"You guys are out here alone," Maj. Gen. William DuPuy, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, told C Company officers. "Your chances of getting hit tonight are very good."

Indeed, they were. Charlie Company was being used as bait to lure Vietcong (VC) units into a fight. In the Army's lexicon, this was quaintly known as "creating tempting targets." GIs had another term for it, especially because they had been ordered into a trap.

At this stage of the war, big unit operations were just beginning. One was Operation Abilene, a pre-emptive campaign targeting the May Tao Secret Zone in Phuoc Tuy province 40 miles east of Saigon. This search and destroy sweep was relatively uneventful with one exception—the action 10 miles southeast of the village of Xa Cam My.

Mostly north of the hamlet was the Courtenay Rubber Plantation, generally covered by dense vegetation. It was close to this leftover real estate from French colonialism that a relative handful of GIs would literally engage in a life-and-death struggle.

MATCH MADE IN HELL
Sent out on its own, C Co., 2nd Bn., 16th Inf. Regt., 1st Inf. Div., was living up to its nickname—the "Rangers." Vastly under strength and mostly green (known in Vietnam parlance as made up of PNGs), its 134 men under Capt. William Nolen consisted of the standard four platoons. Its only fire support would be the 1st Battalion of the 7th Field Artillery.

An unpleasant surprise awaited the "Rangers." The 274th Regiment of the 5th VC Division was itching to take on the Americans. Its 1st Battalion (D-800) of 400 men would lead the attack, but the other two battalions also committed elements to the upcoming combat. That placed C Company in the unenviable position of being outnumbered at least 3-to-1. The communists called the location of engagement the Tam Bo Stream. Their defenses consisted of trenches 300 yards long and four feet deep.

The 3rd Platoon stumbled into the VC base camps area on April 11, 1966, making contact with snipers at 12:45 p.m. In the initial skirmishing, two GIs were killed and 12 wounded. Before long, Charlie Company was completely surrounded. Tree-bound VC snipers would prove to be a major problem. Even worse were the 10 machine guns (two of them .50-cal-
The deadly battle of April 11, 1966, took place southeast of the village of Xa Cam My near the Courtenay Rubber Plantation. It was an area harboring Main Force Viet Cong base camps that were well entrenched.

iber) that bracketed the quickly formed American perimeter.

At 4 p.m., the VC attacked en force. Before it was over, three assaults would be made. Units from all three 274th battalions contributed to the human waves. 2nd Lt. John W. Libs called it simply an “inferno on the ground.” The “Rangers” held their ground, but only with desperately needed artillery support.

**UNSURPASSED HEROISM**

Before long, C Company’s perimeter shrank to 40 yards across. “Stretches of porous perimeter were now held only by the dead and dying,” Steven E. Clay wrote in his history of the 16th Infantry Regiment, *Blood and Sacrifice* (2000). Tracy Derks, in his account of the battle in *Vietnam* magazine, provided an even more graphic description: “The men listened to the cries of their dying comrades calling out for their mothers, calling out to their deity, calling out to a friend for help, but the living could do nothing for the dying.

“Along the blood-splattered, tear-gas drenched perimeter, American soldiers began to give up hope.”

Each platoon seemed destined for its private hell. 1st Lt. George Steinberg’s “4th Platoon fought with heroic abandon, even grappling with the charging Vietcong with bare hands after ammunition ran out,” George Wilson wrote in his book, *Mud Soldiers*.

Despite a shattered arm, Steinberg charged a machine gun position, annihilating the crew. Then he withstood two assaults with only 12 men. Charging straight into an oncoming attack, he tossed riot control grenades into the VC. Shot repeatedly, Steinberg threw six grenades, completely disrupting the attack.
MEDALS OF HONOR

FAR LEFT: Sgt. James W. Robinson was awarded the Medal of Honor for “an act of unsurpassed heroism,” which included destroying a communist machine gun position single-handedly though he had been wounded four times. He died doing so.

LEFT: Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger, an elite Air Force pararescueman, exposed himself to almost certain death by staying behind and rescuing nine soldiers. He was wounded three times before finally being killed by a VC sniper during the night. His selflessness was rewarded with a Medal of Honor.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS

1st Lt. George C. Steinberg, ultimately hit seven times, charged straight into an oncoming VC attack, disrupting the assault at the cost of his own life. This was after he had already annihilated an enemy machine gun crew. He received the Distinguished Service Cross.

before succumbing to seven wounds, according to his Distinguished Service Cross citation.

Meanwhile, 1st Platoon fire team leader Sgt. James W. Robinson had eerily predicted his fate. In an earlier conversation, he had said: “The first big battle I get into, I will be killed and win the Medal of Honor.”

With an M-79 grenade launcher, Robinson started off by eliminating a deadly sniper. Then dragging two wounded GIs to safety, he saved their lives. After collecting weapons from the wounded, he went on to rescue other men. That cost him wounds to the shoulder and leg. But Robinson was just getting started.

Seizing two grenades, he shouted, “I see the .50! I’m going for it. Cover me!”

