'Ain't Nobody Been Walking This Trail But Charlie Cong'

By Ward Just

"I can't breathe. I am going home. I am going to be OK." These were the last words of Pfc. Richard Garcia, dying in a tangled jungle undergrowth in Kontum province in Vietnam.

Garcia was only the first to die. Twenty-four hours later there would be 10 dead, 19 injured on a strangely cool afternoon in the highlands. Only 12 men of the elite 42-man Tiger Force of the 101st Airborne Brigade would come out uninjured from a murderous ambush by North Vietnamese troops.

Garcia died at dusk on June 7, believed killed by firing from his own lines. It was a bad omen.

There had been other things that went wrong. Sgt. Pellum Bryant, 32, an Army career man from Brooklyn, N.Y., would say later that he knew the Tigers were going to walk into it and catch hell. There were signs everywhere, and the signs were terrible.

The Tigers were lifted by helicopter into a high stand of elephant grass in the late afternoon of June 7. They were the spearhead element in pursuit of North Vietnamese regulars who had attacked an American artillery emplacement the night before. There were no intricate orders; the Tiger commander, Capt. Lewis Higinbotham, a 26-year-old Vietnam veteran from Houston, Tex., was to take the men and move north.

"He's a Good Killer"

This he did. The point man almost immediately found a trail, and the 42 began to move through the jungle upwards into the highlands, 40 miles north and west from the provincial capital of Kontum. The trail was well-traveled, and there were fresh footprints. "Ain't nobody been walking this trail but Charlie Cong," said the point man.

Elite units like the Tiger Force are always eager to find the enemy. Their business is killing. "You'll like Higinbotham," the lieutenant colonel commanding the battalion had said. "He's a good killer." But on this mission the signs were too obvious, the indices too blunt.

The Americans fell on one deserted base camp after another, each camp larger than the last. Two hundred yards from touchdown in the elephant grass, there were two small huts; 200 yards beyond them, three more; a quarter mile beyond that, a squad-sized complex.

Then, at 7 p.m., the Tigers stopped for a rest, the VC guerrilla blundered into their midst, and Garcia was killed.

When Higinbotham reported the kill-in-action to battalion headquarters—"We've got a KIA"—the G-2 laconically warned him to watch for more. "Maybe a battalion more," the G-2 said.

Higinbotham decided to stay where he was that night. The men dug in on either side of the trail. Higinbotham, Capt. Chris Verlumis, a 27-year-old career man from Oakland, Calif., who had been in Vietnam barely one week, and I holed up under a large bush.

We passed around a small flask of Scotch with quiet laughter about the incongruity of whisky in the middle of the jungle in the middle of a war.

Half the force stayed awake that night listening for infiltrators. At 7 a.m. they appeared—the second omen.

There was a shout, a rattle of gunfire, and suddenly a sheepish private stood before Higinbotham. There were three Vietcong, armed, the private said. They stumbled into the camp, looked at the GIs, and fled. The GIs, equally startled, had time for only half a dozen rounds, but by then the three had scampered across a small stream into the bush. Higinbotham shook his head. "Hell, they probably spent the night with us," he said.

There had been hope that the Tigers' presence on enemy soil would be undetected. Now, with the escape of the three VC, Higinbotham would continue to move carefully, but security had to be considered compromised.

By 10 a.m., Higinbotham had found a landing zone large enough for a helicopter, which arrived at noon and evacuated Garcia. The Tigers hitched up and prepared to move out. But first Verlumis walked up and offered me his .45 pistol.

I refused it, arguing that it was bad luck for a noncombatant to be armed. Verlumis persisted. He said anyone who wandered around Kontum province unarmed ought to have his head examined, and besides, it was a fair trade for the drink of whisky the night before.

So I took the .45 and Verlumis shouldered his M-16 and we moved out. I never fired the .45 and Verlumis was dead before dusk. The whisky was drunk by the 10 Tigers who escaped the ambush that was now two hours away.

The trail wound into deeper jungle, with base camp following base camp. Higinbotham decided by 1 p.m. that his band had uncovered a staging area capable of accommodating a regiment. The jungle was utterly silent, the only movement an occasional exquisitely colored butterfly.

In nearly two years in the Mekong Delta, far to the South, Lew Higinbotham had acquired a passable knowledge of Vietnamese. When his point man found a small, arrow-shaped sign saying "Anh ban di trang," Higinbotham translated it, "Friends go straight." The sign pointed down a trail which led to a ridge line; it was obviously an enemy message.

Higinbotham deployed his main force in a clearing and sent patrols in two directions where the trail forked. The first, under Sgt. Pellum Bryant, almost immediately saw three enemy soldiers in the khaki uniforms of the North Vietnamese army. They killed two with small-arms fire and hand grenades and swiftly returned to Higinbotham's command post.

Higinbotham's radio crackled almost simultaneously with the sound of firing from the other fork. The second patrol was pinned down and needed reinforcements.

Strung out in a long, thin line, the Tigers moved up the trail to the ridge line—slowly, carefully, radios silent, safeties off. At the ridge line, another six-man patrol went forward to learn the American casualties and estimate the strength of the enemy.

They reported back that the enemy force had apparently moved out. Higinbotham nodded, and the line moved down the side of the hill, down the two-foot-wide trail that wound into the tiny cleft between the two hills. It then curled up the next hill.

A Stateside Wound

Edgy — edgy enough that a man snarled if you stepped on his heel — the platoon moved down. There was a wounded GI in the crotch of the tiny valley. He had been shot through the neck beside a cache of enemy rockets and grenades. A half-dozen men went down to get him, past the body of an enemy soldier whose head had been blown off in the firing 10 minutes before.

"You don't feel no pain, baby," the medic said. "You gonna be all right, baby, you gonna see that girl." While he talked, he wrapped a bandage around his comrade's neck. Another medic stuck a plasma needle in the wounded man's right arm.

"I knew it," the wounded man said. "I knew that my chip was cashed in."

"We gonna get the medevac," the medic said.

"Well, he better be there when I get there." Then, "You think I got a stateside wound?"

The wounded man, Pfc. Frank Wills of Miami, was at the base of a 45-degree incline. But the medics called for a litter, and four men struggled and worried him to the trail which led down from the ridge line.

It was very quiet. The Americans weren't talking, but Wills had become half-delirious with pain and fear. He asked why his stomach hurt so much. Then he told the medic that he had $100 R and R money in his pocket. Take it and hold it for me," he said.

But the medic wasn't listening. No one was. Higinbotham was worrying about Wills and whether a landing zone could be carved out of the jungle.

It was 2:30 p.m. when the first grenade crashed down from the ridge line. It went wide with a thump. Then thump! Again, closer.

In the first 15 minutes, three Americans died, six fell wounded. The firing came from three sides, hitting them at three positions on the trail. Higinbotham, at his command post midway down the trail, knew the danger of the situation before anyone else. He called battalion headquarters and requested artillery and air support.

No one knew then, and no one knows now, how many North Vietnamese there were. They did not have mortars, so the unit was probably company-sized or smaller. But they had grenades and small arms and plenty of ammunition, and they fought from concealed positions. They had the advantage of surprise.

In Vietnam, though, however many advantages the enemy has, the Americans always seem to have more. The equalizers are air and artillery. Higinbotham coolly ploted his location, then called in artillery.

The shells fell in a wide semi-circle just beyond the American positions, but close. One fist-sized piece of American shrapnel landed two yards from Higinbotham. While the shells were

landing, preventing the enemy from overrunning positions, Tigers were dying; a half-dozen in the first 90 minutes, four in the five succeeding hours of what official briefers described as "heavy contact."

In the command post, enemy rifle fire was hitting about two feet high. Higinbotham was superbly cool, talking quietly and easily into the field telephone which was the only link to possible safety. As long as the artillery held out, the Communists could not advance, but the fire and the grenades came closer.

By 4 p.m., the situation was almost lost. The Americans had been pushed back into a tiny perimeter, with Higinbotham and the radio as its nucleus. Verlumis was dead. Sgt. Bryant was the only unwounded man of his eight-man squad.

