

**The Proud Americans' First Casualties
A Battery, 2/32
April 3, 1966
At Xuan Loc**

By Rich Andrews

I remember the day before the Angel's gun barrel blew up. I had taken a picture of SP/4 House standing by our APC. The Angel was in the background.

After eating dinner we starting preparing for the nighttime H & I missions. About a month or so earlier we started testing a new sleeve that everyone thought would increase the amount of rounds we could fire from a 175 MM from 400 to 600 rounds. The sleeve was put around the powder charge and was supposed to lessen the pressure on the tube.

We started firing about 2100 hours and fired for about three hours, off and on. No hot missions came down so we were just shooting H & I's (Harassment and Interdiction). We stood down and decided to crash out for awhile as it was now Angel's turn to fire H & I 's. We were about 40 to 50 meters from Angel when they started firing.

It's funny but when you are in the heavy guns you get used to the sounds of them and sleep right through them. But when it's small arms fire or any other sound and you are instantly awake.

What I remember next was a noise that I can't explain and Cpl. Slay screaming his head off. Without even thinking we all sprinted out of our holes and surrounded our gun -- The Gadsden Alabama. We were still trying to figure out what was happening and shake the cobwebs from our heads.

All of a sudden one of the crew members from the Angel was running our way, screaming his head off. The cries of "Medic" started coming from the area where Angel was firing. I remember running out towards this man and grabbing him to get him down as we still did not know what was happening and we all thought we were under attack by the Dung Nai regiment, which was gunning for us. When I grabbed him, his skin came off in my hands and he really started screaming again. The Medic finally got to him and gave him a shot of morphine to stop the pain, then ran towards the Angel. It turned out this soldier was on the lanyard when the Angel blew up and it detonated right by him, exposing him to a full charge three powder bag blowing up in his face and burning off all of his clothes except for his boots.

The Medic ran to Angel to find the entire section wounded or dying. S/Sgt Tommie Lee Sills had his arm blown off in the explosion (he always stood while the gun was firing and rested his arm against the Truncheon.) Tommie was in a state of shock and climbed down off The Angel and walked around the gun, checked on his crew and sat down by the back road wheel and said "God, I can't go home this way." He then went into shock and died. James Slade also died as a result of this explosion.

(According to the Proud Americans website's best information, Johnny B. Boston died on April 3 as well, probably as a result of the explosion. Anyone reading this story who can confirm the cause of Boston's death should email this website.)

The loadarama operator had the entire hydraulic system blow into his stomach and the pump kicked on, starting to pump him full of hydraulic fluid. The assistant gunner only had minor injuries but the powder handlers were standing in front of the powder canisters when the gun blew up and they all started burning. We all know what it's like to burn powder, imagine 100 canisters going off at once. They were all severely burned. I think only two of Angel's crew of eleven were not injured.

We still didn't know what had happened as we thought the Angel had been hit by an RPG and we were under attack. I remember looking over towards where I was going to say the front gate was but it was our only gate and to this day I will always remember this. The guy on guard duty was staying firmly at his post. He was not budging. Small arms fire (not really small arms; it was the 50 cal off the M88), started at the rear of our position which we found out later was the crew of the M 88 shooting in front of the ARVN's trying to run to our compound for protection (They were supposed to be protecting us – not the other way around -- and the crew of the M 88 put a burst of 50 cal in front of them to remind them of that fact and to let them know "NO ONE" was gaining entrance to our compound that wasn't a PROUD AMERICAN). A nice piece of diplomacy.

Any way as I was looking at the front gate (our only gate) someone was rushing the gate shining a flashlight. You could see the light bounce as he ran towards the gate. I was wondering who would be so stupid to rush us with a flashlight while we were being attacked. I remember the guard (red-haired, left-handed, I can't remember names anymore) screaming at the top of his lungs DUNG LAI (Halt). He did this the required three times and promptly lit him up with an M 14 on fully auto. I can still see that stupid flashlight twirling through the night sky. I will never know why I remember that damn flashlight.

The dust began to settle and the BC called for the medivacs and the 5th Special Forces came to us with a reaction force that was nothing short of John Wayne coming to the rescue. We had fired many times for the 5th Special Forces and pulled them out of many a tight spot and they always were our biggest advocates. Anything we wanted and if they had it, it was ours.

We circled our jeeps in the middle of our compound with the lights on to show the medivacs where we wanted them. Talk about feeling like a giant bulls-eye sitting behind the wheel of a jeep with the high beams on and not knowing if the attack is over or not, but we had wounded to get out and nothing was going to stop us from getting them out. It was at this time I found out what happened to Cpl. Slay. The truncheon that was on Angel blew off and tore through the area we were sleeping in. It bounced two feet on one side of S/Sgt Sellers and creased his stomach (a good sized stomach, I might add) and then sliced Cpl. Slay's head from one side to the other. I remember when I was putting on the first aide packet he was not even bleeding. I tied a perfect bow on the top of his head and he looked like an idiot with that BIG STUPID BOW ON TOP but the wound was covered.

The medivacs came and we put the wounded on board, I think there were about 8 guys wounded -- four in bad shape. The Loadarama operator, a canoneer, lanyard specialist and both powder handlers were really in bad shape with burns and internal injuries. The RTO had his eardrums blown out and the Projo handlers had minor injuries. I put Cpl Slay on one chopper and then helped put S/sgt Tommie Lee Sills on the last chopper. Right before we put him on the chopper the medic found his arm and placed it under the poncho liner on his stomach. As we approached the medivac the poncho liner went sailing up in the air and I saw S/Sgt Tommie Lee Sills for the last time. I can close my eyes today and still see his face looking back at me.

Needless to say no one slept that night. The next morning, everyone from Battalion showed up to view the damages and get those reports started. Our sleeping area had the truncheon and other shrapnel laying all around where we had been and it was a miracle that no one else was injured. The truncheon was headed my way after it bounced over S/Sgt Seller and hit Cpl. Slay but got caught in the tarp we hung and stopped two feet short of my cot. Our APC caught the majority of all the flying debris that was headed our way (Thank God).

Ordinance started to boroscope all the Guns and before they got 6 inches into our breach they condemned our tube. The same thing happened to all the guns in the battery. After that, we went back to 400 rounds per tube. Cpl. Slay came back many days later (after spending an abnormal amount of time in Saigon) with a nasty looking scar and stitches (BIG STITCHES) on the top of his head. No one ever mentioned how he looked at third medivac hospital so I never told him.

I have another picture of House standing by our APC, this time the remains of the Angel are in the background.

Three days later, the gun known as "Can Do" arrived from C Battery to become "An Do" to replace Angel and we fired our first round out of a new tube and we all had more than a little bit of nervous anxiety about it. After we fired the first round things started getting back to normal and we were back to being the BADDEST Artillery in Vietnam again and raising hell with Charlie and the NVA.

I don't remember the names anymore and if anyone can remember more of this event I would be more than happy to append to it.

Regards

Rich Andrews
A 2/32 65-66