

The Battle of FSB Henderson

101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), (Operation Texas Star), 6
May 1970; South Vietnam; located at MGRS YD081411;
Company A, 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry and Attachments

I was the A Company and U.S. Forces Ground Commander responsible for Henderson's defense throughout the battle that occurred on 6 May 1970 until we were extracted with a "change of mission". I was their leader throughout the fight; I fought for and with them; I led them off of the hill when so ordered. The men who fought there were (and are) common Americans of uncommon patriotism, valor, and fidelity. They fought courageously for me and for one another for "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends".

MY PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF HENDERSON IS IN MEMORY OF ALL PARTICIPANTS BUT ESPECIALLY FOR TWO BRAVE INFANTRYMEN WHO WERE LISTED AS MISSING IN ACTION FOR SO MANY YEARS...SSG REFUGIO THOMAS TERAN, AND SSG LARRY GENE KIER.

I don't recall the exact time my UH-1 (Huey) touched down on the sun-baked one-ship landing zone (LZ) on the 5th of May 1970, but I certainly recall the aerial view of Fire Support Base Henderson and its surrounding terrain as we executed the long sweeping left turn and flared on "short final" before landing. As I got my first glance of the hill we were to defend from the air I was astounded by the prominent high ground overlooking three sides of the barren hilltop...an irregular, goose-egg shaped 50 by 200 meter hill that straddled a sweeping ridge line running down eventually to the Song Quang Tri River about a kilometer north and below. I still remember, as if it were yesterday, scrambling to align the thick roll of map sheets I was issued before we began the long move north from near the city of Hue and into an area of operation

(AO) we had never seen before. By my initial map analysis I knew we were being inserted no more the 9 miles or so northeast of the Laotian Salient and we were uncomfortably close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Approximately 15 miles to our east-north-east was the city of Quang Tri. I didn't need the Division's most recent Intelligence Summary to know that our new AO had to be saturated with large, well-trained and untested North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces making their way into South Vietnam from the North. Even though I had not been issued an operation order and had no intelligence briefing before the air assault into Henderson, I had been "up north" near the DMZ once before while commanding E Company, 2n Battalion, 501st Infantry. The experience had occurred in the fall of 1969 and had left me with a clear understanding that we were being moved north this time with a mission that carried substantially higher risks. Working near the DMZ and the Lao Salient was unnerving to say the least and many of the seasoned vets with A Company shared my concerns.

Only a few weeks earlier the senior leadership of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and our Army of Vietnam (ARVN) partners in northern I Corps, had jointly made the decision to conduct combined operations to interdict NVA forces moving across the DMZ with operations to commence 1 April. One interesting aspect of the operation provided for ARVN forces to continue their tactical control of their AOs assigned however, the 3rd Brigade, 101st was tasked to reopen Fire Support Base Henderson. In opening the fire base the 3rd Brigade assumed responsibility for providing base defense and security of both U.S. and ARVN artillery units supporting ARVN infantry operating to the south and west.

During the last week of April, 3rd Brigade, 101st opened Henderson by air assaulting one U.S. infantry company onto the hill for fire base defense followed by B Battery (-), 2-11 Field Artillery (U.S.-155mm) and B Battery (-), 12th Field Artillery (ARVN-105mm) plus the 54th ARVN Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and its supporting elements. The rest of the U.S 3rd Brigade, 101st and its infantry battalions remained well south with very limited capability to reinforce Henderson, if required. As Henderson opened, the 54th ARVN infantry battalions were inserted by air some distance from Henderson. The 54th Regiment's 1st Infantry Battalion was inserted on 30 April well south of Henderson, and on 1 May the 54th Regiment's 2nd Battalion air assaulted into its AO on Fire Support Base Tun Tavern even further from Henderson. In hindsight, this tactical decision to open Henderson without clearing the

immediate surrounding terrain proved to be a fatal error that dramatically increased Henderson's vulnerability and made the hill a much more lucrative target.

To this day I recall thinking, "Wow...who in their right mind could have picked this place to build a fire base?" By simple terrain analysis one could quickly conclude that the hill was not defensible! Once on the ground what I found while I walked the perimeter of Henderson for the first time disturbed me even more. In absolute shock, I instantly recognized that defensive preparations on Henderson were next to nonexistent compared to any other fire base I'd ever seen. With almost a week of occupation, Henderson's fighting positions along and within the perimeter were, for the most part, nothing more than perhaps waist deep holes; few were sand bagged; at best no more than a single strand of concertina (protective wire) had been emplaced; there was no "tangle-foot" at all, and fields of fire had been cleared no more than 15 to 20 meters forward of our lines of defense leading into the dense vegetation. Defensive materiel, normally pre-positioned around the perimeter of newly occupied fire bases, was primitive at best and next to nonexistent. As best I remember, the only positions with even questionable overhead cover were the ARVN TOC, the ARVN Medical Facility, a few positions near the artillery batteries, and my Command Post (CP) some 15 to 20 meters north and below the TOC. I was dumbstruck to see such a lack of tactical preparation for defending Henderson given the hill had been occupied by a U.S. infantry company (D Company, 1-501st Infantry) since 30 April.

