

FSB Pace, October 1971

The story of Pace could be said to begin with FSB Illingworth - built, attacked, and abandoned during 1970 just 10 kilometers west of Pace, which in turn would be built, harassed, and abandoned during 1971. Illingworth, not without its own controversies, was one of the most heroic defenses of the war. Pace would be the backdrop for an alleged "combat refusal" in B Company, 1/12th Cavalry, then another just days later in D Company. The overblown story was the work of free-lance correspondent Richard Boyle, who had snuck back into Vietnam via Cambodia, having been previously expelled. Boyle had an agenda.

By October 1971, the 7th Division (PAVN) was deployed around FSB Pace, the 141st Regiment to the north, and the 209th to the south along Highway 22. The 165th Regiment kept Pace occupied with daily mortar and RPG attacks from the woods just a few hundred meters west.

All four line companies of 1/12th Cavalry were on Pace between 24 September and 22 October. C Company was there just one day before moving to FSB Katum. Alpha followed Charlie and spent two weeks before October 7. B Company arrived on the 7th.



Incoming at FSB Pace, September 1971 (Stempka, C 1/12)

On 9 October, Bravo's commander, Captain Robert Cronin, was asked by LTC Robert McCaffree, 2/32nd FA, to send a night ambush patrol of 15 men 500 meters east of Pace's perimeter. The patrol was preparing to move out when members of the platoon heard from the artillerymen that the Engineer unit that built Pace had put booby traps - including claymores - in the area the ambush was intended to occupy. Specialist Ernest French, point man for the patrol, asked for the maps required for such defenses. There were none. French and 5 others said they would not go without maps of the minefield. The situation soon changed when ground radar picked up enemy movement west of the perimeter, and Cronin was informed that two ARVN companies were out in Night Defensive Positions in the area of the intended patrol. Captain Cronin canceled the ambush.

So what might have been a combat refusal was an understandable - and resolved - push-back by experienced troops to a patrol that did not make sense, a routine enough occurrence that seldom resulted in further discussion. That should have been the end of it, but for Richard Boyle, who had hopped a ride into Pace that afternoon, heard about the "refusal" and quickly became involved. He convinced the B Company troopers to write a letter to Congress, helped them write it, then left with the letter to write a story about "Mutiny at Pace." That fit Boyle's view of American soldiers, the war, and the ongoing American withdrawal. The *real* story is told by William Shkurti, in his excellent book, *Soldiering On in a Dying War*, including that a patrol by Bravo the following day found those claymores, rigged with trip wires. But the story doesn't end with Bravo and Boyle. It would continue with Delta, another alleged refusal, and with an "above and beyond" act of bravery.

On the 12th two platoons and the command group of Delta Company were flown into a remote tarmac at Tay Ninh. They were to replace Bravo at Pace.

“We were met by Lt. Richard Lee, A Company, who had been at Fire base Pace earlier in the month,” said Paul Marling, Delta’s 1st Platoon Medic. “He gave us the lay of the land; what to expect once we got to Pace. Since my platoon was without an officer, Lt Lee went back with us to Pace. With the Pace taking nearly continuous incoming fire, “the choppers would not touch down but get near the front gate and we were to jump, run into the base, and dive into the bunker just to the left,” said Marling, “which is what we did. No sooner than we were in the bunker when Lt. Lee appeared with words I will always remember. ‘Boys, a Cobra just crashed into the wood line. He was protecting us, now its our turn to protect him. Are you with me?’ The twelve of us that were on the ground dropped our rucks and went out that same gate we had just rushed through.”

Two columns were formed, with SP4 Mark Caldwell point man for one. “The Cobra kept blowing up and we had to pull back when we got too close,” he said. “I didn’t think anyone would alive after those explosions,” added Lt. Lee.

The patrol reached the crash site 100 meters inside the wood line. Behind a mound was injured co-pilot Capt. James MacLachlan, pulled to safety by the pilot, WO1 Ernest Rickenbacker (a distant relative of the WWI Ace), who had gone for help. The patrol established a defensive perimeter while armed helicopters provided suppressing fire, and attempted to carry MacLachlan out. Finding he was too injured to be carried far, SP4 Marling, Delta’s medic, stabilized the Captain’s left leg compound fracture and other injuries. A medevac was called and hoisted the Captain out on a litter.

Delta’s combat effectiveness was not “disintegrating,” the questionable thesis of too many post-war writers. “The men went in without hesitation, although Bravo Company had found an automatic ambush [the claymores] in the same area the previous day,” summed up Lt. Lee.

The next day Pace had incoming five times between midnight and 0600. At 0930 Delta was assigned a patrol into the wood line to the east. Third platoon’s second squad, having already heard “Pace stories,” said they wouldn’t go. When company CO Captain Kenneth Smith polled the platoon, 20 of 26 agreed. Major Joseph Dye, 1/12th S-3, who had been sent to Pace on 10 October to “get in there and fix whatever is wrong,” now intervened. He explained the mission: to screen to provide security for incoming resupply aircraft, and offered to lead the patrol. Within 30 minutes Second Platoon had their gear on and headed out with their platoon leader.

The Army Chief of Staff provided a Fact Sheet on these incidents to the White House on 22 October 1971. It read in part, “The third platoon and all other platoons of the company went on all scheduled patrols between October 13 and October 22,” when all US Troops were withdrawn from FSB Pace. “There were no combat refusals. Consequently, there are no grounds for disciplinary action.”

THE VALOROUS UNIT AWARD FOR EXTRAORDINARY HEROISM IS AWARDED TO THE 2ND 32ND FIELD ARTILLERY, AND... COMPANY A, 1ST BATTALION, 12TH CAVALRY, COMPANY B, 1ST BATTALION, 12TH CAVALRY, COMPANY C, 1ST BATTALION, 12TH CAVALRY, COMPANY D, 1ST BATTALION, 12TH CAVALRY... while engaged...during the period 23 Sep through 22 October 1971. General Orders No. 1484, United States Army Vietnam, 3 July, 1972.

Tom Kjos with Paul Marling

Sources: Shkurti, William, *Soldering On in a Dying War*, University Press of Kansas, 2011
Pacific Stars & Stripes, no byline, date likely late October
Personal recollections of Paul Marling, Company D, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry