

MUD SOLDIERS

Life Inside the New American Army



GEORGE C. WILSON

Author of **SUPERCARRIER**

How good is America's brand-new, all-volunteer Army? Only by living with the men themselves, from their recruitment through their training, can one really know. This is what military correspondent George C. Wilson undertakes in *Mud Soldiers*, just as he did so magnificently earlier in his acclaimed *Supercarrier*—when he wrote, uncensored, about his tour observing the Navy.

Wilson lives with the Charlie Company recruits, shares in their field training in bug-infested pine barrens, visits with their girlfriends and wives, their parents and their hometowns. These men, kids—many are 17—are our infantrymen, our “point” men, our “mud soldiers,” from days immemorial always wartime's first line of defense. They are volunteers—will they make it?

Wilson opens his book with a marvelous recreation of the battle by 2d Platoon, Charlie Company, in Vietnam in 1966, in which the platoon was all but decimated. Now Wilson takes us into the same outfit twenty years later, all new faces. Somehow they endure the toughest kind of training, the coruscating discipline of drill sergeants, the grim routines of barracks life.

Wilson deftly personalizes his account throughout: we live with clearly developed, real individuals, get to know them personally and their families and their backgrounds. Sometimes this is an appalling story: a few of the new recruits can't take it, even try to commit suicide. Many of them come from deprived backgrounds—victims of poverty, broken families, child abuse, ignorance, alcoholism, racial discrimination.

But the upbeat miracle Wilson discovers is that the harsh training and life in the Army

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him. Libs at the same time saw men being cut down in his area in the rear of the company. Nobody would ever know for sure who killed the soldiers with this friendly fire. One report estimated five troopers were killed and another dozen wounded by the errant artillery fire. It was confusing who was killing whom because of the combination of sniper and artillery fire that created sudden chaos around 2 P.M. Kroah blamed himself because he had called in degrees (360 in a circle) instead of mils (6,400 in a circle) in adjusting the incoming artillery rounds. Libs blamed Major M, an artillery officer in the rear. The Army calls such death by friendly fire fratricide. It happens in the close quarters of jungle fighting.

Vietcong snipers opened on Kroah's platoon after the artillery had stopped. Several of his men got wounded. He answered a nervous call from Nolen on the radio.

"November Six, Charlie Six," Nolen began. "We're going to pull back."

"Charlie Six. November Six. I can't do that. I've got more wounded than effectives."

"November Six. Charlie Six. Better figure something out. We're pulling out."

Nolen ordered his platoons to pull back from the most intense fire, which seemed to be directed at the front of the company formation. He hoped to avoid encirclement of the whole company, even if he had to lose the point platoon commanded by Kroah that was now in danger of being overrun. It was too late. The company had put itself too far into the closing noose. The other platoon found they could not move, either, without drawing heavy fire. Every time a soldier tried to go into a low crawl, snipers in the trees would spot the movement and shoot at him.

"November Six. Charlie Six. Looks like they've got us encircled. We're not going anyplace."

Two Air Force Huskie helicopters arrived at 3 P.M. to evacuate the men who had been killed or wounded from sniper fire and the misdirected rounds of artillery. Troopers cut a hole in the treetops so the choppers could lower a bullet-shaped jungle penetrator down to the jungle floor. Air Force Captain Harold D. Salem maneuvered his helicopter over the hole in the trees and hovered. Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger, 21, of Piqua, Ohio, pulled down one of the jungle penetrator's spring-loaded seats, straddled it and signaled Sergeant Gerald Hammond to release

the steel cable that would lower him down to the smoking battleground 200 feet below.

Executive Officer Alderson, radio in hand to coordinate the evacuation, was astonished by the sight of an airman dressed in freshly pressed fatigues and a flak jacket and carrying two .38-caliber pistols on his body voluntarily lowering himself into the mud soldiers' smoking hell. "This Saigon cowboy doesn't know what he's getting into," Alderson said to himself.

Libs, from a farther distance, saw the young man riding down the sky through a hail of enemy bullets. "I'd like to shake that man's hand," Libs marveled.

Once Pitsenbarger was on the ground, Hammond at the side door of the Huskie reeled up the hoist cable, attached a litter basket for the wounded and relowered the cable down to the airman.

"Pits" Pitsenbarger patched up several wounded men and lifted one of them into the litter. Hammond hoisted up this wounded man, lowered the litter again to pick up another one. This first helicopter left the spot over the hole in the trees so it could fly the two wounded to the first aid station at Bien Hoa. The second Huskie found the same hole in the trees, retrieved two more wounded. Each Huskie made three trips to the battleground, rescuing twelve of the fifteen wounded.

The two Huskies returned in hopes of hoisting up the remaining three wounded and two dead. On the ground Pits was trying to get the wounded ready for the painful 200-foot trip up to the side door of the Huskie. He had run out of the splints he had brought down from the chopper and was feverishly fashioning make-do ones out of sticks and vines. But this time the Vietcong opened up on the hovering Huskie, ripping holes in its fuel and hydraulic lines. The Huskie lost power. Hammond motioned Pits to climb into the litter basket so he could be pulled back into the helicopter before it left the battleground. Pits waved off the chopper, electing to stay with Charlie Company. The Huskie struggled out of the hole in the trees under heavy fire. The basket caught on the treetops. Hammond cut the hoist cable, freeing the struggling helicopter. The Huskie made an emergency landing a few miles away.

Left by his own choice with the seemingly doomed men of Charlie Company, Pitsenbarger joined the fight. He gathered the idle rifles and ammunition off the killed and wounded and

distributed them to the men still fighting. He used up all his dressings, picked up an M-16 discarded by a wounded soldier and helped a fire team fight the Vietcong.

An Army UH-1 Huey helicopter hovered over the company to kick cases of ammunition out the side door. The ammo was supposed to land within the company's perimeter. The helicopter radioed down that the fire was so heavy he was going to leave without dropping all the ammunition on board. Krcak radioed back: "If we don't get it, you don't leave." The pilot could not be sure whether the beleaguered lieutenant would make good on his threat to shoot him down. He stayed until all the ammunition was kicked out. It was an accurate drop. The ammunition cases landed only 20 yards from where Nolen and Alderson were trying to organize their forces.

"We gotta get out of here," Nolen told Alderson. He told him to find a platoon and try to break out of the Vietcong's tightening circle. Nolen got wounded shortly after giving that order. He was already traumatized by his first big battle.

Alderson and Radio Telephone Operator Bash moved toward the perimeter to organize a breakout. Vietcong AK-47s opened up on them as they moved. One round smashed into Bash's helmet, knocking him to the jungle floor, face down. Alderson thought he was dead. He rolled the soldier's body over.

"What's wrong?" Bash asked as he stared back at the astonished Alderson. The bullet had bounced away or through the outer steel of the helmet without hitting Bash's head.

Boom!

