

Hot Dog Hill

When you lose about seventy five out of a hundred and fifty men in a little over a month it is hard to say that month had been uneventful. Compared to what happened to us on April 26, 1968, the previous month had been relatively uneventful.

The day before then, on April 25th, we had come across this small hill that was no different from any other small hill except that the group of men that had gone to check it out knew from the amount of fire coming at them, they could not go up this hill with the number of men they had. Later, we sent out several other small patrols of ten or so men to probe that hill from other directions. None of them were able to get close to the hill before withering fire drove them back. We now knew that this was no small unit up there, and they wanted to stay. I have often wondered if they really had wanted to stay. I think that they did not. They just had to stay as we had to go anyplace that the other side had indicated that they did not want us to go. I guess by staying they were showing us that they too had duty, honor, and country.

A month and a half after this fight at 'Hot Dog Hill', the company I was with then found some of the largest caches of weapons and ammo of the war just beyond 'Hot Dog Hill'. Those caches were the reasons that this group of NVA and some other groups fought to the last man. At one time that company had led the rest of the Army in 122mm rocket launchers captured.

After failing with squads of ten men, we then tried to check out the hill with a platoon. Calling it a hill is stretching things a little as it really was just a knob at the end of a ridge line. I was about two hundred and fifty meters away from the top of their hill, reading a book, when the firing started. I asked if they needed any artillery help. Nope—not yet. When a bullet went

by close. I had enough experience to know not to bother to duck in most cases—just when they whizzed or cracked. This one had whizzed, so I moved behind a tree to continue reading. A bullet kicked up some dirt where I had been sitting—a rocket went off a few meters away. I knew then for sure that there were more than just a few NVA in a bunker, and even a platoon was not going to be enough manpower. The only thing short of suicide would be to pull back and give the hill to me and my guns which were over ten clicks away. Unlike some, I didn't like to kill. I am not proud that, because I had been efficient, a lot of men had died. Men...? Gooks to most, but to me they were still men. I never had been lucky enough to have been given hate for them.

The infantry captain in charge of the company was getting agitated; upset not so much by the battle as by his superiors back in the rear. He only had had the company for a couple of weeks and he would not, or could not get me enough time for a good artillery preparation before our attack. He was going to be a career officer, and he could not risk upsetting the man who wrote his officer evaluation report (OER) just for the sake of a few kids' lives.

"Captain, get me another thirty minutes! An hour would be better, and we'll go up that hill with no casualties."

"They want to know what's up there."

"Christ! Tell them there are NVA up there!"

"Yea, but they want us to go now."

"Stall! Do something! Get me at least another fifteen minutes!"

I thought about how a lot of our kids were going to die because of some person in the rear who had power, but not the knowledge of how to handle that power. That person in the rear who was in hurry probably never had been to the field in Vietnam. He probably never had been in combat himself. Even in 'good' units like the '101st' once a man got to be a major, (attain field grade rank)

the war was over for him. In '65, '66, '67, and '68 only three field grade officers died from any cause while with the 101st in Vietnam. I know that one of those died in an accident because he had been the Divisional Artillery Commander. He died in June of '68 in a helicopter accident with which the NVA had nothing to do. I do not know how the other two died. The situation was similar for those men in the top two enlisted ranks.

I think one of the toughest things that a field commander must have had to do was write letters to parents of kids who had died in his command. "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lower Class American...or Dear Mr. and Mrs. Black American...your son died at the party at 'Hot Dog Hill' on 26 April, 1968 because someone with power was in a hurry." I know at least seven of those letters had to be sent out. Perhaps there had to be more if any of those who had been wounded later died.

A few minutes, maybe fifteen went by.

"We got to go now."

"Mother fuckin' A...what's the hurry?"

"I don't know, but I got orders to start the attack...Now! Quit! Check fire! First platoon on the left, third on the right-on line and take that hill!"

