up with the “old” radios and began our descent back to home base. True to form, my two buddies almost immediately disappeared from sight as they literally scrambled down the hills toward the river. I couldn’t help but marvel at their prowl ness. They would have certainly been excellent candidates for one of the Army’s elite Ranger units!

I didn’t have the strength left in me to walk, let alone “scramble”. So I just sat down on my haunches and commenced sliding down the hill, using the jungle growth as breaks for my precipitous descent. While my debilitated physical condition made the descent far more arduous for me than the ascent, I somehow reached the bottom and finally, the river’s bank.

It was just about dusk and the river was no more “percolating”. It was now a raging torrent with all sorts of debris – branches and other types of flotsam – a swirling cascade like a furious downstream flow. It was indeed a foreboding sight! Considering the river’s state of total turmoil, I began to wonder if my “buddies” had actually made it across. I was praying that they had, dismissing all my previous negative thoughts about them.

While I was at first inclined to spend the night on the far bank and cross in the morning, when the tidal activity had subsided, I remembered the non-com’s admonition about the vital importance of crossing before dusk. My mind conjured up images of wild-eyed, machete-wielding Japanese infiltrators intent on staking me to the ground and, as was their wont, slowly hacking me into pieces! Well, as far as I was concerned that was not going to happen. I opted to cross then and there!

I grasped the spanning rope and proceeded to cross, but almost as soon as I began a powerful undercurrent turned me upside down and completely submerged me – radio, carbine and all! I still remember the pressure of the rushing currents assailing my ear drums and nostrils! I was certain I was going to drown! I held on to that spanning rope for dear life! If I would have lost my grip, I would have most certainly swept down stream to my demise!

Miracle of miracles! Another powerful current turned me right side up! And I was able – God only knows how – to muster enough strength to complete the crossing. Once on shore I literally staggered, like a man on a drunken binge, down the path leading to our battery area. I must have been quite a sight. I was shivering, my helmet was askew and, my fatigues were soaked and caked with mud. But my radio and my carbine were still slung on my back, all the worse for wear, but still in salvageable condition!

It was dark when I arrived at the battery area. Our First Sergeant had apparently been waiting for me (it was hard for me to tell if his wait was based on a concern for my safety or of he was worried about having to spend his time writing a voluminous MIA report).

At first he didn’t say a word to me, but his eyes said in no uncertain terms, “where the hell have you been?” I told him I was hungry. He said “the mess hall is closed”. He then turned on his heels and disappeared into the night.

While I never had further contact with my erstwhile companions, I was very much relieved to learn later that they indeed successfully forded the river before it had crested and that they were comfortably ensconced in their cots by the time I staggered back into the battery.



*One Last Campaign for  
the Old Guard!*

**MUSEUM**

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## The Listening Post

Dennis Hugues  
(5th/46th -198th LIB)

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"Huey!"

"Yo, L.T. "

"You got listening post"

"F\_kin' A, you sure it's my turn again?"

"Pretty sure, why...what's the matter?" Lt. Kuhn said with a shit eatin grin.

That grin told me all I needed to know. "Ain't no moon tonight, L.T. Like you didn't know?" We were operating off of LZ Ann, a Company-size LZ in the middle of Indian country.

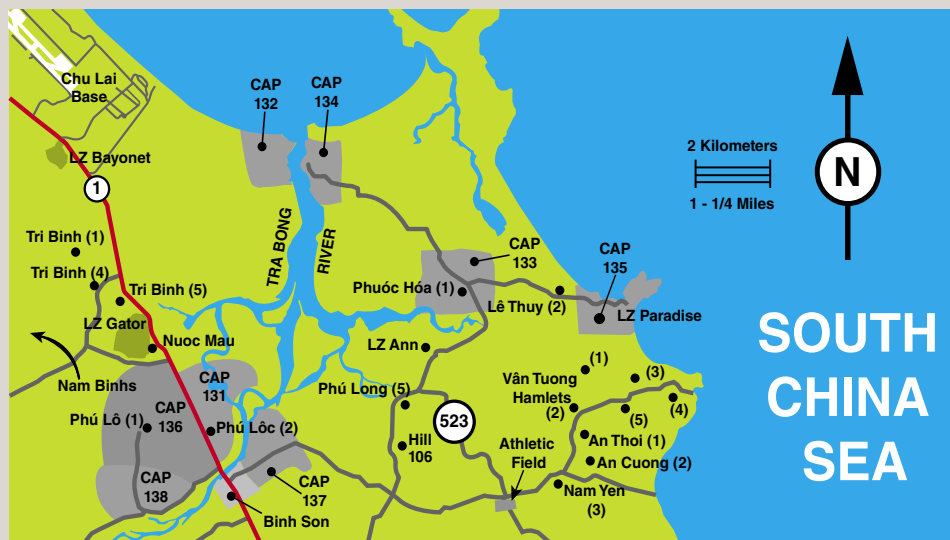
One thing you learned real quickly here were the phases of the moon. You learned it quick or you never learned it at all if you get my drift. A full moon's a grunt's best friend. It's like broad daylight, and Charley mostly stays home. No moon's another story. Charley moves like an Indian and things can get pretty hairy in the boonies on those nights. You could never forget that Charley had home field advantage.

