

**OUTNUMBERED
ON THE DMZ
SAVING CAMP J.J. CARROLL**

**24 HOURS
OF
FACE-TO-FACE, HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTING AGAINST 12,000 ENEMY SOLDIERS
A SMALL CONTINGENT OF DUSTERMEN AND MARINES
TURN THE TIDE OF BATTLE**

WRITTEN BY

JOSEPH M. BELARDO, Sr.

WITH THE SUPPORT OF

COLONEL VINCENT J. TEDESCO, US ARMY (RETIRED)

DEDICATED TO:

**THE DUSTERMEN OF
THE 1st BATTALION, 44th ARTILLERY,
(AUTOMATIC WEAPONS),(SELF PROPELLED);**

THOSE UNSUNG MARINES HEROS WHO STOOD WITH US IN BATTLE THAT DAY;

**THE WALKING WOUNDED
and
THE DONG HA DELTA MEDICAL STAFF.**

DEDICATED TO:

THE 97 BRAVE AMERICANS KILLED IN ACTION AND 99 SEVERELY WOUNDED.

Previously, I wrote a book: "Dustermen - Story of the Last Gunfighters". In that book is a condensed version of this battle. The following story is the most accurate account of the battle taken from my diary and interviews with the combatants. We Dustermen have never openly spoken about it except with those who were in the battle. This was one of about it when brought up and discussed at our yearly reunions. Taking another human's life is the price a soldier pays, in the name of Freedom. He and he alone lives with the emotional effects of war.

This narrative, introduces you to the Duster and the courageous men who rode these Armored Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) into the "Whirlwind of Battle". These men will take you through a metamorphosis of an air defense weapon system and the crews that transformed the Duster into the most devastating ground combat weapon team ever. We do not want this narrative to be considered a self-serving promotion. Nor do we want you to think the story is untrue. The soldiers and Marines in this battle, in their own words, will validate these actions.

We were no braver nor heroic than any other crew member or Marine. We all did our jobs to the best of our ability, without question or pause. We just did our job, as we retrained ourselves into a Vietnam War ground fighting machine. Never thinking that any of us did something better or more heroic than the next crew member. We were a team, constantly retraining, recalibrating and adjusting combat protocols based upon events experienced. We were blessed to be surrounded by the best and bravest.

The 1st of the 44th Artillery was one of the most highly decorated combat units in Viet Nam. From 1966 to 1972, our Battalion's soldiers were awarded: a Medal of Honor, posthumously to Mitchell W. Stout, Sgt, E5; 450 medals for heroism and bravery; and, over 1000 Purple Hearts.

Legendary on the battlefield, 1st of the 44th earned the Army Presidential Unit Citation, Army Valorous Unit Award, Army Meritorious Unit Commendation, Navy (Marine) Presidential Unit Citation, Navy (Marine) Meritorious Unit Commendation, The Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, The Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Honor Medal.

You will be reading the "no holds barred" collective experiences of a handful of "Dustermen" and Marines who fought ferociously in one the biggest, most horrific, under reported, battles in the Vietnam War.

It is one of the many unsung stories of "Charlie Battery" 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, (Automatic Weapons) (Self Propelled); a humble attempt at an "After Action Report" that conveys the selfless sacrifices and the heroism displayed by our "Duster and Marine Brothers" on that day.

On the 24th of January 1968, seriously outnumbered, these modern day "Spartans" - seemingly abandoned to die by their Charlie Battery Captain - fought in one of the most treacherous battles along Route 9.

Route 9, which ran east to west along the DMZ was one of them. Its nickname was Rue Sans Joie. Vernacularly translated as:

"The Street of Sorrows",

You'll soon understand why the French so appropriately named it.

The portion of Route 9 where this fight commenced was in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the Northern Boundary of South Viet Nam.

Dustermen supported a string of Marine Combat Bases along the DMZ. They stood between the NVA and their taking of South Viet Nam.

We want to share with you, the riveting fighting experience of these brave Americans.

These men: made a stand and stopped the enemy cold in their tracks.

That day, none of the DMZ Combat Bases were breached.

The NVA plan collapsed; the NVA had failed miserably.

South Viet Nam was spared, due to these courageous, tenacious men.

THE DUSTER

During 1966 and 1967, 3 Air Artillery Battalions arrived in Viet Nam. Nicknamed "Dusters" for the clouds of dust made by their "Steel Tracks", these Armored Air Defense Vehicles' with two fast firings 40mm cannons were designed to shoot down planes. However, there was no air threat. Almost overnight, Dusters were repurposed, without much thought as to what repurposing entailed.

During early 1967, an "illogical" ARMY cadre decided that as soldiers trained in ground artillery skills arrived in Vietnam, they could quickly be reassigned to Duster units; even though these soldiers had never seen a "Duster", let alone operated one, such "never trained" soldiers, often, were assigned to replace Duster casualties.