We went with a classical attack formation. Two platoons attempted to surround the hill but only had enough men to get about two thirds of the way around it. This gap in our perimeter allowed some NVA to escape. The company that swept on down the trail to the next hill said that there was gore for three or four hundred meters. An infantry company was authorized to have about two hundred men in the field organized into four platoons and the command and control (C&C) group. Our company had taken so many casualties with no reserves available that we were down to about ninety men organized into only three small platoons. Two platoons attacked, and the other platoon was going to stay back with the command and control group to act as a reserve.

"Lieutenant, I want you to stay back here."

"Should I blow up and tell him that he doesn't understand? Should I try and reason with him? Should I try to explain that I could not do my job back there? No, I've learned a little. I'll just act as if I didn't hear him. In a short time I had got to know him well enough to know that he would not order me back if I just walked out with the troops.

When we got close enough for them to start firing at us again I dodged from tree to tree. You couldn't hear the whiz of the bullets because the cracks ran together like heavy rain. The hand grenades and the rockets were the thunder. My short artillery preparation had not been enough because they had to stay. I had not even got to the bottom of our hill when trouble hit me.

"Peoples, my weapon is jammed. Toss me one of those."

He had several bodies around him behind the log that he was using for cover. He was about ten feet in front of me. I did not expect or intend for him to expose himself to fire to get me a weapon, but he jumped over the log to a body in an exposed area about ten feet in front of him.

"Peoples, get your fucking head down!"

He was living in the middle of a swarm of pieces of metal going very fast, but he stopped before he grabbed the M-16 and turned his head...

"Sir, they can't hit me."

And so far they hadn't been able to. He had come out to the field as an E-3, a private first class. After his first fire fight the battalion commander had to come out the next resupply day and make him an E-4, a corporal. After this fire fight the lieutenant colonel would have to come out again to make him an E-5, a sergeant. We later heard that the colonel really had to fight for that promotion. I guess that the people who shuffled and OK'd things way way back in the rear-rear didn't want to believe that there were any real soldiers in the Army anymore.

Well, they had not hit him, and I had a weapon that worked. I don't know if the people lying behind the log near him were only slightly wounded and might need their weapons, or if he had some reason to know that their weapons did not work, or what. With all of the bodies around at the end I forgot to ask him.

And then the medic got it for the second time. This time he did not yell and scream that he had been hit. He just lay still.

"Hey Tom, we're getting the shit shot out of us. Are we just gonna sit here, or we gonna do something?"

It was a rhetorical question. Truly a rhetorical question. It definitely was not a challenge. But...

"You heard Lieutenant Jasperson...CHARGE!!!"

They did the best they could. They had to do an impossible thing...totally impossible...because somebody in the rear had a reason for being in a hurry. For this reason blood was being let in payment.

"Hey Tom! Get your people down! We aren't going to get it done this way. I'm gonna put some more rounds up there and fuck those guys who are in a hurry. Pass the word around!"

And I went back to work. But now, the big artillery rounds were a lot closer-insanely close. But it was the only way we were going to take that hill. In some early fire fights our men had cowered behind their trees, furtively asking if I was going to bring the shells closer to us. This had happened because I had been a new man to them, an unknown quantity whose mistake could have meant their death. But now, because of our untenable position and the fact that I had been with them for almost six weeks, I was an old head who could be trusted. As the first rounds came in they yelled and screamed-my cheering section.

"Go get 'em sir!"

"Right in there!"

"Give 'em hell!"

"Beautiful!"

Because of the fact that our own people were only about a hundred and fifty or two hundred meters from each other across the hill, I could only use a platoon of two guns instead of the full battery of six guns. I had to use the 155mm howitzers because we were out of range of the 105's, and a 155 round supposedly has a killing radius of fifty meters. The first rounds came in only one at a time as I readjusted on the hill. I could not trust the old data fired by the guns in the prep because our own people were just too close to the hill. There was no margin for error. The first round came in about one hundred and fifty meters away from me.

"All right, give me the platoon now, and tell the people in the FDC and on the guns that this is CLOSER than 'danger close'."

Two huge cracks as the rounds exploded just over the hill from me.

"Tom, get the other platoon leader on the horn and find out if I can bring the rounds straight back towards the C&C and the reserves."

"Yea, go on! Fire 'em up!" More cheers from the men.

"Drop two zero, danger close, over."

"Drop two zero, danger close, out."

"Shot, over."

"Shot, out."

Two more incredible explosions.

"Tom..."

"I'm already doin' it...he says OK! Bring 'em back some more!" More cheers.

He had already got the information that I was going to ask for, the information about where the last two rounds had landed in relation to the other platoon.

"Drop two zero, over."

"Drop two zero, out."

As I finished that command it felt like a hand had clapped very hard over my right ear, and the plant that had been dangling across the right side of my face was gone. All my RTO could say was, "God Dammmmmn!!!"

We had been lying on the down slope of our hill with my RTO above me and his legs around my head and shoulders. A machine gunner had stitched us with a bullet going between his leg and my ear clipping off that plant that had been dangling in my face. He later said that he had watched the rounds kick up dirt as they had come at us from our right, but it had happened too fast to move. After it happened we moved.

The last two rounds of artillery had hit on the far side of their hill and had been almost perfect. I decided to let the natural difference in range between rounds fired with the same data on the guns do any more adjusting for me. I told the FDC...

"Repeat, five rounds, over."

"Repeat, five rounds, out."

The first two rounds hit.

"Hey, the cap'n says cut 'em off. Those last two came too close to clipping the trees above him."

"Tell him to duck. I got four more sets just like the last ones coming, and they are already in the air!"

"OH, SHIT!"

Two...by two...by two...by one... they hit the hill, and our guys cheered with each salvo. But the insanely close had become too close as a shell in the last twosome went off behind me as it clipped a tree between us and the reserve platoon. Because of luck, the ninety feet of triple canopy vegetation, and the

fact that everyone who had a hole was down in it, nobody got hurt. But, word got back to the rear, and the higher ups took away my guns. Further artillery had been judged too dangerous. After putting those rounds on their hill only one more of our men would be killed as we overran them.

I became an infantry private, and we charged the hill again. It still wasn't easy or quick. It must have taken more than another hour, and every once in a while I thought of the ignorance of those in the rear who had been in a hurry. They could have saved time by giving me an extra hour to work on that hill in my initial prep, and seven of our men probably would not have left the field wrapped in their ponchos with them tied around their ankles leaving only their boots sticking out. We had no more body bags left. Men had been dying faster than they could keep our battalion supplied with body bags. Three of those men wrapped in their ponchos had died within ten meters of me.

A quarter of the way around the hill to my right Peoples and my recon sergeant had been busy taking out that part of their perimeter. Peoples had somehow got up to their bunkers (totally impossible) and had been busy dunking grenades back handed into them through their firing ports. When he would run out of grenades Byerly would spray the area to get the NVAs' heads down and toss another couple of grenades to Peoples. I believe that they knocked out at least three bunkers this way, and Peoples got put in for the Medal Of Honor and Byerly for a Silver Star. I had to put Byerly's paper work in four times before the people in the rear would get his Silver Star for him. Three times the artillery rear lost the paper work, so I finally gave it to an infantry officer who had been there that day and since had been transferred to the rear. He knew what Byerly had done, and he made sure the infantry rear did the paper work. Byerly finally got the award in November.

The day after the fight the battalion commander walked up to Sergeant Byerly

after he had promoted Peoples...

"Sergeant, is it true that you carry an AK-47?" (An AK-47 was the standard rifle used by the NVA.)

"Yes sir, uh guess it is."

"Sergeant, do you know that is a court martial offense?"

"Ah...yes sir."

"Well, if you won't tell anybody about it, I won't either."

At that time there was a rule that our soldiers could not carry any weapons captured from the enemy. We thought it was basic bureaucratic bull shit and treated it as such. Even lieutenant colonels treated it as such. We reasoned that if a man wanted to carry the heavier weapon with its heavier ammunition, let him. Byerly liked the weapon better than an M-16, and, as he was a big kid, he didn't mind the extra weight. I think a part of it might have been done for flair to add to his reputation. He had just recently gone AWOL from a hospital to get back out on line. The bandages wrapped around his head would not allow him to wear his steel helmet, but the M.P.s were not about to come out and make him go back-not where he was.

Twelve years after this fight I was able to find out that there had been a good reason for that rule, but it could not be told to us. Some rear area intelligence type had thought up a scheme where we would doctor up some captured AK-47 ammo and return it to the enemy caches. They wanted to convince the NVA that those caches had never been discovered. This doctored ammo would cause the rifle to blow up in its user's face, and the man who told me about this scheme said that he had seen two of its victims. One was theirs, and one was one of our own men. The bureaucrats in the rear felt that they had to keep the information about the ammo top secret as they hoped that the NVA would begin to mistrust the Chinese about everything else they were receiving from them. I don't know why this was

deemed important as the Vietnamese had never liked the Chinese and were only using them because they had to. But the intelligence people in the rear had to try and do something to justify their presence in Vietnam. If the hordes in the rear who ran the war had known anything about the war, this scheme would never have been implemented because they would have known the order about not carrying enemy weapons would not have been obeyed. I am sure that the person who had thought up this stunt thought he was a military genius.

Big fire fights meant big paper work for those that pushed the papers for a company. As soon as they could the first sergeant and the company executive officer were out to the scene of the fight. They probably had come out on one of the first medevac choppers. These men were not Rear Eschelon Maintenance Personnel or REMPs but troopers with a lot of field time whose present jobs just had to be done in the rear. The first sergeant was helping the medics try and do first aid, and Dr. 'Mad Ran' Phillips had come out to try and save the ones who could be saved by having professional help come to them before they could be taken back to the hospital. There probably were others, but Dr. Phillips was the only doctor that I ever saw out in the field after a big fire fight.

First aid was getting finished as I wandered back to the aid area where the wounded had been taken during and after the fight. I had a small gash in my upper lip probably ripped open by a thorn on a vine. Seeing the twenty eight seriously wounded men there I had no intention of trying for a Purple Heart. If we had had the three Purple Hearts and home rule that the Marines had, I might have tried later. I think we had a rule that you didn't get a Purple Heart unless you were injured seriously enough to have to be medevaced from the field. The next day a trooper who had been hit in the arm by a very large piece of secondary shrapnel was showing his bruise to the company commander and trying to talk him into putting him in for a Purple Heart even though the skin had not been broken. He

was a good man with eleven months in the field and no Purple Heart. I guess he felt left out, but he didn't get a Purple Heart for that.

Nobody had started to worry about our dead out on the hill yet. They were getting information about the seriously wounded and those that had died after being taken back to the aid area while still alive. The first sergeant looked up while taking information from someone's dog tags...

"Sir, you ought to be careful. There might be some snipers left up in those trees."

"First sergeant, after going through something like that, you get the feeling that nothing can kill you."

Somebody from someplace in the rear wanted a tour, and I was getting ready to leave the aid area, so I said that I'd show him to the hill. Dr. Phillips had done all that he could do and asked about his missing medic. He came along too, and we went to the medic first. The first time the medic had been hit it was in the foot which had caused all of the yelling. But he had continued to work until he had been hit in the side of his head. He had died while working on another wounded man. The doctor said that this medic had been causing him trouble, getting spooked, saying that he wasn't going to go back to the field anymore. He had been getting scared because he had seen too much of what could happen out there. The doctor said that, since he had been the senior medic, he was going to pull this man out of the field as soon as he got a replacement for him.

"Yea, but he died doing his job."

The guy from the rear said that. I guess that he had thought it was important to somebody. It wasn't important to the medic.

I looked down at Lee and was sorry his brains were running out of the furrow

in the top of his head. He had perhaps saved my life earlier when he had jumped in between Tom and me and had tried to point out a heavy weapons position which I never did see. He must have got it later in the assault because he and Tom took off in one direction and I in the other. He had had a very young almost delicate face in life. Death and its peace made his face Madonna-like. I paused to look at him and kept on going, but the rear area person stopped, unbuttoned several buttons, and pulled the bottom of Lee's fatigue shirt over his head. I knew Lee, liked him, good kid. I was uncomfortable when his face got covered, uncomfortable with the person who felt it made a difference. Or was I slightly uncomfortable with myself for not having the feeling to do the covering? I still do not know.

I got to the hill, and my RTO said that the artillery rear echelon types wanted me to go around and examine all of their dead and determine whether they had been killed by artillery or infantry. Need as much of that good body count as you can get. The bodies were easy to analyze, but the bunkers which had been hit by artillery were not. Judge the size of the bunker by what's left of it, the number of men in it by its size and the amount of gore. After a few bunkers I think we started to laugh. Byerly and I got into a black humor argument over whether a bunker was a two or a three body bunker. Someone came up and insisted that it had to be a four. We had to laugh at the shitheads in the rear who were going to take our guesses as 'actual body count', inflate it to what ever they thought that they had to have, and report it to the media as 'exactly XX or XXX' NVA killed in action depending on the amount of inflation. The report would be changed along the way until it got to 'Pentagon East'. I once heard that 'Pentagon East' was so civilized that the phones there actually worked unlike the system the military set up for the rest of the country. I really don't know because I never got that far back to the rear.

All of our dead still had faces, and they looked peaceful in their death. Some of their dead had faces. Some did not. An empty V.O. bottle sat on one of mine. There was a small piece of his skull left sticking out of his neck. It was about the size of a girl's palm. Small arms won't do that. On my last trip to get my eye checked I had bought the V.O., and my recon sergeant, my RTO and I had been sipping on it on the extra tough nights--savoring it--stretching it as far as we could. They had got into my rucksack, drained the last few drops, and marked this body in case anyone might mistake who it belonged to.

Some of the grunts were digging through the crimson clay and gore that had once been a bunker.

"We might be able to find out how many were in there by the number of weapons."

"You're doin' a great job."

"Thanks"

With that absurdity out of the way I went to see if the company commander wanted anything. His two RTOs were sitting on dead bodies cooking their C-ration dinners. One of the bodies did not have a head. The guy sitting on the body with the head got up...

"Sir, can I drag a body over for you?"

"No thanks, I'll sit on my rucksack."

I was glad that my RTO had gone and policed up our rucksacks. I was hungry, so I sat down and fixed dinner. Sitting on bodies is declassé. I wish the captain had discouraged it. Those two RTOs had not even been in the fight.

Later, I went back to the evacuation landing zone (LZ) where a gut shot kid had not been medevaced, and dusk was already coming. Perhaps the doctor had wanted to get him stabilized at the aid area before moving him the three or four hundred meters to an LZ that we had blown several weeks earlier when we had come through that area from a different direction. The people in the rear didn't want

to send a medevac because it was getting dark. Dr. Phillips decided to use some tact and military courtesy to convince them.

"You stupid mother fucking bastards, get a chopper out here immediately! This kid is going to die unless he is operated on tonight!"

Not, 'Sirs, you stupid mother fucking bastards...'. Most people talking to colonels and generals would at least have said 'sir'. The bird came out but stayed way up there--out of small arms range. The pilot reported that the LZ was too small. As far up as he was no wonder it looked small. We had earlier had two birds in that LZ together--at the same time. The pilot was scared because he had heard what had gone on near there earlier in the day. When the doctor found out about the two birds in that LZ at one time he exploded and tried to get someone to order the pilot to land. No one would, and the kid was going to die because there were no decent pilots available.

He was crying and begging for his mother, begging for water, begging for God not to let him die, and when he wasn't begging, he was screaming with fear. I was very tired. He was going to die sometime that night, and I was very tired, but no way sleep could come. God, I wanted sleep to come and take me out of that day. Guilt from being alive, from wanting sleep to come, from knowing he was going to die, from wanting him to stop screaming. Tired, but not tired enough to sleep; tired but not tired enough to keep out the guilt coming from wanting him to stop screaming, guilt coming from wanting the inevitable to happen so sleep could come. Then, about ten o'clock.....silence.

A few days after this I went back to the rear to change companies. In a long letter written to my brother from there at this time I found this paragraph.

"I've still got a slight headache from the excesses of last night. I have been thinking about the bodies with no heads. Perhaps, for a split second, their

nervous systems let them know that they had a headache, but I doubt it. When I got shot in the face I felt no pain for a while. Those men certainly have no headaches now. They're mine now."