

# FIREFIGHT

By

Joe E. Abodeely

The Tet Offensive of 1968 began on January 31, 1968. Major cities, towns, and installations such as Saigon, Hue, and Khe Sanh were subjected to violent attacks by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) with the intent to incite a major uprising by the Vietnamese people against their American protectors. Contrary to what Walter Cronkite and other media purveyors of prevarication said to the public, the offensive was a disastrous military failure. 20/20 hindsight has shown this to be true.

In the later part of February 1968, I was an infantry lieutenant, second platoon leader of Delta Company of the 2nd battalion 7th Cavalry of the 3rd brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division (airmobile). We had been patrolling south of our position--a base camp with 175 millimeter and 8inch guns. I think we were only around twenty-five "clicks" (kilometers) from Hue, the walled imperial city with much beauty and great history, which had suffered intense fighting. We were right near Highway 1 on the main supply line to Hue and had set up a defensive perimeter with the artillery near a group of old French buildings, which were once a convent or monastery, or so I vaguely recall.

The 1st Cavalry Division or the "1st Air Cav", as we were more commonly known, was the first airmobile division of the U.S. Army and the first division to be deployed to Viet Nam. We did not usually travel by tanks or trucks or jeeps or armored personnel carriers; we either walked or were transported by helicopters. We also received our logistical and frequent fire support from helicopters. On this day, February 27, Captain Roper (the C.O.) called me over to his C.P. and said "Skeeter" (as he used to call me and as we looked at a map); "I want you to take your platoon and go north along the river." We were hoping to make contact with the enemy.

I got my platoon ready—we checked our weapons, ammo, smoke and fragmentation grenades, gear, radios and SOI (signal operating instructions), and C rations. We walked out of the base camp perimeter and proceeded on our mission. Occasionally, we would hear the artillery at the base camp pound away on fire missions directed in support of units at the ancient city of Hue. The marines and a couple other units of the 1st Cav really saw hell during the battle of Hue. And these big guns had supported them.

It had been raining for days, but the sun was out this day. My platoon moved along in relatively open areas in a modified squad column for ease of movement, control, and security. I formed the platoon into three squads—each with a PRC-25 radio, and I had two RTOs (radio/telephone operators) with PRC-25s at my side for constant communication. When we got into jungle, we went into single file with

troops posted as flank security, and I positioned my RTOs and me behind the lead squad for the best command and control and reaction capability.

We came to a village, which was deserted except for an old man who had his nose cut off. His face had the triangle scar of where his nose should be (like the triangle cut in a Halloween pumpkin). He told us that there were no V.C. (Viet Cong) in the area. Sergeant Duk (pronounced Duke), an ARVN interpreter along with us, did the questioning; and neither Duk nor I believed this guy. We left him and moved through the empty village. It was ominous that no one else was around.

As we moved along on our patrol, we were still moving in a platoon column formation with my RTOs and me positioned behind the lead squad. I heard small-arms fire up in front of my lead squad. Since we all had stopped to eat lunch (our Cs), I checked to see what was happening up front. Specialist 4 Sanders (the point man) told me that he saw what appeared to be an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam soldier) who fired at him. The ARVNs were the soldiers of the Republic of South Viet Nam—the people we were there to protect from the communist NVA (who invaded from the north) and the Viet Cong who were insurgents and “terrorists” to the people and government of South Viet Nam. Sanders said he shot at the ARVN, and he thought he hit him. He said he thought the guy was an ARVN because he was wearing green fatigues. Whoever this guy was, he wasn't friendly.

We moved to the area where Sanders described, and we saw a small ditch. We also saw some blood, which indicated that Sanders hit the "ARVN." At about the time we found the blood, a small "bubble" chopper flew overhead nearby and we heard automatic weapons fire apparently directed at the chopper. I did not want to pursue the "ARVN" whom we thought did the firing at the chopper because it looked like he was leading us away from our objective--which was to proceed along the river heading north.

We ignored his firing as we continued along the river. Finally, we got to a road, which went over a small wooden bridge, which traversed a small stream. There were trees and other thick foliage around the bridge and stream. The platoon carefully and quickly crossed the bridge and assembled behind and around an abandoned stone house surrounded with trees and other vegetation. On the side of the house opposite our location was a rice paddy clearing with a tree line and stone buildings approximately a couple hundred meters away.

