

HATCHET MEN  
BEN CAT VEIT NAM  
DEC. 1965

Preface: My name is George R. Bassett (E-4), Point Man-2nd squad, 1st. Platoon, Co B, 2/502 Abn. Inf., 101st Airborne Division. I will relate my participation in an event that took place at Ben Cat, Viet Nam, Dec. 1965.

My company, B, 2/502, was conducting combat operations in the Michelin Rubber Plantation at Ben Cat, V.N. in Dec 1965. The plantation stretched for miles and had been neglected, waist high brush had grown thru out the plantation. This area was known to be a VC haven and they were there in large numbers. Shortly before being deployed to the plantation, our battalion Cmdr. Col. Hank "GUNFIGHTER" Emerson, had ordered, out of his own pocket, hatchets from the United States. When they arrived at our battalion, Col. Emerson let us know that we were all going to have to pay him \$3.00 for a hatchet and that we had no choice in the matter. He also informed us that the first trooper's squad to kill a VC with a hatchet would be rewarded with a case of liquor. We were now to be known as the "Hatchet Men" and our patrols would be known as "Hatchet Teams" and our company sign was changed to show two crossed hatchets. We didn't want the hatchets, as we had no use for them and we had enough to carry on our backs without another three pounds, but we had no choice in the matter. When the hatchets arrived, and were passed out to us, the handles were white, and we were instructed to paint them black, so they would not stand out in the bush. I was in charge of the detail for my platoon to paint the handles black and have supplied a photo showing them drying after being painted. With our new hatchets, we were deployed to the Michelin rubber plantation. Our three company platoons were traveling in file on a narrow plantation road, 3rd Plt. on point, 1st Plt. following and 3rd Plt. last. Suddenly a large volume of gunfire erupted from in front of us, 3rd Plt. on point had been ambushed. Word was quickly passed to us, 1st Plt. to go forward and engage the enemy and assist 3rd. Plt. which we did. The gunfight lasted about an hour with the VC withdrawing, leaving behind some dead and wounded. We were dispersed in the brush along the road side and one of the 3rd Plt. troopers, who I shall not name, came across a wounded VC and with the assistance of some others managed to hold him down and he then proceeded to whack his head off with his new hatchet. The trooper proceeded to the road, very proud of his trophy and held it above his head as proof that he had killed the first VC with a hatchet and that his squad would claim the case of liquor that "GUNFIGHTER" Emerson had promised. A reporter from Life magazine was attached to us at the time and he took a picture of the trooper displaying the head, I believe that his name was Malcolm Brown. Shortly thereafter the picture appeared on the cover of the Dec. 65 issue of Life Magazine in the U.S. Word very quickly came down to get rid of the hatchets and anyone caught with one would be brought up on charges of "Brutality" Needless to say, "Gunfighter" did not refund us our three dollars each for the hatchets that he had forced us to buy from him. The trooper that had taken the head was later KIA. Our Co. commander was Cpt. Thomas Taylor, son of Gen. Maxwell Taylor. Pictures are enclosed.

George R. Bassett