"That's why I'm putting my two best men out there, you and DeMott; our lives are in your hands, I can't think of anyone in the entire battalion better suited for the job "LT was laying it on thick. I was experiencing Deja Moo... the feeling that I had heard this Bull before.

"Your life is in our ears is more like it ", I said sarcastically. " I'll get DeMott, we'll find a good spot to dig in and let you guys know where we are."

"Roger that "said L.T.

I found Terry DeMott sitting under the shade of a lean-to that he put together with a poncho liner and a couple of sticks. He was entertaining a couple of replacements with one of his favorite stories. It goes like this... We had just come in from the field after four weeks. We were tired, dirty; beat up from booby traps, snipers, mine fields and the occasional fire fight. Half of us had come back earlier.... we were what was left if you get my meaning. Anyway, we were supposed



to be coming back to our company rear on the battalion's base, LZ Gator for a little breather. Just for a couple of days, replace missing gear maybe get a shower and then back out to the bush. Well, the first thing that happens is this L.T. grabs Terry and me and wants us to burn shit. You heard me right.... The "Out Houses" had a cut-in-half 55 gal. Drum sitting under a cut-out "toilet seat". The procedure was to drag the drum out, replace it with an empty and burn the shit that was in the loaded one. You mixed diesel fuel into the piss and shit, stirred it with a broom handle and cooked the mess while you baked under the Southeast Asian sun...like it wasn't hot enough. Never mind the smell. Well, Terry, he looks Lt. REMF right in the eye and tells him there ain't no way on Gods green earth that he is going to burn shit...not after spending a month beating the odds in the field. He told him he could send him back out but he couldn't get him to burn shit. He turned and walked away leaving Lt. REMF staring dumbfounded at his back... I thought Terry's argument made a lot of sense and took his side... I left too....end of story.

The new guys were equally impressed and vowed that if they were lucky enough to get out of the field alive, they wouldn't burn shit either. I'm pretty sure that no one from our platoon ever burned shit again..... Terry is a pretty persuasive guy.

"DeMott ", I said "We're on listening post."

"So I heard" said Terry. Damn...he

did have good ears!

"Get Migacz to go, I'm on a roll here "he continued.

"John's been on point all day, he deserves a break", I replied.

John Migacz would walk point all day and not complain but he wasn't dumb enough to spend all night in a listening post unless you dragged him there at gun point, and nobody was gonna' try that; after all John was armed too... I thought it best not to mention this to Terry; he had a bad enough attitude as it was.

"Keep your heads down", Terry warned the new guys, as he got up and we went out to find a good spot to spend the night.

"Here's a good spot "said DeMott.

"Works for me ", I said, as I unfolded my entrenching tool.

"Very funny "said Lt. Kuhn, "What? You figure I'll be nice and safe with the listening post right beside my command center? "

"Actually, I figured that you'd be scared shitless and stay awake all night... and me and Huey can crash till sun up" said DeMott. Now you know why I liked this guy so much.

Terry's motto was "never share a fox hole with someone braver than you ". We were both determined to stay alive. We weren't about to take any unnecessary risks. However our L.T. pulled rank on us and made us move the listening post to a position that he claimed made more sense. Hey, maybe he knew what he was talking about,

after all we were barely nineteen and he was almost twenty... plus he had six months of OCS.

Well, here we were. We each dug a hole about five feet from each other. That way if Charley stumbled onto one of us we had some back up. I had some twine tied around my left wrist and the other was tied to Terry's wrist; A silent communication device.

