

## Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There

Marlon R. Mee



With reluctance, I answered the phone, “My name is Gary Schoolcraft and I live in Vermont. I’m a good friend of Jim Mangiapane and Jim was in Vietnam with your brother.” This was how the conversation started.

Gary told me Jim passed away the previous April from pancreatic cancer. Before he died, Jim made Gary promised that he would find Randy’s relatives and tell what happened on Hamburger Hill. I can’t remember how long we talked. Gary ended our conversation by letting me know he was sending me some of Jim’s notes.

In Jim’s notes, I found a letter he had written to Samuel Zaffiri who authored a book about Hamburger Hill. Mr. Zaffiri sent Jim a copy of the book. An excerpt of the letter Jim wrote to Mr. Zaffiri reads:

“At first, I saw the names of soldiers along with their ranks but I didn’t recognize any of them, until I came across Randy Mee’s name (it jumped off the page and smacked me in the face). Hands shaking, I opened to the page number behind his name and you brought me right back to those very moments just before the shit hit the fan for 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon, Charlie Co., 1/506 Infantry. It brought back the pain that I suffered watching Randy Mee and Sgt. Peterson fall as heroes. I was on the left side of that skirmish line on the opposite side of the ravine helplessly watching those precious lives snuffed out. Don’t get me wrong-I’m not a sadist or war monger, it’s just that for all these years since that battle, I’ve tried to keep Randy alive in my mind with accurate recollections of those moments, but everything happened so fast it became a blur.

Randy Mee, Joe King, Danny Williams, Tom McKay, Johnny Young, Edwin Murray, Ron Straight, Doc Jones, Richard Mooney and me, led by Sgt. O’Brien were the 2<sup>nd</sup> squad of 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon “C” Company. Randy was our M-60 machine gunner. All I could remember about that incident was that we were the point element for our company and we were headed toward a lot of heavy gun fire. 3/1887 was “in the shit” as the expression goes-they needed help. We came to the top of a small hill dwarfed by another much larger hill across a ravine. This was where PFC King, Sgt. Brinkle and Lt. LeClair argued over our advancement. Sgt. O’Brien, our squad leader ordered us (2<sup>nd</sup> squad) to get online overlooking the ravine. I was sitting there smoking one of Randy’s Salem cigarettes, Randy and Danny Williams and I

and I were taking in the argument. All of a sudden, we spotted a NVA soldier filling his canteen. All the rest was just as you documented in "Hamburger Hill".

Gary did tell me during our conversation that Jim told him to "tell Randy's relatives that we got the son of a bitch that got Randy". I never met Jim Mangiapane and I wish I had.

I was able to contact some of the guys who were with Randy that day. I received the following letter from Ray King:

Marlon,

I'm sorry it took so long getting this letter to you. I didn't realize how hard it was to write. I'm enclosing the only picture that I can find of Randy, when I go north this fall I'll check with Charlie Clark and see if he has any, if so I'll send them at a later date.

This letter is only giving you the last moments. To do otherwise would require many more pages. You know in the situation we were in it didn't take long to figure who was who and Randy was a man to have by your side. Had there been more time to prepare before going into a place like the Ashau Valley, who knows what fate may have dealt us. I will always remember Randy as a young paratrooper who carried himself with honor and courage, a brother in our family.

Here is Ray's account of May 19, 1969

"I sit here and try to compose a letter that should have been written 38 years ago, so please bear with me. From the time I joined Charlie Company, St. Burnym wrote the letters for the dead. But at the time of Randy's death he was on his way home. And Sgt. Brinkle had replaced him. (Brinkle much older (a Korean War vet). I just assumed he also wrote the letters. I know the Army sends one but it usually didn't tell the family what happened.

I wanted to write to you before speaking, so I could talk to a couple of guys who were there, so as not to leave out some of the details that might be important. I have never forgotten what happened during those days but sometimes the little stuff gets cloudy in one's memory.

I met Randy in March of 69, he was one of the replacements the company needed in order to try and return to T.O.E. strength (which while I was there we never achieved). The company had been through a bad operation and we needed all the guys we could get. As we lost men their replacements showed less and less qualities needed in becoming good combat soldiers. But Randy was one of the

few that stood out, showing strength, desire and the brains to listen to those that knew what was happening. A real paratrooper.

