

## **MAY 5, 1968 AT THE BATTLE OF AN BAO**

By Wendell Barnes

In May 1968 I was the Squad Leader of the 1st Squad, 1st Platoon, A Company, 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 50th Infantry. I traveled to Vietnam with the unit in 1967 and saw my share of the fighting in the months between September and May. By May 5th, 1968, most of the men who had sailed across the Pacific with me were no longer with A Company. Some died in fire fights, others were seriously wounded and sent to the States, and some soldiers were traded with other units to make sure that DEROS dates were staggered. During my tour in-country I saw and did a lot, but my worst experience was during the Battle of An Bao.

As I recall, it was Sunday morning and we were weary. During the previous weeks it seemed like the company and my platoon had been constantly on the move. Each new mission followed the previous task so closely that they merged into a continuous operation searching for and fighting the enemy. By that morning both the men and the tracks were showing serious signs of overwork. I remember that I felt that it was important to give my rifle a thorough cleaning, but I also felt that it was equally important to get some rest. So the rifle got a quick cleaning and a good oiling and I got a little rest before it all began.

When the order came down to get ready to move out, most of us assumed that it was just another routine mission. No one gave me any useful information about the size of the enemy force. In fact, many of us who went out of LZ Uplift that morning thought that it might be just another hurried-up event that didn't make contact with the enemy. In spite of the lack of details, we just mounted up and set off for the objective. According to my watch we arrived at the location about ten minutes before noon.

As our Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) approached the area where someone reported enemy activity earlier that day, we spotted about a dozen men armed with rifles and pursued them for a short distance. Then we set up facing the direction that the enemy soldiers had run. An officer ordered us to send out a listening post, so I took two men and established the LP about 75 yards in front of the tracks. Sgt. Harbison and another soldier, a nice, likeable young private whose name has faded from my memory, sat with me in the brush. We settled in and began opening C-rations because it was lunchtime. Then while we started eating, the battle began.

To my ears the sound of the enemy opening up was like someone had set off ten thousand firecrackers. The rounds were zinging past us and we could tell that there were enemy soldiers very close, hidden in the small growth 20 to 30 feet in front of our LP. There was no doubt in my mind that the three of us were heavily outnumbered and very soon those NVA would be overrunning our position.

Knowing that we could not hope to stop the group in front of us, I told the other two guys that one-by-one we would have to run back to the APCs. There, we could make a stand where we would have a better chance. Harbison said: "I'm not going to stand up in that hail of bullets." The private just looked at me with fear in his eyes. I knew that I would have to be the first to go and told them to cover me as I took off for the nearest APC.

They laid down a good base of fire and I made it back to the track, which had already been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. I got down behind a rice dike that ran a few feet behind the track. Then I hollered for Sgt. Harbison and the private to come back to the APC while I laid down some covering fire for them.

Harbison made it without being hit, but he did not have a rifle. Sgt. Phil Davis, a man who traveled to Vietnam at the same time I did, made his way to where I was near the APC about three minutes after the shooting started. He did not have a rifle either. After Sgt. Davis joined me, I laid down some covering fire and told the Private to leave our LP site and run back to the track. He made it about halfway when it looked like a bullet hit him in the leg. He dropped his rifle and made his way back to where the three of us were sheltering behind the dike. Of the four of us, I was the only one with a rifle.

Less than a minute after the private made it to our position the enemy began to pour in on us. I saw one NVA point his rifle at us, and I swung my rifle in his direction, preparing to fire. When I had him "dead on" I pulled the trigger, but the rifle wouldn't shoot. I had used two magazines of ammo firing on full automatic covering Harbison and the Private as they returned to the APC.

When I looked for the cause of the problem, I found, to my horror, that the last cartridge had not properly ejected. I frantically cleared my rifle, expecting to be riddled with bullets any second. Somehow, none of us were hit by the bullets that came in our direction. I don't know why he failed to kill us, but as soon as I could I shot him, hitting him several times before he fell. As I turned my head looking for more enemy in our vicinity I saw an APC escaping. Then I saw two NVA soldiers run up and squat behind a bush to take aim at the vehicle with an RPG. After I emptied my magazine shooting at them, they disappeared. It's likely that I hit both of them. The APC continued its escape from the kill zone without being hit.

Next, I saw Lt. Webb running between me and the two enemy soldiers that I had just shot. I believe that it was his voice hollering at us, ordering us to retreat. I told the three men with me to come along and go back toward the remaining tracks and men. Sgt. Davis said: "I can't afford to run because I don't have a gun." In all the years since that battle those very words have remained embedded clearly in my memory. Sgt. Davis had the same opportunity as the rest of us. He was told to retreat by one of our officers. He was not "cut off" at that time, and could have run back with the rest of us. Instead, he made a choice to stay behind and play dead.

The enemy ran past Sgt. Davis, pursuing the rest of us, who were then running for our lives. After they passed his prone body, he took a rifle from the NVA that I shot and sprayed the moaning, wounded man with a burst, killing him. He made his escape by walking along the creek back to LZ Uplift. I did not see him again after we left him and made our dash for life until I returned to our base camp the next day. It was then that Sgt. Davis showed me the rifle that he had taken from the NVA that I had killed.

In our retreat we ran to our right, toward the wood line at the end of the rice paddy dike. When I looked back there were several enemy soldiers behind us. There were also some Americans trying their best to help others who were wounded or hurt. One situation stands out in my memory.