Combat experienced Duster crewmen became instructors to these replacements. "Morphing" these "new crewmen" was done on an "on the job training" (OJT) basis. They learned "their craft" while on the front line, most often when engaged with the enemy.

The M42 Duster was a small tank like vehicle weighing 25 tons; small compared to an M48 tank that weighed 52 tons. The M42 was 10 feet wide, 21 long and 9 feet high. It had an open turret with no protective armor overhead. Each Duster was a self-contained fighting machine equipped with Twin 40mm Bofors cannons. Each cannon was capable of firing a single round or fire up to 120 rounds per minute. Dustermen, contingent upon their mission, chose to fire either High Explosive or Armor Piercing rounds. At a combined 240 rounds, per minute the Dustermen fed both cannon an amazing 1,740 pounds of 40mm ammunition in one minute.

Fast and accurate, the Duster's cannon had an effective firing range of three miles. When firing on automatic, a layperson would think it looked like a 4th of July fireworks grand finale, only ten times louder and many thousand times more dangerous. They were two lethal cannons mounted on an Armored Fighting Vehicle (AFV) that fired as fast as machineguns. The M42's fast firing cannons proved very lethal against enemy forces.

Each 40mm shell traveled at over 1000 miles. Each exploding shell could pepper a pie shaped area 100 feet in diameter with shrapnel and killed, shredded or wounded anything in its path. Dusters' additional weapons included: M60 Machine Guns, Hand-grenades, LAWS Rockets and Claymore Mines. Each soldier was equipped with his personal M16 rifle with bayonet. Several had 45 caliber pistols and their own razor-sharp hunting knives and machetes. They even sharpened the edges of entrenching shovels for close quarter combat. Dusters were powered by 500 HP, 6 cylinder, air-cooled, fuel injected, super-charged Continental or Lycoming gas engines. With maximum speed of 45 - 50 mph, it was an awesome war machine.

Charlie Battery 1st Bn. 44th Artillery Dusters normally consisted of a crew of five: Squad Leader, Driver, Gunner and two Cannoneers. There was an additional passenger compartment seat to the right of the Driver, called the Track Commander's Hatch or TC Hatch. An officer or additional combatant would use this seat. The crews found themselves increasingly involved in ground support missions. Most often the Duster was on point security, convoy escort, search and destroy missions, mine sweeps, daily perimeter defense, body recovery, and, also served as field reaction forces.

The Duster was soon found to excel in providing close-in fire support to first echelon ground combat elements - i.e. Marines, Infantry, Armored Cavalry, Mechanized Infantry, Combat Engineers, and Special Forces Compounds. The rapid firing 40mm guns could devastate massed enemy infantry attacks or sweep away guerrillas hiding in the jungle with equal ease. Some G.I. coined it "Mowing the Grass": our enemy called us "FIRE DRAGONS". The Duster was both feared and hated by the enemy: North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong. It was the most powerful ground support weapon in the Vietnam War.

The four men who sat in the small open turret were only protected by a thin ¼ inch thick armor plate proving to be inadequate protection from enemy ground forces. The surrounding turret was only twenty-four inches high and exposed the crew to enemy fire. One's head, torso and arms were totally unprotected. Upper head and chest wounds were quite common. The two cannon loaders, called Cannoneers, had to: stand to load the cannon shells into the clip-fed, high speed, auto-loaders; or, shoot the M60 machinegun; or, fire their personal weapons; or, throw hand

grenades; or fire LAWS rockets. This exposed them to increased danger from enemy fire. The Gunner sat to the left of the cannon with head and chest exposed. He was responsible for raising the guns up and down and firing the cannons, single fire or automatic. The Squad Leader sat to the right of the cannon, head and chest exposed, as he traversed the turret left to right, identifying targets.

The Driver sat below the turret and was responsible for daily track maintenance and radio communications. During combat, the Driver was forced to leave the confines of his Driver's compartment, fully exposed and pass ammunition from the Track's belly to the men in the turret. It was also the driver's job to make sure the enemy did not get close to or breach the Duster. The Squad Leader, Gunner, and Driver wore radio-controlled plastic helmets for constant communication while in the Duster. The two Cannoneers wore standard issue steel helmets. Because of the lack of officers, the Squad Leader was totally in command of the Duster with the Driver, second in command. The Duster gave the occupants no room to hide or run. The crew stood up to fight, brazenly defying the enemy to kill them. They called it "dueling with the devil" or "fighting the dragon face-to-face". The Marines and Army troops the Dusters protected could not believe the bravery of the Dustermen, steadfast to their Duster jobs, totally exposed to enemy fire, not ducking or looking for cover. Their combat heroism was legendary on the battlefield. The famous Marine Captain John Ripley called the crew of the Dusters "The Last Great Gunfighters".

