

ALAN JOSEPH O'BRIEN

CLASS 7-65

is honored on Panel 10E, Row 109 of
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Full Name: ALAN JOSEPH O'BRIEN
Wall Name: ALAN J O'BRIEN
Date of Birth: 4/12/1942
Date of Casualty: 9/17/1966
Home of Record: REVERE
State: MA
Branch of Service: ARMY
Rank: 1LT
Casualty Country: SOUTH VIETNAM
Casualty Province: PR & MR UNKNOWN



1LT O' Brien was assigned to Battery A, 2nd Battalion, 320th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division. He was a Forward Observer serving with Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry when the unit's command post was overrun by an overwhelming enemy force. Details on the incident can be found under the Remembrance "How it Happened" posted by Al Davis OCS Class 3-68A.

To a Friend

We served together before OCS and proudly afterward. I have carried your memory with me all these years. It means a lot for me to finally say goodbye. You are my hero.

Posted by: Jack Sturtevant 11-65
January 30, 2009

How It Happened

Hill 86

On September 17, 1966 Company B, 2nd Battalion 327 Infantry's command post, located on Hill 86 near the village of Tuy An in Phu Yen Province, was attacked and overrun by an overwhelming superior enemy force employing numerous grenades, satchel charges, and automatic weapons, supported by mortars and machine guns.

The attack, which took place in a driving rain storm, was launched at 0030 hours and with such force, the command post defenses quickly collapsed. The enemy force was estimated at over 100 men consisting of NVA regulars, supported by local main force VC. Bravo company's commanding officer, executive officer, an artillery officer

and seven other troops were killed. An additional 15 officers and men were wounded, including the company First Sergeant and the First Platoon Leader, who were both seriously wounded. Every member of the command post element was either killed or wounded in the devastating attack.

During September 1966 Bravo company, along with Alpha and Charlie companies, were participating in Operation Seward in Phu Yen Province. The mission was to protect the rice harvest in the Tuy Hoa and Tuy An areas, and conduct search and destroy operations to locate NVA and VC forces. A number of NVA units, including the 18B and 95th regiments, as well as main force VC battalions, were known to be in the area. The NVA's 5th division headquarters, which had operational control over the 18B and 95th regiments, was also thought to be in the province.

The 2nd Battalion 327th had engaged the same NVA regiments three months earlier during operation Nathan Hale in Trung Luong valley, about 10 kilometers from Hill 86. The NVA lost 437 KIAs in this engagement and the 2nd Battalion 327th earned a Presidential Unit Citation for their efforts. Many members of Bravo company killed or wounded on Hill 86 fought at the battle of Trung Luong and were wounded in action there also.

Bravo company's commanding officer, Captain Joseph B. Mack, thirty-one years old from Marietta, GA, had commanded Company B since May and was known to be an aggressive leader. He was in command of Bravo Company when it was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the battle of Trung Luong in June, and also earlier in the same month at Dak To in operation Hawthorne, which earned Company B another Presidential Unit Citation, making the company one of the most decorated units in Vietnam.

Since finding and fixing enemy targets was one of the most challenging and frustrating elements of combat U.S. troops encountered in Vietnam, Captain Mack had maintained his command post on Hill 86 for almost two weeks in an effort to draw out the NVA/VC forces. To locate the enemy, Bravo company's platoons, broken down in small units, conducted search and destroy patrols and night ambushes over a wide area. Unfortunately on September 17th his plan back fired and the enemy took advantage of the limited security at the CP to inflict a devastating blow to the very heart of the company leadership. Captain Mack died courageously in defense of his country on Hill 86. He was promoted to the rank of Major posthumously.

On the evening of September 16th the activities at the CP were much like the previous night's. In what had become a routine, hot chow was brought in by helicopter, a squad from one of the platoons was relieved from normal night ambush duty to provide security and preparations were made for another night on Hill 86. Intelligence sources had not indicated any unusual enemy activity in the vicinity and the officers and men of Bravo company settled in for what had become a fairly uneventful and monotonous routine for them.

