(Painting of Tiger 1 provided by the artist, Jim Nelson)

FIRE SUPPORT BURT TIGER 1

On January 1, 1968, I was assigned as a Forward Observer for 81mm mortars to Company C, 2nd of the 22nd Infantry, 25th Infantry Division. My rank was Private First Class. Our location was approximately 1.5 miles from the Cambodian border. It was officially designated as Fire Support Base Burt. I was ordered to attend an ambush meeting which would be going out that evening. The patrol was made of twelve men. Our company commander, Captain Allison, took charge of the meeting, showing us where the patrol was to set up. Patrol leader SSG Mark Ridley and I were shown exactly on our maps where to set up our ambush, and we were told to be sure to set up at that location. Captain Allison made it a point to advise us that we were to take as much M-60 ammo as possible, as well as extra M-16 ammo and extra magazines, M-79 grenade launcher rounds, and extra frag grenades. We were to also take a shoulder-fired M-67 recoilless rifle and extra HE and canister rounds for it. Extra medical kits were also passed out. Captain Allison advised us that when we made contact, we were not to expect any relief until day break.

At dusk we assembled at the perimeter, checked our equipment, and when we head out it was almost completely dark. I could barely make out my compass, the jungle and the vines made it impossible to keep a pace count, and there were hardly any landmarks visible to us. Finally, Sergeant Ridley told us that we were where we were supposed to set up. I was sure that we stopped on the wrong trail, and that we needed to one trail beyond. I took out my poncho and tucked it over and underneath me, checked my map, and I was convinced I was right. I told Sergeant Ridley that we were not set up where we were supposed to be. He snarled back, “This is the spot and that’s all.” I told him artillery and mortars would be firing harassment rounds on pre plotted areas and if we were in the wrong spot, those rounds could land on us. I asked if I

could call my fire direction center and as for artillery to send a 100-meter-high phosphorus round. He told me to make the call. I heard the round coming out, and when it exploded, I aimed my compass at it, noting the azimuth. I tried to guess the distance, and called it in to the fire direction center. FDC called back and said our position was plotted. Sergeant Riley spaced nine men on the trail. Ridley, his RTO, and I set up about eight meters behind them. It was close to 9:30 pm and we began monitoring our radios, calling in situation reports, and listening in on the reports from the LPs which were positioned thirty to forty meters out in front of the perimeter. All of a sudden, all the LPs started reporting movement. The LPs were ordered to pull back inside the perimeter. We also began hearing heavy movement around us, and we heard the VC and NVA screaming as they began their attack. Now the enemy was behind and in front of our position. About the same time, the 50-cals and small arms began firing, and we could hear explosions going off and the jungle was coming alive. The 50-cal tracers were coming right over our heads and chewing up trees and the jungle. I realized we were going to be overwhelmed. I screamed at Sergeant Ridley that we had to get off the tail and seek a better position in the jungle. He told me to lead the way. I crawled back about thirty meters and to my surprise I fell in a bomb crater. The Sergeant Ridely and the RTO fell in behind me, and we moved to a better position. I was trying to make radio contact, but the traffic was crazy. Then it hit me that the nine men on that trail were still out there, pinned down. I had to go back and try to locate them, and lead them back to the crater. I crawled out and tried to get my bearings as I made my way around the crater. The jungle was being chewed up by the rounds coming just over me. The I felt a bit slap on my chin and a burning sensation. I kept going in the direction that I thought the trail and the men might be on. Finally, I came upon a small clearing with a trail. I crawled about thirty meters and came up on San Favata. I grabbed his leg and hollered, "Don't shoot, it's me, Jesse!" I told him to pass the word to follow me, single file, back to the bomb crater. I crawled back, still dodging the intense fire, trying to find the edge of the crater. I finally found it and everyone followed me in. I told them to get ready and to set up defensive positions. I was squatting down next to Sam, looking up at the tracers and illumination floating down to the jungle floor, when I noticed six or eight NVA coming our way. I slammed my elbow into Sam's ribs, and he raised the M 60 and I aimed my M-16. Sam opened up, and you could see the tracers going through them, and they all went down. We knew there were mor coming, so I started throwing grenades in the direction the gooks had come from, hoping to direct the enemy away from us. The grenades went off, and we heard screams and coughing. I thought, "Damn, that will bring more gooks." I saw an explosion to my left and heard some of our guys screaming in pain. I got my gear and crawled that way. One of the men asked me what had just happened. I told him a gook must have thrown or fired something we had to see if he was still out there. I rose up slowly, knowing that I was probably going to get my head blown off, but saw that the gook was slowly crawling away. I fired my M-16 three times and then it jammed. I pulled the pin on a grenade and rolled it between his legs, and blow him in half. I could see more gooks crawling around, so I asked the men around me to throw more grenades. Sam Favata came crawling by me. Now my only weapon was my radio, so I followed Sam.

As I approached the other men, I told them to try and keep their muzzle flashed below the rim of the hole, so as not to give themselves away. Also, to try and not fire when the gunships were close by. The jets were firing their 20mm cannons and tearing up the jungle. The gooks were so close. I got to where Sam was and I was about to cross over him when he shoved

me aside. Six or seven gooks were on the trail just above where Sergeant Ridley and the RTO were set up. Sam opened up and knocked all the gooks down. Some of the rounds had barely missed Sergeant Ridely, and he started cursing at Sam. I hollered back, “Shut the fuck up, he just saved your life!” Things were getting really bad, so I crawled out of the crater and started calling in fire missions. I could see the VC and NVA rushing across on their way to the perimeter and our company area. I called in fire to try and head them off, and then they started coming towards our position. Before we knew it, they were almost on top of us. I had to adjust my mortar fire to within ten meters of our position and try to bracket fire in and out to try and keep them off of us. The fire direction center (FDC) called me back and advised me that they had air strikes coming in, if we could use them. I told them the gooks were all over us, and for them to give us what they had. They said, “Okay, good luck.”

I was still lying on the rim of the crater when the first jet came over us. It was so low it blocked out the sky, but nothing happened. Then I remembered that it had to let go of his bombs ahead of its target. I screamed for everyone to get down, and just then the bombs hit. Shrapnel tore into my shoulder and slammed me back into the crater. My arm and shoulder were burning, and I couldn’t move. Then I could hear moaning all around me. Thank God the jets had dropped anti-personnel bombs (cluster bombs) on our position, the only place they could. Contact was very minimal after that. It was coming up0 on daybreak, so we had to prepare for the gooks coming back from the perimeter. Sam and I made our way to where Norm Nishikubo was. Earlier a VC had crawled forward and fired an RPG down in the crater. It hit between Norm and the man next to him and exploded, sending the RPG’s energy into the ground. The next morning, they showed me the round, it was as flat as a pancake. Norm was sure blessed that night. Sam and I were sitting across from where Sergeant Ridly had been all night. Sam had put his M-60 on the ground between us. All of a sudden, we heard automatic fire and rounds were kicking up dirt and gravel next to my feet. I saw who I believe was John Marts raise up and fire his M-16, killing a gook that was falling back and collecting weapons and bodies. I heard that a relief patrol was coming out to get us. A few minutes later I noticed them about twenty meters behind us. We hollered at them to look our way. It was Captain Allison and fourteen men that were sent out to take us back to safety.

When Sergeant Ridley saw them up close, he grabbed Sam’s M-60 by the barrel and slammed on the ground, trying to help himself out of the crater The M-60 discharged and burned his hand, so a medic bandaged him up. When we arrived back at the perimeter, I was taken to where the dust-off choppers were loading up the wounded. I was flown to Dau Tieng and then to Vung Tau hospital.

I later learned that Lieutenant Gordon Kelley had been coordinating artillery fire to coincide with where I was adjusting my 81mm fire missions. He surely saved our lives that night. I also learned that he was the one who called in our air strikes. FDC had to patch him in since my radio wasn’t capable of artillery or air support communications.

When I was released from the hospital and returned to my unit, the men that were on the patrol told me that they were all asked to make out statements of facts as to what had taken place during the ambush patrol I was never asked what had taken place, or to make a statement. I wish I could locate those statements.

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