

OTHER OPINION

Giving Thanks Atop Hill 875

EARLE L. JACKSON

Two days before Thanksgiving in 1967, three companies of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, about 300 men, moved cautiously up the hill with no name. It was tough going. The riflemen could only see 10 feet in any direction because of the jungle cover.

Charlie and Delta companies were within a couple of hundred yards of the summit. Alpha Company hung back to hack an LZ (landing zone) out of the jungle so that choppers could resupply and carry out the wounded, if necessary.

Hill 875 is in Dako Province, Republic of Vietnam. Dako was the main exit route for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, just a few miles away was Cambodia. It was on this day, in this place, that I, a 22-year-old paratrooper and medic from Plainville, would forever change the way I think about Thanksgiving Day.

As the two infantry companies moved up Hill 875, sniper fire rang out, then mortar fire crashed through the trees. The paratroopers immediately went to the ground for cover and then looked forward to return fire, but there were no targets. That would

soon change.

Near the unfinished landing zone, Pfc. Charles Lozada, a young Puerto Rican soldier from New York, was the first to make contact with the enemy as he covered his Alpha Company's move uphill eastward from the LZ.

Alpha Company was trying to join up with Charlie and Delta companies further up the hill but were pinned down by enemy fire.

Lozada stayed behind and fought off more than 50 North Vietnamese soldiers. He was last seen on his knees, covered with his own blood, still firing his M-60 machine gun from the hip until he ran out of ammunition. On that

day Lozada earned the Medal of Honor for his bravery but lost his life in the process.

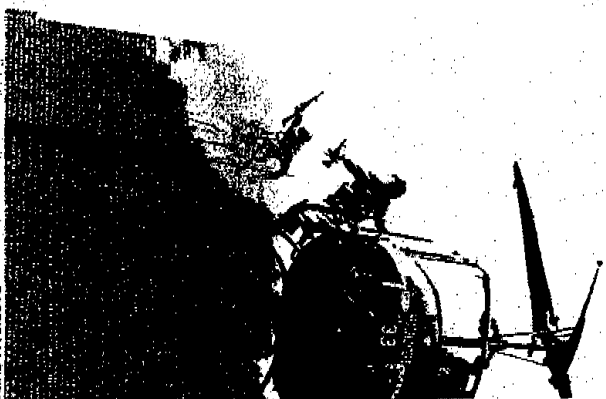
The battle for Hill 875 was now under way and, for the next 50 or so hours, the tide of the battle would turn again and again. There was little water and no food, but the men hung in there, the living lying next to the growing number of dead.

Then the worst possible thing happened. An American Sky Raider missed his target, dropping a 500-pound bomb that crashed through the trees. Instantly 20 paratroopers were killed, including our beloved brigade chaplain, Maj. Charles Waters.

Chaplain Waters didn't have to be in the field, but he always insisted on being up front where his men needed him most. He died, comforting wounded paratroopers. Chaplain Waters was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, America's second highest honor for bravery.

The North Vietnamese commanders sent wave after wave of fresh troops firing downhill at the paratroopers. The noise was deafening. The withering fire was taking its toll. Most of the officers were now dead or wounded and almost all of the medics were dead.

Reinforcements finally arrived



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from the 173rd base camp a few miles away, air strikes and artillery kept the enemy off guard and in their bunkers, but the pounding had little effect on the 10-foot-thick bunker covers constructed by the North Vietnamese.

Like every enemy-held hill in Vietnam,

Hill 875 could only be taken one bunker line at a time, and this would eventually require men to face off against men. Before this battle was over, many more men would suffer and die.

The troops, now in to their second night on Hill 875, continued to hold their ground. No one slept that night; the silence was occasionally broken by the wounded crying out in pain.

There is something gut-wrenching about severely wounded men that I will never forget, and it is that most become delirious and almost always cry out for their mothers. The scars of wounded could not be evanished because of the heavy enemy fire and had to stay on the hill for the night, many died from their unattended wounds.

On Thanksgiving Day morning, the order came down to move up and take Hill 875. At one point, the firing was so heavy it took almost four hours to move 50 meters.

Hill 875 was finally taken. With the hill secured, the battalion commander ordered that hot turkey dinners be sent up from the base camp by chopper immediately. We sat quietly, fully and exhausted from not having slept in 2 1/2 days.

As the sun set on the now barren hill, atop the bunkers that had been occupied by enemy soldiers just hours before, we sat and ate our Thanksgiving dinner in silence. Some men were just too shaken to eat, others couldn't keep the food down in spite of their hunger.

When I look back, it wasn't much of a holiday. 110 young paratroopers died taking Hill 875, and hundreds more were wounded.

On Thanksgiving Day I enjoy my dinner and my family, but I will forever think of Lozada, medics Riggsy and Hester, and many others less fortunate than myself who gave their lives on Hill 875.

If you have trouble finding something to be thankful for, be thankful that you were not on Hill 875 that Thanksgiving Day in 1967.

Earle L. Jackson, a regional director for United Distillers and Vintners in West Hartford, was a medic in Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

What's Your Wish?

If you could have one wish come true this holiday season, what would it be?

The Courant will publish a selection of wishes from readers, old and young, before Christmas. Send your wish to Op-Ed Wishes, The Courant, 285 Broad St., Hartford, CT 06115. Or fax your wish to 862-528-6941. Or e-mail your wish to letters@courant.com.

Wishes should include a day and evening phone number and a home address for verification. Children should include their ages.

The deadline for receipt of all wishes is Dec. 6.

When It Comes To Giving Thanks, Remember Cohen