Randy was placed in the machine gun team and with all the new Cherries we begun light patrols in and around Camp Evans (Base camp for regiment) and fire base Jack just on the edge of the mountain to the west. Fairly secured ground at that time. So our main goals for the month was to teach the new guys how to fight, build up their endurance (the heat until one got accustom to it was almost unbearable especially since you were caring about 70-80 lbs. of equipment) and getting accustom to long hours, little sleep and staying alert to your surroundings 24/7.

We slowly made progress and by the end of the month, we began operations (search and destroy) once again working north towards Quan Tre near the DMZ and then west into the mountains through highway 58(??) to fire base Birmingham. This A.O. was the jumping off point into what we called Indian Country, home to a lot of NVA units.

Up until then we had been extremely lucky, only having a few little fights with small units, usually surprising them or just missing them. Our luck held, we were assigned to work our way west with combat engineers and a tank company building a supply road into the Ashau Valley. The majority of the battalion was in front of us and it turned into a cake walk, no real involvement with the enemy (Although we did find caches of food, weapons, and even vehicles as we moved closer toward the Ashau Valley and Laotian border.

When May rolled around, we were pulled back to Fire Base Jack where we were resupplied and got some well-deserved rest. We then returned to base camp for a couple of days and then along with the whole battalion (every man they could get) we air assaulted back into the Ashau Valley. Starting a sweeping operation towards the north and west trying to drive the enemy units into the open areas of the valley. Things didn't go well from the beginning. Small fire team bases that we established came under constant attack with Fire Base Airborne being overrun and only about 20 men surviving. As Operation Apache Snow continued we along with the rest of the regiment moved further north seeking contact with the enemy (our order was to destroy all we found). The operation at first began flushing small units of NVA into the open valley where they didn't stand a chance of survival. As each day passed we ran into more of the enemy, we found well maintained roads, rest areas for NVA soldiers moving south, a hospital underground, even poles with commo wire for a phone system and lots of caches

of weapons, munitions, food, a tunnel complex with over 40 trucks. With all that was going on to this point we still hadn't made serious contact with the enemy, although the 3<sup>rd</sup> 187<sup>th</sup> was really in the fight on (Dong AP bia) hill 937. We received orders to move with Alpha and Bravo Co's (Charlie Co. providing security for the Battalion Command) toward hill 900 to help the 187<sup>th</sup>. We also found out that we were fighting the 29<sup>th</sup> NVA regiment- they were known not to run from a fight.

Alpha Company began the advance from the south-west toward hill 937, Bravo on our right flank ran directly into the enemy and lost a whole platoon of men in the first few minutes. As this happened we ran into a bunker complex but surprised the enemy they withdrew uphill 900 to 937. At that point we had a chance to make a run up the hill. Then a freak storm struck and it began raining like crazy, stopping our advance and giving the enemy a chance to regroup. Once the rain subsided we began our advance again. Alpha immediately met strong resistance and finally ran into an interlocking bunker complex (rows of bunker with rows behind the first line protecting each other). Charlie Company was then called up to move to Alpha's right flank and help relieve some of the pressure on them. Naturally 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon was in the lead with my team walking point, not having anyone with more experience than me, I walked point with Williams as my slack man. As we moved forward- an aerial gas attack was made on one of the bunkers to front driving some of the enemy above ground. We continued up the ridge where I came a bombed out opening on a small finger of the mountain.

I proceeded to split the team on both sides of the clearing and informed the lieutenant. He ordered my team to secure the flanks but to our utter surprise the lieutenant didn't give us enough time to do it. He sent Randy's team into the clearing; they immediately saw enemy on the ridge to their front moving. The lieutenant ordered the team to attack with M-79's (grenade launchers) and rifle fire. After a brief exchange of fire, the lieutenant ordered the team to assault the position while still not giving the other team time to get into position. Randy's team descended into the saddle between the two fingers and started up the other side, halfway up all hell broke loose. Randy and his team had gone head on into another bunker complex with little to no cover. The carnage was instant. No one stood a chance. Randy was the first to fall. Killed instantly from rifle fire, Peterson was next and Lt. LeClare followed. Those that survived were wounded and pinned down. Brinkle took command. He reformed the rest of the platoon and started suppressive fire. We were then able to cross over to Randy's team. The fighting was intense for a while, but we took several bunkers and by the time

1st and 4<sup>th</sup> platoons had moved up to help. As the fighting continued, we retrieved the dead and wounded. Not able to do more, we placed Randy's body and the rest in a bunker and fought on through the night.

