

Delta Company and the Battle of the 506 Valley, December 17 1966
by Bob March
(Based on Interviews with Delta Company Members and Records from the National
Archives in College Park, MD.)

After darkness fell, the Delta company dead and wounded lay in an open area between the North Vietnamese Army bunkers and the hedgerows. In the light of day it had been a place where anyone who moved was shot, a no-man's-land. PFC Michael Noone had been shot three times; once in the leg and twice in the torso, breaking his ribs and knocking his stomach out of the body cavity. Giant red and black biting ants, known as "Blood Ants", crawled over him, feasting. He used his one good arm to slowly pick them off and bite them in self defense.

In flare lit light, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers crept out to execute the wounded and scavenge from the dead. One approached Noone and peered over him. A flare went off and the enemy soldier ducked down until the light began to recede, then got up and looked Noone directly in the eyes as he feigned death. He put his rifle down and picked Noone up by the pistol belt. Not being familiar with the hook attachment, the North Vietnamese soldier struggled to remove it. As he fiddled with the belt, the ants began biting, causing him to drop Noone to the ground, as if throwing back a fish. After searching him, he left him for dead. Michael Noone was one of the lucky ones.

Seven hours earlier, Delta had been alerted to rush to a Pickup Zone (PZ) and be ready for an air assault. That began the worst of days for the best of men. Based on the number of US casualties, the Battle of the 506 Valley (located north and west of Landing Zone (LZ) Uplift in Binh Dinh Province, and named for the "highway" that runs through the valley), ranks within the top battles of the entire Vietnam War. Yet it is strangely absent from the literature and is not well known except by those who survived.

The Battle of the 506 Valley involved all of the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (1/12th), two companies of 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, a platoon of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry and elements of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, over twenty infantry platoons in total. Thirty-four Cavalrymen were killed and 81 wounded in the 506 Valley that day. Delta Company bore the brunt of the casualties. Half of those killed were in the 2nd and 3rd platoons of Delta and most were hit within a few minutes of one another. D Company, initially the battalion's Combat Support Company (recon, mortars and weapons), had recently been reorganized into a line infantry company. Its 1st platoon continued to be used at the battalion's reconnaissance unit.

SP4 Larry Nolen was concealed in an observation position behind thick bamboo and elephant grass. Sweat dripped down his nose as he sat motionless, waiting. He was part of a six man Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) team (designated "Team 2" in

the battalion log) from the 1st Platoon of D Company, 1/12th, sent to identify NVA activity in the Valley. Eighteen NVA approached the team, carrying mortar tubes and base plates. LRRP 2 watched the NVA moving slowly, cautiously, across their front. A flank NVA scout, walking parallel to the line of march, approached the LRRP 2 positions, checking for the possibility of an ambush. He pushed the bamboo concealment back with the barrel of his AK-47 and looked Larry Nolen right in the eye, three feet away. Pretending not to see Nolen, he let the grass spring back into place. Nolen shot him dead. The team's position was "blown." A running fire fight ensued. Steven Chestnut remembers, "The NVA headed for the cover of a nearby tree line and the LRRP team ran down-slope towards a possible pick-up zone near a small village."

Unfortunately, before they could get there, the team was surrounded by the larger enemy force. One Recon trooper was shot in the elbow and his bone fragments wounded SGT Smith, the team leader, in the lower leg. The team was in trouble and needed help. Fortunately, at 1315 two "Guns-a-Go-Go" (heavily armed black Chinook helicopters) came to the rescue and hosed down the NVA, driving them away. The early afternoon encounter was the first of the day for D Company on a day that would ultimately cost them 17 KIA, its highest one day death toll of the entire war. Yet those 18 NVA would be the most seen by anyone in Delta all day, despite the fact that the rest of Delta was about to engage a much larger force.

