By Barry R. McCaffrey

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Relief force
To assist besieged Marines at Khe Sanh, Huey helicopters bring in soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division on April 5, 1968, during Operation Pegasus.

A retired four-star general recounts his experiences as a captain leading a company of 7th Cavalry troops at the height of the war

Assault Company Commander

By Barry R. McCaffrey
The years 1968 and 1969 were the turning point years of the war. Beginning with the Communists’ 1968 Tet Offensive and continuing through the second-wave NVA offensive of 1969, about 500,000 U.S. troops were engaged in an intense air-land-sea campaign against the determined and well-armed main battle force divisions of the NVA and their southern Viet Cong guerrilla units. Our troops paid a heavy price. During this long struggle, the 1st Cavalry Division suffered the highest casualties of any Army division—5,444 killed and 26,592 wounded.

By 1968, our military and political leaders had lost their way. They could not see a path to victory. They also could not bear the political costs of throwing in the towel. The war ended up on tragic autopilot. U.S. casualties were appalling. During the Tet Offensive week of Feb. 11-17 alone, U.S. casualties were 543 killed and 2,547 wounded. The American people finally concluded that our national leaders had no strategy to succeed. The Army and Marines were bleeding to achieve no sensible purpose.

Those of us who are 1968-69 veterans from the 7th Cavalry’s B Company, 2nd Battalion, still meet every two years to remember those long-ago battlefields when we were all very young. We can still remember the green, suffocating and beautiful triple-canopy jungle. The intense burning heat and humidity. The numbing cold rain of the mountains in I Corps, the military designation for the northern region of South Vietnam.

During Operation Jeb Stuart, north of Hue in early 1968, B Company was at Camp Evans before Air Force C-130 aircraft flew it hundreds of miles south to III Corps, the region around Saigon, in an emergency deployment to confront an anticipated assault during the 1969 Tet holiday.

When I assumed command of B Company in III Corps on Nov. 3, 1968, the entire 1st Cavalry Division had just completed the shift from I Corps and moved into blocking positions along the Cambodian frontier. The division’s brigades were deployed along a 150-mile arc of the Cambodian border northeast of Saigon. Our “Garryowen” (named after an Irish song) 3rd Brigade of three 7th Cavalry battalions—the 1st, 2nd and 5th—landed at the Quan Loi combat base. The troops were loaded into helicopters and dropped off in air assaults up to the Cambodian frontier as a covering force for a defensive campaign around Saigon named Operation Liberty Canyon. From Oct. 25 to Nov. 15, the 1st Cavalry Division battled four enemy divisions—the 1st and 7th NVA and 5th and 9th VC. The air-ground campaign was a series of bitter battles as we engaged enemy forces attacking toward the huge U.S. logistics base of Bien Hoa, about 20 miles east of Saigon.
The central thrust of the NVA offensive in our brigade’s area was channeled down the “Serges Jungle Highway,” a sophisticated high-speed system of corduroy log roads with overhead woven-bamboo camouflage netting. Deep bunkers lined the network of trails to provide cover from the U.S. Air Force’s Operation Arc Light B-52 bomber strikes. Huge NVA base areas, depots and underground hospitals were spread out in the dense jungle. NVA anti-aircraft weapons provided protection for the night movement of enemy combat units. The NVA soldiers had clean automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, fresh haircuts and sharp-looking uniforms. Their leadership was good, and they were very brave young men.

Life in the jungle meant never-ending leeches on your legs, testicles and armpits. We were surrounded by the wild animals of the jungle—monkeys, elephants, tigers and “f--- you lizards.” Mostly, these Cavalry troops remember the utter exhaustion and backbreaking physical misery of a combat infantry unit, a tough and brutish way to exist.

We lived like animals. We dug like moles. We carried individual loads of 90-plus pounds: an M16 rifle, M79 grenade launcher or M60 machine gun, .56 mm and .762 mm small arms ammunition, trip flares, six quarts of water, hand grenades, Claymore mines, smoke grenades, .04 explosives, entrenching tools and pick axes—and some food, one pair of extra olive-drab socks and half a towel. The mortar platoon carried one 81 mm mortar and 100 rounds of ammo spread out in the company. We looked sick and malnourished, and our uniforms were frequently in shreds. We constantly had multiple minor physical injuries, crotch rot and infected bug bites. Our hands were blistered from digging.