A mile away there were American reinforcements, a full company. But could Charlie Company get to the ridge in time?

"Well, you've got to try it," Higinbotham said over the radio. For the first time his voice cracked and you saw a 26-year-old advertising account executive or civil servant or department store clerk, not a captain in the United States Army. "If you don't get up here we're all going to be dead. If you don't get up here soon, I'm gonna melt."

There was another crackling over the radio and, barely audible, but precisely as he was reading from a piece of paper, Higinbotham said: "Dear God, please help me save these men's lives."

It got worse after that.

The sniper fire came closer, along with the friendly artillery. A wounded infantryman, his voice loud as a bullhorn, was calling from the left flank: "You've got to get me out of here." He repeated it again and again and again. Then he screamed, and was silent.

The Americans were pushed back into an area half the size of the White House lawn, and at the worst of the firing the tiny group in Higinbotham's CP heard over the rise of a small hill: "Tigers, Tigers."

No one answered. Had the enemy penetrated the perimeter, or what was left of it? I was grateful now for the .45 and thought of identifying questions to ask. Who managed the New York Yankees? Was Marilyn Monroe dead or alive? But then a voice said "Christ, don't shoot" and a sweat-drenched head appeared over the ravine. The head belonged to an American.

No Way to Stop Them

There were now seven men in the CP and a 360-degree defense. Pfc. Sam Washburn of Indianapolis, Ind., made a dive into the CP and told Higinbotham: "I got two Charlies and the Captain got one. The Captain's dead. We were firing from the trail and I looked over and asked him how his ammo was and he was dead." Higinbotham said nothing and continued to talk the artillery in.

The cries of the American wounded were getting louder as the men pulled back into a tighter circle. There was no firing from the command post because no enemy could be seen.

But then came the grenades. They were coming closer, just off the mark. That was when the awful fear set in. It was the fear of sudden realization that the North Vietnamese were lobbing grenades and there was no way to stop them.

In Vietnam, if you are 30 years old, you feel an old man among youngsters. I was thinking about being 30 among youngsters when Pfc. Washburn leaned over and very quietly, very precisely, whispered "grenade." Then he gave me a push. I don't remember the push, only a flash and a furious burst of fire. The grenade had landed a yard away and was the closest the North Vietnamese were to come overrunning the CP.

Now the enemy was closing, but so was Charlie Company. Air was now available and 500-pound bombs and .30 calibre machine guns ripped the thick jungle. The wounded men lay scattered in pockets of violence near the CP. They worried about both American bombs and VC grenades and small-arms fire, both coming steadily closer.

Charlie Company, moving up from the rear, could hear the bombs but could not see the trapped platoon. On a signal from Higinbotham, who was in continual radio contact with Charlie, the Tigers began to yell and scream, great banshee whoops to guide Charlie Company to the ridge line. They arrived in tears and handshakes.

And whisky. The battered flask, a tartan-covered bottle more suitable for the Yale Bowl than Kontum Province, was passed around the 10 unwounded Tigers and their comrades.

Charlie Company relieved the exhausted defenders, established their own perimeter, and swept up the ridge behind a drumbeat of rifle fire. The enemy had moved out, and the air and the artillery strikes were temporarily halted.

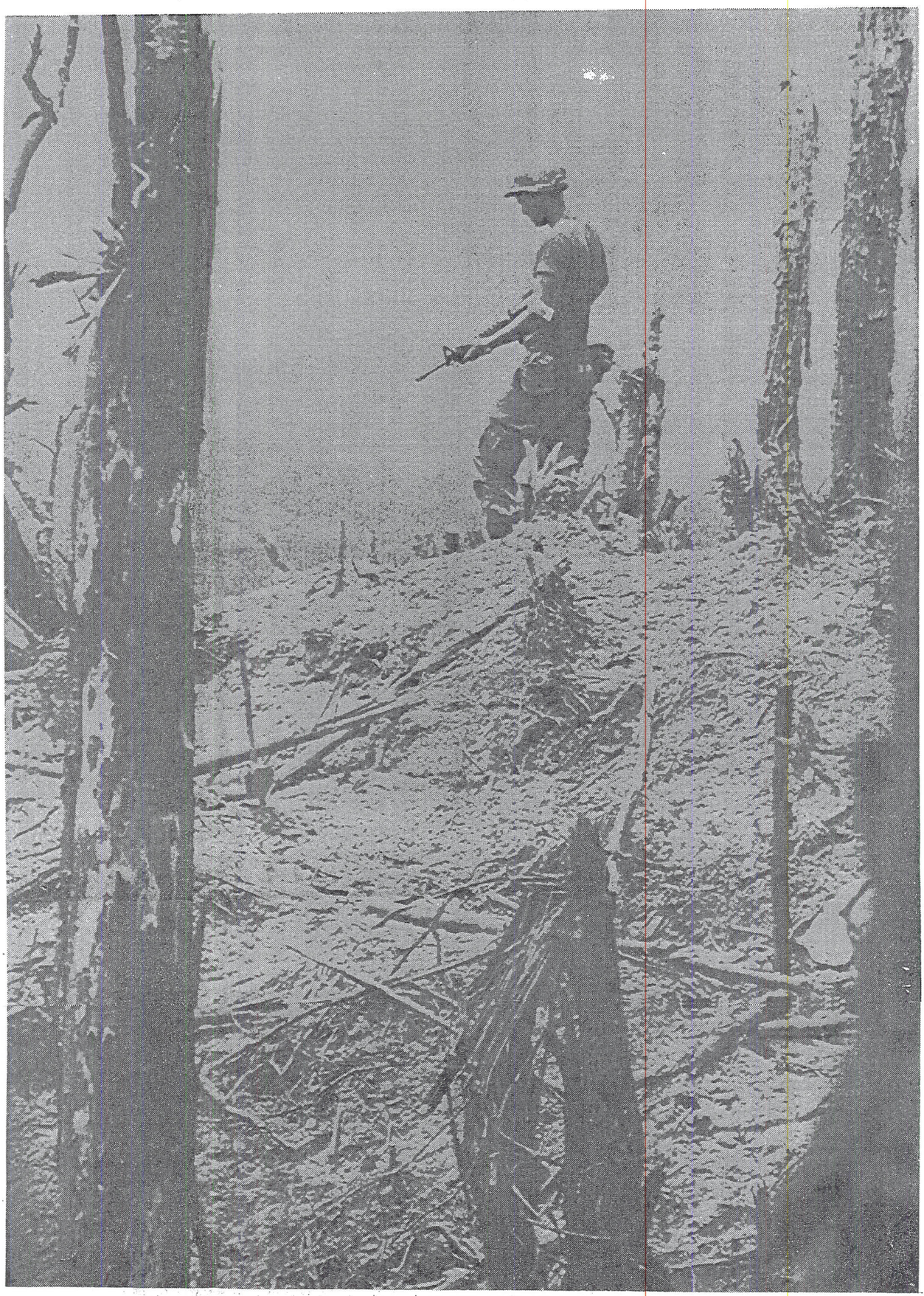
Among the Tiger force, 19 wounded were collected and medevac helicopters were brought in. There was no landing zone, so they hovered at 100 feet and sent down a T-bar to hoist the wounded to the chopper. Strobe lights from the chopper illuminated the area as arc lights illuminate a baseball stadium.

The first chopper took three wounded. The men were strapped into the T-bar and slowly lifted the 100 feet. You saw flashes of light and heard the crack and thwup of bullets and realized that the enemy, still entrenched on the ridge line, were shooting. They were shooting at you. □

Ward Just was seriously wounded in the ambush. His story first appeared in The Washington Post on July 17, 1966. A few days later he returned to duty as the Post's correspondent in Vietnam.

Photo by Frank Johnston

"You don't feel no pain, baby. You gonna be all right . . ."



1972 Pulitzer Prize Photo by David Kennerly, United Press International

Patrolling a devastated hill near Firebase Gladiator: The American equalizers were air and artillery.