Meanwhile, a few kilometers away, the opening act of 506 Valley engagement was well underway. Delta's second and third platoons would shortly be committed; a total of 62 men, only 35 of whom would be left at day's end. The opening round of the 506 Valley battle began at 1003 when C Company 1/8th using an XM-2/E63 personnel detector "people sniffer," made contact with an estimated platoon size NVA force in the hills above the 506 Valley (Map location BR 802803). The NVA fled down the hill towards a village, leaving behind equipment, including a switchboard, which implied the presence of a much larger force. They had been "found", but needed to be "fixed." For this, the 1/9th aerial scouts were deployed. At 1334 they reported that the NVA were dug-in around the village. The squadron's ground platoon (the "Blues") was inserted and immediately they ran into a buzz saw, taking significant casualties, until they pulled back.

By this time it was apparent to Lieutenant Colonel George D. Eggers, Jr., commanding the 1/12th, and responsible for this Area of Operations (AO), that the enemy force was much larger than had been earlier estimated. At 1338, Eggers told the Battalion Operations Officer, Major Leon D. Bieri, to order all 1/12th companies to move to the nearest Pick Up Zone (PZ), and prepare to join the fight. The plan: move A, C and D companies to attack from the north and insert B company to the east to cut off escape. Elements of 1/8th and 1/9th were already deployed from west to south. Major Bieri said over the radio, "It looks like another Hoa Hoi," a successful battle fought just two

months earlier by the battalion. The strategy was simple and classic: find, fix, surround and attack. It had worked as planned at Hoa Hoi. But the vicissitudes of war do not always yield the same outcome.

Delta company hurried to a PZ. On Dec 17 the company was commanded by its Executive Officer, Lieutenant Chester Cox, an Airborne Ranger acting for the CO, CAPT Barnett, who was absent on R&R. At 1540, the second and third platoons led, respectively, by Lieutenants Paul Prindle and Timothy Feener, air assaulted into a Landing Zone (LZ) near Thach Long (2), a village in the 506 Valley. Delta secured the LZ for the battalion's C Company, then moved southeast. Within 15 minutes they made contact.

SP4 Jack Deaton was a married, 22-year-old airborne volunteer, who arrived in Vietnam September 1, 1966. Shortly before the 506 battle, Jack confided to Michael Anderson, the platoon medic, and other members of his platoon, that he had received a letter from home that expressed the wish that he would be killed in Vietnam. He did not elaborate. But he was upset, and his buddies were concerned about him. Caustic letters were common, but wishing a combat infantryman death was extreme. His buddies wondered: "Had someone become a hard-core anti-war activist, or worse a North Vietnamese sympathizer? Had he said something unwise that fueled such sentiment?" Jack would not say. But a pall hung over him on Dec 17, with that letter in his pocket.

As described by Lieutenant Steven Schopp, 1st Cavalry Division History Detachment*, "They [Delta Company] had been on an assault line facing a hedgerow, LT Feener's third platoon on the right, or south end, and LT Prindle's second platoon on the left or north end,...each squad on line facing the hedges. The NVA lay just beyond the second hedgerow but no one was aware of that. The enemy positions were of the cleverest camouflage, impossible to detect." Delta passed the first hedge row, then once out in the open again, not ten feet from the second hedge, [LT Shopp] "the enemy at last revealed their presence with a fusillade of bullets. The surprise was effective. Delta was now in the open with no place to turn except over more open ground.

"The first burst knocked down PFC Timothy Ewing and Corporal Jack Deaton. The NVA, realizing that Deaton was still alive, put another burst in him. The squad leader, SGT Cook, was hit and fell fatally wounded. SP4 Michael Anderson, the medic, moved forward immediately and got to Ewing. A lung had been punctured and Ewing was having trouble breathing, so Anderson tried mouth to mouth resuscitation. Just then an enemy bullet hit across his hand. Anderson continued his job all afternoon and into the night. It was nearly one o'clock the next morning when he stopped to patch his own wounded hand.

"Close to the first squad, machine gunner PFC Roger Hattersley was pinned down in the

open, apparently in a blind spot because enemy bullets kept churning the dirt on both sides of him. He fired all his ammo from there and then ran in the open to where Deaton was lying, picked up 200 rounds and ran back. Hattersley shot up three fourths of this, then he got up and charged the bunker, killing at least one. A bullet hit him in the right shoulder. Somehow he made it back and was later medevac'd. The next day his machine gun was found right next to the bunker.”

