

## Syracuse University Veterans Writing Group – non-fiction

### The Beacon Strike

By Don Western – “Fess”

It was a company movement on to the mountain side of the Thung Duc corridor to check out a beacon strike, a place where B-52s had dropped bombs. There were rumors about the mission, maybe factual but probably not, that were repeated among the grunts. Their truth did not really matter, when this action was done it would have its own history with the rumors replaced with stories that fade or are amplified over time.

In the fall of 1969 the three Bravo company platoons were often separately located on high ground in parts of the valley corridor southwest of DaNang, on hills that served as a base for day patrols and night observation posts. For this action the platoons were brought together at the hilltop base near where the valley floor met the rise of land forming the north valley wall.

The company hiked up from the valley floor, headed for the area up on the mountainside where the bombs from the B-52s were to have wrecked an NVA camp or staging area. It reached a location thought to be near the beacon strike although the ground was not disturbed by bomb craters. The company stopped in an area where the forest cover and undergrowth were not so dense to set up a perimeter from which to run patrols.

The Captain told a lieutenant to check out a faint trail that led further up the mountain. That lieutenant told the third platoon sergeant to pick five soldiers and have them move up the trail about 300 meters. He chose five from the second squad.

It was short patrol so neither a medic nor guns unit was included, but one grunt was assigned as the radioman. The platoon sergeant and soldiers reviewed topo maps and marked with grease pencils the best guess about the path to follow and the terrain to be covered.

The grunts reset their equipment after the long hike up the mountain. They took the c-rat cans of food out of their flak jacket pockets and put them in the packs to be left behind; rechecked that rifles were locked and loaded; tested magazines to be sure the spring followers were free and would push each round into the chamber; kept hand grenades but left behind the signal flares; kept their duty belts with canteens, bayonets for those who had them, and first aid bandages.

Shelly started on point, then CR, Namesake, Fess with the radio, then Menninger.

As the fire team left the company area the vegetation became thicker. The grunts started out in a slow walk, then crouching as they got farther from the company position. The faint trail turned as it worked around rocks and trees. The group moved slowly, at times stopping and knelling

with time to consider tripwires and booby-traps. The grunts were within five feet of each other, not clusterfucked but close enough to keep contact.

About 200 meters up, bursts of automatic gun fire covered the trail – a heavier sound than the clap of an AK-47. Each grunt hit the ground. Fess fell to his left to keep his right arm free for the rifle and landed on the radio, his left arm went numb and he thought he was shot.

The incoming rounds buzzed and made ripping sounds as they hit the leaves. There was no clear idea of the source other than it was from ahead somewhere.

The firing was brief, maybe 20 seconds. CR yelled that Shelly was hit. He began pulling Shelly back down the trail, and Namesake then Fess and Menninger helped. The company was calling over the radio “ Bravo 3 india, Bravo 3 india, Bravo 3 india – Bravo 6” . Fess ignored it. Shelly was shot between his nose and left eye. Part of the back of his head was gone. He was not responsive. He was dead.

Shelly’s rifle and other equipment, except his helmet, had stayed entangled with his body. The grunts considered what to do while caught up in the adrenaline rush of close live fire and death: there was too little fire for a full ambush; would the enemy assault?; could they leave Shelly, maybe flank the trail and bushwhack toward the incoming?; or get fire support?; although too far from An Hoa for artillery and it would have to be air support that had to go through the company and battalion. The grunts agreed not to try to get the helmet.

Fess radioed the platoon, told Clabow, the platoon radioman, there was one casualty, that the team was returning down the trail and do not shoot them. Fess did not wait for the lieutenant or platoon sergeant to give any orders.

They scrambled back down the trail. Menninger and Fess dragging Shelly, and CR and Namesake checking for pursuit. When they got close to the perimeter they carried Shelly to the company position, each taking a leg or arm. They put Shelly on the ground in front of the Captain. They held their weapons across their bodies, facing the Captain in a semi-circle. Without prior thought together they stared at the Captain, then in unison imperceptibly leaned toward him while he and the lieutenants and NCOs near him imperceptibly leaned away. In that moment a single consciousness existed among the four grunts: that Shelly’s death belonged to the Captain and he should pay.

Then the moment passed.