As A Company, 2-501 Infantry's 80 plus infantrymen (less than 60 percent of our authorized strength) continued to land one aircraft at a time on Henderson and make their way up and onto the hill to occupy the defensive positions, I walked back through the two artillery battery positions on top of the hill to better understand the terrain we were to defend. I was amazed to see a number of unprotected pallets of artillery ammunition (approximately five to eight as I recall) and at least one or more fuel bladders positioned at or within the artillery positions. I could not have imagined a potentially more lethal mistake. Little did I know of the effects this blatant tactical error would cost us in lives in just a matter of a few hours. As I made my way back to my CP, I stopped by the ARVN TOC to introduce myself and gather as much information as I could before meeting with my platoon leaders to walk our perimeter. I briefly spoke with the senior ARVN officer there and casually spoke with an ARVN captain who proudly announced that he was a graduate of our Infantry School at Fort Benning. During our initial conversations I quickly determined that Henderson had no combined defensive plan. There were

no direct or indirect fire plans, no counterattack plans, no counter-reconnaissance plans, no surveillance plans, no obstacle plans, no designated reserves, and no “hard wire” communications from my CP to any locations around the hill. Henderson was a disaster waiting to happen and I knew it within the first hour I was on the ground. Essentially, the 54th ARVN Regiment and I had no command relationship either! Neither of us could require anything of the other in defense of the hill. I was absolutely dumbfounded by the lack of “unity of command” on Henderson. I departed the ARVN TOC confused, frustrated, and angry for having been injected into such a tactical mess but determined that we absolutely had to make the best of the remainder of the daylight hours to fix what we could before nightfall.

Arriving back at my CP, (a roughly eight by ten foot hole covered by three or four sections of steel planking and sandbags) I found my Artillery Forward Observer (FO) Team, RTOs, and others in my command group busily setting up our own static communications equipment and taking closure reports from our subordinate units as they filled in the perimeter. By radio, as I recall, I immediately instructed my platoon leaders to focus on preparing our fighting positions along the perimeter with priority to getting appropriate overhead cover on them before last light. Frankly, such instructions were not required for the work had already begun at the direction of my subordinates. The survivors of A Company’s successful defense of Fire Support Base Granite only about a week earlier knew the importance of digging in properly with the requisite overhead cover as well. From the moment A Company’s infantrymen got on the bunker line there were frantic efforts to get “underground” and construct some form of overhead cover. Getting dug in with appropriate overhead cover was my message to my platoon leaders, (1st LT Jim Knight [1st Platoon], 1st LT Rick Hawley [Recon Platoon], 1st LT Lyn Hargrave [2nd Platoon], and SSG Bob Nichol [3rd Platoon]). Jim Knight and I were the only two A Company officers left to make the trip to Henderson since we had moved north the first week of April as part of the 3rd Brigade offensive. Rick Hawley and about 14 members of our battalion’s Reconnaissance Platoon were attached to the company as last minute reinforcements given we were already so terribly under strength. Rick and I had served together as platoon leaders in C Company, 2-501 Infantry back in the fall of 69, operating along the Song Bo River west of Fire Support Base Bastogne. Lyn Hargrave joined us to lead the 2nd Platoon for the Henderson operation having formerly been a Platoon Leader in C Company, 2-501 Infantry and most recently he had been leading a Mobile Training Team for the 2nd Brigade. SSG Bob Nichol led the 3rd Platoon in the

absence of an officer, however, I had absolute confidence in Bob for he was an A Company veteran...a smart, crafty leader, and one of the finest noncommissioned officers I'd humped the jungle with while in Vietnam. Some time around mid day we received a few additional infantry replacements but even with these and the attached Recon Platoon our foxhole strength around the perimeter was no more than about 120 soldiers...still well short of our authorized strength and certainly far short of our needs to effectively man Henderson's irregular perimeter.

While A Company and its late arriving attachments were racing to dig in properly, my senior RTOs and I had another battle on our hands in that we were unable to communicate effectively with the 3rd Brigade Headquarters almost 30 miles southeast of Henderson. I had been forewarned that the problem had existed since the fire base had been opened but we simply had not been able to establish continuous direct radio contact. The dilemma was that we were required to maintain radio contact through a distant "retransmission site" using our own organic communications equipment and a single AN/GRC 292 radio antenna. Either faulty equipment at the retransmission site or the extended distances made communications nearly impossible. (Only years later would I learn that the division had provided a Multi-Channel Radio System to the 54th ARVN TOC twenty yards directly behind me and provided them with an operator or operators as well!). For more than a week the 3rd Brigade had ignored the requirement to establish reliable communications with the defenders of one of its fire bases...an unpardonable "sin" that added to the list of leadership failures existent on Henderson. Despite our best efforts we never established continuous communications with our higher headquarters and were forced to relay our hourly required situation reports. On a more positive note, my FO was able to maintain excellent communications with our direct support artillery Fire Direction Center (FDC). I believe this communication link would later play a vital role in preventing an NVA reinforcing attack for we had 155mm fires on the ground within minutes of their initial assault and we were able to pound likely attack positions along most likely enemy avenues of approach as the battle progressed.

