

THE BATTLE FOR FIRE SUPPORT BASE PACE

Late September through mid-October, 1971

By PAUL CIBOLSKI

I served with B Battery, 2/32 from April 1967-68 and returned to the 2/32 in July of 1971 after a 2/12 Field Artillery standdown. I was sent to C battery, which was located on Fire Support Base Pace within 200 meters of the Cambodian border. I was a staff sergeant at the time and had section chief responsibilities.

As usual, 2/32 was living beyond its means. On the night of Sept. 25, 1971, we started receiving a lot of incoming rounds from the direction of the border. The following morning we were informed by the Battery Commander that we were cut off and surrounded by approximately 5,000 NVA.

Our FSB had only 80 battery personnel along with two quads, two dusters and a radar section. The previous night's mortar attack badly damaged Gun 2 (a 175 mm), leaving me with only one long-range gun. We also had two eight-inch guns.

We believed our situation was very serious. By late in the afternoon, an entire infantry company (1/12th Cav, 1st air Cav) arrived to support us.

Two First Cav helicopters were shot down during the insertion of the 1/12th. One was a UH-1 which exploded about 50 feet off the ground just outside our perimeter. The other was a Cobra that went down along the tree line about 250 meters from the FSB.

Both pilots were recovered by the Quad 50 team. All the UH-1 crew perished. We were only able to recover three bodies.

The NVA decided to check out the remains of the UH-1 that night. Big mistake on their part. Guns 3 and 4 were shifted around to cover the downed copter. Ground radar said approximately 40 individuals were moving toward the crash site. On their command, one of the 8-inchers fired a Charge 1 GB (green bag) with a four-second fuse and it exploded about 30 feet off the ground. The green bags were perfect for this mission because they had a very short range – approximately 800 meters – if fired at maximum elevation. Radar said we still had a little movement beyond the perimeter so we fired another round. Radar then reported no movement. I don't think the NVA were aware we could fire or would fire that close to our perimeter.

The 1/12th was followed by a company of the best Airborne Rangers the ARVNs had plus a battery of 105s (also ARVNs).

Despite all this additional firepower, the NVA and VC continued to pound the FSB daily and nightly. We received well over 2,300 rounds of incoming during a siege that lasted 23 days.

Two Kit Carson scouts attached to the 1/12th were killed and a large number of defenders were injured, including yours truly. I feel the ground radar section gave us a great advantage over the enemy. We had 360-degree information as to where the enemy was moving or where it was trying to concentrate its forces. We could either put effective fire from perimeter weapons or artillery with killer junior fuse settings.

This was also the first time I had been bombed by B52s during my two tours in Vietnam. That was the most unnerving display I'd ever seen in my career. The two 8-inchers fired over 5,000 rounds and my section alone fired 2,300 rounds in this battle. One round – I think it was an RPG – caromed off my tube one afternoon. Fortunately, the Quad section next to us had moved to the other side of the fire base because the greater number of incoming rounds were landing on our end. The RPG bounced off our gun tube and proceeded through a 2-foot by 6-foot wall and exploded on the inside of a section building, destroying everything. I took my troops over and made them look at the damage. They could easily have been in that building if they hadn't been on duty. That day we scrounged up enough wire to string up across our entire frontage area in the hopes we could get a pre-detonation from any incoming RPGs or mortar fire. That night the 12th Cav showed up. They were going to send out a few ops. I told the Lt. there were claymores on a daisy chain around the perimeter but we didn't know exactly where because the engineers had put them out while building the FSB. The platoon refused to go out. It just happened that a reporter from TIME magazine was there. Of course in his twisted little mind he printed a story about how "The platoon refused to go out in the field. Don't want to be the last killed in Vietnam." This was total crap. The next day the infantry went out and recovered the mines. They almost tripped a couple before they spotted them. A platoon of Cav and three platoons of ARVNs left the FSB and the NVA actually yelled at them with a bullhorn, telling them to keep coming so they could wipe them out. The crap hit the fan moments later within 250 meters of the FSB. Eventually, the enemy decided this little 100-meter square FSB wasn't worth the terrible cost it had to pay. The ARVN Rangers reported the smell of bodies was so bad in the jungle that it was months before they could go back to cutting trees. Body parts were found in trees and were laying all over the ground around the FSB and for several thousand meters south of the base where the B52 strikes landed. After the battle was over, a transport company moved our howitzers back to Phu Loi for standdown and deactivation. The entire Battalion rotated back to the USA in Jan., 1972. Lt. Colonel Robert McCaffee was the last battalion commander. To all those brave men I served with at FSB Pace may the remainder of your lives be filled with peace and happiness.

**Signed, First Sgt. Paul Cibolski, USA, Ret.
First Section Chief, FSB Pace.**