There were, however, some ominous signs that Bravo company was not in for an ordinary night. Two Vietnamese interpreters, who had been with the company for some time providing translation for the Americans in their dealings with the local populace and enemy prisoners, disappeared without warning just before sunset. The interpreters had been considered loyal to the American soldiers, but as the events of that night unfolded it was obvious they had been providing valuable intelligence to the enemy.

The other indication this would not be a typical night at the Bravo company CP was the lack of peasants in the village at the base of Hill 86. Normally the village was bustling with people as many of the rice harvesters, who farmed the fields surrounding Hill 86, lived in the village. When a small detail of men went to the village in the late afternoon to fill canteens for the CP element they noticed there were very few people around. A number of these villagers had been allowed to go to the CP on Hill 86 during the preceding two weeks, providing them the ability to gather intelligence for the enemy.

As sunset approached the command element and the men securing the CP began their preparations for the night. The top of the hill, which was triangular in shape, had two sides with fairly steep access and a gently sloping side that provided easy access from below. The gentle sloped side faced south and led to the village below. The side on the top of the triangle faced north, and the other two sides faced east and west. Since the most vulnerable access to the CP was the finger on the south side, the M60 machine gun crew was positioned there. The west side of the hill top presented another way up from the base as the slope was steep, but could be climbed. Two defensive positions were set up on this side. The east and north sides of the hill had very steep slopes and therefore were not considered to be vulnerable from attack from below.

The hill top was mostly rock and hard packed soil. Even though the CP had been on the hill for two weeks the defensive positions were not improved much due to the difficulty in digging in the soil. Inside the perimeter the situation was the same and holes were barely a few feet deep, hardly providing any protection from the intense mortar barrage, grenade and satchel charge attack that would rain down upon the CP later that night.

As the sun set and the day turned to night it began to rain. Not just a normal rain, but a torrential down pour. The guard rotation was established at the three defensive positions and the command group settled it for what they thought would be a routine, although very wet night.

At 0030 hours, in the driving rain, the first mortar rounds began to land on the CP. Two 50 caliber machine guns also trained on the hill top began firing from enemy positions to the north and east of Hill 86. The mortar rounds landed right on target as the enemy had their weapons zeroed in with deadly accuracy. As many of the

defensive positions provided little or no cover the mortar rounds took their immediate toll, killing and wounding many of the defenders. The 50's also found their marks.

The first wave of the enemy's ground assault began while the mortar rounds were still landing. Enemy sappers throwing satchel charges and grenades attacked and overran the M60 position and sprinted inside the perimeter to the heart of the CP. The explosive devices achieved their deadly objective and many casualties resulted. Many of the Bravo company command group and defenders were hit multiple times by mortar rounds, grenades and satchel charges.

A second assault was then launched by the enemy. In this assault approximately 100 enemy soldiers led by a NVA officer, blowing a bugle, charged up the hill. With the M60 machine and its crew having been wiped out, the enemy soldiers met no resistance and ran directly into the center of the perimeter.

The remaining men in the two positions on the west side of the hill, not killed in the initial mortar and grenade attack, attempted to provide fire support. With the visibility close to zero due to the driving rain and the confusion created by the attacking force now inside the perimeter, the few men in the defensive positions were not able to mount any type of counter attack.

PFC Douglas Field, twenty years old now living in Peachtree City, GA, wounded in the initial mortar attack and later by grenade fragments, recalls he stood up and began firing his weapon at shadowy figures in khaki uniforms and black pajamas inside the perimeter, killing or wounding several. He also recalls seeing his squad leader, Staff Sergeant James McGill, stand up and attempt to fire a LAW (Light Anti-Tank Weapon) at a group of enemy soldiers. PFC Field remembers thinking the LAW is a tricky weapon to set up and fire under normal circumstances and how difficult the task would be in these conditions. Sergeant McGill seemed to be suspended in time as he prepared to fire the LAW. Just as he fired it, Sergeant McGill was hit and crumbled to the ground. PFC Field recovered from his wounds and returned to B Co, volunteered for a second tour in 1967 and completed his service in 1968.

There were individual battles and acts of courage going on all over the hill top. First Sergeant Thomas Pulliam, forty one years old now living in Sanford, North Carolina, and a World War II and Korean War veteran was grievously wounded in the battle, losing an eye and suffering a serious leg wound. Despite his injuries Sergeant Pulliam became engaged in hand to hand combat with one of the enemy soldiers. In the fight he lost his jungle fatigue jacket, in the pocket of which was his gold Gruen watch. The watch was found after daybreak by a member of Bravo company's third platoon, Sp4 Four Anthony Burgee. Sergeant Pulliam was medivaced for his injuries and assumed he would never see it again. Thirty-three years later Sergeant Pulliam and Sp4 Burgee were reunited at an awards ceremony at Ft Campbell, KY to honor the men of the 2nd 327 with the Presidential Unit Citation for the Battle of Trung Luong. At that time Sp4 Burgee gladly returned the watch to its rightful owner. First

Sergeant Pulliam retired after a long distinguished career in the Army as a Command Sergeant Major.

1Lt. Louis McDonald, Platoon Leader of Bravo company's first platoon now living in California, also displayed great personal courage during the assault. He was wounded several times including being hit by an explosion from a satchel charge, which he was able to turn away from at the last possible second before it would have exploded directly in front of him. He still sustained serious injury from the blast, but he would have been killed if he had not taken the evasive action. Despite being seriously wounded, Lt. McDonald was able to kill or wound several of the enemy soldiers. After the attack was over he rallied the few remaining Bravo Company soldiers that were able to stand and fight and formed a tight perimeter, consisting of himself, PFC Field and PFC Donald Lombardi, the company commander's RTO. He also cared for the many wounded men. 1Lt. McDonald retired as a Lt. Colonel after a distinguished career in the army.

During the time the enemy soldiers were on the hill they took many of Bravo company's weapons and the men's personal effects, some of which were found the next day in the village at the base of the hill. As the VC were searching for Bravo company defenders still alive, they kicked and prodded several men who lay on the ground wounded. PFC Field and PFC Lombardi, both wounded, were able to remain still and were not shot. Lt. O'Brien, who had just joined the company as the new forward observer was not so lucky. He was shot and killed when he called out after being kicked by an enemy soldier.

1Lt. George Pearson, the company's executive officer, was due to rotate to a staff position and 1Lt. McDonald was to become the new XO. Lt. Pearson was killed in the attack and Lt. McDonald severely wounded.

While the battle on top of Hill 86 raged on, the 2/327th battalion command post, located near the village of Tuy An, was monitoring the situation. Concern had already developed as the RTO in the battalion CP was unable to raise Bravo company at 0030 hours for the normal situation report. Alpha and Charlie companies had reported a negative situation report, but there was no response from Bravo. At 0125 hours the battalion CP monitored a transmission from Bravo's CP that clearly indicated a serious situation was unfolding. Loud explosions, machine gun fire and screaming Vietnamese voices were all that could be heard, apparently from an open keyed handset from one of Bravo's radios.

Unable to raise anyone on the radio on Hill 86 the battalion executive officer, Major John Gilboux, considered his options. Major Gilboux was acting on behalf of 2/327 battalion commander Lt Col Joseph Wasco, who was on R & R. One option was to call an air strike on the hill as it was becoming apparent the Bravo CP had been overrun and, unable to contact any one on the hill, from all appearances there were no Bravo company personnel still alive. Due to the weather, an air strike or gun ships were not feasible. Finally Major Gilboux contacted Bravo's third platoon leader

and ordered him to advance to the hill ASAP. All of Bravo company's platoons were spread out over a 2500 meter area in night ambush positions, but third platoon was closest at 800 meters.