I was in that semi-conscious state that passes for sleep in the boonies, when I felt a slight tug on the twine. Instantly alert I strained my ears. Nothing! Couldn't see anything of course, it was pitch dark, no moon remember? I quickly surmised that Terry was telling me it was my turn to be alert and his turn to be semi conscious. I gave a slight tug back to let him know I got the message.

It was really dark, not even a star could be seen. It was hot and still and about 0330 I think, I was seeing things that most likely weren't there. Man I hated this shit. Twenty or so guys behind us trying to get some rest and Charley knowing we were around and likely looking for us. And me... crouching in a hole in the ground, the early warning system. I'm getting really edgy; a heightened state of alert can't be maintained indefinitely. It takes a toll. Someone once said that WWII was long periods of boredom punctuated with periods of sheer terror. Well let me tell you, for the grunt in Viet Nam, life was constant apprehension punctuated by frequent periods of sheer terror. And, if you can f\_\_king believe it, we actually got used to it! I hope God has a special place for the Infantrymen of this world. How's that poem go? "And when I get to heaven...To Saint Peter I will tell...Just another Grunt reporting sir... I've done my time in Hell"

It was creeping up on 0345 and I heard something. Oh shit! did I really hear that? It sounded like a foot step. Was it my imagination? As I strained my senses I heard it again. Oh f\_\_k! Not my imagination, the real thing, and not far away by the sound of it. What should I do? I don't want to make any noise that would give away my position. Maybe Charley will walk right by. It happened one time before.

We were on an ambush. We were hiding in the undergrowth beside a trail that was heavily traveled. We heard Charley approaching and held our collective breath. But Charley wasn't on the trail right in front of us. He was on a newer, less noticeable trail right behind us. We all knew instinctively that to try and turn around and redirect our field of fire would create a suicidal situation. So we just kept on holding our collective breath and let Charley walk on by. No harm, no foul... Next time Charley.

But I knew that I couldn't let whoever was out there stumble onto us. I had taken a hand grenade out the instant I heard the noise and told myself that if I heard it again I would pull the pin. So here I am with the pin in one hand and a live grenade in the other. I heard another footstep and threw the grenade in the direction of the noise.

Now, if you've been paying attention you know what happens next... Right! All hell breaks loose from the perimeter behind us. I can't communicate with Terry, too much noise and like me he is as deep in his hole as he can get. We aren't about to raise our heads above ground level...all that hell that is breaking loose is going right over our heads

I know Terry is doing what I am doing.....lying on his back.... his M16 on full rock an' roll..... pointing up..... ready to waste anyone who pokes his head in.

The guys in the perimeter finally decide it's time to stop shooting and start asking questions. Terry and I both have questions too. I have a little more information than he does but our basic concern is the same .... Who the f\_\_k is out there!

We aren't about to give our position away until we know we're safe, so we aren't answering the guys calling to us to see if we are all right. Everything is happening at once now....Terry and I are both cautiously raising our heads up to have a look-see..... as if we could see in the pitch dark.....however, as I start to peer over the top of my hole I actually do see something; four tiny white paws. Damn.... it's Bitch! And she comes over and starts licking my face.

Bitch is a mutt that hangs out with this Marine CAP team, not the one that trained us, another one. Even though we're Army, we occasionally operate with these guys and Bitch knows me well. Stupid dog is just like the Marines she pals around with, doesn't have enough sense to stay in her own AO.

We had a full pitched fire fight one time with this same CAP team. No shit... we start to saddle up one morning after cleaning up our RON (Remain-Over-Night) on top of a hill and we come under fire. We can see these idiots running around in the valley below us and the only reason no one got killed is they were out of range of accurate small arms fire. It wasn't until we called artillery in on each other that things got sorted out. Thank God we both called the same Battery. And I thank him again that whoever was in charge realized what was going on. Turns out these dumb F\_\_ker's were in the wrong AO. Bitch should find some smarter friends. I mean who the hell attacks a hill from an open valley? Our L.T. was so pissed he contemplated not calling off the artillery strike... something about the Army being a lot safer without the Marines to contend with. (On the other hand maybe we were in the wrong AO; our LT wasn't the best map reader in the world...however he swears by the first version.)

So...here's the situation. I'm laughing and marveling that Bitch survived everything we threw at her. I'm filling Terry in on what happened and listening to the guys in the perimeter speculating about what went down. Because we weren't responding they decided that Charley got us. Not all that unreasonable an assumption. As we hastened to tell them that the reports of our demise were slightly exaggerated I became aware that Danny Powell was moved to tears by the thought of my death. And now he was just as emotional at the sight of my resurrection. I was deeply touched by this, since I only knew Powell as one of the guys in our platoon and we weren't really what you would call close friends. Of course we now became very close... I should have known better.



## Nose to the Ground

Jim Pene, 5<sup>th</sup>/46<sup>th</sup>, 198<sup>th</sup> LIB

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Mines are expedient. No one has to be nearby to detonate them if they're armed properly. They can be command detonated by a hidden guerrilla for maximum benefit, so to speak. Properly designed they'll fly upward from under the earth and explode at chest height. If large enough they're mass killers. Small ones shatter feet and remove from action the casualty and those that have to transport him. They can rip asunder the main victims but those nearby physically unharmed are crippled in another way. Survivors are dealt severe psychic trauma. They're weapons of terror. This I know all too well.

All Alpha soldiers wear one dog tag dangling around the neck and the other fastened to a bootlace in the hopes of identification of our remains should an explosive encounter of any kind occur. Gould is the FNG. He's pleasant and seems easy going. He should fit into 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon fairly well. He's watching the disarming of a mine and he asks all the right questions. He's naturally curious about how to avoid such devices. I'm more than happy to divulge my personal rules for avoiding bad encounters. So I relay the rules. I hope they will serve him well.

Walk in the middle of the trail. Don't step near the edge. If you must step off the trail take a big step. Don't step on anything in the trail, don't move it, kick it, or disturb it in any fashion. When you come to hedgerow opening don't step into the center of it. Be especially cautious where trails cross one another.

Hueys ferried us to a small hilltop with knee high grass. Out we spring from the helicopters and circle around to form our perimeter. To the south there is action occurring. A helicopter has engaged the enemy and has them moving into a wooded area. Our platoon will move out, establish a blocking force, and engage them as they emerge.

The trails are narrow and crowded mostly by grass, but other foliage as well. We walk in the middle. Near the edge of the wood line we get on line.



Photo taken before mine incident; Doc Brannon standing second from left; Jim Pene standing far right with cigarette (Photo: Jim Pene)

The helicopters are firing. Rockets explode. Then all goes quiet. The VC has run into the hamlet of Nghiem Quang for safety. There they stay secure in the knowledge that the ville won't be fired upon unless they engage us. We will move in to get them.

Several pathways wind their way to where we need to go. A few of us have to be on the same avenue of approach due to the terrain. Woven grass hooch's can now be seen. They are typical in the countryside and probably contain earthen bunkers. The enemy can also seek shelter in these. It will be a dangerous chore to find them.

I walk carefully in the center of the trail. It's difficult to do this and keep an eye on the hooch's as we approach. I don't want to get shot, and I don't want to get maimed by a mine. But long ago, I decided I would rather be shot square in the face than lose a limb. Following on the trail as is Gould. He's carrying a M79 grenade launcher. Behind him is Ardoin. I've shared much with him and trust him without any reservations. We all wear flak jackets and steel helmets. Slung across my back is a LAW. I'm hoping the armor-piercing rocket will come in handy if we meet up with VC in bunkers.

Three trails meet in a small opening just outside the village. I make my choice and step through the junction. Peck is up ahead of me on the winding

trail. We're near the entrance to the ville. Then a giant clapped his hands around my whole body and my eardrums collapsed against each other. Concussive force thudded clear through to the marrow of my breast. The blast propelled me, with a stumbling gait, toward Peck. I remained erect and watched as Peck kept his footing, too. Completely surprised I turned and knew what had just happened. I just didn't know right away whom it happened to. Through the thinning cloud I could see Ardoin far back on the trail. He was erect and clasping his hands over his eyes. Terrified he was blinded by the blast I called out to him.

"Ardoin!" He didn't move.

"Ardoin! Are you alright?"

Slowly he lowered his hands and looked in front of himself and realized the miracle of safety just given him. "Yeah." He breathed in wonderment. Ardoin and I both peered at the trail and could make out the outline of Gould. He was barely discernible with the dirt and dust upon his body, I wasn't sure he was alive. Then his head moved. I could see that at least his right leg was gone. Simultaneously Ardoin and I started shouting in shrill voices.

"Medic! Medic!" It came together for me. Gould lay right at the trail junction. He'd tripped a mine. I'd just walked through there myself. Doc Brannon came trotting back along the