Sanders came back to my location and said, "2-6, I just saw about twelve or thirteen NVA moving along in a trench" off to our left front. "2-6" was my call sign and nickname. The "2" meant second platoon, and the "6" meant leader. He assured me they were NVA because of their khaki uniforms and pith helmets.

I immediately tried to get everyone assembled in a good defensive position around the house because we weren't dug in and were

extremely vulnerable. All of a sudden all hell broke loose! RPG (rocket propelled grenade) rounds started coming in exploding on the other side of the stone house. Automatic weapons fire seemed to come continuously from our left front, front, and right front. Bullets were popping by us no matter where we moved.

I saw Sanders lying in a prone position pumping out a lot of rounds from his M-16. I saw a bullet hit his steel pot (helmet) and throw sparks as it glanced off. Sergeant Vivo, Sanders' backup point man, stood up behind Sanders and fired several rounds. All of a sudden he got hit in the arm and in the torso.

Some of us were able to get into one of the NVA trenches near our position for cover. Bullets were coming from everywhere, and we expended a lot of ammo in return fire. A blonde kid we called "Smitty" was firing his M-60 machinegun from an old leafless tree. He was standing up behind the tree making the machinegun spew forth its rain of steel as fast as the metal links of the ammunition belt would allow without jamming the gun. Since he was not behind cover, he took a round clean through his arm. We got him to our location in the trench, gave him morphine; and he slept throughout the rest of the firefight.

When Sergeant Vivo got hit, Doc Halverson (my medic) and I crawled out of the trench under heavy enemy fire and dragged Vivo back to the trench. Vivo was gurgling; he had been shot in the arm, spun around, and shot in the lung. I found out later that he got transported to Tokyo and lived. I now had five men wounded (three with the first in-coming RPGs), Smitty, and Vivo.

Lieutenant Steelman, the artillery forward observer who came along with us, was trying desperately to get some artillery support for us. He kept calling on his radio for artillery, but all the guns were trained on Hue because there was a lot of action going on there, so we couldn't get artillery. I saw Sergeant Rose take out a C ration can of apricots, open it, and start to eat. I asked him what the hell he was doing, and he said, "Sir, we're surrounded; we can't go anywhere; so why not eat the apricots?" There was some logic to his thinking. But I had a firestorm to contend with. We were completely surrounded by a much larger and entrenched force; I had wounded men; and we could not get artillery support. Things were not good.

At one point we tried to see if we could get back across the bridge. I asked a young sergeant to take a few men to see if they could back over the bridge. He said, "Sir, we'll get killed if we go out there." As scared as I was I knew I was going to have to lead a few men to check out a withdrawal route. I took my RTO (radio/telephone operator) and a few other men, and we slowly eased out of the NVA trench and low-crawled to a furrowed field. Bullets were still flying everywhere as we hugged the earth for dear life. As our mini "patrol" eased back toward the little wooden bridge, two snipers in trees at the bridge started firing at us. They pinned us down, and we couldn't move. Lieutenant Steelman was able to get us an ARA (aerial rocket artillery gunship). It was a Huey armed with rocket pods and two M-60 door-gunners. We were the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav, so we had the lift ships to haul troops and logistics; and we had the gun-ships—the ARAs on call. As we inched toward the bridge, the

snipers kept us pinned down, so we lay flat in the furrows of the field. I could hear the snap of the bullets breaking the sound barrier as they passed by. We hugged those furrows for dear life. We directed the ARA to fire on the trees with the snipers. The helicopter made a couple of passes firing rockets. The screaming hiss of the rockets, which seemed to go right over our heads, convinced me we would be hit by "friendly fire". I just knew they would hit us—but they didn't. The gunship did a good job of hitting where we told him, but the snipers were still there. We crawled back to the trench after the unsuccessful attempt to get back across the bridge.