Duster crews of the 1st/44th seldom saw their battery headquarters or an officer. They were "orphaned out" to Marines or other outfits scattered across the DMZ and to as far south as Hue City. Duster crews received most of their orders via the radio. Each day they started an hour before sunup with a mine sweep of part of the road, and then returned to the base to take a group of Marines on a combat mission or a convoy to another isolated oasis called a "COMBAT BASE". They then returned to perform nightly perimeter security firing hundreds to thousands of 40mm rounds in what were called "H & I Missions" (Harassment and Interdiction) at suspected enemy positions.

During World War II and the Korean War, U.S. convoys operated mainly behind friendly front lines with virtual impunity.

Things were very different in Vietnam. Our troops never held the ground they fought for. As they advanced from jungle area to jungle area and defeated the enemy, they never were allowed to hold the ground.

There were no front lines and the American Combat Bases were prime enemy artillery targets. Convoy duty in Vietnam was dangerous and nerve-racking. Ambushes were a constant threat along all our resupply routes. Ambushes posed a serious logistical problem as trucks provided most of the supplies to inland installations and isolated combat bases. There were no modern highways nor trains of any consequence. Roads were mostly narrow dirt roads with heavy vegetation on both sides. Perfect "Ambush Alleys".

Normally, on convoys or search and destroy missions, the lead Duster, at or near the front, covered the left side of the road while the rear Duster covered the right side. The roads these Dustersmen traveled were usually in the valleys of the mountainous DMZ northern terrain where the enemy lived, thus making convoys easy targets. Convoy duty was like being in a shooting gallery, except Dusters were the targets - "the sitting ducks

Dusters caught in an ambush pulled off the road, traversed their guns and provided direct covering fire. The remainder of the convoy accelerated to escape the kill zone. The Duster crews: remained on the battlefield; provided medical assistance and recovered American bodies until all were accounted for.

Duster combat tactics were effective, but it meant Duster crews spent eternities in the kill zone. Although, sometimes, ambushes would overwhelm even the firepower of the Dusters.

Duster effectiveness was especially limited by the fact that only three Duster Battalions existed, with only 64 Dusters in each. Collectively, not nearly enough to cover the country. Need for Duster protection exceeded capacity to respond.

By way of example, the number of miles Dusters had to patrol was unfathomable: In northern I CORPS, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery's Area of Operation was huge: Bordered by the Gulf of Tonkin on the East; Laos on the Western Border; to the DMZ in the North; and South towards Hue City.

DUSTERS: ARMY'S GIFT TO THE MARINES

Since the Marines did not have anything resembling the Duster in their arsenal, Marines embraced the Duster and its crew. It was the Army's gift to the Marines; a mobile combat team. A single Duster had more firepower than several companies of Marine Infantry. It meant death and destruction to the enemy. The ultimate ground weapon. Duster crewmen now retrained themselves as a front-line ground support team weapon. Retraining was an on-the-job experience on the battlefield. Dustermen now became the instructors meshing their weapon system with Marine battle protocols.

Instantly, Dustermen went from air warfare warriors to dueling face-to-face gunfights with their enemy. Common sights and sounds of land warfare became common routine to Duster crews as they fought along the DMZ.

Killing enemy in face-to-face confrontations were more frequent than not. In an ambush or all-out firefight, the enemy always targeted the Dusters first. They tried their damndest to neutralize or totally destroy Dusters and crews. Every day, Duster crews saw their comrades wounded or dead. Picking up the pieces, whether whole bodies or remaining parts, was part of their job. Going to the river washing off the blood of young Americans was an ordeal from hell. Graves Registration took on a whole new meaning.

Getting oneself mentally ready each day to face the trauma of combat and the possibility of one's own demise became an unbearable stress on Duster crews. They endured the combat stress of being totally exposed to the enemy. Seeing the enemy take aim and hoping you would not be killed was an everyday fear. Running over landmines, Dusters destroyed, crews mutilated or killed, hearing the enemy bullets ping off the Duster or crease the air as they pass near your ear, feeling and seeing the RPGs wobble toward you; mortars exploding, hot shrapnel all around. A torturous existence.

After the battles they assisted in body recovery and loading the wounded or dead on the back of their Dusters. At base camps collecting the entrails of their friends and burning them in a 50-gallon drum. They buried their emotions deeper and deeper; and, lost the ability to allow themselves any emotion. This enabled them to face the enemy eye-to-eye and return fire.

Living conditions were extremely difficult. Food which consisted of C-Rations, water was rationed, bathing opportunities were scarce, and bathroom facilities did not exist. Living and sleeping with rats, scorpions, snakes, and insects in small, dark, makeshift, underground bunkers, was the normal existence at the combat base camps along the DMZ. Electricity for lights was non-existent, making candles a valued commodity. Duster crews were regularly sprayed by airplanes using Agent Orange or another chemical to defoliate vegetation. These agents were also used it to defoliate the area around their own positions, unknowingly exposing themselves to an even greater, future health risk.