B Company soldiers were extremely cautious and wary grunts. We worked constantly to minimize danger. We observed sound and light and radio security and moved silently. All soldiers were camouflaged. We established security with observation posts in daylight and listening posts at night. Our tactical operations were carefully planned. Actions-on-contact were rehearsed at our firebases before we moved out. The company and platoon command teams understood the requirement for immediate succession-of-command when key leaders were wounded or killed. We were also very, very lucky.

In the end, however, service in an infantry company was simply too violent to make it through a combat tour unscathed. Eventually—probably—you got wounded or killed. We would never leave a fallen buddy even if all of us had to be killed attempting to recover the wounded trooper. Our combat medics were incredibly good at keeping a terribly wounded soldier alive. Each platoon carried a wooden frame stretcher. We had morphine, blood expander, tourniquets and compression bandages. The incredibly brave 1st Cavalry medevac pilots would come to pick up a wounded trooper no matter the intensity of enemy groundfire. In 20 minutes of flying time, our soldier could receive superb medical treatment in an air-conditioned surgical unit at the rear combat bases. If he was still alive when we put him on the medevac chopper, he very probably was going to survive to see his family.

The overwhelming percentage of battle casualties occurred in direct combat infantry, armor, reconnaissance, special operations and helicopter units—the thin line of soldiers in the forward edge of the battle area. More than 58,200 were killed during the Vietnam War, and 303,000 were wounded, including 75,000 severely maimed. Others bore the invisible wounds of combat. This was a violent war of point-blank combat against a well-led and determined enemy.

Our air-assault rifle company was invariably successful in getting the tactical mission accomplished. We were almost never surprised. We were always part of a larger coherent battalion and brigade tactical plan, which I as the company commander understood, but from the perspective of these B Company troopers it appeared to be us against the NVA, as we operated alone on the battlefield most of the time. Perhaps 150-plus soldiers were in an environment of constant danger day after day. They endured bone-crushing physical...
American casualties

Soldiers in the 1st Cavalry Division came under heavy fire as they moved toward Khe Sanh during Operation Pegasus.

Barry McCaffrey served four combat tours: in the Dominican Republic as a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division, 1965; in Vietnam as an adviser to the Vietnamese Airborne Division, 1966-67; and commander of a company in the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) 1968-69; and in Iraq as commander of the 84th Infantry Division (Mechanized) during Operation Desert Storm, 1991. He received three Purple Hearts, was twice awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross, and twice received the Silver Star—all in Vietnam.

Decorated officer

VIETNAM

Khe Sanh during
they moved toward
under heavy fire as
and trained at the company level.

geants were courageous, smart, natural leaders chosen
and keep the trust of their soldiers. The NCOs promoted
losses decimated the ranks of noncommissioned officers),
NCOs” (enlisted soldiers rapidly promoted as combat
mission), who served a three-year obligation, and “instant
was trusted and loved by our soldiers.

Trainer was a leader of absolute competence who
soldiers. Trainer was a leader of absolute competence who
could not be overrun by any enemy unit of any strength
alry’s 105 mm artillery was our ultimate hammer. We
huge decisive edge. However, we knew that the 1st Cav-
attack helicopters and the Air Force. Air power gave us a
violent band of brothers. We lived outdoors, together,
tary and not face the perilous life of an infantry soldier
have enabled them to join some other branch of the mili-
in Vietnam was to maintain a student exemption or find
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in Vietnam was to maintain a student exemption or find

Service Cross in 1967.

presents McCaffrey with
his first Distinguished

Decorated officer
Gen. Creighton Abrams

services of my memories, I fade back
each other. Sometimes in the dim re-
lost — and all those who suffered. Most important, we still
have tough and impairing memories of the war. Others
ers. I am not surprised that they almost all have had suc-

A 1st Cavalry Division patrol passes dead NVA soldiers during Operation Jeb Stuart.