

The Battle of **LIBERTY BRIDGE**



“In war, there are no unrounded soldiers.” ~José Narosky

An Hoa, Vietnam 1969

By Gary Forston, Staff Sergeant USMC (Retired)

1800 hours, 18 March 1969: We just finished feeding a small contingent of Marines and Seabees. The small mess hall was cleaned up. The cooks and mess man were busy writing letters home, laying around in their bunkers having a smoke, engaged in small talk about rotation dates, or just dreaming of going home. Later, some drifted off to sleep or listened to armed forces Vietnam radio. Across the valley, bright green tracer bullets crept skyward toward the blinking lights of Huey and cobra helicopters. The choppers answered back with heavier volleys of bright red tracers. Here and there parachute flares illuminated the sky. Shouts from the Marines in phu-lac-6 could be heard: “Get some! Get some!”

On a small hill northwest of An Hoa, where one of the most deadly single battles of any 1st Division out-fit of 1969 was fought, 72 North Vietnamese gave their lives for their hopeless cause. Shortly after 2 a.m., March 19, one company of NVA crept within mortar range of the Liberty Bridge CP and began pumping a gargantuan number of mortar and rocket rounds onto the hill.

0200 hours, 19 March 1969: I awoke to the sound of heavy explosions. Coming in such great numbers, the explosions sounded like the staccato of a machine gun magnified many times. I leapt from my fighting hole and gazed toward Liberty Bridge Hill. The sight was awesome. The hill was lit up with small explosions from rockets, grenades, artillery and small arms fire. Marine NCO’s were shouting orders to be alert, lock and load. I quickly dispersed the squad around the perimeter and wait for the attack to begin. Another glance toward the hill and it was apparent that the enemy had broken through the lines. The Marines returned fire with artillery, 106 mm beehive rounds, 81 mm mortars and arms fire.

A mortar round landed within the compound, showering the area with dirt and debris. The whole compound came alive with small arms fire. Even the Seabees took part in the fight, they armed themselves with M-16s and an M-60 machine gun and join in the fight.

This was my baptism of fire. I was almost overwhelmed with fear. My mouth was dry. The sweat was rolling off of me and I could feel the overwhelming adrenaline coursing through my body. The realization hit me: these sons of bitches want to kill me.

I let loose a volley of automatic fire from my M-16 and quickly reloaded. The parachute flares filled the sky and drifted lazily downward, creating eerie shadows that danced back and forth, making it difficult to make out the enemy. I was strangely alone in an alien world, my primitive senses had taken over. I wasn't even aware of the other marines around me. All I knew is that death was near and I had to stay alive no matter what happened.

I fired in an arc and the noise was deafening. Then as suddenly as it began, the firing ceased.

As daylight neared, I approached the base of the Liberty Bridge Hill under the sound of sporadic small arms fire. As I reached the top of the hill, I saw heavy black smoke drifting across the hill over artillery entrenchments, mortar pits and the command post. The ground was littered with dead NVA sappers (National Vietnam Army soldiers). They lie there, their bodies twisted and mutilated. There's blood everywhere.

Some of the Marines walked around hollow eyed, some just sat in place with the "thousand yard stare".

The NVA sappers were almost naked except for their shorts. Their arms, wrist and leg joints had leather straps tied tightly around them to cut off the circulation when they were hit with fire. It was a strange and eerie scene. We went back to the business of picking up the bodies of the enemy and placed them on motorized mules (flat carts). We transport them to the hole dug by the Marine engineers or Seabees.

After the bodies were policed up, I made my way to the mess hall to assess the damage there. I discovered that about 80% of the field mess equipment is destroyed. I turned toward the mess supply tent, opened the flap of the



tent and I was greeted with the putrid smell of blood and burning flesh. The smell seemed to stick to me and my clothing. It was so powerful that I can still remember it while writing this account years later. Then I saw the twisted and mutilated bodies of two more NVA sappers. Their flesh and blood was mingled with opened cans of peas and corn that they had been dining on even as the battle blazed on. The air was hot and humid, which elevated the odors of the dead.

On this night, 72 North Vietnamese soldiers died attempting to do what proved to be impossible.

At around 1300 hours, a battalion formation was held in front of the command post. The battalion was called to



attention and the commander read the list of fallen Marines that gave their lives defending the hill that day. We were then given at-ease. As I looked upward at the American flag flapping in the afternoon breeze, I suddenly felt a great euphoria, a fantastic feeling of freedom and indescribable elation. We won. We beat the bastards. At the end of the ceremony, the battalion chaplain lead the battalion in prayer for the fallen Marines of Liberty Bridge.

At 1600 hours, I was informed that I had been appointed the non-commissioned officer in charge of the battalion perimeter defense. I was also told that my cooks were my marine infantry squad for the next nine months of my tour of duty in Vietnam. I'd been saddened to learn that my lead gunnery sergeant, Floyd Keefe, has been killed in the fighting the previous night. Before the battle, he confided to me that he had orders to go home the following day, the 19th of March 1969.

Individual heroism was commonplace that night. The Leathernecks met overwhelming odds, but they mustered up everything they had and defeated the enemy. It's that little spark of devotion to duty, that tiny flame of pride, and most of all, the belief that what they were doing was right.

There were many more battles to be fought before my tour of duty ended. Some were even more bloody than that of Liberty Bridge. But this was my baptism of fire, the one I remember most vividly.

The Battle of Liberty Bridge will long be remembered in the history of great land battles, but for the men of the 1st Bn., Fifth Marines and Battery "D" 2nd Bn., Eleventh Marines, it will remain a special memory where fear met guts, and guts reached the realm of glory for one eternal night.