

Forty years ago the survivors of the battle of Fire Support Base Illingworth were trying to figure out which of their battle buddies were alive and which they would never see again. That's why the men of A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery said it is important

to have a reunion this year, the 40th anniversary of the battle. **The public is invited to today's ceremony at 2 p.m. at the unit monument on Courage Drive.** Courage Drive is south of Minor Road along Crane Avenue, between Minor Road and the Impact Zone Brewery.

The battle

April 1, 1970 was the deadliest day of the deadliest month of the year in Vietnam and the ad hoc patch on a hill with no perimeter fence between them and the wood line, was right in the middle of the carnage.

The manning of FSB Illingworth, five miles from the Cambodian border, was made up of elements from several units including; B Battery, 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery; A Battery, 1st Battalion, 30th Field Artillery; A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery; B Battery, 5th Battalion, 2nd Field Artillery and Companies C and E, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. The artillery units are either current or former Fort Sill units. The base overlooked a heavily-used North Vietnamese Army route. And, the enemy didn't want them there.

Ralph Jones was a young Soldier with A Battery, 2nd-32nd FA when the unit and the two self-propelled 8-inch

guns and several tons of ammunition were assigned to FSB Illingworth as added protection.

Jones said right from the start, the Soldiers had a bad feeling because they weren't allowed to get their ammo off the face of the hill.

"We were dangling out there like a piece of bait with no protection," Jones said.

"On April 1, they hit us."

In an interview with "VFW Magazine" in 2008, Jones said before the attack, his unit wanted to get the ammo underground, but was ordered by higher headquarters to not waste time digging.

"From the first day on, we wanted to dig our ammo pits using our 8-inch howitzers as spades," said Jones. "We were ordered not to, thereby allowing the enemy to view our ammo from the jungle line."

Early in the morning of April 1, 1970, the NVA launched the first of 300 mortars, rockets and recoilless rifle rounds that would deluge the base for 20 minutes. Then, about 400 NVA soldiers assaulted the base.

The battle was too close for artillery. The dust from the NVA barrage was so thick it caused M-60 machineguns and M-16 rifles to jam, according to Jones. The FA Soldiers jumped from their tracked vehicles and joined the infantry on the front line.

When guns jammed, Soldiers fought hand-to-hand, using their rifles as clubs, said Jones this week. Then, about 190 rounds of the ammunition that had been stacked on base exploded. In the magazine interview, Soldiers described it as a "titanic roar," and "everyone there

was lifted off the ground."

The explosion left a 20-foot deep crater and Americans and NVA alike stepped back to recover. This resulted in a lull in the fighting for five to 10 minutes, according to the after-action report.

By 5 a.m., nearly three hours after the first NVA rounds hit, the battle was over. Twenty-four Soldiers were killed in action including 10 from field artillery.

Another 54 Soldiers were wounded. Reports said 88 NVA were killed.

"Some of the kids who came in as replacements on March 31 were dead by 4 a.m. the next day," said George Hobson, who was the commanding officer of C Company, who will be attending the ceremony. During the three hours, about 3,372 artillery rounds were fired.

Two Soldiers were awarded Distinguished Service Crosses and one Soldier, Sgt. Peter C. Lemon, was awarded the Medal of Honor."

The reunion

Jones has put himself in charge of getting his battle buddies together for today's reunion.

"You remember some of the good times, some of the bad times and you remember those special guys, your friends, that gave their lives so you could live on," Jones said. "We honor them."

Reunion bonus

This year's reunion will have the added bonus of about 15 members of C Company, 2nd-8th Cav, the infantry unit that fought with everything they had to keep FSB Illingworth from being overrun. For most, it

will be the first time they've seen each other since the dust settled on that hill.

"The commander of Charlie Company [Hobson] traded e-mails and said he was coming and knew of about 15 more Soldiers that wanted to come," Jones said.

Hobson was originally drafted, but stayed in to make the Army a career before retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

"What this means to the men of Company C is it gives us an opportunity to honor all of the men who served in Vietnam," Hobson said. "They were all ordinary men who did an extraordinary job in extraordinary circumstances."

Jones said the reunion is open to the public and especially invited all Vietnam veterans

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