As a Duster crewmember, survival depended on great teamwork and the ability to control one's emotions during fierce contacts with enemy forces. Encounters with the enemy could be from a distance of many meters to only a few feet in face-to-face enemy ground assaults. It was not uncommon for Duster crews to kill the enemy as they tried to overrun their tracked vehicle. Crewmen stood fast in their positions while the enemy bullets ricocheted off the Duster, as mortars and RPG's exploded all around them. At the end of the battles, the Duster crews would always account for the highest enemy body counts. On many occasions, Dusters were credited with killing scores of enemy soldiers. The Duster crews remained on the battlefield until the last American wounded or killed in action was retrieved. This is the legacy that haunts each Duster crewmember to this very day.

On their off time, the crew would learn every Duster position until all functioned at the same level of competence. All crewmen were expected to fill the gap of their wounded or killed comrade. The Duster, as a crew-served weapon, did not allow any crewmember the opportunity to raise their rifle, aim and shoot at enemy close in or trying to get on or destroy the Duster. In most cases, the Driver or one of the Cannoneers would throw hand grenades or fire the M60 machinegun at enemy soldiers in close range.

In a full scale firefight, it was almost impossible for the crew in the turret to raise their M16 rifles, take aim and shoot. They began training each other on a "point and shoot" system of shooting. The main object was to be able to fire quickly, without taking aim, and just hit the enemy. Once the enemy was knocked down, he was much easier to kill. It was the Driver's job to finally eliminate the knocked down enemy soldiers. An example would be this: You are the Squad Leader or

Gunner and are in a sitting position in the turret on the left and right side of the 40mm cannons. The turret is approximately 24” high and the upper portion of your torso sticks out of the turret. This makes it difficult to raise your rifle over the edge of the turret, take aim and shoot the enemy. Yet, your head was a great target for enemy snipers. Plus, the primary job of the Squad Leaders was to traverse the turret, pick targets and command.

The Gunner’s job was to raise and lower the guns and shoot the 40mm cannon. Plus, 45 caliber pistols were not standard Duster issue and those who had a 45 took it off a Marine who was killed in action. A pistol for each crewmember would have been more practical, but they were never available or issued. This is why the crews developed the “point and shoot” method of shooting the enemy. The crew in the turret depended on the Driver to keep the enemy away and off the Duster. They developed added confidence as they taught themselves to point and shoot making their effectiveness even greater as a combat team.

MARINES

Because Duster crews were engaged in a lot of combat, and to help support their crews, they would train the Marines how to use the Duster. In turn the Marines trained the Duster crews how to operate their weapons. It was imperative during combat to keep the Duster shooting to help insure minimum casualties to the ground forces. One of these Marines was Corporal Roger Blentlinger. Blentlinger was in charge of making potable water for Camp J.J. Carroll and the surrounding combat bases along the DMZ. His area was called “The Water Point”.

It was a finger shaped position to the right of the main camp entrance of Camp J. J. Carroll. It extended out of Camp Carroll’s perimeter toward the northwest. At the tip of the finger was a Duster’s position, known as “The Water Point Position”. Roger was used as the extra Duster crewmember, in case any were sick or wounded. Out of friendship, Roger accompanied many Reaction Force teams or ammunition trucks that resupplied the Dusters during a firefight. We mention him because all the Duster crews owe him their thanks and gratitude for risking his life to help save the lives of many Charlie Battery Dustermen and fellow Marines. The 1st/44th awarded Roger Blentlinger the Bronze Star with “V” Device”. He is the

only Marine on the DMZ to receive an award from the Army for bravery on the battlefield as a Duster crewman.



Corporal Roger Blentlinger once said”

When you are in heavy combat, it feels like everything around you goes into slow motion. Living on the edge of your own existence gives you an adrenaline rush and a taste of copper in your mouth, like nothing you have ever experienced or tasted. For some strange reason, it’s something you end up missing. If you won the Super Bowl every day of your life, it would have no comparison. The bond and love between those who saw combat with the Dusters outlasts time and family.

Sadly, Roger Blentlinger passed away 6:00 AM on August 23, 2019 from a long battle with cancer. He will be dearly missed.

PRELUDE TO A DUSTER BATTLE

In an all-out firefight, soldiers and Marines are shooting their M16's, shooting M60 Machineguns, throwing hand grenades, and firing M72 LAW's Rockets. Dustermen are in radio contact with jets, coordinating their bombing and napalm drops. Talking with helicopter gunships as they spray the area with machinegun fire and rockets or trying to land to pick up the wounded or dead. The noise levels are above anything one has ever heard. The ground is shaking from the exploding ordinance, both friendly and enemy. The constant firing of the Dusters' 40mm cannon makes crew members' inner core ache and ears bleed.

