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The Death of Lieutenant Pershing

Forty-three years ago, I was a PFC, Light Weapons Infantryman (11B2P) in A Company, 1/502 Infantry Battalion, 101st Airborne Division then Commanded by Captain Terrance Spiegelberg who had replaced the late Captain Joseph Holland (KIA, 2/1/68). I had joined the division in October 1967 and had deployed with the 2nd Brigade to the Republic of South Vietnam in December of that year. I started out in the 2nd platoon but over the course of the ten months, with the division in country, I eventually ended up in all four platoons to include the mortar platoon. Anyone who has ever been a foster child can tell you that getting bounced around from home to home is not a particularly good feeling, but it does and can provide dividends. For example, you get to know and serve with a lot more people; Perhaps more like a minor military dependent than an unwanted, foster child. I guess you could say, I was expendable but hey, it's a tough life. When I think back to those adrenalin fused days in the field under Spiegelberg, I can still see him and his Radio Operator (RTO), the ungodly, brash, Sp4 Jesse George battling for control of the company to the point of almost coming to blows. I once heard George respond to a Spiegelberg threat by telling him, "IF you thought you could kick my "expletive," you'd have done it a long time ago so let's try to reason this out like grown men (SMILE)." Although you're talking about an officer and a subordinate in a relationship brimming with insubordinate overtones, these guys were extremely devoted to each other. Military humor being what it is, George was often teased about being Spiegelberg's illegitimate son, I know with a certainty that there's nothing one wouldn't have done for the other in life.

In February of 1968 I was reassigned from the 2nd Platoon to the 1st Platoon, commanded by Lt. Richard Pershing who was most ably supported by legendary SSGT Jorge Otero Barreto, often called and recognized as the most decorated soldier of the Vietnam War (see Wikipedia). Attention is further directed to the documentary "Brave Lords" concerning the same. If my memory has not failed me, I believe we were operating from a hardscrabble, firebase called Landing Zone (LZ) Jane. This was during the height of the Tet Offensive and the monsoons; we were scared, cold and wet all of the time (not necessarily in that order). Hunger was another whole issue unto itself. There was another treatment done on this story which I considered woefully inaccurate, it is my desire to the best of my ability to set the record straight.

In the early morning hours of February 16, 1968, A Company boarded Huey helicopters for an Air Assault on an NVA held village in Thua Thien Province. This was the largest Air Assault I had participated in up to that time and I remembered thinking as we flew along, this is not going to end well. My feelings of foreboding were born out when we jumped/fell out of the choppers onto what was called in the vernacular, a Hot LZ! We formed up on line and proceeded to advance rapidly toward our objective under rifle fire that went from intense to withering with the 2nd platoon absorbing the brunt of the fire. As I looked to my left, I watched in dismay as many of my former 2nd platoon buddies were cut down. I remember thinking selfishly, that would have been me. On the other hand, I saw my former platoon sergeant amongst them with his right forearm shattered and I knew with a certainty that he

