



The Quintessential Quint

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By: Andrew B. Wilson

On this day – and, indeed, on many other days of every year going all the way back to 1968 – retired St. Louisan Gary E. Quint stops to give thanks for the fact that he and some of his Vietnam wartime buddies are still alive. Caught in the jaws of a U-shaped ambush by a much larger enemy force, he believed that there was little or no chance that any of them would live to see the light of another day – let alone another 50 years.

Separated from others in two mechanized U.S. Army platoons, many of them already killed or wounded, and hunkered face-down behind an 18-inch high dike in a paddy field, he experienced a my-life-flashing-before-my-eyes moment. “I totally zoned out,” he recounted, “disconnected into a rapid slide show in my head. Beginning as quick flashes of scenes from my early life, long since forgotten, progressing in chronological order to a family scene at a point just before I left for Vietnam.”

Waking up from that dream (“While obviously only seconds had passed it seemed like an hour or more”), he peeked over the top of the low dike and saw supremely confident North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers advancing in the direction of the scattered remains of his unit in no particular hurry. They were visibly smiling and engaged in audible sing-song chatter – firing their

rifles as they went about what they clearly saw as an easy mop-up operation. The beginning of the end?

Hardly. A minute or two later, Quint heard the distinctive roar of M-113 armored personnel carriers (also known as APCs or “tracks”) – the first crashing at full speed through a line of hedgerows that had constituted one of the two extended arms of the U-shaped ambush. In a manner of speaking, it was the U.S. cavalry arriving in the nick of time.

Prelude to the Battle of An Bao

Fought 5–6 May, in Bing Dinh Province, South Vietnam

RIP: 22 American soldiers killed in action

This is Gary Quint’s story and that of several other combatants, including my own brother, Lieutenant Harry B. Wilson, and his company’s commander, the hard-charging and intrepid Captain Jay Copley, who spearheaded the rescue mission in what came to be known as the Battle of An Bao. On April 28, 2011, Capt. Copley was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Though badly injured, Copley survived the battle. He lives today with his wife in Columbus, Georgia, and recently celebrated his 86th birthday.

All of the Americans in this story were part of 1st Battalion of the 50th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army, which was engaged in action in Vietnam from 1967 to 1970. The battalion consisted of four companies (A, B, C, and D). In this battle, C Company under Copley’s command, with about 120 men, raced to the rescue of a large part of A Company under the acting command of Lt. Dennis Hinton, with 50 men. Hinton was killed by sniper fire in the first 30 minutes of the battle.

The story begins at Landing Zone (LZ) Uplift, which was the battalion’s command post. On this same day, C Company arrived at the site and was scheduled to take over base defense from A Company the following day. This was standard procedure, with responsibility for defense of the battalion’s base camp rotating between companies on roughly a weekly basis.

At 7:48 a.m., Lt. Hinton departed from LZ Uplift with nine APCs, or tracks, with orders to search for an NVA regimental command post somewhere in the central coastal plain to the north (going up the asphalted Highway 1) and west (across dirt trails and coastal flatland). As it happened, the distance between what became the battlefield and the command post was not far – just five kilometers as the crow flies, but double that by road in having to skirt around a hilly mass – known to the soldiers as “Miss America” because of its supposed resemblance to a reclining woman.

Quint, a tall, lanky man who had been drafted into the army within a few weeks of his graduation from Lindbergh High School in 1966, was riding in the command track with Lt. Hinton as his radio operator.

Late in the morning, A Company broke into big rice paddy field. Except for a wide opening at the

northeast corner of the field, it was bordered by long lines of thick hedgerows that backed up on tall palm trees. Uncomfortable with the situation, Hinton ordered a strafing of the hedgerows and sent out foot patrols to probe into the hedges and palms. Satisfied, at about 11:40 a.m. he told the men they could break for lunch.

“The respite was short lived,” Quint recalls, “Alpha (A Company) was literally out to lunch when the first high-explosive round aimed at the command track fell. Fortunately, that one missed. Then – BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. We lost three other tracks in less than a minute” – all of them set ablaze by rifle fire or rocket-propelled grenades.

You can get some sense of the awful speed of the assault from three radio dispatches sent in rapid succession by Quint to the command post (preserved in the battalion’s radio log from the battle):

11:44 a.m. Received one round recoilless rifle fire.

11:45 a.m. Request MEDEVAC (i.e., medical evacuation by helicopter), just had one APC hit.

11:46 a.m. Receiving fire from 360 degrees.

The battalion’s base camp mobilized artillery and air support within the next few minutes. At 12:12 p.m., it radioed back that air strikes were on their way and that C Company had been dispatched from the base to provide on-the-ground support and rescue.

One of the helicopter gunships sent to the embattled rice field was hit with enemy fire and exploded with the loss of four lives. The situation on the ground became increasingly desperate. Inside the command track in the large opening behind the turret, Lt. Hinton stood fully exposed from the belt up. He was trying both to direct the movement of the craft and to direct its firepower against the enemy. When the track became stuck on a berm, he gave his last order. He directed everyone to “leg it” – meaning to evacuate out the back side of the vehicle and continue the battle on the ground. Hit in the head by sniper fire a moment later, he died instantly.

C Company to the Rescue

In a personal account of the battle, Lt. Harry Wilson gave this account of how C Company entered the battle:

We pulled into LZ Uplift in mid-morning on 5 May 68, supposedly for a stand-down after a long, hard time in the field. We got orders to mount up again on the tracks after a very short period, with almost no knowledge of what we were doing other than that A Company was in trouble over Miss America, a line of hills. We went down Highway 1 at top speed (over 40 mph on pavement), with Capt. Copley continually radioing me (the point platoon) for more speed. He was hammering for speed.

After turning west off the highway, Wilson’s 3rd platoon APC encountered heavy small arms fire. He pulled up to return fire, but, as Wilson put it, “Capt. Copley in the command track (following the point platoon as usually did), just kept going past us through the incoming fire – without holding up at all – and burst out into the dry paddies, and we followed . . . The captain, and then

we, just drove right through a serious firefight.”

It appears that the NVA battle planners had devised a double and perhaps even a triple ambush for the Americans. Having marshalled an unusually large force in the immediate vicinity of the battle (more than 1,000 men with heavy equipment and firepower), it is plain that they fully expected and were prepared for the U.S. battalion command to send another company (and possibly a third company) out to rescue the first company.

Capt. Copley spoiled this plan by hurtling straight through both ambushes and exposing NVA forces to heavy casualties of their own. The captain told me: “Perhaps we shocked them as much or more than they shocked us. We were able to consolidate and pull Alpha Company in with Charlie Company, though both of us suffered heavy casualties.”

Postscript to the Battle of An Bao

C Company arrived at the scene at about 12:45 p.m. – and just about 60 minutes after A Company first came under fire. Gary Quint – who went on to a 43-year-long career with the Kirkwood Police Department ending with his retirement in 2012– was one of those who was scooped up and taken to safety. Today he says: “If they [C-Company] had even stopped for a cigarette, we would have all been dead.”

About the Author



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Fellow and Senior Writer*

A former foreign correspondent who spent four years in the Middle East and served as Business Week’s London bureau chief during Margaret Thatcher’s first two terms as Britain’s prime minister, Andrew is a regular contributor to leading national publications, including the American Spectator, the Weekly Standard, and the Wall Street Journal.

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