



# Ambush in --- Plei Trap Valley

During *Operation Wayne Grey* in 1969, a battle near Kontum City came at a deadly price to A Co., 3rd Bn., 8th Inf., 4th Inf. Div.

by John F. Bauer

**T**he Army's 4th Infantry Division began *Operation Wayne Grey* in early March 1969. Its mission was to prevent enemy movement in South Vietnam's Central Highlands, particularly in Kontum province near the Cambodian border.

Just northwest of Pleiku is the Plei Trap Valley—the site of a deadly ambush March 3-4. That engagement claimed the lives of 31% of the 86 men in A Company. The stories of some who survived are told here with the hope that those who died will forever be remembered.

On the morning of March 3, A Company was dropped by helicopters into the valley to prepare for a night patrol. Regrettably, the 66th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment was ready and waiting for the GIs.

"We were undermanned and ill-prepared to enter a meat grinder," said 1st Lt. Felix Williams, who was the leader of 3rd Platoon. "What we did not know then was that we were out of artillery range."

As the men made their way along a ridgeline, they killed two NVA soldiers, and that's when the firefight began. A machine gun opened up at close range, killing one soldier



PHOTOS COURTESY CHRISTIE HOLMES

and wounding another. Williams and his men took cover and returned fire, but more NVA joined in the fight.

"We were smack in a deadly crossfire, and guys began to drop all over," Williams said.

A medic tried to save the first wounded man who had been hit four or five times and had a sucking chest wound. The medic was killed, but the wounded soldier survived.

The company commander, Capt. Dennis Isom, was killed quickly and Williams was one of only two remaining officers.

"It was sheer chaos," said Williams, who took charge of A Company. "Dead and wounded were everywhere. I had lost more than half of my platoon." He was now responsible for the company's X-mode radio and code key.

For squad leader Julio Leon, it was "one of the scariest nights" of his life.

"All I heard were people screaming and moaning in pain," he said. "We were way undermanned to have to face the 66th."

As night settled in on a nearby hill, Williams put the word out to pull back to the original night location. Once there, an ammo supply drop was made. But due to the triple-canopy jungle, only 20% of the ammo reached its intended target.



▲ **Above:** Capt. Dennis Ross Paul Isom (right) looks on with other officers prior to the operation in the Plei Trap Valley. Isom was later killed in action on March 3, 1969, in the ambush.

◀ **Far left:** A Company soldiers examine a captured anti-aircraft gun.

◀ **Left:** Pfc. John A. Holmes, III, a medic attached to A Company, received the Silver Star for braving a hail of enemy fire to help the wounded, despite being wounded himself.

At daylight, Williams asked for volunteers to head back up the hill to retrieve the dead and wounded. Led by Sgt. Sam Jones, about 25 men set out to probe the area and recover casualties.

After going about 110 yards, they heard voices yelling, “Don’t shoot! It’s Bravo Company.” Instead, it was the crafty NVA—posing as U.S. troops—who proceeded to open fire on the Americans.

Williams made the decision to get his men off the ridge, so he ordered them to pull back down the finger of the hill toward a dry creek bed. The weary troops carried their wounded buddies, while dodging enemy fire along the way.

“We only had one way off that steep hill,” Leon said. “Some of the guys were just rolling to the bottom, losing everything they were carrying along the way.”

following closely behind. He covered the Americans until Hueys (utility helicopters) arrived for evacuation.

“Guys with uniforms half gone, some without weapons, clambered aboard with wounded buddies,” Williams said. “A couple died en route. I was the last man out.”

### Surviving Vietnam

For squad leader Jones, the man originally tasked with heading back up the hill to retrieve the wounded, the evacuation didn’t quite work as planned.

Before receiving Williams’ order to retreat down the hill, he and his men were getting hammered with enemy grenades, as well as fire from both sides of the perimeter.

“The gooks were real close to coming

through now,” Jones recalled. “We kept firing away. Before we could get out, a B-40 rocket round hit nearby and killed a couple of guys next to me. I was stunned and disoriented.”

When Jones regained consciousness, everyone was gone. He ran down the hill, but there was no one there. He realized he was going in the wrong direction, but decided to keep running, just the same.

For 10 days, Jones worked his way through the jungle with nothing more than one grenade, a compass, a pocket knife, a metal mirror and a plastic bag.

He tried to signal with the mirror to a pilot flying overhead, but instead caught the attention of an enemy sniper. He used the battery bag as a canteen, filling it up at night. He survived only on water, for fear of getting sick from eating foliage.

Jones followed the sound of where the U.S. artillery came from each day and finally found his way to Fire Base

Mary Lou, about 16 miles from where the mission originated.

"Aside from losing 25 pounds, I was in good shape," Jones says.

He called home but the connection was so bad that his parents didn't first believe it was their son on the other end of the line. They put him to the test, asking him what color the family barn was.

"Charcoal brown, Dad, charcoal brown," he responded. "Thank God, son," his grateful father replied.

### **Heroism in the Valley**

In the aftermath of the deadly battle, Williams' superiors threatened him with a court martial because he failed to return with the X-mode radio and code key. They further said that Williams had directly disobeyed orders on the hill. His men stepped forward on his behalf.

"We, the survivors of Alpha Company, were mad as hell when we found they were going to court martial Lt. Williams," said Emmett Myron Gwin, a squad leader with 3rd Platoon. "We got together and wrote a letter to division headquarters and the charges were dropped."

Indeed, Williams received the Distin-

guished Service Cross for acting quickly to save as many lives as possible that day.

Gwin received the Silver Star for gallantry in action. That day, he killed a VC dressed only in loincloth and hiding in a tree sniping at him and his men.

"I got off one round, but then my M-16 jammed," he said. "As a little bit of panic started to set in, I saw him sway back and forth in the branches. There was a hole in his chest, and head first he fell from the tree."

Medic John A. Holmes, III, also received a Silver Star for continuing to administer first aid, though wounded himself. Attached to A Company, Holmes carried two wounded GIs to the extraction point and was one of the last to leave.

In a letter to his parents a few days later, he aptly described the horrific scene: "They were in trees and bunkers. All I remember is people screaming in agony and bullets coming from all directions. I was the only able medic as two were killed and the third shot in both arms. After we left, the enemy went around and shot all the wounded in the back. We had to run about five miles before we could be picked up, and it was

such a relief to get out of there."

Helicopter crew chief Ron Carey recalls extracting A Company following the battle: "I will never forget the smell of gun powder, burning, rotting jungle and the smell of death which hung over that hill."

When the battle in Plei Trap Valley was over, 27 members of A Company were dead, including Pfc. David A. Seiber, Spc. 4 Barry D. Horton and Spc. 4 Dennis J. Coll, all of whom received Silver Stars.

At the time, the *New York Times* reported: "The U.S. Command said today that 21 Americans had been killed in two days of intermittent fighting with a battalion of North Vietnamese regulars 31 miles west of Kontum City."

For 39 years this firefight has remained virtually buried, recounted only now. The men of A Company deserve better. 🇺🇸

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**JOHN F. BAUER** was a platoon leader with D Company on March 4, 1969. His unit arrived too late to support Alpha. His awards include the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. Today, he teaches online classes for the University of Memphis and resides with his wife, Anne, in South Carolina.