At first light, a platoon from Alpha Company came down the finger and we were able to push the enemy back. With the platoon low on ammo and no water, we were relieved by 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon and ordered back to a hasty cut LZ on the mountain at which time we retrieved our dead and wounded and placed them with the others waiting to be airlifted out. We all said our good-byes and prayed each in his own way. We resupplied and returned to the fight. As you know the mountain of The Crouching Beast (Hill 937) was taken but at a terrible cost. A price that you all know too well, they say time heals all wounds but not for me, I'll always remember that place and never forget the brothers I lost."

Jeff Kanouse was another veteran on Jim's list. I can't remember how I initially contacted Jeff. I was able to meet Jeff in Fort Lauderdale a few years ago. We had lunch and Jeff told me what happened on May 19, 1969.

Jeff said when they came to the clearing by the two fingers there was some disagreement in how to address the situation. The lieutenant insisted they were going to cross the clearing. Lt. LeClair was relatively new in country and had limited experience in the field. Several enlisted personnel felt it was safe to cross. Lt. LeClair sent the team out and the firefight started. Jeff told me he was fighting alongside Randy and that Randy was hit almost immediately. According to Jeff Randy, machine gun fire to his chest and dropped. Jeff told me he made his way to Randy and attempted to address the wound. Jeff said he tried CPR but Randy no longer had a chest. I will never forget Jeff's words, "I tried to save him. I did everything I could, but he was dead before he hit the ground. I'm sorry. I tried."

Lt. LeClair also died in the firefight along with Howard Peterson. Because of the firefight, they had to put the bodies in a ravine and recover them later. I mention to Jeff that we did not find out about Randy's death until May 23<sup>rd</sup>. Jeff responded with, "May 23<sup>rd</sup>, that was the day I got shot."

Every May 23<sup>rd</sup>, I send Jeff a message and let him know that I am thinking about him.

Stanley Fisher was not in the firefight on May 19<sup>th</sup> however, he was on the body recovery team. Stanley calls me every May 19<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of Randy's death. He told me he was sent to get supplies that day and was shocked to hear of Randy's death. He told me that when they got to the bodies that the jungle along

with the humidity and animals had already taken toll on them. He was it was impossible, because of the terrain to carry the bodies out on stretchers. They had to carry them out in body bags tied to bamboo sticks similar to the way hunters often carry the animal they have harvested. It's tough to listen to Stanley relive that day every year. I usually let him talk. I feel its good therapy for him.

I look forward to his phone call every year.

After I retired, I worked for a resort in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin. One day as I passed one of the cabins a gentleman came out wearing a 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne baseball cap. I commented, "The Screaming Eagles" and that started a short but meaningful conversation. I told him my brother was in the 101<sup>st</sup> and was on Hamburger Hill. The gentleman responded that he was on Hamburger Hill too. I told him my brother died on Hamburger Hill. He responded with, "Oh my God! I was a medic on Hamburger Hill. I may have bagged and tagged your brother." I thanked him for all he did for the wounded and he replied, "I have something for you." He went to his car and gave me a 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne cap. I only wear that hat on May 19<sup>th</sup>.

After Randy died, my parents received a letter from two of the soldiers he served with. Here is what they wrote:

3 June 69

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Mee,

Thomas McKay and myself Johnny Young are writing this letter to you to express our sincere grief in the recent death of your son Randy. As members of the same platoon Thomas, Randy and I were the closest of friends. We have always had the utmost respect and admiration for Randy. He was truly one of the finest men either of us has ever known. Everyone that knew Randy and worked with him thought and felt the same about him. Randy is a man whom neither one of us will ever be able to forget and fond memories of him stay with us always.

With sincere Sympathy,

PFC Johnny Young

PFC Thomas McKay

Randy was buried in the Warren-Mills Cemetery on June 4, 1969. The playing of "Taps" still echoes in my mind.