At this point in my account of the battle I must add that one or more accounts of the afternoon of 5 May suggest a visit to our hill by the 3rd Brigade, 101st Commander, my immediate commander on Henderson. I recollect a brief visit by the 1st Division (ARVN) Commander but I must admit, I can't recall COL William Bradley's presence or his visit on the 5th. However, and in all honesty, my interests on the day of our arrival were focused on our

vulnerabilities and the enormous amount of work that needed to be accomplished before nightfall. We had a real mess to clean up and not a moment to spare. With all candor I must add here as well that I had learned to routinely “discount” senior officer visits into our jungle locations (including forward fire bases) as nothing more than “face time with the troops” unless they were conveying specific actions and orders. I had concluded months before (with an admitted level of cynicism) that senior officers didn’t have the slightest idea of what we “grunts” were enduring day after day in the mountainous jungles of Vietnam nor were they “situationally aware” of the unique dangers and personal challenges we faced as jungle fighters in Vietnam’s mountainous north. Frankly, most were absolutely oblivious to the fact that as jungle fighters, our immediate and perhaps most difficult task was surviving the environment. We learned by mostly trial and error to live in harmony under the harshest of conditions or become a casualty of its circumstances. I would opine that we survived by sheer determination, individual toughness, and “pack instincts” and, as such, we assumed the role of the most intelligent and dominant beasts in the jungle’s food chain. Said another way, we lived under the jungle canopy much like the creatures (both man and beast) we encountered. It was a cruel, survivalist, “kill or be killed” environment made more hazardous by the enemy we faced. Unless you humped an eighty to one hundred plus pound ruck in the mountainous jungles every day, laid on a wet ambush site every night and faced every contact with the enemy at fifteen meters or less, you had little in common with those of us who did...matter of fact, “visitors” to our environment hardly spoke our language! It was as simple as that! Again....recognizing the degree of my cynicism that comes with these observations, most of us saw our senior leadership as stark aliens helicoptering in from their stuffed chairs and elaborate headquarters, freshly showered/shaved and well fed.... adorned in starched jungle fatigues and spit-shinned boots, and well air-conditioned...ready to shake a few hands and ask a few mundane questions before disappearing into the sky in a matter of a few moments. I always marveled at the contrasts with our “guests” who ventured into the jungle to visit us. They hopped from their glossy command and control aircraft and infiltrated the tattered, filthy, often unshaven grunts who had been trudging the jungled mountains, often times for the better part of a month...worn, weathered, sleep-deprived, jungle-rotted, and always hungry. I’ve often made the point that we were more beast than man having endured endless days in the jungle...all of our senses were distinctly modified and different...we were acclimated to nothing more than whispering and attuned to be instinctively survivalists above all else. I

think I can speak for any “grunt” that humped the jungle with me that a low aerial kick out of the red mail bag every week or so was far more welcome in our midst than having to scramble to an LZ to meet one of our senior leaders! I would add as well that our “guests” were, more often than not, treated as a nuisance and their noisy arrival by air always compromised our locations, disrupted our “battle rhythm”, and forced unnecessary movements thereby increasing our vulnerability of being ambushed or being caught up in untimely meeting engagements with an enemy that was grossly underestimated. Every time my radio announced the inevitable “visitor” my first thoughts were that we would be operationally compromised. I learned a lot from these all to frequent “intrusions” and as a Colonel and General Officer later in my career I sought to make my encounters with subordinate units in the field far more purposeful and much less intrusive.

On the 5th of May 1970 the darkness arrived far to soon on Henderson for an under strength, somewhat battered, tired and edgy group of defenders, some who had just arrived and were newly assigned to A Company and others, like the Recon Platoon, who were unaccustomed to operating within a rifle company structure. For many soldiers the night of the 5th would be their first exposure to the combat environment (and sadly for many, their last). The seasoned few combat veterans of A Company, particularly those who had participated in the fights on REUP Hill and FSB Granite during the previous weeks, had all heard the rumors that Henderson would be “a quiet and welcomed break to give the company some time to rest and reconstitute itself and integrate the many replacements” that had just joined us after losses incurred the previous month. That was the message I got as well, however most of us veterans just didn’t “take the bait”. We knew we were extremely vulnerable but we had done our absolute best to improve our positions before darkness fell and I was hopeful that we could get through this first night and start a new day of making vast improvements in our defensive posture. By around 2100 on the night of the 5th, Henderson was quiet and the clouds and dampness from the valley below had crept up and onto our hilltop adding to its darkness.