Lt. Robert Meager, 3rd Platoon Leader and his men advanced to the hill as quickly as possible. As his men approached the hill they observed a large enemy force in the village at the base of the hill. In the ensuing fire fight Lt. Meager's men killed 15 enemy soldiers. At 0245 Lt. Meager arrived on the hill. He made contact with Lt. McDonald to assess the situation and set up security around the perimeter. He also requested a flare ship and artillery around the village where the VC were seen fleeing.

Lt. McDonald, despite being severely wounded, and Lt. Meager organized the efforts to care for the WIAs. There were 15 men wounded in the attack, some like 1st Sergeant Pulliam, suffering grievous injuries.

Due to the continuing heavy rain the medevac choppers were not able to reach the hill until 0615. The first chopper, with the most severely wounded men, lifted off the hill at 0630, drawing fire as it took off. There were VC soldiers spotted in a number of locations near Hill 86 by the 327 recon platoon, indicating the enemy was still in the area in significant numbers.

As day break arrived, the reality of the carnage that occurred during the night became readily apparent. While the enemy had inflicted severe casualties on Bravo company's CP, they did not escape without losing many of their own men. Blood trails leading off the hill were everywhere, indicating the VC had dragged off their killed and wounded. There was so much blood it appeared as if 55 gallon drums of the red liquid had been strewn all over the hill top. Many of the bodies of the dead Americans were missing arms and legs. One corpse in the machine gun position was missing both arms and legs, and was headless. The mortar rounds, grenades and satchel charges that rained down upon the defenders of Hill 86 were so numerous there were at least 50 unexploded devices covering the hill top. White paper plates, left over from the previous night's hot chow, were used to mark their locations.

By 0900 all of the KIAs and WIAs were off the hill. Small groups of enemy soldiers were spotted by the 2/327 recon platoon though out the day, indicating the large enemy force that had overrun the hill were moving out of the area to prevent retaliation by the 2/327. The 2/327 would gain revenge for the events of September 17 in future battles, but for the time being the VC had scored a major victory.

One of the lessons learned from the Hill 86 incident was no company CPs were ever allowed to remain in one fixed location for more than 48 hours. While ten men lost their lives and 15 others were wounded on Hill 86, many future lives were saved as

a result of the changes in operating procedures made as a result of this event.
The following 101st Airborne soldiers killed in action on Hill 86, September 17, 1966:

Major Joseph B. Mack, 31, Marietta, GA (promoted posthumously) B Co
Commanding Officer
1Lt George Pearson, 25, Towanda, PA B Co Executive Officer
1Lt Alan J. O'Brien, 24, Revere, MA 2/320 Artillery Forward Observer Team
SSgt Leonard Burrow, 33, Ferguson, MO 326th Engineers
Sgt Michael C. Nations, 20, Dalton, GA Squad Leader, 1st Platoon, B Co
Sp4 William F. Siegert, 19, Duncanville, TX Machine Gun Crew, B Co
Sp4 James A. Lockwood, 20, Sandpoint, ID 2/320 Artillery Forward Observer Team
PFC Dennis Bunting, 19, Neptune Beach, FL Machine Gun Crew, B Co
PFC Atlas J. Smay, 19, Baltimore, MD 1st Platoon, B Co
PFC Frank F. Douglas, 19, Columbia, PA 1st Platoon, B Co

The following 101st Airborne soldiers were wounded in action:

1Lt Louis M. McDonald, 1st Platoon Leader, B Co
1Lt Acevedo, 2/320 Artillery Forward Observer
MSgt. Thomas W. Pulliam, 1st First Sergeant, B Co
SFC James M. Hargrove, 1st Platoon Sergeant, B Co (Died of wounds September 29, 1966)
Sgt. James McGill, Squad Leader, 1st Platoon Squad leader, B Co
PFC Douglas N. Field, 1st Platoon, B Co
PFC Donald Lombardi, CO's RTO
PFC John D Cudmore, 1st Platoon Leader's RTO
Seven unidentified men were also wounded in the attack.

Posted by: Al Davis, OCS Class 3-68A
December 28, 2005