

A BAD DAY AT DIEN BAN
BY FRED DUPONT
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In August 1968, 9th Engineer Battalion, 1st Marine Division, III Marine Amphibious Force was tasked with “keeping open and passable the 47.6 mile stretch of Vietnam’s Route 1 from Chu Lai north to the Cau Lau River.” Lt. Colonel Horacio “Hank” Perea, Commanding Officer of the 1,000 Marines and Corpsmen of 9th Engineers, was based in Chu Lai. This mission included daily mine sweeps of the entire stretch and construction and maintenance of “41 bridges and 97 culverts”. Captain Reno Rizzo, Commanding Officer of Delta Company, was based at Hill 63 (LZ Baldy) and assigned the northern most “11.2 miles” which included the longest fixed span bridge ever built by the Marine Corps that measured 722 feet across the Ba Ren River. In support of that mission, on August 5, 1968, Capt Rizzo was leading 30 Marines from Delta and Service companies in a convoy of seven vehicles loaded with bridge materials from Da Nang. Just south of the village of Dien Ban they ran into an ambush of an estimated 100 NVA.

If it wasn’t the first bullet, it was close as it tore into Capt Rizzo’s chest, passing through his right lung, and lodging next to his spine. His driver, LCpl E.J. Hayward, sought lower ground by running off the road, spilling the Captain, SSgt Charlie Edwards, and SSgt Nehila into the mud on the west side of the road.



Captain Rizzo’s Jeep after the ambush
(Photo provided by Reno Rizzo)

LCpl John Ruley from Headquarters Company was driving the second vehicle in the convoy, the “gun truck”. A 6x6 stacked with sand bags and some armor plating with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the back, the gun truck was designed to be the lead vehicle, blast through any trouble, and keep the convoy moving. LCpl Ruley covered the 200 yards from the edge of the village to where the jeep left the road with LCpl Pete Triosi blasting away with the 50cal, taking tremendous damage from the small arms fire. LCpl Triosi was hit in the arm but, never quit firing along with PFC Paul Ricard manning “everybody’s M16s”, giving their CO as much covering fire as they could. Faced with turning his truck and everybody in it into “swiss cheese” and trapping the remaining vehicles in the ambush, LCpl Ruley continued to draw fire as he drove through the ambush, as was the original plan for the gun truck.



LCpl John Ruley and his “Baby”
(Photo provided by John Ruley)

Sgt David John Green, Delta Co., 1st Platoon, was the senior U.S. Marine present when LCpl Ruley pulled the gun truck into the Korean Marine Compound near the village of My Hat. By this time the radio was crackling with gun fire and a call for help. Sgt Green called in a Medevac chopper for LCpl Triosi and with the help of the Korean Marines repaired the truck as best they could. As they began mounting up to go help, 1st Lt Dean Marcellus of 2nd Platoon, busy at the Ba Ren Bridge, radioed Sgt Green to wait until his arrival. Together, elements of the 1st and 2nd

Platoons under Lt Marcellus moved north on Ruley's gun truck to relieve the situation in Dien Ban.

North of the Thu Bon River, the gun truck over heated and stopped, they dismounted and advanced on foot. Sgt Green led a column on the east side of the road and Sgt Willie Linner, 2nd Platoon, did the same on the west. They took cover and returned fire as they approached the tree line south of Dien Ban. Major Caleb Wall, Executive Officer of 9th Engineers, arrived by helicopter from Chu Lai at the Provincial Forces compound in Trung Phu' and established contact with the Australian Army Advisors to the 2/4th ARVN Cavalry Regiment at the scene in Dien Ban. They engaged the enemy for over an hour, until Lt Marcellus was advised to pull back to the compound before a counter attack by helicopter gunships began.

Back at the jeep, before they could get their bearings, an NVA soldier was standing over them with an AK-47 blasting away. SSgt Edwards caught three rounds in his stomach before he got his hands on an M-16 and emptied the whole 20 round magazine into him. SSgt Nehila was wounded in the back and legs.