The firing of both 40mm cannon at full auto, which is four (4) 40mm cannon shells per second or 240 per minute is, in itself, a heart wrenching experience. The heartbeat of the battle is non-stop. The adrenaline rush is at an all-time high. Orders are being yelled; radio communications are constant. The Duster crew is at the zenith of its existence. Target acquisition is primary. Men are screaming both for courage, pain or fear of dying. Blood, guts and parts of humans are spread across the battlefield. The screams for Medics and Corpsmen are heard above the roar of the battle. The smell of sulfur, cordite and death fill the air. Another eerie, frightening battle sound, is that of the screaming wounded and dying, both Americans and enemy soldiers. Their high pitched screams are a shrill, eerie sound, adding confusion to the battle - like the cadence of a high pitched piper. The crew feels helpless and prays all the screaming will stop. All of this is happening at the same time, causing a chaotic atmosphere that is constantly changing and regrouping as the battle progresses. A brief moment feels like hours and, in the lull of the battle, crewmen try to regroup, hoping this is not their end. They hold fast to their guns and positions, exposed to every bullet, RPG (rocket-propelled grenade), mortar or artillery shell fired at them. There is no place to duck or hide on a Duster. They don't even have time to flinch. They just do their job. They see the enemy take aim at them and all they can do is hold their breath and pray they are not hit, mutilated or killed. Each of them knows that if a crewmember is wounded or killed and cannot fulfill his combat assignment, he or they will be placed on the back of the Duster or the inside of the Duster's ammunition compartment. In an all-out firefight Duster crewmembers must fulfill their combat duties and acknowledge the fact that they cannot instantly aid their wounded comrades. Fighting wounded is a pre-requisite to the Duster crewmen. If a Medic or Corpsman is not available, any

needed medical attention will be given when there is an ebb in the firefight or back at base camp.

JANUARY 24, 1968 DUSTER BATTLE

As you read this, please remember that everything in a battle is happening at the same time. Because of the ferocity of this particular battle, a perfect timeline is impossible to write. Each crewmember is viewing the battle from a different Duster position and, as you rotate the turret, their personal point of view or recollection of the battle will be different and is constantly changing as the battle progresses. Individual accounts and interviews of this battle are included.

In the early morning hours of January 24th, elements of NVA General Giap's elite 320th NVA Division, plus the 48th Regiment and 52nd Regiment hastily made last-minute camouflage adjustments and checked their fields of fire against Camp J.J. Carroll. This was one of the first big TET Offensive traps. This was an attempt to isolate and overrun Camp Carroll and sever the main supply route across the DMZ, which was about to snap shut.

The NVA had to take Camp J.J. Carroll, known on the DMZ as "Artillery Hill" because it had eighty long range artillery pieces, consisting of 175mm guns, 8 inch, 155mm, and 105mm howitzers.

Additionally, present were a platoon of Marines, several mortar teams, eight Dusters and two Quad-50 gun trucks.

Camp Carroll was the key to capturing the Khe Sanh Combat Base and other Combat Bases along the DMZ.

The NVA expected a "*de ja vu Dien Bien Phu*" redux! They were determined to prevail and send us "American Dogs" home with their tails between their legs.

Early Wednesday morning, January 24th, a US "Rough Rider" convoy pulled out of Dong Ha, heading for Camp Carroll. It consisted of three trucks and a jeep mounted with an M-60 machine gun. On the convoy were Captain Sullivan, Cpl. Riley, Cpl. Walsh, Cpl. Todd, and Pfc. Chastain. Other personnel followed in a truck. The Marine complement trundled west, looking forward to completing their routine artillery resupply mission and rolling through the gates of Camp Carroll by

the first hours of the afternoon. When they reached the Cam Lo Village area, located along side Route 9, a small group of trucks heading east to Dong Ha stopped them and advised them to be careful because they had received some sniper fire. The Marine Captain in charge of the convoy disregarded the warning.

Being shot at on Route 9 west of Cam Lo was a common everyday occurrence and he did not think it was an abnormal situation. At Cam Lo three Army vehicles joined their small convoy. Their anxious faces seemed relieved to be beginning the final stretch home to Camp J.J. Carroll. Words of hot chow and a clean shower at the Water Point began to circulate. The Marine and Army convoy rumbled forward, ultimately passing into the NVA kill zone. As the vehicles reduced speed and geared down in preparation to cross a small bridge on Route 9 called Checkpoint 39 --- also known as the Lone Tree Area, they saw NVA troops crossing the field and Route 9, heading towards Out Post Hill 250 and Camp Carroll. Within seconds, all Hell broke loose. The NVA opened up on the small convoy with small arms fire, automatic weapons fire, including RPG's (Rocket Propelled Grenades), NVA 57 recoilless rifles and artillery..

The explosions buckled the trucks off their wheels as they absorbed the impact of their accurate fire. Wrecked vehicles plumed smoke and the convoy rolled to a listless, zig zag stop. Mortar rounds trounced the pinned-down Marines. Cries from the wounded echoed through a din of explosions and automatic weapons fire.

Reeling Marines and Army soldiers dismounted without delay, [finding](#) what cover they could and returned fire.

The NVA, rising out of hidden spider-holes, methodically started hitting the first and last vehicles at point-blank with RPGs. And then, handily wiped out the middle trucks.

Corporal Walsh got hit in the early stages of the firefight.