would not be putting me on "Point" anymore, which he was very fond of doing. You think of a lot of things in these very compressed situations that the uninitiated could never imagine. We proceeded to cross a little canal in front of the village and breached the hedgerow that many Vietnamese villages have surrounding them. There was a 45-degree incline in this portion of the village - if you saw Hamburger Hill, it looked very much like that. As we proceeded up the hill, we started taking sporadic gunfire, not particularly troubling but enough to kill you, when all of a sudden there was this loud, ominous swoosh and a contrail coming down the hill. For those of you who have never experienced a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) coming at you, by the time you realize what happened, it's too late. I heard Lt. Pershing say with a sigh of relief, "That damn thing almost hit me in the head!" He ordered us out of the village at this point and we were soon airlifted out of the area and taken back to either LZ Jane or An Lo Bridge; I can't remember which at this point. I do remember that on the ride back, I had the very exhausted but satisfied feeling of a survivor. I was saddened to learn later that we had lost Sp4 Randall Saunders and Sp4 Valentine Vollmer who was the assistant gunner to M60 machine gunner, PFC Matt DuRousseau. I remembered Vollmer well from Ft. Campbell because he was a very amiable, good hearted kid out of Wisconsin who once told me during a pre-deployment soul searching moment that he became a paratrooper because he wanted his father to be proud of him. Vollmer's death was compounded by the fact that because of the intense fire, repeated attempts to remove his body from the village had proven futile. Of the 3 people who had been with him when he died, two of them, Otero and Sp4 Ronald Nye were wounded- Nye three times. In the end, it was literally all they could do to save themselves. I cannot speak for other units but in the 101st leaving a man behind was something that just wasn't done. That night I overheard some of the officers say, "We're going back tomorrow to get Vollmer!" In the cold, early morning hours of February 17, 1968, we stood in line as we had the day before waiting for the Huey's to come pick us up for our second assault on the aforementioned village. I do not know with certainty, but I believe that our primary objective was the retrieval of our fallen brother. Waiting with us was the intrepid Otero with his leg bandaged from the day before, ready and more than willing to face the enemy again. What a marvel he was, the average Troop would have milked that wound for at least a month. I had an advantage that I did not have the day before. This time I knew what to expect, it was terrifying and comforting all at the same time. Picture if you will the helicopter assault in "Apocalypse Now" minus the goofy Hollywood BS. Our pilot came in low over the village and did a very, tight, bank turn. As I looked directly down from my seat in the chopper doorway, I could see combatants with AK-47s running from house to house which up to this time I had never seen before. I got the distinct impression that they were positioning themselves to their best advantage in order to meet out as much mayhem upon us as possible; there wasn't going to be any running today! By my best estimate, we landed about 100+ yards from the hedgerow of the village which was also separated from us by a rice paddy. Disembarking was a little more orderly than the day before but the paddy in this area was kind of deep; the water was at least waist high. Imagine walking in this with a foot of mud under that. It was arduous and time consuming but safe because it lowered your profile to an enemy watching you advance; there was less of you to shoot at. I don't know when it happened, but somebody got up on the rice paddy dike, followed by the rest of us in rapid succession. This was a Cardinal Sin in Southeast Asia because you had negated the advantages you had by walking in the paddy. We walked down the dike to the point where it connected with another dike which ran horizontal to the village hedgerow; we turned left and proceeded on. I looked at the hedgerow (which was somewhere I guess between 50 and 100 yards away by conservative estimate) and saw in an instant an image which will be frozen in my memory for the rest of my days. From under the water in the canal rose a small, brown, wet figure with black pajama pants clinging to his small frame. He raised what looked like a broom stick to shoulder level and fired! I saw a black bead and gas escape from the stick. My brain recognized all too late the terrible swoosh sound from the day before. I don't know whether it was the grenade or it's vapor trail, but something passed so close to my head that I was flipped over backward. In my bodies

rotation I observed Lt. Pershing seemingly cart wheeling in the air in slow motion, his final sound in life audibly escaping his lungs. There were other men clustered around Pershing that had also been wounded by the explosion that killed him. They were at this point floundering in the rice paddy water trying to reconnect to real world time! As my brain made adjustments, I also observed that the Field First Sergeant's hand was badly mangled. You can do a lot of things when you're terrified out of your wits and one of them is the ability to run very rapidly over water. With the exception of the medic Dave Kraus who stayed behind to tend the wounded, this is exactly what we did with great dispatch to a distance about thirty to forty yards back from the position we were fired upon. This was by no means an orderly retreat and we again found ourselves faced with yesterday's dilemma, we had left Lt. Pershing's body behind. As we kneeled/sat, gasping for breath, SSGT Thomas Hall stated, "We (?) gotta go back and get Lt. Pershing." He instructed me, PFC Joe Sanchez and two other individuals whose names are loss to history to retrieve Pershing. After a few moments to catch our breath, we proceeded to do this under very intense, hostile fire that was sending up ominous geysers of water around us as we moved to our task with great haste. If you're looking for an image, think of the bullet strikes in the opening sequences of "Saving Private Ryan." Now that I've thought more about it, it seems like the distance back to Pershing was more than 40 yards but under the prevailing conditions it might as well have been 40 miles! The impact of the RPG had completely crushed Pershing's head, I don't remember whether we put him in a poncho or not, but we managed to get him back roughly to our starting point where a medevac had landed. As we placed Pershing's body onto the chopper, I observed a Rolex Oyster on his wrist that I knew it would never make it back home to his family. If this was a football game which it obviously wasn't, this would be the point when the halftime comes because we were too tired, decimated and beat up to continue. I've have talked to other participants in this battle who say there were three RPGs fired at us that day. I know these people, I know them to be credible and I believed them, but Helene Allen's baby boy can only remember the one that almost got him.