At approximately 0430 on 6 May my FO and I were up and sitting on top of the company CP just below the ARVN TOC working the last minute details of a series of scheduled calls for artillery fire against preplanned targets on the hills and ridge lines that lined the eastern side of Henderson. Although most of us had accepted a rather sleepless night trying to work through our communications problems with the 3rd Brigade, we had prepared (as was our Standing

Operating Procedure in A Company) to hit the terrain around us hard with artillery at first light. Such use of artillery was a routine piece of our defensive planning any time we were defending from a fire support base and its purpose was to disrupt and/or deter early morning attacks. We had no idea that the assault elements of the 8th Infantry Battalion, 66th NVA Regiment of the 304B Division (NVA) were already inside our planned and scheduled defensive targets and in their final attack positions for the assault on Henderson.

At precisely 0505 in the fog-shrouded darkness, I recall the silence on Henderson being broken by a single burst of automatic weapons fire to my right rear along Henderson's eastern perimeter followed by an almost immediate roar of exploding grenades, claymore mines, satchel charges (improvised explosive devices), rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), and assorted types of small arms fire, both friendly and enemy. I knew immediately from my experience a week earlier on FSB Granite that the NVA were in or through our single strand of protective wire and the face-to-face perimeter fighting had commenced along our thin lines of defense. Within a matter of a few minutes the ground attack to my right rear and to my front intensified dramatically. As our hand flares streaked into the low hanging cloud cover, I observed and engaged several attacking NVA Sappers to my immediate front between my CP and the bunker line below. The NVA movement across and through the bunker line to my immediate front told me that the soldiers who had occupied those forward positions had been killed or wounded within moments of the initial assault. Each of the NVA soldiers appeared to be crouched or crawling toward us throwing improvised explosive devices as they advanced and it became immediately obvious their attacks were focused on specific assigned objectives within our perimeter. I have always marveled at how they attacked with such "tunnel-vision" to their predesignated targets, oblivious to the chaos around them. I recall that at one point a single NVA soldier rose from behind one of our neutralized fighting positions about 20 meters to my front and fired a single RPG round directly at us before I could get off a shot with my M16. The RPG round appeared to strike our 292 radio antenna about 10 feet up its aluminum mast almost directly above our CP with a tremendous concussion and showered one of my radio operators (RTO) and me with aluminum fragments or small pieces of thin steel. Although my RTO had received a serious wound to the hand and I had collected several smaller pieces to the head, both of us were extremely fortunate to have survived the incident. I recall thinking some time later that we were probably not his target...his aim was likely directed at the ARVN TOC behind us and he had accidentally hit our

antenna mast in the darkness. For several minutes my RTOs and I continued to engage and repel several NVA attackers attempting to either come through us toward the TOC or move across our front, right to left. The fighting was close and intense under the drifting shadows of our hand flares...for a while we shot anything moving that didn't wear a helmet (as did the ARVN defenders at the ARVN TOC door I confirmed later).

Behind me and to my right the NVA attack continued to build in intensity. It was apparent that small elements of the attacking sapper forces had pierced our defensive line in at least two platoon sectors and it was clear by the volume of fire that the enemy efforts were focused on our principle indirect fire weapons (our artillery batteries) located atop and center of the fire base. The volume of satchel charges and RPG explosions near the 2-11 FA Battery location was so intense that it was difficult to distinguish each detonation individually. At this point in the fight radio or visual communications with subordinate leaders on the perimeter and with our higher headquarters was nonexistent due to the shear noise of exploding munitions, small arms fire, and smoke and fires in and around the top of the hill. Any effort to move to reinforce adjacent units was not a viable option either given the hill was being raked with small arms fire from both U.S. and NVA forces. Frankly, everything attempting to move on Henderson during the initial 30 to 45 minutes of the battle was being engaged by either friend or foe in the fog and flare-lit predawn hours. Perhaps 30 or so minutes into the intense fight I heard several long hissing sounds characteristic of a flamethrower to my right rear and I could not believe at that moment that such a weapon was being employed by the NVA. I had seen and heard U.S. flamethrowers before in training exercises but never under combat circumstances. Almost immediately and with the illumination over Henderson I could see the orange and white flickers of fires beginning to grow in intensity in the vicinity of the pallets of artillery ammunition and shortly thereafter the rounds began to "cook off" due to the intense heat. For at least 5 to 10 minutes or more the artillery rounds exploded one after another driving other hot unexploded illumination and high explosive projectiles into the air and raining them down all over the hill. Finally, the ammunition fires became so intense that Henderson was suddenly and violently rocked with at least one or more deafening, ground-shaking sympathetic detonations some 30 or more meters up and to my rear. The whole fire base shuttered as if hit by an earthquake with these devastating explosions no doubt taking the lives of both friendly and enemy soldiers. Concurrently, the bladder or bladders of fuel had been ignited as well sending a stream of fire across and down the hill on the

east side of Henderson and into and around several of our fighting positions. The chaos and carnage atop Henderson and along much of its perimeter was indescribable unless you were a participant in the fight. Not only were we dealing with small groups of NVA hurling explosives from several locations along the bunker line but we were trying to deal with our own exploding artillery ammunition and the fires they were creating.

I recall that about first light our attack helicopters finally arrived over Henderson. Initially, they were limited in their usefulness primarily due to the low ceiling, foggy conditions at ground level and the fires and smoke coming from along the hilltop and eastern perimeter. I know the courageous pilots were frustrated as they made continuous nap-of-the-earth gun runs screaming across the battered and burning hill without being able to engage because of the low ceiling and sparse targeting information from us on the ground. However, their presence was a significant threat to the NVA and, even without firing a shot, they were a critical component in repelling a determined NVA force hell-bent on destroying Henderson.

We were still taking an occasional RPG and some sporadic small arms fire as dawn broke but most of the NVA had withdrawn back onto the Hills to east and southeast. During the lull many of the war fighters on Henderson who had survived the initial assault were making a frantic effort to locate, collect and treat our wounded, rescue others in and around smoldering fighting positions along the eastern perimeter, account for the missing, and reestablish our defenses. At the same time, gallant efforts were common place among our attack aviation assets as they continued to scream low over Henderson under the cloud cover to attack suspected NVA targets in the surrounding hills. I cannot over emphasize their contributions to the fight even if their targeting (and ours) was suspect due to the weather or lack of information about known enemy positions. Concurrently, we were pouring artillery fires into suspected enemy locations along the eastern side of Henderson. I recall at on point the ARVN 105mm howitzers on Henderson cranked their tubes down into the direct fire mode and fired “point blank” into the ridge line no more than a few hundred meters or so across from our location. I’m certain these direct and indirect fires prevented NVA reinforcements from mounting a counterattack.

In the 6 May early morning twilight leaders crawled and scrambled from position to position to search for missing infantrymen all along the perimeter and to reestablish new lines of defense around the now rubble hill. There were many soldiers and leaders unaccounted for as daylight exposed our beleaguered hilltop. Many of Henderson’s defenders who had survived the

initial attack were thrust into new leadership positions regardless of rank and their performance was nothing short of magnificent. As I made my way up behind the ARVN TOC and into B Battery, 2-11 FAs positions I quickly determined that our 155mm howitzers were all inoperable. In fact, I found the area hardly recognizable and the infantry fighting positions below them along the eastern perimeter were still burning. Many of the fighting positions along the eastern perimeter were difficult to locate due to the fires and the damage done by the huge explosions that had rocked the hill only an hour or so earlier. Much of the area around B Battery's positions was now blackened, smoldering rubble. Lieutenant Rick Hawley's fighting position just east and below the artillery batteries was a smoldering pile of rubble and unapproachable due to the intense heat. (Later in the morning I returned to search for Rick in and around his position but to no avail).

As quickly as we could safely land them, our medical evacuation helicopters (MEDIVACs) were taking out the most seriously wounded. The crews of these "Angels of Mercy" time and again risk their lives to land on both ends of Henderson to extract those deemed most critical. The LZ near my CP quickly became a collecting point for many of the wounded and two or three of our surviving Medics worked feverishly to administer morphine, and perform other lifesaving measures as they prepared the wounded for extraction. The LZ directly in front of my CP was lined with casualties awaiting extraction and the hard baked ground was a bloody mess. All-the-while, the more able war fighters continued to carry in our wounded as the evacuations continued. The carnage and dismemberment around the hill, both enemy and friendly, was beyond my description as was the gallantry, bravery, and heroism of so many who had desperately fought to hold onto Henderson. There are countless stories of the seriously wounded continuing to fight and protect those among the wounded who were unable to raise a rifle to defend themselves. In the days ahead I would conclude that I had learned as the leader of this magnificent group of men, a combat infantryman's most valuable lesson.....
"SOLDIERS FIGHT, ABOVE ALL ELSE, FOR ONE ANOTHER...FOR SMITH ON THE LEFT AND JONES ON THE RIGHT". Time and again I saw men rise from their fighting positions under the most intense fire to defend a brother in harm's way. Throughout my career, I would cite this lesson learned over and over again to those preparing for combat. It is the essence of the American Warfighter...a critical element of our ethos.

Sometime later in the morning, perhaps around 0730, after the ground fighting had reached its conclusion, I received a radio call from Colonel William Bradley, the 3rd Brigade Commander. He indicated that he was approaching Henderson by helicopter and he notified me that his intent was to land at the LZ immediately to my front. I informed him that I felt a landing and ground move (about 30 meters) up to the ARVN TOC was extremely risky and that any instructions he might have for me would best be radioed to the hill rather than chance a landing and walk up to the TOC. (I based my recommendations to him solely on my experiences a week or so earlier while defending Fire Support Base Granite in that we all were waiting on the NVA mortar attack that we knew was imminent.) Bradley's response was that he intended to land anyway and he would move directly to the ARVN TOC. I replied that if that was his decision, he'd best dash into my CP until his helicopter lifted off and if all remained quiet he could make his way on up to the safety of the TOC. I watched from my CP fighting position with great concern when he, his Operations Officer (MAJ "Tex" Turner), perhaps his Fire Support Officer, and his Command Sergeant Major (CSM Ray Long), stepped onto the LZ and started up toward the TOC. I waved them toward my position but all of them walked briskly and purposefully past my position in route to the TOC entrance. COL Bradley had just stepped through the TOC door with his command group party in trail when I observed a mortar round impact some five to 10 meters behind them. I knew some in his party had to have been hit and almost immediately heard a cry for a Medic. My Company "Doc" and I ran from my CP to render help. We reached the TOC in seconds finding MAJ Turner suffering from obvious wounds to the lower extremities and the CSM face down and motionless on the TOC floor. My Medic instinctively went to attend to the CSM who appeared to have suffered life-threatening head wounds. Tragically our Brigade CSM's wounds were fatal and he died almost immediately. While my Medic tended to MAJ Turner, COL Bradley directed me to medically evacuate CSM Long. I told him that I could not medically evacuate a deceased soldier however his response was to do it anyway. We complied with his directive and the medical evacuation helicopter pilot called me immediately after liftoff to express his ire over our blatant disregard for division medical evacuation protocol. The Medivac Pilot had every right to be angry for not only had we risked a helicopter and the lives of its crew but one of our own wounded had been "bumped" in the priority of life-saving evacuation. I have never, ever forgotten this incident nor the tragic and unnecessary loss of CSM Long. COL Bradley's ill-advised decision to land on Henderson

coupled with his total disregard for the ground commander's assessment of the threat resulted in unnecessary risks to many others and the loss of a great professional soldier. I have yet to come to grips with such blatant battlefield incompetence.

Around mid to late morning as I recall , and without prior coordination, the 3rd Brigade inserted one or two "others" onto Henderson to "provide assistance" in our efforts to reorganize, rearm, and refit. Much has been written about their contributions and heroics however, as the senior U.S. ground commander, let me make clear....their contributions were minimal at best and their presence as an operational entity separate and apart from my chain of command made my job that much more difficult.

Throughout the remainder of the day we conducted seemingly continuous aerial evacuations of our wounded and our KIA's while receiving tactical emergency resupplies of ammunition and water. Our supporting tube and ariel rocket artillery continued to hit suspected NVA targets located on the ridge lines that looked down onto Henderson from several sides. Between the sporadic NVA mortar attacks we searched for several missing soldiers and we were harassed by inaccurate but unsettling recoilless rifle fire coming from the northwestern side of the perimeter. Either the NVA had faulty recoilless ammunition or their gunners were untrained and for that all of us were quite thankful.

As I recall, the remnants of A Company and its attachments left Henderson's blood-spattered LZ mid to late afternoon on the 6th. We departed still under the threat of NVA mortar and recoilless rifle fire. Arriving back at Camp Evans, we were at best an infantry unit of no more than forty to fifty men (many walking wounded, including me). Despite our desperate searches prior to our departure from Henderson I had left three soldiers (Rick Hawley, Refugio Teran, and Larry Kier) unaccounted for. All three were last seen in or near their assigned fighting positions as the fighting commenced. The areas of their loss were still smoldering from the intense fires and horrendous explosions that had consumed several of the fighting positions they would have been in or near as the NVA assault began. We had done our very best, given the circumstances, to account for them but our search revealed nothing. We all came off of the helicopters at Camp Evans exhausted and those requiring medical treatment moved immediately to the nearest Aid Station for treatment. I recall standing in line with a dozen or so others to either have shrapnel removed or have cuts cleansed and closed as a result of the melee on Henderson. As soon as we were patched up, each of us walked back to the Evans LZ to find the

rest of the men of A Company “crashed” on their rucks around the LZ’s edge....those awake were sitting in twos and threes quietly talking to one another, sipping on coffee or hot chocolate.

While we were there at Evans, I recall receiving a summons to report to COL Bradley at his headquarters so I headed that way promptly. Upon my arrival in the headquarters area, I was offered the “VIP Hooch” for the night which I promptly declined. Frankly, I was far more concerned for the survivors of the Henderson fight still on the unprotected Camp Evans LZ and their immediate physical and emotional needs. I had no plans or desires to be anywhere other than with them for we had much to do in regenerating and reorganizing ourselves as quickly as possible. We were still a rifle company operating with its “emergent leadership” having lost so many leaders and I really wasn’t sure what I had left in noncommissioned officers that could fight. I had lost all but one of my platoon leaders as well (1LT Rick Hawley was missing and 1LT Lyn Hargrave had been wounded)....1LT Jim Knight and I were the only officers left in the company.

I recall meeting with COL Bradley in his office for no more than about thirty minutes or so and our initial discussions centered on the operational aspects of the battle at Henderson. The meeting began very cordially but our conversation was business-like and commander-to-commander regarding the events that had transpired over the past 24 hours. I made it quite clear to COL Bradley that “I HAD A COMPANY FULL OF HERO’S” and I was proud beyond description of our organization's performance in defending the hill under the most difficult circumstances. While in his office I wanted him to understand clearly the true intensity of the fight and the courage and bravery of so many who risked or had given their lives to hold on to the hill. I suspect that my statement about the heroic performance of many in A Company was used in the printed account of the Henderson fight published in the theater newspaper a few days later although that was never confirmed. As we neared the conclusion of our conversation, I was taken aback when COL Bradley’s demeanor took a sudden and quite unforeseen turn in subject and seriousness. He quite sternly informed me that I would remain silent regarding the details of the Henderson battle and that I was specifically prohibited from making comments to anyone from the press about our actions on Henderson. Furthermore, I would only comment on the fight at Henderson if so ordered by the Division’s senior leadership. I’m certain that he noted my expression of dismay in receipt of such instructions but I did not question his direction at the time. Shortly thereafter I was dismissed and I returned to the Evans LZ and the remnants of the

A Company team. (Some time later I did provide a statement concerning the battle to LTC Bobby F. Brashears [MG, USA, Retired],[my former battalion commander in the 2-501 Infantry], who I believe had been appointed by the 101st Airborne Division to gather facts concerning the Henderson affair).

I was glad to get away from the 3rd Brigade Headquarters and return to the LZ and the A Company team. Frankly, I had hoped the purpose in visiting with Bradley was to receive orders of another “change in mission” so that we might return to our parent battalion’s control. The 2-501 Infantry was far more capable of tending to the company’s personnel and logistical needs. That didn’t happen and we were subsequently “missioned” for about a week to augment the Camp Evans base defense. During the remainder of our stay at Evans all of us began to deal with the devastating losses of so many friends and great soldiers who had given their lives so that we could survive to fight another day. I was overwhelmingly proud of A Company and its attachments for their heroic defense of Henderson. In reality, the surviving veterans of A Company had seen 36 killed and approximately 100 wounded over a period of 8 days while defending Fire Support Bases Granite and Henderson. In fact, there were very few survivors of both of these battles that were not awarded one or more Purple Hearts. To this day, the acts of bravery, heroism, gallantry in action, and dogged determination have, for the most part, been ignored and thus been unrecognized. Neither the 3rd Brigade, the 101st Airborne Division, or the Army bothered to fully document what actually happened on Henderson on the 6th of May 1970. However, the facts are clear for those of us who fought there. A Company and its attached and supporting units on Henderson had inherited a disaster waiting to happen and the war fighters on Henderson had made possible the impossible by sheer courage and determination in the finest traditions of the 101st Airborne Division and the United States Army. A Company and its attached and supporting units had repulsed the NVA’s best efforts to kill or capture all U.S./ARVN forces on that hill and it remained under our control until we were ordered to leave. The 66th NVA Regiment had not gained or retained an inch of ground on Henderson and had paid dearly for their encounter with the soldiers of the 2-501 Infantry.

For the rest of my career I often was challenged or queried with the following: “Oh...were you on Henderson when it was overrun?” In response, I’ve quite pointedly and proudly responded with the following: “Henderson was not overrun...A Company and its attachments and supporting units were never overrun. We held Henderson throughout the battle at a terrible

cost of our own killed and wounded and we departed the hill when so ordered in an orderly fashion still under fire!”

U.S. casualties on Henderson have been the subject of considerable debate from the moment the battle concluded until now. Initial reports were 32 U.S. KIA...in fact, the Division’s After Action Report states 32 were killed during the battle as do a host of official documents citing the division’s records. However, by my review of several available casualty records I can account for only 27 soldiers listed as “killed on Henderson or likely killed on Henderson”. My search continues for others who may have died of wounds as a result of the fight at Henderson on 6 May 1970.

Similarly, an accurate count of U.S. wounded on Henderson as a result of the 6 May battle has been even more illusive. In all likelihood, the number of wounded will never be known and is primarily attributable to questionable records keeping within our array of otherwise excellent medical facilities. I’m certain however, that at least 70 U.S. soldiers were treated for wounds received as a result of the fight on the 6th.