Desperately wounded with no cover, SSgt Edwards and Capt Rizzo crawled about 100yds back to a well surrounded by a dirt berm. Their 45cals full of mud, SSgt Edwards washed them off, chambered a round and handed Capt. Rizzo's back to him. His back to the well facing the enemy, with Capt. Rizzo facing him, he began stuffing mud in the bullet holes to stop the bleeding. The surgeon told him later it was that action that saved his life.

SSgt Nehila lay wounded and dazed during the entire ambush and could not be found in the confusion. He wandered into the PF compound at Trung Phu' the next day and was taken to Da Nang by Medevac.

When the NVA opened fire, the rest of the convoy stopped about 200 yards from Capt Rizzo's jeep. After LCpl Ruley's gun truck blasted on ahead, LCpl Ray Cummings' tractor/trailer was now the lead vehicle taking the brunt of the NVA punishment. LCpl Bill Lee's tractor/trailer was behind Cummings'. Everyone on those two trucks bailed out and began returning fire. Firing from the back of the third truck, PFC Bob Uderitz was only able to get off one round with his M-60 machine gun before the firing pin broke. From the back of the convoy, Sgt Lee and Cpl Larry Barabaz advanced to Uderitz' position and took the M-60 and two boxes of ammunition off of the truck to repair it at a house at the south end of the village. Not being able to fix the broken firing pin, they moved forward to the well. PFC

Uderitz then proceeded back to the ARVN's position north of the village to use their radio and call for help. Not knowing what the call signs and frequencies, he procured an M-1 carbine from them and advanced to the well to assist the wounded.

By this time the automatic fire from the NVA had died down as they started walking mortars in on the Marines. The jeep caught the first round and exploded taking their only radio with it. One round exploded next to the well wounding SSgt Edwards again, this time in the head. A piece of shrapnel stuck into his forehead. He pulled it out and placed it in his flak jacket. It was later returned to him by a nurse in Da Nang.

Exposing themselves to fierce enemy fire, the Marines on the convoy left their cover to aid and protect Capt Rizzo and SSgt Edwards at the well. Capt Rizzo gave the call signs and frequencies to LCpl Lee and told him to find a radio.

The only radio in the convoy having been destroyed in the jeep, LCpl Lee, despite the intense enemy fire, proceeded to use one of the radios on the APCs from the 2/4th ARVN Cavalry Regiment at Hoi An which they had passed to the north of Dien Ban. LCpl Lee was hit in his flak jacket by a round that knocked him face down in a rice paddy. Shaking that off, he again proceeded to carry out his orders. After calling Delta Company Headquarters at Hill 63, LCpl Lee exposed himself to enemy fire for the third time to return to the well. Under the covering fire of two ARVN APCs, directed by Australian Army Advisors WO1 James Francis Harrower and WO2 Terence Francis Malone, LCpl Lee coordinated the retreat from the well. As soon as all the Marines stood to carry the wounded back to the village, LCpl Moore from Delta Company was shot in the shoulder. For the fourth time, LCpl Lee exposed himself to enemy fire this time carrying Capt Rizzo to safety.

At this point the Australian Advisors took control of the situation and called for Medevac Helicopters from Da Nang. Determining that the LZ was "too hot" for the U. S. Army "slicks", four U. S. Army gunships arrived. After pacifying the NVA, one of the gunships landed to lift out Captain Rizzo, SSgt Edwards and LCpl Moore.

On the south end, as the counter attack began, the gun truck having been repaired again at the PF compound in Trung Phu', Lt Marcellus and his men mounted up and moved south to the KMC compound at My Hat. Sgt Linner manning the 50cal as they passed the Korean Marines from My Hat moving north.