Captain Spiegelberg radioed LZ Sally for some reinforcements and B Company which had been positioned at LZ Sally as a reactionary force, sent some guys out to help us, as I remember five men. On this day SSGT Hall was undoubtedly acting as my Guardian Angel. He told me to go down to Spiegelberg's position because he wanted to talk to me (?). When I arrived at his position I observed some 90-millimeter recoilless rifles (90) on the ground with ammo. With the B company replacements and the chosen A company personnel, Spiegelberg began to tell us what he wanted done. He instructed us to go down to the edge of the village, close to the hedgerow and fire the 90 rounds into it because he felt that snipers in the village were using it as a vantage point. I stood there trying to collect my thoughts and muster my courage when Cpl Billy Myers (KIA, 5/7/68) who was the leader of the detail said, "What's the matter with you, you want to live forever?" I responded in the affirmative but reached down to pick up the 90 anyway. As my hand touched the 90, it was knocked away by the hand of PFC Henry Gregory from B Company who stated, "I'll take this, I fired expert on it in Advanced Infantry training (AIT)." I looked at Gregory for a moment who I didn't know. He was the embodiment of the cockiness of youth and its innocence all wrapped into one. I told him it didn't make any difference to me and that I would carry the rounds and be the loader. We ran under sporadic fire down to the edge of the hedgerow followed by the others, PFC Frank Hoge also from B Company was immediately behind us carrying the M60 Machine gun. When we got into position, I loaded a round into the back of the recoilless rifle and laid down beside Gregory who quickly fired off a round. We repeated the procedure but this time as I laid down next to him, watching him adjust the sights, I saw his head slump over the 90 and he exhaled; he did not inhale again. I didn't get excited or scared, I didn't try to shake or revive him because I knew in that instant, he was gone, the thought screamed through my Tired brain, "Sweet Jesus, that was supposed to be me!" As I turned to my right rear I saw Hoge being shot off of the M60 from about 10 yards distance. I never heard the round that killed Gregory or Hoge. At this point, I don't

believe I was afraid of dying anymore, there was nothing left for the rest us to do but end this murderous folly; the snipers simply got us before we could get them. We collected our dead comrades and returned to Spiegelberg's command post where one of the kids from B Company was in an understandable, very, foul mood. He stated, "If we hadn't come out here to help you, our people would still be alive." I felt like I was coming apart at the seams but there wasn't any point in coming unglued or crying because I knew there would be other days like this and worst.

From December 26, 1967 to February 17, 1968 the 1/502nd Infantry Battalion had lost 100 men. With the aid of National Archives records, I've come up with the figure of 22 wounded and 5 killed for the action described above. A Company retired to LZ Jane to Stand Down because it was no longer able to function as such, we were in desperate need of the replacements. On February 19, 1968 which also just happened to be my birthday, I ran into new replacement, SGT. James Holmes in the company tent, I made it my business to try and scare him with some war stories which I had become pretty good at. I always liked to think that I scared him the right way because he went on to win a Silver Star at the historic battle of Phouc Yen a couple of months later. Also in this new group was Charles "Country" Cole who went on to become a 1/502nd writer of some renown, Wallace Chavis who was also the recipient of a Silver Star at Phouc Yen, Ben Jones who was tragically lost on March 22, 1968 while on ambush and Michael "Music Man" Shramko who died heroically on March 8th at the Battle of Ap Dong Lam. On this eventful morning I was assigned to go on a mine sweeping, road detail and I had made all preparations to do. Just prior to reporting for duty I went to the slit trench to relieve myself when I noticed some blood in my stool. Thoughts about my own mortality started to run through my head; well at least I'd be going home. I was back in the 2nd platoon at this point so I reported my condition to SSGT. Gelasio Gomez, Jr. (KIA, 5/1/68, Phouc Yen) who informed me that he was going to put me on sick call and send me to the infirmary. He further informed me not to concern myself about the detail because my place would be taken by one of the new replacements. Somewhat to my dismay the doctor very quickly corrected my C-ration- induced, hemorrhoid condition and I was deemed fit to return to the field. I consoled myself and celebrated my birthday by eating a case of tootsie rolls that I had borrowed from a special provisions box that I found. Later on, that day, I was informed that the kid that took my place on the detail was blown up when he stepped on a vehicular mine that a truck had run over prior to his stepping on it. His name was Ronnie Harrell, he had been in A Company all of two hours. This was the point in my life when I started to think in earnest that maybe the Great Master had something else in mind for me.

I saw SSGT Hall shortly afterward at An Lo Bridge. He informed me that they (?) were putting the members of the 1st platoon who had participated in the retrieval of Lt. Pershing's body, in for the Bronze Star w/V device. We didn't get it, and Hall died in 1991. It's a little late for that now but life gave many of us other rewards that we could have never imagined at that time. Just the opportunity to have had a full life and grow old is reward enough in and of itself. I remember when I could jump out of airplanes, now I can't even jump out of bed.....but that's alright! As for our fallen comrade, Valentine Vollmer, his remains were ultimately recovered on March 19, 1976 and returned to his family. It has been many years since he was physically with us, but he has never been absent from our heart.