The list of the 27 Killed In Action or likely killed 6 May 1970 on Henderson (as best I have been able to confirm) are as follows (with rank after posthumous promotion, MOS, unit of assignment, cause of death and home of record):

1. Refugio T. TERAN, SSG, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died while missing; body not recovered, repatriated 13 Jun 1996, identified 28 Feb 2002. (HOR-Westland, MI)
2. Larry G. KIER, SSG, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died while missing; body not recovered, repatriated 13 June 1996, identified 28 Feb 2002. (HOR-Omaha, Nebraska)
3. George W. BENNETT, Jr., CPL, 11B-Infantryman; A Company 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Dallas, TX)
4. Gregory A. CHAVEZ, SGT, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of burns. (HOR-Colorado Springs, CO)
5. Douglas W. DAY, CPL, 11C-Indirect Fire Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Hacienda Heights, CA)
6. Robert A. DENTON, SSG, 11B-Infantryman; B Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of gun or small arms fire. (Wichita Falls, TX)

7. Lawrence L. GORDON, CPL, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Noblesville, TN)
8. Frank F. LEWIS, SGT, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. (HOR-Affton, MO)
9. Ronald D. VAN BEUKERING, SP4, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Kalamazoo, MI)
10. Gary F. SNYDER, SFC, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Toledo, OH)
11. John G. WIDEN, SGT, 11C-Indirect Fire Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Owatonna, MN)
12. John J. WILLEY, SSG, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-West Covina, CA)
13. Frederick P. ZIEGENFELDER, SSG, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-St Marys, OH)
14. Michael L. ANTLE, SGT, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. (HOR-Tulsa, OK)
15. Melvin BOWMAN, SGT, 91B-Medic; HHC, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. (HOR-Iva, SC)
16. Jay T. DILLER, SGT, 91B-Medic; HHC, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. (HOR-Chambersburg, PA)
17. Tommy I. HINDMAN, CPL, 11B-Infantryman; A Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket or mortar. (HOR-Cedar Rapids, IA)
18. Richard A. HAWLEY, Jr., CPT, 1542-Infantry Unit Commander; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Devon, PA)
19. David E. OGDEN, SSG, 11F-Infantry Operations and Intelligence Specialist; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from multiple fragmentation wounds. (Paramount, CA)
20. Dickey W. REAGAN, SGT, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. (HOR-Lumberton, NC)
21. Edward VESER, SGT, 11B-Infantryman; E Company, 2-501 Infantry; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Milwaukee, WI)

22. * James D. JENNINGS, SGT, 31M-Multichannel Transmission Systems; A Company, 501st Signal Battalion; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. Casualty Record misidentifies unit of assignment; service member killed on 6 May 1970 during an attack of a Fire Support Base in 101st Airborne Division area of operations. (HOR-Brandon, MS)

23. Ray L. LONG, Jr., SMAJ, 00Z-Command Sergeant Major; HHC, 3rd Brigade; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Little Rock, AR)

24. Michael F. BROWN, SSG, 13B-Cannon Crewman; B Battery, 2-11 Field Artillery; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Baltimore, MD)

25. John E. GRANATH, Jr., CPL, 13A-Field Artillery Basic; B Battery, 2-11 Field Artillery; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-McHenry, IL)

26. David YELDELL, SP4; 13A-Field Artillery Basic, B Battery, 2-11 Field Artillery; died of multiple fragmentation wounds. (HOR-Greenwood, SC)

27. * Billy J. WILLIAMS, MAJ, 2162-Operations and Training Staff Officer; Advisory Team Three, HQ, MACV Advisors, MACV; died from artillery, rocket, or mortar. Service member killed by mortar fire on Landing Zone in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam (101st Airborne Division area of operations); “may have been with ARVN at FSB Henderson” on 6 May 1970. (HOR-Marion, KY)

“TO THOSE LOST ON FSB HENDERSON, YOU WILL FOREVER BE REMEMBERED AND MAY YOU REST IN PEACE; TO THE SURVIVORS OF THE HENDERSON BATTLE, YOU TOO ARE BROTHERS-IN-ARMS FOREVER”.

The author of this account, Brigadier General James E. Mitchell, USA, Retired, served on active duty for more than thirty years. He led two rifle platoons (one in combat); commanded four infantry companies (two in combat); commanded a motorized infantry battalion, a light infantry battalion, and a light infantry brigade and served as a Division Deputy Commander for Support and Division Deputy Commander for Operations. Key staff assignments included: Battalion S3 Air (twice), Infantry Battalion S3, Infantry Battalion S2, Infantry Battalion XO, Light Infantry Division G3, Chief of Current Operations, U.S. Army-Pentagon, and Deputy Director of Operations, The Joint Staff-Pentagon. He is a graduate of the Army Command and Staff College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University.