

50 YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, 30 U.S. TROOPS WERE KILLED IN AN ATTACK ON A FIRE SUPPORT BASE NEAR THE VIETNAMESE DMZ.

At Firebase Charlie 2 around April 1971, Don Wilson, Darwin Olesen, Jerry Kemp, Robert Cadena and Mike Bodyl gather around an APC hit by a mine.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY KEMP

DEADLY CLIMAX OF GROUND WAR ON FIREBASE CHARLIE 2

BY RICHARD K. KOLB

“It was our deadliest day in more than three years in Vietnam,” said Society of the 5th Division (the Red Diamond Division of WWII fame) national historian Keith Short. “And it occurred on the 1st Brigade’s last major mission — *Operation Montana Mustang* [April-July 1971] — in-country.”

In the summer of 1971, U.S. forces turned over responsibility for the DMZ to the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN). But before the change was complete, GIs there were struck by a tragedy that turned out to be one of the highest single-incident death tolls of the war.

“A single 122mm rocket made a direct hit on the sandbagged roof and in one screaming flash, [30] GIs were dead,” is how the late author-historian Keith Nolan described it.

At a firebase known as Charlie 2, grunts of A Co., 1st Bn., 61st Inf. Regt., 1st Bde., 5th Inf. Div. (Mech), had come in for the night in May 1971. In this case, the bush would have been much safer.

The firebase, located four miles south of the DMZ among the rolling hills of Quang Tri province and three miles northeast of Cam Lo village, had been under frequent rocket attacks. Troops had almost grown accustomed to the incoming rounds, especially because the

enemy’s aim was often inaccurate.

“You could set your watch by the attacks,” recalled supply Sgt. Bernard Gates of C Btry., 5th Bn., 4th Arty. “Every night at about 1700 hours [5 p.m.] the NVA would drop their rockets on us.”

For three consecutive nights, the NVA had rained 122mm rockets on the base. At 102 pounds and 6-and-a-half feet long, the projectiles have a range of 6.5 miles. They were equipped with time-delayed fuses.

Six hours before the destructive round hit, just north of the base, two rocket sites and their NVA crews were reported. Gunships attacked them and grunts on the ground clashed with the

regulars. During the encounter, two U.S. recon helicopters were shot down with three wounded.

Unfortunately, this did not deter another barrage on Charlie 2. Over a period of 15 to 20 minutes, 11 rockets landed within the perimeter.

On that May 21, evening rain clouds rolled in, concealing the NVA rocket launch site to the north. In the middle of evening chow, GIs had left the mess hall to take cover in a nearby club bunker, 16 by 32 feet.

Even though the bunker was covered by four layers of sandbags and three feet of dirt, the seventh rocket penetrated its protective barrier at 5:44 p.m. When the rocket struck, 65 to 70 GIs were inside.

'SCREAMING AND SCRAMBLING'

"There was a flash and a ringing noise and it knocked me down," said Spec. 4 William Benthimer, an APC driver. "People were pinned by beams and dirt. Guys were screaming and scrambling to get out. It happened so fast — then other guys came over to pull people out."

Gates helped in the rescue: "I volunteered to dig bodies out of the dilapidated bunker. I crawled into a hole to get those guys out. It was pretty messy. There were a lot of bodies in there. I didn't actually know how many until 25 years later.

"Chopper pilots flew in during the middle of the night to take out the bodies. They did one hell of a job. They all deserved medals for bravery."

Nearby units pitched in in other ways: "When Firebase Charlie 2 came under rocket attack, my platoon was setting up an NDP [night defensive position]," said Sgt. David Gahagan of 1st Plt., A Trp., 4th Sqdn., 12th Cav. "One of our track commanders spotted an explosion in and around the base. We radioed the Troop command post that rocket flashes were spotted about two kilometers away.