“In an act of unsurpassed heroism”—to quote his Medal of Honor citation—he charged the machine gun and was hit again in the leg. The VC tracer round set fire to his uniform but that did not slow him down. Hit twice more in the chest, Robinson nonetheless threw the grenades when he got to within 30 feet of the weapon, destroying the VC position before collapsing over dead.

Incredibly, such displays of selfless courage were repeated that day. Charlie Company grunts were in awe of Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger, one calling him the “bravest person I’ve ever known.” A member of Detachment 6, 38th Air Rescue & Recovery Squadron, he chose to stay behind after descending 100 feet in his jungle penetrator when the rescue helicopter departed.

“Pitsenbarger exposed himself to almost certain death by staying on the ground, and perished while saving the lives of wounded infantrymen,” says his Medal of Honor citation. Immediately tending to the wounded, he saved at least nine lives. When not patching up the grunts, he held off the VC with a rifle and distributed ammo. That was all in the course of being wounded three times.

Pitsenbarger exemplified the motto of the pararescuemen: “That Others May Live!” Killed that night by a sniper, his body was found the next morning with a bullet hole in the forehead. He was the first Air Force enlisted man to be awarded the Medal of Honor since the service was created in 1947.

Staff Sgt. Rolf Schoolman, though wounded, crawled among his men to distribute ammo and then continued the fight. Pfc. Marion Acton, only 18, took out a machine gun crew; he then eliminated several more VC before being killed by a sniper. Sgt. 1st Class Charles Urcocis killed an entire VC .50-caliber machine gun crew with only a pistol and later rescued a wounded officer trapped beyond the perimeter. All three men received the Silver Star.

TEORM OF THE NIGHT

Despite the abundant bravery, things appeared ominous when the sun set. “As darkness enveloped the battlefield,” Clay wrote in his history, “VC women began searching the perimeter, stripping the American dead of weapons and ammo, and killing the wounded with a shot to the head.”

Sgt. Harold Hunter, of the 4th Platoon, recalled: “I saw the woman bend down to look in his face [of his friend], and then shoot him in the head.”

Others barely escaped that fate. Three men of 3rd Platoon, including platoon leader Lt. Martin Kroha, Jr., who had been hit five times, found themselves stranded amidst the communists. They played dead, but one, a medic, panicked while being searched by a female VC and was shot in the head. No wonder the grunts considered them scavenging jackals.

At about the time most of the men thought they were through, a savior came in the form of artillery. Only an artillery curtain of 1,100 rounds saved them from annihilation. Screams from the retreating VC during the night were telltale signs that all was not lost. The VC broke off the battle about 7:30 p.m.

Around 7:15 a.m. on April 12, B Company finally made its way to the beleaguered perimeter. “Ordered to saddle up, we started humping all night until we arrived at the site,” recalled Peter Alcala, who was point man for the 1st Squad, 1st Platoon. “It was one bloody mess. Men were receiving last rites, and we started body bagging and matching up body parts. Needless to say, I could not sleep that night.”

Charlie Company’s living nightmare was over; it was time to leave the dreadful scene. Pfc. Roger Harris, of C Company’s 1st Squad, 1st Platoon, wrote years later in his memoirs: “We walked out of the thick Continued on page 34.
‘Inferno on the Ground’
<continued from page 32

jungle into the clearing. Television news cameras filmed us as we walked past 35 body bags without being sure which of our friends were inside them.

“The following morning, Charlie Company was assembled. Some officers and men who had not been on the operation stared at us. Jaws dropped as they saw that there were only 28 of us left standing of the 134 men who had left our base camp at Bearcat” only days earlier.

RESTORING ‘Pride and Dignity’

No wonder—106 of the men had become casualties for a rate of 79%. Exactly 36 men were KIA, including the Air Force pararescue man. Another 71 were wounded. Some 69% of those killed were volunteers; 31% were draftees. They died in heartbreaking ways. VC executed some of the wounded outside the perimeter. Errant U.S. artillery rounds—“friendly fire”—claimed five lives and mangled 12 more bodies inside the perimeter. Pfc.

Maj. Gen. William E. DePuy pins the Silver Star on Staff Sgt. Charles Urconis at Bearcat Base Camp on April 14, 1966. Urconis killed an entire VC .50-caliber machine gun crew with only a .45 pistol.

Edward W. Reilly died in prayer, clutching a crucifix.

Life-long, painful memories and a Valorous Unit Award and streamer embroidered with Courtenay Plantation were all the veterans of Charlie Company would have to remember the showdown at Xa Cam My.

When Gen. DuPuy arrived near the village to assess the situation, Libs had some blunt words for him. “You walked us right into a goddamn holocaust, general,” he said. DuPuy’s reply: “Yeah, but there’s no other way to get a goddamn fight going.” That was scant comfort for the young officer.

Some 24 years later when George Wilson skillfully recounted the events of April 11 in his book, Libs could finally derive some relief from the mental anguish he had suffered in the decades following the battle. “After all these years of sometimes debilitating thoughts comes a stranger who somehow has given Johnny Libs his pride and dignity back,” he told Wilson.

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