Donald Lowe, the driver of our APC, was hit in the head and chest by a number of fragments when an RPG hit the front of the vehicle. SP4 Cally risked his own life trying to help Lowe escape, but the driver was already dying. I wanted to go back and help Cally, but I felt that returning to the track would mean certain death for me. Instead, I tried to shoot at the enemy to keep them at bay, but it was so hot and humid that day that the sweat ran into my eyes making it hard to see. I had thrown my canteen away so that I could move better and only had my M-16 with about 14 magazines and two grenades as we continued running for the wood line.

We were almost to the edge of the trees when a hail of bullets forced us to take cover behind the rice paddy dike. The enemy fire was so heavy that we had no other choice. When we took cover, Sgt. Harbison took up a position about three or four feet to my left, and Lt. Webb was about the same distance away on my right. I was shooting at the enemy soldiers who were still chasing the few Americans who were just taking cover.

The position behind the dike left our rear exposed, and bullets started tearing up the ground all around us. Lt. Webb said: "Some of you guard the rear" and I swung around to shoot at the enemy soldiers who were behind us as bullets hit the dike right in front of the three of us. I looked around to see who was guarding which direction and, remembering that the two men next to me did not have rifles, I hollered: "Does anybody have a rifle not in use?" Lt. Webb passed one to me and Sgt. Harbison said: "Let me have it." Harbison took the rifle and immediately started firing at the enemy to our front. I shot at one shooting at us from the rear and I think I hit him. Then I noticed that Lt. Webb wasn't talking on the radio any more so I looked in his direction. He had a hole in his temple and there was blood oozing out. Then, I heard a gurgling sound to my left, and looked in that direction. I saw Harbison lying there with a bullet hole in the center of his back, near the heart, and blood was coming from his mouth. At this point I was beginning to worry about having enough ammunition. Even so, when I saw several NVA in the paddy behind us walking toward the opposite wood line, I felt that I needed to use one more magazine on full automatic.

A Staff Sergeant hollered to me, ordering me to bring Lt. Webb's radio to his position. I took the radio and crawled to the sergeant's side. When I got there I realized that he had a much better view of the rear and more protection to the front, so I stayed near the radio. While I was next to the Staff Sergeant I began using my remaining bullets more sparingly. Each shot was carefully aimed at a good target, but rounds were still going fast because there were so many enemy soldiers all around our position. By the time I heard the roar of C Company's APCs I was down to five rounds of rifle ammunition and one grenade!

The relief force from C Company arrived just in time. Not long after they reached our position, some tanks from the 69th Armor joined in the battle. When I looked at my watch, I saw that it was 2:00 in the afternoon. We had been fighting for over two hours before C Company's tracks approached our position. The additional APCs and the tanks gave us a chance to recover and reassemble what was left of those who were present when the battle began. After what seemed to be a long time we were able to gather the wounded and load them into serviceable APCs and move back from the kill zone. The tanks helped cover our movement. The remnants of our group, C Company and the tanks moved a couple hundred yards back toward the way we came. Then we hit an area where the rice paddies were flooded and tanks got stuck in the mud.

We formed a perimeter around the tanks. The perimeter was the proper military thing to do in the situation, but for me and the rest of the soldiers who had fought the NVA for more than two hours without relief, it was a difficult time. We had seen that the enemy had a very large number of troops. Comparing their force to the number of Americans on the battlefield was troubling. The thought of spending the night surrounded by a determined enemy force kept us alert, even in our exhausted condition. Our officers exercised their authority well that night. They encouraged us to maintain a good watch on the perimeter, reminding us to stay alert and report any sign of movement. Staying awake was hard because we were tired when we left LZ Uplift and exhausted after hours of fighting. We stayed awake as well as we could, and it was a good thing that we did.

Shortly after I stood down from manning an M-60 Machine Gun at around 3:00 in the morning, the soldier who took my place was shot in the chest. I saw two NVA run out of the wood line about 70 feet away and shot at them. I may have hit both, because I didn't see any sign of them again. Someone said: "Maintain the perimeter." My first thought was: Great, here I am on the wood line side of the perimeter and we all know that the woods are the best place for the enemy to use to launch their attack. I moved behind an APC and was prepared for the enemy to swarm out of the woods, but the attack came across the paddies instead. Only a few NVA approached from the wood line and most of those died quickly. The tanks took several hits, but kept firing, except one that went silent. Then the .50 caliber machine gun on the tank resumed firing while the main gun remained silent. That particular tank took at least six hits that night, but the .50 resumed firing shortly after each RPG impact. One RPG missed the tank and landed so close to me that it knocked me out. I didn't even hear the sound of the explosion. Eventually the enemy broke off the attack and the battle wound down.

The next morning the tankers hollered for some help getting the men out of the vehicle. They wrapped the crew in ponchos and needed help lifting the bodies out. I ran over to help and thought that I was helping recover SP/4 Cally's remains. He had volunteered to man the .50 on the tank and helped prevent us from being overrun during the night fighting. The poncho sank in and blood ran out as I thought about Cally's valiant efforts. After the body was out I heard a voice behind me say: "Hey Wendell, how are you doing?" When I turned, there was Cally. He had made it through the night and was OK!

I know that some people don't put much faith in this kind of thing, but SP/4 Cally was a Christian as well as a soldier. His faith had played a part in his survival. I also had a relationship with Christ and a mother who felt a need to pray for me all day long and during the night of May 5-6. I say this because I believe that a miracle allowed Cally and I to live through the battle. In addition, I have a special right to say this because I was a soldier fighting for our freedom to do so.

May God bless all my fellow soldiers.

Sergeant Wendell Barnes, Squad Leader during the Battle of An Bao



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