"We took our compass and shot an azimuth to the flashes and called in counter-battery fire from Alpha 4. The following morning we returned



PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY KEMP

From left, Bill Dodge, Ryan Riska, John Lacey, Jerry Garlinghouse, Andy Ramos and Terry Garrett at Quang Tri City airport, circa July 1970. Most were members of A Co., 1st Bn., 61st Inf. A Company lost 11 KIA in the rocket attack on Charlie 2 on May 21, 1971.

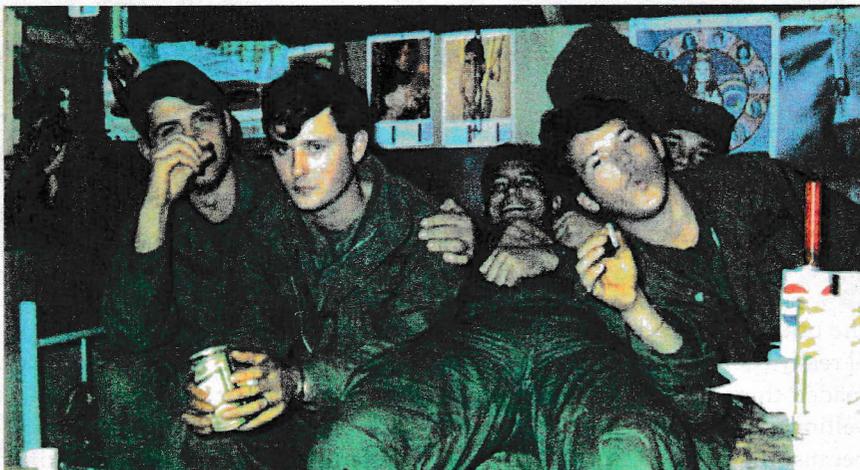


PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRIE OATMAN

Among those killed in the attack was Sgt. Leo Oatman, third from left. Other GIs in the photo were not identified.

to Charlie 2 to resupply and refuel. We saw the bags containing the bodies of the soldiers killed in the bunker. An engineer unit was called in to assist in excavating the ruined bunker."

Some of the men felt it was an awful coincidence that local workers failed to come to work on May 21. "At the time of the attack, I was sitting outside our bunker and saw the rocket being shot out of the rocket tube toward the bunker," remembered Spec. 4 Charles Gray, a rifleman in B Company. "It was a small club near the mess hall. Because the NVA dropped rockets there at chow time, everyone went to the club bunker for cover.

"The rocket hit directly on top of the

club bunker. What I could not figure out is why the Vietnamese who usually worked in the club did not show up for work that day."