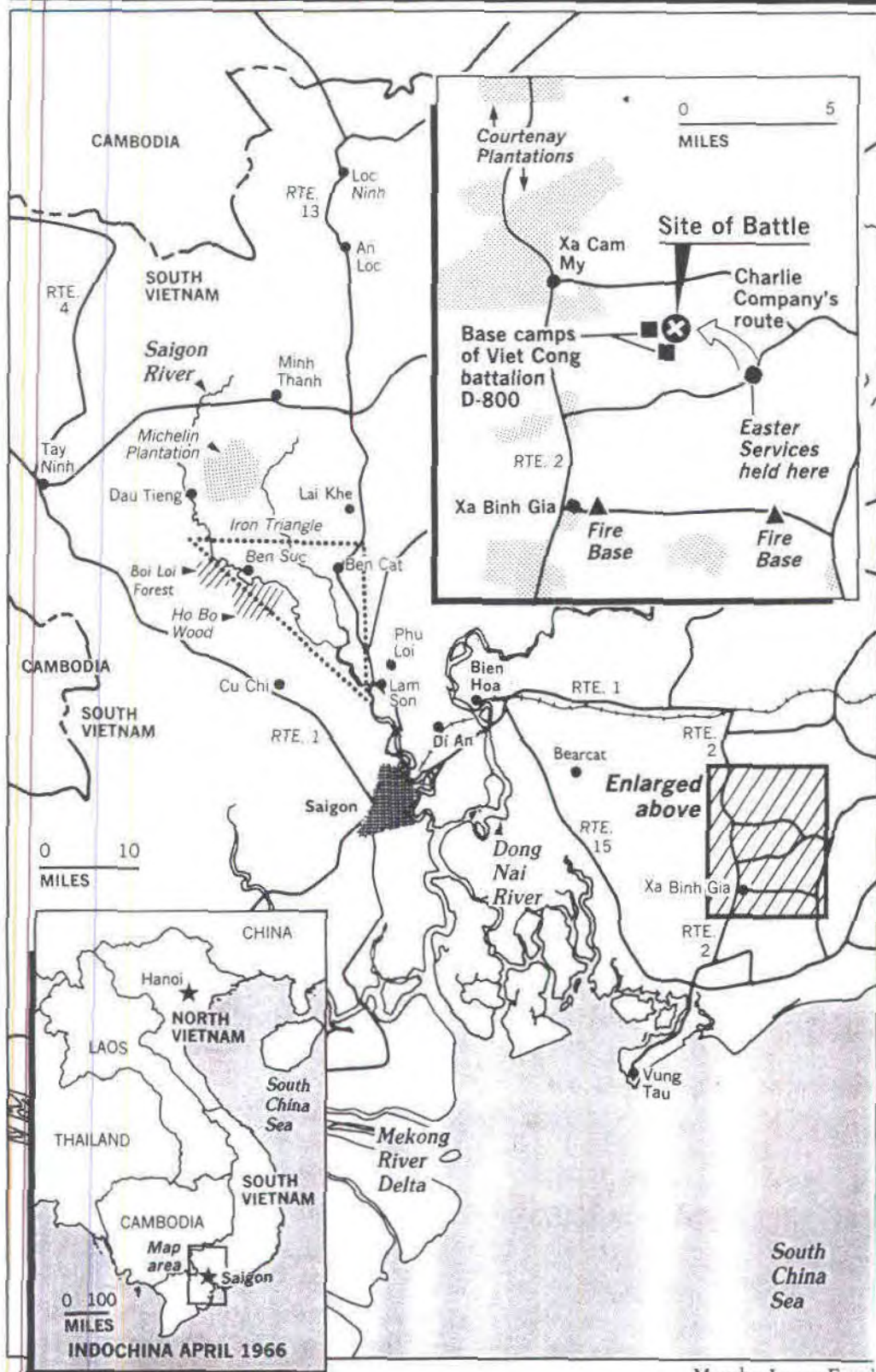
Another Vietcong bullet knocked the helmet off Alderson's head. Again, the bullet ricocheted away from its target, Alderson's head.

Bash's radio was attracting so much fire that Alderson ordered him to stash it behind a tree rather than continue to wear it on his body. Alderson could communicate only if he stayed near the radio. This became impossible during the fluid fight. The radio was soon destroyed anyway.

Alderson was trying to reach the center of the perimeter when he encountered a sergeant from the 1st Platoon sitting against a tree with the blank stare of battle shock. The sergeant's rifle was lying unused on the jungle floor. Alderson talked to him, gently.

"The only way we're going to get out of this is to fight our way out," Alderson said. "If we can't do that, let's not make it easy for them. Most of our leadership is already gone. We need you."

CHARLIE COMPANY'S BATTLE



Map by Larry Fogel