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February 20, 2008

Dear Jimmy,

Enclosed is an "After Action Report" of D - 1/501's combat action in I Corps of Vietnam on March 30, 1968 and March 31, 1968 relating to your brother - Danny.

Jimmy, thank you for your patience with me; I am so appreciative. The medical condition that I have been dealing with for these past four years has thrown many obstacles in my path. I now feel blessed to finally share my words with you and with the Stephens family.

And, thank you, for asking me to do this writing. I am honored and humbled with your trust.

In closing, I genuinely hope that you and your family will find consolation and peace with what I have written.

Sincerely,

Dave Lamenzo

AFTER ACTION REPORT

March 30, 1968 and March 31, 1968

SECOND PLATOON**D Company, 1st Battalion - 501st Airborne Infantry Regiment,
2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division**

at

Quan-Tri Province, Republic of South Vietnam

During the last week of March 1968, D Company moved to the north of the town of Hai Lang which was located at the northern edge of Thua-Tien Province and about ten miles south of the city of Quan Tri. Hai Lang, situated on the coastal plain about five miles inland from the South China Sea, served as a regional and inter-provincial traffic hub (Route 1 - a major north/south highway passed through) for distribution of agricultural products (mainly rice) grown in the area and for products from the nearby ocean fishing boats.

From the beginning of the Tet Offensive that started in the dark early in the morning of January 31, 1968, D Company, along with its sister companies of 1/501, was engaged in continuous day and night combat with regular North Vietnamese soldiers ("NVA") in and around Hai Lang. By the end of March, the NVA in Hai Lang and the area surrounding it were eliminated. It was time for the Battalion to move out to new areas where enemy forces were concentrated and to engage them in combat. Experience from the initial Tet battles and the battles throughout the months of February and March, taught the D Company paratroopers well. D Company, with first-class leaders, was battle hardened. D Company was skilled in combat discipline, teamwork and tactics; it was eager to engage the NVA in battle at anytime.

D Company's first new objective was to clear out and eliminate a large NVA unit entrenched in a small farming village located about three miles northeast of Hai Lang and just north of the boundary between Quan Tri and Tua Tien Provinces. D Company (consisting of its Headquarters element of about 6 and three Platoons of about 25 each) arrived near the outskirts of the village late in the afternoon of March 30th. The village stood out clearly; it was surrounded by a vast expanse of rice paddies. The NVA, dug in and fortified, were certainly prepared to defend the village and its nearby cemetery. Since they were surrounded, they had no choice.

A short time after arrival at the village outskirts, the D Company Commanding Officer ("CO") decided to conduct small-unit probing attacks to ascertain the strength and strong points of the NVA. The several probing attacks in the late afternoon and early evening proved one sure thing for the CO and the D Company paratroopers; the NVA were ready to fight and to fight hard since there was little hope for most of them to sneak away and escape.

The CO established the plan of attack which called for an assault by two Platoons at first light the next morning. The attack plan was direct and simple (there were few, if any, options considering the fact that the village was isolated out in the rice paddies) with two Platoons comprising the initial attack element. The remaining Platoon, as standard procedure, was to stand by in reserve. In D Company, the CO established the reserve Platoon on a daily rotational basis between the three Platoons. As such, the First Platoon's turn as reserve was March 31st. The Second and Third Platoons would then comprise the initial "first light" assault elements with the Second Platoon on the right and the Third on the left.

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The village, as noted previously, was isolated out in a vast rice paddy area. The village was a typical Vietnamese farming enclave with its adjacent and traditional Vietnamese cemetery about 50 yards from its outskirts.

Off to one corner of the village and along the left side (the left side being from the direction of the attack) of the cemetery was a shallow drainage ditch with scrub bamboo and other brush growing in it. As planned, the vegetated ditch was to serve as the dividing line between the two attacking Platoons.

On March 31st, first light soon arrived for the paratroopers of D Company and the attack by the Second and Third Platoons on the village commenced. The NVA were quick to respond to the assault on their positions. The paratroopers faced intense rifle, machine gun and rocket propelled grenade fire from the entrenched NVA. In spite of the heavy enemy fire facing them (which resulted in several wounded-in-action casualties to their ranks), the Second and Third Platoons made slow but steady progress toward their objectives. The Third Platoon initially cleared out several enemy positions firing at them from the drainage ditch. Alternatively taking cover where available and laying down suppressing fire it began maneuvering toward the small farm structures at the village edge. Upon receiving instructions from the CO, the Third Platoon temporarily held its position while the Second Platoon dealt with an unexpected strong enemy resistance at the cemetery. The Third Platoon maintained its position and exchanged concentrated fire on the enemy at their defensive positions within the village. This action drew the village bound NVA's total attention. They were unable to provide support to the NVA that was stiffly engaging the Second Platoon as it approached the cemetery.