Captain Sullivan tried to radio for Medivacs, gunships and artillery. The NVA zeroed in on the jeep with RPGs to silence their radio. Captain Sullivan continued to direct fire on them. At one point, another RPG hit the jeep and spun him around 180 degrees.

The small force tried to regroup under the fire from the NVA. The NVA were now within 20 meters of the road. "Wild Bill" Paradise, a passenger in the truck with PFC Chastain, took out an NVA in a spider hole a few meters from the road. They would soon learn that the edges of the road were lined with NVA spider holes, which held RPG teams and satchel charging Sappers.



Route 9 – Check Point 39 - “Lone Tree”

CAMP J.J. CARROLL COMBAT BASE

Camp J.J. Carroll was the home of “C” Charlie Battery, 1st Battalion / 44th Artillery “Dusters” and the new home of the 4th Marine Regiment.

In the early morning hours of January 24, Section Chief Sgt. E6 Chester Sines accompanied one of his Dusters called “The Grim Reaper” to the Camp Carroll Charlie Battery maintenance motor pool for repair. The normal crew of the track consisted of Squad Leader Sgt. E5 Sam Lewis, Gunner Spec.4 Russia Holley, Cannoneers Spec. 4 Earl Holt, Pfc. David Lewis, and Driver Spec. 4 Joseph Belardo. At the motor pool, the crew was to replace both 40mm cannon with new barrels, repair damaged track treads, and replace the starter, since the only way to start their Duster was by pulling it with another Duster. After a few hours, the track treads were repaired and re-tensioned, the engine oiled and gas tank refueled. Both 40mm barrels were replaced, but not fully cleaned of Cosmoleen and oil. The starter was not yet replaced or repaired.



Crew of the “Grim Reaper”



Driver – Joe Belardo



Cannoneer – Earl Holt



Squad Leader – Sam Lewis



Section Chief – Chester Sines



Cannoneer – David Lewis



Gunner – Russia Holley

Squad Leader Sgt. E5 Johnie Towns, was also in the maintenance motor pool refueling and training his crew on proper Duster procedures. Towns' crew consisted of Gunner Spec. 4 Jackie Gilbert, Cannoneers Pfc. Shora Solomon, Pfc. Townsend, and one seasoned Driver Spec. 4 Billy Conley. Towns' Duster was comprised of three new inexperienced men. The only seasoned combat veteran was Squad Leader Johnie Towns, who had only one week left in his tour and Spec. 4 Billy Conley who only had two weeks.



Squad Leader – Johnie Towns



Driver – Billy Conley

In the distance, they could hear what sounded like a full-scale firefight, a common sound along the DMZ. Thinking nothing of it, they all proceeded with their normal Duster duties.

The observation post on Hill 250, outside the northeast corner of Camp Carroll, heard and noticed explosions along Route 9. Large numbers of enemy were observed moving along the river and ridgelines north of the ambush site. The Dustermen and Marines manning the outpost (OP) were now aware that an ambush was taking place in the valley in front of Camp Carroll. They could see NVA infantry crossing the Cam Lo River in boats. Explosions and smoke were coming from the ambushed convoy. Dusterman Spec. 4 Louis Block, positioned on his Duster up on the OP, requested permission to fire their Duster at the enemy. The

camp officers were advised that the fight was just below the eastern slope of Camp Carroll.

Duster Lieutenant Steve Moore charged out of Charlie Battery's Command Post. Seeing Lewis' and Towns' Dusters in the motor pool, he informed them of the ambush situation below Camp Carroll. Moore jumped on the back of Lewis' Duster and ordered both tracks to the perimeter to begin counter battery fire into the valley and avoid hitting the destroyed convoy. Both Duster crews stood on top of their Dusters as Moore pointed to the convoy and directed their first fire missions. Sgt. Lewis' Duster was the first and Johnie Towns' Duster was the second to start shooting from Carroll's perimeter.

A few minutes later, they were joined by Lieutenant Steven Hardin who took command as Moore returned to the Command Bunker. Now under Hardin's command, they expanded the shooting from the convoy to the Cam Lo River and lower eastern section of Dong Ha Mountain. Three more Dusters would join those shooting more than 8,000 40mm rounds at the NVA that had attacked the convoy on Route 9 in the valley in front of Carroll.



Joe Belardo's Duster lined up along Camp Carroll's northern perimeter shooting at the NVA – trying to protect the ambushed convoy.

The following bold, underlined names are interviews with combatants of this battle and also include portions from Joe Belardo's diary.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: Charlie Battery's 1st Platoon had just rotated back to Camp Carroll and the 2nd Platoon took over their task of supporting the Khe Gio Bridge, Delta 5, Rockpile, Ca Lu and several other small combat positions along the DMZ. Recently, I had turned over my command of 1st Platoon to Lieutenant Steve Hardin. I was in the Command Post when Louis Block radioed our radio operator, John Gunesch that his crew up on Outpost Hill 250 saw a small convoy down in the valley on the dirt road called Route 9, being attacked by the NVA. He asked permission to fire. I coordinated approval with Marine command at Carroll, and authorized Lou's Duster to commence firing. His Duster was the first to fire at the NVA and gave the ambushed convoy its first form of protection.

I then ordered two Dusters to take up position at the northeast corner perimeter of Camp Carroll, up against the concertina barbed wire. It was a large open area between the number two Duster position, and the Marine machinegun position that protected the gate, valley, and the road that lead up to Hill 250. These two Duster crews were commanded by Squad Leader Johnie Towns and Squad Leader Sam Lewis. All other tracks were to hold position and await instructions.

After a few thousand 40mm rounds were fired, it was evident that more firepower was needed to protect the now overrun convoy. Five Dusters in total were now positioned along the camps perimeter wire, firing everything they had at the advancing NVA. Lieutenant Hardin took over control of these Dusters. I went to the Command Bunker for a meeting and situation report with our Battery Commander Captain Easter. Easter informed me that Camp Carroll was preparing all troops left on Carroll for an all-out assault on the base by the NVA. Camp Carroll could not and would not be overrun and fall into NVA hands. As a line officer, I totally understood his position and offered all the support I could.

I then requested that we assemble a Reaction Force and retrieve all those trapped in the convoy. Easter finally agreed, after a long drawn out argument, and authorized one officer with two Dusters to retrieve the convoy. I then contacted Marine Command at Carroll and they authorized two Marine Tanks and Marine infantry support. Because I was 1st Platoon's Lieutenant for almost a year, I wanted to be the Reaction Force Duster leader. But, Lieutenant Steve Hardin was now in charge and was assigned the task as Duster Reaction Force officer. He was authorized to choose two Duster crews for the mission and report to the main gate and wait for

the Marine Reaction Force that would become the lead element in the Reaction Force and team leader control.

At that point, I requested to command the Duster position on Hill 250 and be liaison for all counter battery firing. I took control of Louis Block's Duster up on the Hill and directed his guns. The elevation of Hill 250 gave me a great view of the valley and allowed me to coordinate the other Dusters and artillery shooting from Camp Carroll.

Dusterman - Spec. 4 John "Tank" Huelsenbeck: We were all surprised when we heard all kinds of artillery and machinegun firing coming from the valley in front of Camp Carroll. A few of us, being inquisitive, ran to the camp perimeter and peered into the valley. We could see a small convoy taking some kind of enemy fire. Within minutes, our Duster up on Hill 250 opened fire and was shooting at what looked like people running across a large flat open area below Camp Carroll on the north side of Route 9 next to the convoy. We all knew this was bad and returned immediately to our designated combat positions and duty assignment. Since I was now in charge of supplying all Duster ammunition, I quickly refueled our two 2 ½ ton ammunition trucks. Next, I had the truck drivers go to our ammunition storage area and start filling the trucks with 40mm ammo. We were helped by six other Dustermen, because the ammo cans weighed about 116 pounds per can. After filling the trucks, we returned to the Battery motor pool area and awaited instructions. By the time we got back, Dusters had already lined up against the wire and were shooting non-stop at the NVA crossing the river. I did not require any orders and positioned two of the trucks behind the Dusters. I was notified that Hill 250 requested ammo. I then had two Dustermen get Charlie Battery's supply truck and mess hall truck. Both trucks were filled, sending one truck to Hill 250 and keeping one in reserve in our motor pool area. We rotated the ammo trucks to Dusters as needed and back to the waiting loaders at the ammo dump. Lieutenant Steve Hardin then ordered two Dusters to accompany him to the main gate as a Reaction Force to save the ambushed convoy. Hardin took the Grim Reaper's crew of Sam Lewis and Joe Belardo, along with Johnie Towns' Duster. I knew he took Sam Lewis' crew known as Grim Reapers because they had lots of combat experience, but Towns' crew was a makeshift crew of guys ready to rotate home.

The Original First Reaction Force from Camp J.J. Carroll

Sgt. Sam Lewis' crew was a very seasoned combat team and were known as the "Grim Reapers", however, the other crew rescuing the convoy had no idea what to expect. Their Squad Leader Johnie Towns and Driver Billy Conley were the only combat-experienced members on that Duster and both were scheduled to go home within the week. This alone was unfair to the short-timers. The Driver, Conley, was not the track's designated Driver. He was only a reaction force volunteer who had only been in a few skirmishes. Lt. Hardin had been advised that The Grim Reaper's Duster had no starter and had to be towed to start the engine. He knew the shortcomings of Towns' crewmembers and took charge of that Duster himself. He was the Platoon Leader. They had no clear plans; all the cards were stacked against them. Everyone knew that the ambush was big and bad by the amount of firepower the NVA had already expended trying to destroy the convoy and advance towards Camp Carroll. They also knew it was a bad scene by the thousands and thousands of 40mm shells they had already counter-fired at the NVA from Camp Carroll. Both Dusters already fired thousands of rounds at the ambush site and should have been quickly cleaned and re-oiled before leaving camp. The 40mm shells were already jamming since the cannon breach blocks were overheating.