The killing continued unabated. Troopers were scattered, dead and wounded laying in the open. The chaos of battle reigned, explosions rent the battlefield, bullets cracked, men yelled and moaned. Time itself became distorted, as it does for those who are near death. Acts of valor abounded.

LT Feener's third platoon, located on the right side of the Delta Company line, was pinned down in the open, as close as 20 feet from the interlocking NVA bunkers and spider holes. They were being picked off one by one. If they moved, they died. The NVA fighting positions were almost impossible to see.

Almost at the same time, LT Prindle's second platoon approached the bunker line, [LT Schopp] “PFC Eleazar Trevino started through a small hole in the hedgerow. A sniper bullet cut him down. SP4 James Jeffers, close behind, could see him and started out to him, but Trevino motioned him back. Someone yelled, 'Stay back, there are snipers all over.' At this time PSG Perpetua and PFC Angel Luna went through another opening in the hedgerow. Perpetua spotted a machine gun bunker and charged for it. He was right on top of it when he was hit. His helmet had eleven bullet holes in it...” (PSG Perpetua was one of the original Delta Company members who landed with the USS Geiger in July 1965. He had extended his tour.) PFC Luna was killed by a sniper as Perpetua fell.

“LT Cox, the acting CO, had been shot. PSG Leemhis crawled over to help Cox. As Leemhis lifted up, a sniper bullet found its mark in his neck and he fell dead next to Cox. PFC Alton Kennedy (medic) was close by treating the wounded and dragging them back out of the fire-swept field. Kennedy made two trips, braving the bullets in spite of pleas for him to stay back. He couldn't bring himself to ignore the pitiful plaintive cries of 'Medic, help, Oh God, help!' Moving out again, Kennedy was wounded on his third trip. His fourth was his last. Kennedy gave his life to save others.”

In late 1966, the 1st Brigade (Airborne) was just beginning to fill its ranks with non-airborne personnel. PFC Richard Rock was the second non-airborne trooper to show up in his platoon and became known as “NAP2”, for *non-airborne person number two*. (The pejorative term “leg” was officially discouraged.) Staff Sergeant (SSG) Forsythe, one of the more senior NCO's and considered to be “tough”, often teased Rock about cowardice. “NAP2, if I see you run away in a firefight, I'm going to fill your back with holes”.

As PFC Richard Rock emerged from the hedgerow, he witnessed PSG Perpetua get shot in the head. People on all sides of him were being hit and falling. Running to a clump of bushes in front of him, he observed bullets hitting the ground that could only have been coming from the trees. So he shrugged off his radio, rolled over, and fired three round bursts into the trees, emptying twelve magazines. He then ran to the nearest dead trooper and took his ammo. In a recent interview Rock explained, "I saw so many wounded and thought 'somebody has to do something to help these poor guys'. Realizing that all the NCO's were dead or wounded, I concluded that 'somebody' was me."

Bullets were still snapping around Rock. He patched up two troopers who were badly wounded, then fired his M-16 at a bunker to no effect. Seeing an M-79 grenade launcher and ammo on the ground, he ran out and retrieved it. He stood up to shoot over the bush in front of him. Hurrying the first "blooper", it sailed about four feet over the bunker. The machine gun chattered. His next shot hit the corner of the bunker opening. On the third shot he stood up, again exposing himself, but he took his time, carefully aiming, controlling his breathing and trigger pull, and sent a round through the bunker opening, silencing the machine gun.

SSG Forsythe and LT Feener attempted to bring in artillery, but because of the terrain, neither was able to pinpoint their map location. They did a position estimate and called in smoke to confirm, but no one saw the smoke rounds. Their position was incorrect by one klick to the east. It almost didn't matter because the proximity of the Delta troopers to the NVA positions and the number of helicopters in the air precluded artillery.

PFC Rock continued to patch up the wounded. He retrieved weapons for those who could hold one, gave them a sector to watch and told them to "kill anything that moves". Grabbing the wounded by the collar, he dragged them back to a safe area, making multiple trips back and forth, still under fire.

Helicopter ARA (Ariel Rocket Artillery) came roaring in but had only momentary effect on the bunkers and wounded some of the GI's. It was called off. (During the battle two helicopters were shot down and seven were damaged so severely that they could no longer fly.)

LT Paul Prindle, near the left side of the Delta Company line, was blocked by a barbed wire fence. As he reached out to cut the barbed wire, PFC Rock saw Prindle's watch casing disappear from his left wrist. The bullet left the base of the watch and the band intact. Undeterred, Prindle reached out again to cut the wire and a bullet hit him in the front of his helmet, passed around the inside, blowing an exit hole out the back, briefly knocking him unconscious.

Like a prize fighter recovering from a knock-down, LT Prindle jumped up, grabbed a machine gun, and yelled, "Let's go!" He, PFC Rock and SP4 Calvin Brown headed towards the next bunker to rescue those who had been lying out in the open in no-man's-land. Prindle fired the machine gun directly into the bunker while Rock and Brown went forward and grabbed Trevino and a wounded medic. In the process the machine gun overheated and jammed, but the rescue was successful. Twice Prindle used a machine gun to attack bunkers. He shot so many rounds that the machine gun slowed down from overheating. He ran and found another barrel to repair his gun and returned to the fight.

About three hours into the battle, PFC Rock remembers hearing SSG Forsythe's voice rise in the distance, "Heeey Rock, are you still alive?" Rock yelled back, "Yeah, why?" Forsythe asked, "Are you gonna run away?" Rock answered, "Why?" Forsythe's response: "If you do, I wanna go with you." Despite the circumstances Rock had to laugh.

As for Jack Deaton, who had his "death" letter in his pocket, the following is from his Bronze Star with V award....."Several men in the platoon were felled during the opening volley of fire Standing up in the fire-swept field, Specialist Deaton led his men straight at the startled enemy force....In the exchange of intense close-in fire, Specialist Deaton was mortally wounded." The bitter consensus of his buddies was that Jack may have lived, had he not carried the debilitating burden of that letter into battle.

After sunset, Delta Company and other elements of the 1/12th Battalion were consolidated to an LZ one klick northwest of the battle area. Wounded men needed to be medevac'd. All was dark. The flying conditions were terrible with poor visibility, a low ceiling, and hostile ground fire. While green tracers converged on him, LT Feener bravely pointed two flashlights in the air to bring in the medevac choppers. He stood his ground with the medevac in-bound.

Later, a wounded man arrived from the jungle, and struggled to say there was still someone left alive in the killing zone. First Sergeant Gene Helgeson assembled a medical team of volunteers to go out and look for anyone left on the battlefield who might still be alive. The volunteers included CAPT Edward Wagner, the Battalion Surgeon, SP5 Donattis de Baitis, and SP4 James Ennis, both combat medics. NVA were still plentiful in the area. [Lt Schopp] "Helgeson's team crept around, looking for American wounded, treating them and pulling them back for evacuation. There can be no doubt that Helgeson and crew put life back into men who otherwise would have surely died from their wounds."

Having spent hours wounded and alone, except for marauding NVA, Michael Noone was near despair. He remembers someone quietly approaching him in the dark and

dreading that it was yet another NVA. But the shadowy figure grabbed his wrist and whispered, "This one's still alive." The shadowy figure turned out to be CAPT Wagner, who was in a dangerous and precarious situation for a battalion surgeon, just out of medical school. Helgeson's team brought Michael Noone back to the living.

The team carried him to the LZ, where he was treated and kept alive. By this time it was not possible to bring in medevac choppers because of fog. So he was evacuated at the first opportunity the next morning. Noone remembers, "the chopper maneuvered in flight, causing me to roll off the top stretcher and land with my arm around the pilot's neck."

The medevac helicopter sped to the hospital at max power where the staff immediately brought him into surgery. There, the giant "blood ants" still infested his body and clothing. The surgeons sprayed anesthetic gas to knock out and disperse the ants before they could work on him. He was given the Last Rites twice, before his eventual recovery in a hospital in Japan.

By the end of the day Delta Company had been reduced to half its size. The acting CO was KIA, as were all of the Platoon Sergeants and most of the NCO's. The remnant of Delta became attached to Charlie Company where they spent the night being tormented by snipers, many in the trees. (SP4 Carlisle Mahto from B Company shot ten snipers out of the trees using a starlight scope.) That night most of the NVA dispersed in small groups heading into the mountains, according to a prearranged plan.