The firefight continued; and at one point, we called in a couple medevac choppers for our wounded. Prior to their arrival, Sergeant Blank, my platoon sergeant, and I used machetes to try to clear a LZ (landing zone) so they could land. We hacked at saplings and brush and made a suitable LZ to pick up our wounded. For some mysterious reason, the NVA firing lightened up as we were clearing the area.

As the medevac helicopters began their descent and then landed, the NVA quit firing. We loaded the five wounded troopers on the choppers, and they took off. After the medevac choppers were in the air, out of the fighting, and on their way to save lives, the firing started up again. To this day, I don't know why the NVA stopped shooting when they did, but I'd like to think they recognized the big Red Cross on the front of the medevac ships and thereby honored the Geneva Conventions.

While all of these events were occurring, we of course notified Heavy Bones 6 (my C.O.), and he was bringing the first and third and mortar platoons up to give us some support. It seemed to take forever for them to get to our location.

Prior to their arrival, we were able to get some "4-Deuce" fire support. I never really appreciated the effectiveness of the 4.2-inch mortar until that day. When those 4.2-inch mortar rounds were called in, they came crashing down in the open rice paddy and tree line in front of us. The explosions were tremendous--trees were flying, smoke was rising--the "thump-thump", "thump-thump" had rhythm. One has to remember that a 4.2-inch round is like a 105 howitzer round; so we finally got our artillery, after all.

As Captain Roper (Heavy Bones 6) got closer to our location, he tried to pin point where we were. We'd guided him to our location over the radio, but it was difficult for the rest of the company to know where we were because we had traveled through some jungle; and now, we were taking cover in NVA trenches. To make matters even worse, first platoon was "reconning by fire" as they were approaching us from our right rear. They were shooting randomly into the jungle to secure their path of approach. Now, we had to worry about getting hit by our own guys. We stayed low, and eventually, Delta Company got to the tree line to the right of the NVA as we observed them. My platoon laid down a base of fire as the company minus (the other two rifle platoons and the mortar platoon) acted as the maneuver force. We let loose with our

M-16s, M-60s, and M-79s.

After the company swept through the enemy positions, we regrouped south of the wooden bridge. The company ran into what was estimated to be an NVA company or regimental headquarters. It was right on the direct supply line to Hue. Some of the guys told me that there was commo wire all over the place indicating a major headquarters. The Cav troopers killed an NVA officer, and one of them got his 9-milimeter pistol as a souvenir.

We called in an air strike to level the whole area, but we had to get a good distance from the target area. I think we moved about a click away, and a jet roared in and dropped its thunderous payload. We were in a prone position on the ground when the explosion occurred. The ground shook, and it was extremely loud. After the blast, I heard this whirling-buzzing sound heading my way. Then a “plop”! About two feet from my leg was a 6-inch by 5-inch chunk of metal fragment from the bomb still smoldering in the dirt.

Captain Roper and Lieutenant Gayheart, the mortar platoon leader, said I did a really good job that day. I had five guys wounded; none killed. It was that day that I made up my mind I would not lose any of my men if I could help it. By the end of my tour, I had kept my promise.

I put Sanders in for the Silver Star, and he got it. Other decorations were also awarded—none to me. I got the satisfaction that I led my men the way an infantry officer is supposed to lead, but more importantly, I kept them alive. The survival instinct and my training as a combat infantry unit commander served me well.

The day had been terrifying, exhilarating, challenging, ultra stressful, and emotionally draining, but I learned a lot about the meaning of life, infantry tactics, and myself from that experience. After Lieutenant Gayheart complimented me, I went over behind a big tree so nobody could see me and cried.

Joseph E. Abodeely, Colonel, USA (Ret.)

-----

**The following photos are all after Khe Sanh.** All of the photos are post Operation Pegasus, except a photo of my 3<sup>rd</sup> squad at a bunker. The photos are related in that they all depict persons involved in the relief of Khe Sanh. They were all the “tip of the spear.”

The bugle is the one used to play the Cavalry “charge” going into Khe Sanh after we cleared Route 9:



Joe Abodeely, in front of a bunker:





The below platoon depicted was the lead platoon of the lead company of the battalion (2/7 Cav) which cleared Route 9 to Khe Sanh Combat base to end the siege.

Joe Abodeely, kneeling left front, and his platoon RVN 1968:

