

Sixty Minutes of Terror at Mary Ann



PHOTO COURTESY EDWARD MANSON

Though the Vietnam War was winding down for the U.S. Army in 1971, the enemy attack on Fire Support Base Mary Ann in March claimed 30 American lives in one hour of no-quarters combat. The Americal's 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, and attached units sustained the single largest American loss of the year.

By Al Hemingway

“Most of us didn’t talk about it when we came home,” said Ed Newton of Sawyer, Kan., and a veteran of the 46th Infantry. “In my opinion, the media blew it all out of proportion when they mentioned the drugs and sleeping on duty. It’s time we set the record straight and tell the truth about Mary Ann.” Indeed, it is.



In the early morning hours of March 28, 1971, an estimated 50 sappers from the 2nd Co., 409th Viet Cong (VC) Main Force Sapper Battalion quietly neared their objective—Fire Support Base (FSB) Mary Ann—a remote outpost of the 196th Light Inf. Bde. (LIB), 23rd Infantry (Americal) Div., located in the western highlands of Quang Tin province in Military Region I of South Vietnam.

Precarious Position

Mary Ann’s purpose was to provide a protective shield for Da

Nang and other coastal hamlets. Also, it was a jumping-off point for operations designed to disrupt the flow of men and matériel coming down the Dak Rose Trail.

Erected on top of a ridge, it “occupied two camel humps with a shallow saddle in between.” A series of ridges and hills enveloped the outpost on three sides, and thick jungle

obscured the field of observation. Described as a “shantytown,” 30 hootches, bunkers and other buildings were sprinkled over its interior. The base was 546 yards in length, 82 yards wide across its saddle and 136 yards wide at both ends.

Twenty-two bunkers, constructed from metal conex shipping boxes, were placed around the outer perimeter. Most of the headquarters buildings were situated on the southeast side of the base: the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (BTOC), company command post (CP), communications bunker, a sensor monitoring station, ammunition storage

◀ **Left:** GIs arrive aboard a U.S. helicopter at Firebase Mary Ann. Situated atop a ridge, the base was hit by Viet Cong sappers on March 28, 1971.

bunkers, three mess halls, artillery liaison center, battalion aid station and fuel storage area.

The northwest end of the camp held two 155mm howitzer parapets, the fire direction center and the artillery CP. Also, a quad .50-caliber machine gun team was placed along the perimeter together with a detachment from a searchlight unit.

One line company from the 196th LIB was rotated from the field to Mary Ann approximately every two weeks and was responsible for its security while there.

On the Perimeter

In all, 231 Americans and 21 South Vietnamese (ARVN) soldiers defended Mary Ann on that fateful night. Among them were the 75-man C Co., 1st Bn., 46th Inf.; an 18-man recon platoon; 34 medics, communications personnel, clerks and cooks from HQ Company; and an eight-man contingent from the 4.2-inch mortar platoon of E Company.

That crew was there assembling the remainder of the mortar ammo to take to FSB Mildred. (No heavy mortars were present that night on Mary Ann. Two mortars were sent to Chu Lai for repair, and the other two went to Mildred.)

There, too, were 81mm mortar crews from B and D companies; 20 men of 1st Plt., C Btry., 3rd Bn., 16th FA, manning two 155mm howitzers; and artillerymen from four other units. Finally, 22 grunts from A, B and D companies were in transit.

Mary Ann had been spared an all-out attack. With the war winding down, no one believed the VC would hit such an insignificant outpost. "There was a false sense of security at Mary Ann," said John Pastrick, an infantryman with C Co., 1st Bn., 46th Inf. "It was very lax all the time."

But on this fog-shrouded evening, 50 VC sappers, their bodies covered with charcoal and grease to make them more

difficult targets in the darkness, quietly slipped through Mary Ann's perimeter. Crouching low in three- to six-man teams, they made their way through the base's unsuspecting defenders.

Struck With a Vengeance

They wasted no time. Under the protective umbrella of a mortar barrage, sappers struck the vulnerable BTOC with a vengeance. Lt. Col. William P. Doyle, the battle-hardened battalion commander,

Lt. Col. William P. Doyle drew his .45 pistol and pumped a round into a sapper's chest just before another satchel charge was heaved at him.

Soldiers clean weapons captured just prior to being overrun. Men of the 1/46th had unearthed a large weapons cache two weeks before the assault.

was awakened when 82mm mortar shells landed with a resounding thud just outside his bunker.

To make matters worse, the sappers tossed CS (tear) gas into the BTOC. Choking and unable to see, Doyle was knocked down when a satchel charge exploded. Regaining his composure, he drew his .45 pistol and pumped a round into a sapper's chest just before another satchel charge was heaved at him.

The force of that explosion threw him to the ground, leaving him unconscious. Coming to, Doyle struggled to stand up, only to have a third explosion go off in the BTOC. As a result, Doyle was again knocked out. He eventually made his way out of the burning BTOC and linked up with Capt. Paul S. Spielberg, who had choppered into Mary Ann several days before with a three-man training team from Chu Lai.

Spielberg had written that he was "so proud of my men I could burst. When we were without food and it was cold

and pouring down rain ... there was good humor and the highest degree of cooperativeness. The grunts were clean in the jungle—no drugs." He earned his third Purple Heart on Mary Ann.

While the BTOC was being destroyed, C Company's CP also was being hit hard. Capt. Richard V. Knight, the company's popular commander, was killed outright. 1st Lt. Daniel J. Mack, executive officer, was struck in the right leg by an AK-47 round, shredding his calf muscles. He



PHOTO COURTESY WILLIAM WALKER

feigned death while a sapper ripped the watch off his wrist.

Spec. 4 Carl D. Carter, a radio operator, was buried under sandbags when a wall of the bunker collapsed on him. He went undetected as the VC sprayed the room with automatic weapons fire.

Not so lucky was Sgt. Ronald J. Becksted, an easygoing NCO, who was killed instantly as he tried to escape the CP. Spec. 4 Thomas Simmons also was gunned down, but survived.

Staff Sgt. John C. Calhoun was hit three times and was lying near Pfc. Michael S. Holloway, who was frantically trying to tie a tourniquet on Calhoun's leg. As enemy sappers approached, both faked death. Calhoun survived, but Holloway was killed. As the VC moved on, one let loose a burst and Calhoun was wounded two more times.

Mary Ann was struck with such ferocity that its defenders were unable to mount any type of counterattack. Many grunts, who were asleep in their

hootches, were either shot trying to escape or buried alive when the satchel charges were hurled into their quarters.

Mounting Resistance

A few soldiers managed to avoid the initial onslaught. Tripping over the body of a dead sapper in the confusion, Spec. 4 David Tarnay picked up his AK-47. As he carefully maneuvered about, he saw an enemy soldier in the wire attempting to leave. Tarnay took careful aim, killing him.

ments arrived, the assault was over. It had lasted just an hour. The results were disastrous: 30 GIs killed and 82 wounded. C Company was hardest hit, with 20 KIA alone. The Battery C platoon sustained five KIA, 25% of its men.

(Incidentally, website claims that some of the deaths were due to “friendly fire” are absolutely wrong.)

Maj. Gen. James L. Baldwin, commanding general of the Americal Division, arrived on the scene at dawn.

“The firebase was a shambles,” he

Hell, he was the division commander. It was a brigade and battalion problem. The day before we got hit they had us pull in all the sensors from around the perimeter.

“Kim, our Kit Carson Scout, warned us we were infiltrated. He said the enemy was posing as ARVNs on the base. One ARVN officer even inquired about the easiest way to get off the firebase to fish.

“We thought that was strange and nobody told him. In fact, the night of the attack, we took fire from the ARVN position. When we returned fire, it stopped. Not one ARVN came out to help us. And the enemy left them alone.

“We tried to tell the officers what Kim had said, but they didn’t listen to us. It was poor intelligence and gross negligence—plain and simple.”

Allegations of drug use also have hovered over the performance of the GIs at Mary Ann.

Platoon Sgt. Bill Walker, who was in charge of bunkers 15 through 22, has a different viewpoint: “Everyone was awake when I made my rounds. There was no pot in my bunkers. And I know what pot smells like. One soldier, manning a bunker by the trash dump, was dozing. I stayed with him for a few minutes to make sure he was awake, then I returned to my bunker. Not two minutes later, everything hit the fan.”

Sgt. Gary L. Noller, a battalion radio operator for the 46th Infantry, recalled: “The belief that the enemy would not waste its time attacking a force that was soon leaving anyway led to a false sense of security. And while drugs were present on Mary Ann, they were used only by a minority of soldiers.”

Why Mary Ann?

Why had the enemy made such a determined effort to overrun Mary Ann? It was late in the war, and Vietnamization was progressing steadily. GIs were being replaced by ARVN units.

Timothy Baldwin, son of Gen. Baldwin, who did extensive research on Mary Ann to clear his deceased father’s name, may have found the answer: “The 1/46th was causing too much trouble from ... Mary Ann.” Just two weeks before the assault, the unit had unearthed a large enemy cache. Sgt. 1st Class Edward “Pop” Manson, platoon

“That commentary which tars the 1/46th Infantry as a ‘mob’ ... is grossly exaggerated. Most of the draftees on Mary Ann had already proven themselves in combat. And yet, however reluctantly, there were still soldiers like those in the 1/46th Infantry out fighting the war.”

— Author Keith Nolan from his book, *Sappers in the Wire: The Life and Death of Firebase Mary Ann*

Sgt. Maj. Carl N. Prosser and Pfc. John A. Bruno killed another sapper trying to flee the area. When the VC returned fire, Prosser and Bruno manned the quad .50, while Spec. 6 Freddie Fillers, the chief cook, commandeered an M-60 machine gun. Between the two weapons, the trio let loose hundreds of rounds. At least three more sappers were cut down trying to make their way to safety.

A Night Hawk Huey gunship, with a starlight scope aboard, was the first aircraft on the scene. The chopper, flown by Capt. Norman Hayes, was from Trip. D, 1st Sqdn., 1st Cav. Hayes had to fly his helicopter at a higher altitude due to the thick smoke coming from the burning hootches at Mary Ann.

But the gunship did score some kills. “[We] ... could actually see the VC in the wire... It looked like they were trying to take people out of the wire... We engaged, and I know that anything we fired on ceased firing at us,” said Hayes.

In the end, however, only 15 VC bodies were found. Evidence indicated the enemy dug a few hasty graves to bury their dead before withdrawing.

Unfortunately, by the time reinforce-

wrote in a letter home, “with things burning all over the place... There were many [soldiers] who were sitting around with rather dazed looks on their faces, and another group which was actively and energetically trying to pick up the pieces. There were no in-betweens.”

Intelligence & Negligence

The consequences of the attack were quickly felt. In the aftermath of an investigation, Baldwin and Col. William S. Hathaway, the 196th LIB commander, were relieved of duty. Both would retire soon afterward. A host of other officers were reprimanded, including the hard-driving Lt. Col. Doyle. He remained in the service until his retirement, but never received another promotion.

Many felt Baldwin’s reprimand unjust. “It was a political thing,” said Capt. John Strand, commanding officer (CO) of A Co., 1st Bn., 46th Inf. “Scapegoats were needed... What happened to Baldwin was wrong, but it’s not hard for me to understand given how big organizations work.”

Spec. 4 Ed Newton also felt “it was not right what they did to Baldwin.

sergeant of the 4.2-inch mortar platoon, agrees: "Charlie was after Company C ... they got the CO [Knight] in his bunker, too..."

Baldwin interviewed several Mary Ann VC veterans: they had no idea the Americans were about to abandon the firebase and turn it over to ARVN. "The VC," Baldwin wrote, "normally known for their superb intelligence-gathering, had failed on this issue."

That American courage was displayed on Mary Ann is indisputable. Silver Stars were awarded to Sgt. Elmer R. Head, Capt. Virtus A. Savage, senior medic Larry J. Vogelsang (a conscientious objector), Sgt. Ervin E. Powell, 1st Lt. Jerry W. Sams, Pfc. Paul G. Grooms, 1st Lt. Arthur D. Schmidt, Capt. Paul Spilberg and Spec. 4 David Tarnay.

In one legendary exploit, 1st Lt. C. Barry McGee choked a sapper to death before being killed.

Recognizing Hardships

In *Sappers in the Wire: The Life and Death of Firebase Mary Ann* (1995), the late author Keith W. Nolan counters many bogus claims. "Unfortunately, we historians got it wrong," he wrote.

"I do not mean to whitewash what happened at Firebase Mary Ann with such a remark, for the incident was a tragic disaster with much to teach today's soldiers about vigilance.

"What I do mean to say is that commentary which tars the 1/46th Infantry as a 'mob' ... is grossly exaggerated. Most of the draftees on Mary Ann had already proven themselves in combat. And yet, however reluctantly, there were still soldiers like those in the 1/46th Infantry out fighting the war. Their hardships should be recognized.

"Author [Geoffrey] Perret got it right when he wrote that these troops who 'had faith in nothing much, least of all in men like Johnson and Nixon,' still 'served their country a lot better than it served them.'"

AL HEMINGWAY, is a Vietnam vet and member of Post 201 in Waterbury, Ct.

Editor's Note: Vets of Mary Ann will hold a memorial service at Ft. Benning, Ga., on March 28. For information, contact Gary Noller at gnoller@aol.com.



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