The next morning LT Prindle was told to report to a helicopter that had just landed. There he found a Major wearing clean, starched fatigues directing him to get in the chopper. A high ranking officer wanted to see him, perhaps for an award. LT Prindle told the Major, "Fuck off, I'm not leaving my men. They've just been through hell." Then he turned and walked away.

Epilogue

In the following days, 1st Battalion 12th Cavalry pursued the NVA into the mountains. Intelligence gathered from captured POW's indicated that it had been the 7th and 9th Battalions of the 18th NVA Regiment fighting in and around Thach Long (2). The battle, and subsequent pursuit, put the 18th NVA Regiment in disarray. Thus they were unable to carry out their existing orders to participate in coordinated attacks on LZ Bird and LZ Pony on December 23rd. Instead, the NVA ordered the 22nd NVA Regiment to attack LZ Bird on Dec. 27th. LZ Bird was nearly over-run. However, The NVA was unable to launch effective attacks against LZ Pony. (LZ's Bird, Pony and the 506 Valley were all close to one another.)

CAPT Wagner went on, as a civilian, to have an illustrious career as a medical doctor. In September 2020, PFC Michael Noone and CAPT Edward Wagner made contact with each other. It was the first time they had spoken since Michael was rescued. Michael Noone thanked Edward Wagner for finding him and saving his life.

LT Prindle resigned his commission soon after returning home and became a civilian. For many years, he hoped to talk to PFC Richard Rock. They finally made contact in 2018 and spent a few days together at Prindle's home talking about their experiences in Vietnam and the 506 Valley. LT Paul Prindle managed to bring the helmet home that the NVA bullet had pierced and miraculously deflected around his head. He still has it.

PFC Roger Hattersley made a career of the army and retired as a First Sergeant. He passed away in 2020, after suffering from a long illness that left him handicapped. Despite his mental challenges, the last thing he was able to articulate clearly was his account of the battle in the 506 Valley.

SP4 Micheal Anderson lives in El Sobrante California. He still recalls many details of the 506 Valley, and was a valuable source of information. Michael stays in contact with other Delta Company veterans of the 506 Valley.

First Sergeant Gene Helgeson returned to Vietnam on a second tour with the 173rd Airborne Brigade and later retired as a Command Sergeant Major. He is now 91 years old. In 2015 he attended a reunion with other Delta Company veterans. There he gave an impassioned speech in which he talked about the bravery and sacrifice in the 506 Valley. He and his wife, Wanda, danced like they were still in their 30's.

Orders were found at the National Archives which awarded Delta Troopers for heroism at the Battle of the 506 Valley:

PFC Roger Hattersley, Distinguished Service Cross

PFC Alton Kennedy (Combat Medic), Distinguished Service Cross (Posthumous)

PFC Richard Rock, Silver Star

Platoon Sergeant Roque Perpetua, Silver Star (Posthumous)

First Sergeant Gene Helgeson, Silver Star

Lieutenant Chester Cox, Silver Star (Posthumous)

Lieutenant Timothy Feener, Silver Star

Lieutenant Paul Prindle, Silver Star

Captain Edward Wagner (Battalion Surgeon) Silver Star

SP5 Donattis De Baitis (Combat Medic) Silver Star

SP4 James Ennis (Combat Medic) Silver Star

Ten others were awarded Bronze Stars with "V" Device for Valor. Five of those were posthumous.

Seventeen in Delta Company were Killed in Action on 17 December, 1966.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all those who provided their recollections, from which were gathered important details about the Battle of the 506 Valley: Michael Anderson, Reggie Anderson, Stephen Chestnut, Roger Hattersley, Gene Helgeson, William Inhat, Michael Noone, Paul Prindle, Richard Rock, Edward Wagner, Michael Walsh, and Ed Waltz. All were there. All remember.

For more details, visit the Delta Company 1/12th association website at www.cattrack6india.com

*A Staff Historian for the First Cavalry Division Office of Information and History, LT Steven M. Schopp, prepared a comprehensive historical document describing these events, which encompass all the units involved. This story is based on his document, which is frequently quoted, as well as recent interviews of surviving Delta Company veterans.