A Vietnamese cemetery consists of numerous gravesites that are at ground level. A grave is covered with a durable concrete seal and is set on a thick concrete slab. Each grave is further surrounded by a low (about 3 feet high) decorative masonry railing supported by numerous decorative masonry posts and religious symbols. The grave sites were ideal for defensive fighting positions and on the morning of March 31st, the NVA put them to good use.

With courageous and skilled leadership, the Second Platoon Leader maneuvered his paratroopers who placed withering fire on the enemy at their grave site fortifications. The accurate and concentrated fire from their rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers kept the enemy down allowing effective use of hand grenades and more careful maneuvering. After more than two hours of this tactic, the Second Platoon eliminated several enemy grave site positions along the edge of the cemetery and closest to its line of attack. Finally, the tables of the battle for the cemetery had slowly started to turn in the Second Platoon's favor. From the beginning of the attack at first light and through out the period leading up to the taking the first few grave site enemy positions, Danny Stephens, along with his Second Platoon comrades, performed his duty as a rifleman with determination, skill and courage. There is no question that on that morning, the Second Platoon was a "well-oiled" fighting machine as it engaged the NVA with each paratrooper doing his job in a first-class and resolute manner.

By this time the battle for the village had moved well into mid-morning. With the few initial grave site positions now in the Second Platoon's control and with the limited protection they provided, it was able to engage the stubborn NVA in fire and maneuver actions going from one grave site to another adjacent grave site eliminating the NVA in each as progress was achieved.

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It was during the mid-morning period of the battle among the cemetery's masonry structures that Danny Stephens, while providing intense suppressing fire on the NVA, received an instantly fatal single shot to his upper chest.

Danny had taken cover in one of the grave site positions. Lying prone, he was covered on most sides by the stone posts and railings of the low enclosures that defined the borders of this particular grave site. Enemy forces were within 30 to 50 yards of the Second Platoon line. As the squad on his right engaged the enemy by throwing hand grenades at the enemy positions to their front, Danny provided effective suppressive fire on the enemy while his comrades were throwing the grenades. He was doing everything correctly; prone, not exposing himself unnecessarily, shielding himself behind available cover and firing at the enemy. Unfortunately, an enemy rifleman was able to engage his position through a very narrow field of fire and by firing only inches above the ground.

After driving the enemy from the cemetery by late morning, D Company's attack halted to regroup and re-arm. During this lull the enemy engaged the cemetery area with what were estimated to be 60-mm mortars. The Second Platoon Leader and his Radio Telephone Operator (RTO) and several other members of the Platoon were wounded. The NVA mortar attack essentially blunted the attack on the village. The CO then decided to pull the two assault Platoons back and to establish a cordon around the village.

After the cordon was established, the CO called for artillery fire to pound the village and the NVA in it. The artillery fire softened the area for the remainder of the day and throughout the night. That night, a squad from the First Platoon successfully set-up an ambush at a trail along a dike leading out of the village. They made contact and early the next morning, while policing the ambush site, they found, among other fallen NVA, one wounded enemy who was taken prisoner.

As was often the case, the few NVA that remained in the village and who survived the battle and the artillery exfiltrated during the night.

Early the next day, D Company was able to enter the village without any enemy resistance.

AFTER ACTION REPORT RESEARCHED and WRITTEN BY:
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POSTSCRIPT FOR DANNY STEPHENS –

As Executive Officer (XO) of D Company, I was the first to meet Danny and to welcome him when he arrived in the early part of January of 1968 from the 101st's Replacement Unit. Danny had just completed jump school and was so proud of the status his jump wings gave him and to have been assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. He certainly was a young, proud, well-trained and confident "Screaming Eagle". Danny was assigned to D Company's Second Platoon as a rifleman. Over the remaining few weeks of my duty as XO and before the Company moved from Cu Chi, west of Saigon to I Corps in the north, I saw Danny a few brief times as he was performing his assigned Second Platoon duties. I always noticed his wonderfully engaging and happy smile (and, I will never forget it either).

Danny was a close and trusted friend to his many comrades in the Second Platoon. He also had many other friends throughout D Company. It goes without saying, that after the battle for the village was over, many members of the Second Platoon shed sincere tears in their loss and in memory of their friend and fighting buddy, Danny Stephens. I am sure his memory lives on with many from D Company even to this day, scores of years later.

Well, Danny –

**"AIRBORNE; AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY and MAY THE GOOD LORD,
AS HE HAS DONE FOR NEARLY FORTY PAST YEARS, KEEP YOU
IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND FOREVER !!"**