Battalion records show that 5 Marines were wounded in this battle: Capt Reno Rizzo, SSgt Charlie Edwards, SSgt Nehila, LCpl Moore, and LCpl Pete Triosi. These were the five that required Medevac, however, two more were wounded. Sgt Mike Cummins was hit in the leg by a ricocheting bullet as he dismounted one of the low bed trucks and was treated by the Corpsmen at 7th Engineers that night. Also, PFC Larry Organ was knocked unconscious when a round hit his helmet as he left the truck in which he was riding.

At the end of the battle, while the trucks were being turned around to return to Da Nang, Sgt Cummins went into the house where the sniper must have been that had hit Bill Lee in his flak jacket. He found the sniper on the second floor blown to hell, apparently by the 50cal on the ARVN APC. He took his rifle and still has it on his boat in Ft. Lauderdale. He plans on cleaning it and presenting it to Bill Lee at the next Reunion.



LCpl Bill Lee pointing out the hole in his flak jacket
(Photo provided by Bill Lee)

I would like to thank the following comrades who helped piece this story together.

Lt Col Caleb Wall who provided information about the efforts from the south and worked with me in submitting an award for LCpl Lee to Headquarters Marine Corps.

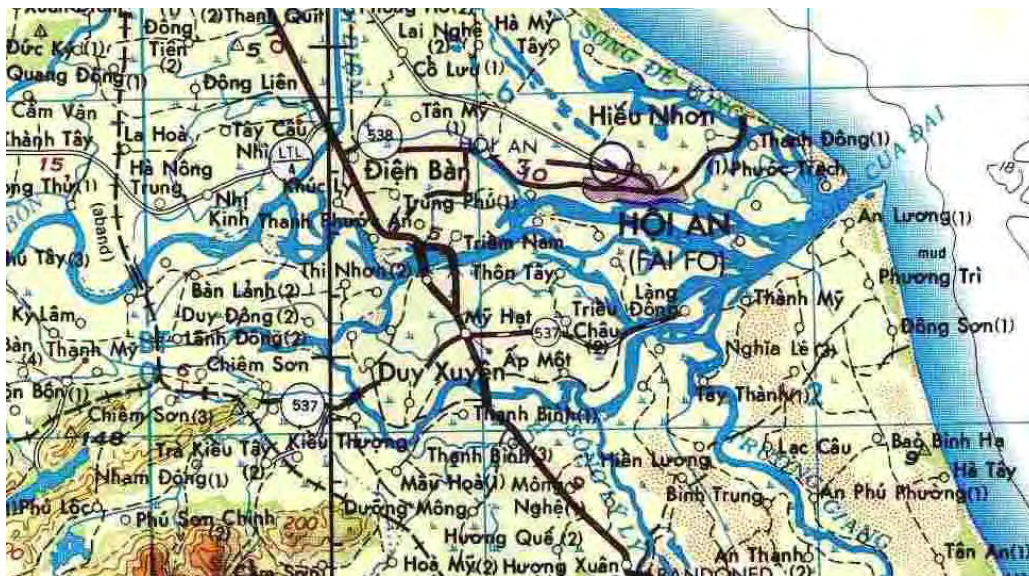
Capt Reno Rizzo who also assisted in the award for LCpl Lee and still has the bullet they removed from his spine.

SSgt Charlie Edwards who also assisted in the award for LCpl Lee and wanted all of the Marines at the “Well” to know they deserve a medal.

Dr. Gary Ward, who relieved Capt Rizzo, and provided the information about SSgt Nehila.

Major Rick Ryan and all members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam for Persevering to provide the information about the Royal Australian Armoured Corps officers who saved our bacon that day.

Cpl “Machine Gun” Mike Maxfield, who was on the south end with 2nd Platoon and always kept good notes.



This article is dedicated to Staff Sergeant Charles E. Edwards who passed away on the Marine Corps Birthday, November 10, 2010, to WO1 James Francis Harrower who passed away November 16, 2006, and to WO2 Terence Francis Malone who passed away in 1986.



Semper Fi