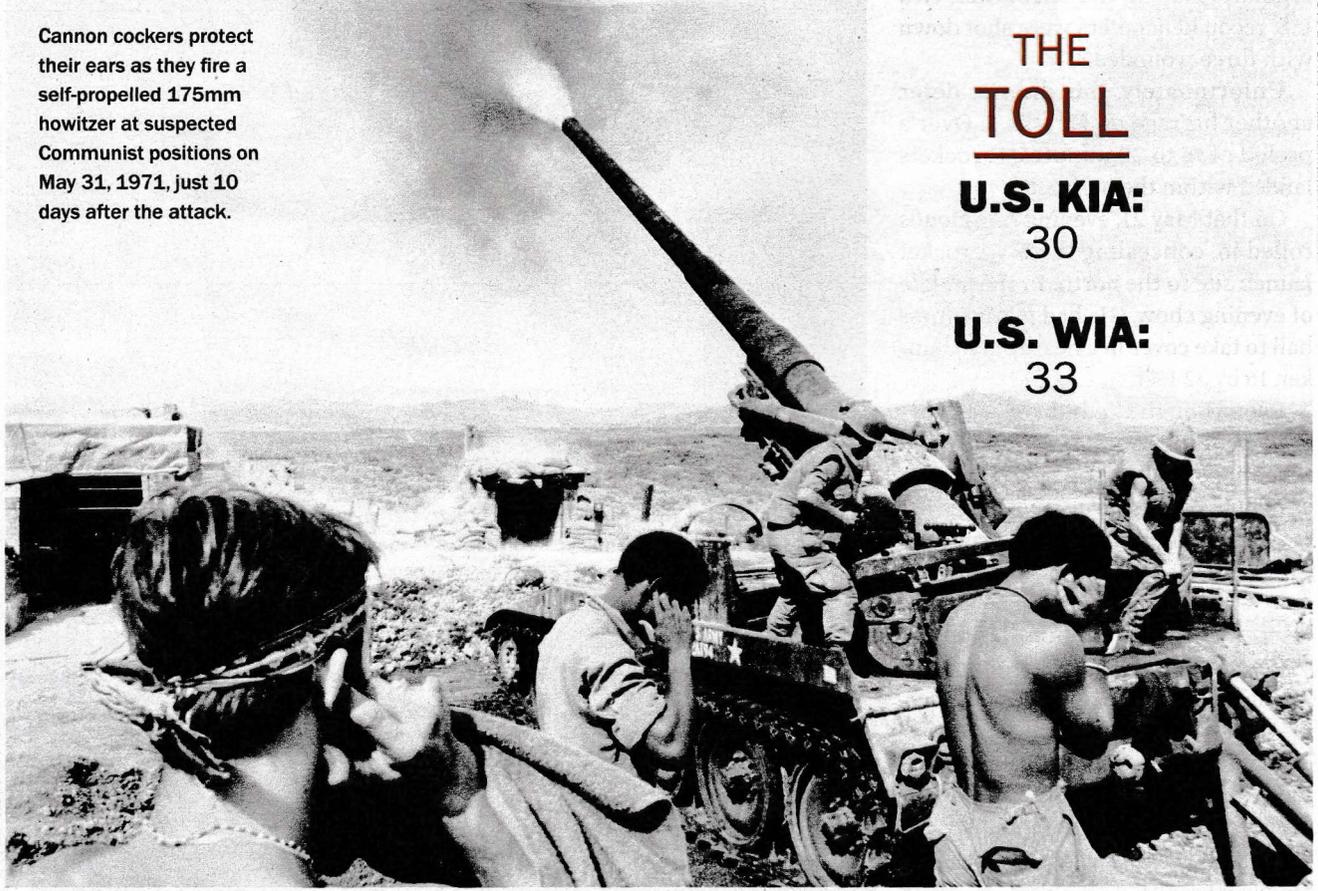
RESCUING AND RETRIEVING

By pure chance, a few of the GIs had just left the club before the rocket struck. Bill Dodge, then an infantryman with A Company, recalls: "I was in the mess hall when the rounds started. It had become pretty much a daily routine. The first sergeant came in and told everyone to go to the club for a drink until it stopped. I went to the club, then headed out and then shortly after ran back.

"I dug down into the rubble from

Cannon cockers protect their ears as they fire a self-propelled 175mm howitzer at suspected Communist positions on May 31, 1971, just 10 days after the attack.

THE TOLL
U.S. KIA:
 30
U.S. WIA:
 33



the other side and we pulled several really badly wounded guys out and loaded them on Hueys. I remember yelling at the medics in the chopper because they were treating the injured so roughly.

“Guess there were so many that they were just trying to do the best that they could. They were throwing guys in like cordwood to haul them out. I remember digging until about 2:30 a.m. and sitting in the mud at the helipad. As usual, the mud was so deep and sticky that you couldn’t even walk. There were so many dead. This was my worst night in Vietnam.”

Spec. 4 Carl J. La Palme, an armor crewman in C Company, had a similar experience. “The first sergeant had ordered the men there because the club was above ground. I had just left it when the rocket landed there.

“I yelled out to my friend, ‘Damn, that rocket hit the club.’ Then I ran to the bunker. On the way, another GI ran right into me. His face was covered

with blood. I took him back to my bunker and put him in my bunk, then ran back to the bunker and called a medic.

“By this time everyone was at the bunker. What we saw was shocking. The rocket had hit right in the middle of the club bunker, driving through the roof before exploding. It literally cut the tie rod beams that held up the roof.

“We started digging the men out of the bunker, using anything we had — shovels, our hands, anything. Confusion reigned: People were running around everywhere. It was about 6 p.m. now, and we started pulling the men out.

“I went to the place where the door used to be. A man was lying face-down in what I call the splits—his back was broken. I pulled him up by his collar and out of the doorway, then laid him on the ground out of the way. He was dead.

“Back in the bunker, I helped to get out the men who were still alive. When I got there, you could hear men praying and crying and screaming for someone to get them out of the fallen debris.

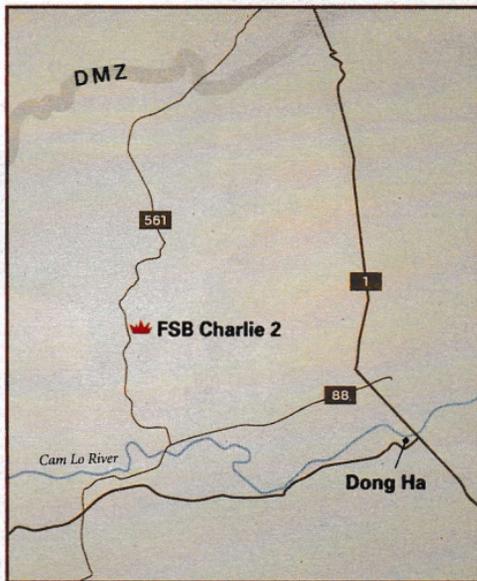
“We worked into the night rescuing the living and retrieving the dead. About midnight, we had the dead stacked on the helicopter pad waiting to be moved to Quang Tri City, brigade headquarters.

“Next day, CBS and NBC news arrived and took pictures of all the helmets and M-16s we had lined up. This was by far the most tragic time I spent in Vietnam.”

TALLYING THE TOLL

Ten sub-units of the 1st Brigade sustained casualties in the bunker. The 61st Infantry was hit hardest, losing 14 men — 47 percent of the 30 Americans KIA. A Company alone counted 11 killed; Headquarters Company, one; D Company, two; and brigade HHC, four.

The 7th Engineer Battalion’s A Company also saw seven members perish in the rubble. A Co., the 77th Armor had one KIA, as did HQ Btry., 5th Bn., 4th Arty. Two batteries from the 26th and 65th Artillery, 108th Arty



Firebase Charlie 2 was situated halfway between the Cam Lo River and the DMZ, just northwest of Dong Ha.

Group, probably there for fire direction control, each had a KIA, too. One grunt from the 11th Infantry died also.

Exactly 50 percent of those killed were infantrymen. Fatalities were split evenly between draftees and volunteers. Age-wise, they ranged from 19 to

45 with 80 percent in their 20s.

Only the sapper attack on FSB Mary Ann the previous March equalled this toll in a single ground incident during the war's last three years. Just one other single hostile action in the 1970s exceeded either toll. That was the helicopter shoot-down at LZ Judy on Aug. 28, 1970, which claimed 31 GIs' lives.

Besides the KIA, 33 soldiers were wounded in the attack.

John Estrada of A Co., 1st Bn., 61st Inf., was with the 5th Mech to the very end. Because he was on R&R on that fateful day, he narrowly missed the deadly strike. "Good friends of mine died on May 21," he says. "For many years, I buried those memories. During the unit's last few months in-country, the loss hung like a pall over our heads. But we maintained. Finally, within only the last few years did I come to terms with it and begin reconnecting with my fellow vets at reunions."

Less than two months after the rock-

et attack, on July 10, the last 500 members of the 5th's 1st Brigade departed Charlie 2. Two separate contingents of 50 American artillerymen and technicians each remained behind at Charlie 2 and Alpha 4 to monitor radar sensors and man a battery of 8-inch guns.

America's last days on the DMZ ended much as they had begun. From now on, the war in this no-man's land would be waged by ARVN. The 1st Brigade, 5th Division, left Vietnam on Aug. 27, 1971.

Though U.S. infantry units remained on the ground for another year, never again would they sustain casualties even approaching those at Charlie 2. ✪

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