Lt. Hardin instructed Lewis to saddle up, refuel, replenish ammo and meet him and Towns' Duster within fifteen minutes at the camp main gate to rescue the ambushed convoy. Lewis advised Lt. Hardin of the Duster's starting problem, but was still ordered to follow. Hardin needed his most seasoned fighting crew. Lewis instructed his crew to return to their position at the "Water Point" and re-supply. The crew hastily fueled, ringed the turret with 40mm ammo, restocked upper and side turret ammo compartments, filled the Driver's compartment with all the extra reserve loose clips of 40mm ammo they could fit, and threw a couple of extra cans of 40mm on the back deck. Section Chief Sgt. E6 Chester Sines went as the extra sixth combatant. He sat to the right of the driver in the "TC" hatch. Lewis' crew had done this several times before and knew the drill.

The thirty-two man Reaction Force from Camp J.J.Carroll consisted of: Two Tanks commanded by Marine Captain Daniel W. Kent consisting of: a 90mm, M48 Tank, Lt. Terry Joeckel in command; and a Flame Thrower Tank, commanded by a

Marine Sergeant, both from Company "H", 3rd Marine Division, twelve Marines from the 4th Marines and "H" Company 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, and two M42 Twin 40mm Dusters. One Duster was commanded by Lt. Steve Hardin and Squad Leader Johnie Towns and the other Duster commanded by Section Chief Chester Sines and Squad Leader Sam Lewis. Each Duster crew was from 1st Platoon – Charlie Battery 1st/44th Artillery. Four of the twelve Marines rode on back of the Flame Thrower Tank and four rode on the back of Sam Lewis' Duster. Two rode on the back of the other Marine Tank and two were on Towns' Duster.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: Around noon, our Duster met the other Duster commanded by Lt. Hardin and the Marines Tanks at the main gate of Camp Carroll. A platoon of Marines now joined our Reaction Force and jumped on the back of the tracks. Our relief column roared from Carroll under the command of Captain Daniel W. Kent, who was seated high in the turret of the lead tank. Second in command of the same M48 90mm tank was Lt. Terry Joeckel. Kent's tank was in the lead, followed out the gate by Lt. Hardin/Towns' Duster. Next in line was the M48 Flame-Thrower Tank. Last in the column was our Duster called the "Grim Reaper". The relief force stopped within 100 yards of the ambushed convoy and began to give direct fire at suspected enemy forces along the northern hill ridge above the convoy. The enemy had anticipated the reinforcements and did not return fire. They waited to spring their second trap of the day. Via radio, I instructed the Driver of the other Duster, Spec. 4 Billy Conley, to keep a fighting distance; a good 100 feet between his Duster and the M48 Tank in front of him and the ambush site. All was now relatively quiet at the ambush sight. Americans could be seen lying in the kill zone, wounded or dead. The destroyed trucks zig-zigged across the road, still burning. There was no shooting from the NVA or the convoy. The only sound we heard was the eerie whistling and screaming of hundreds of Duster 40mm shells from Camp Carroll shooting over our heads and exploding into the slopes along Dong Ha Mountain.

Both officers instructed all tracks to proceed forward with caution into the ambush site. I instructed Conley to hold fast and not move. Sines advised both Lieutenants that this was not a hit-and-run NVA action, and that all caution should be used and

not to advance. Sines advised them to sweep both the north and south sides of the convoy before moving forward. I advised Conley to drive his Duster to his right and take position on a small, elevated knoll overlooking the convoy so they could get a better look at the situation. Sines advised Hardin to reassess the situation and to clear the area around the convoy before advancing into a possible trap.

The Marine Captain and our Lieutenant called all the shots. Sergeant Chester Sines, our Section Chief and the extra man on the crew, repeatedly advised both officers about proper ambush deployment. I begged Towns and Conley not to move and to just start shooting.

The two officers issued orders that they were moving forward and would not chance shooting any Marines who might have taken cover in the brush. Nothing was moving or shooting from the ambushed convoy or from the NVA.

It should have been obvious, by how quick the enemy knocked out the convoy, that they had a lot of firepower and did not have time to leave the area. Plus, from Camp Carroll, we could see hundreds of NVA.

They ordered us to hold our positions and await instructions as they advanced forward into the heart of the ambushed convoy. Our Duster had been in many firefights and learned to shoot our 40s a few hundred yards out past the ambush site, shake up the enemy, and see if could get their attention with some return fire before we would advance.

We would put the enemy on the defensive and then assess the situation before committing and moving.

Shoot, move, and communicate was our motto.

This ambush was too big to be so quiet, and I was very concerned. They were the officers in charge and Chester's and my suggestions were ignored.

Sines radioed the officers again and suggested we should take up position on a small knoll on the south side of the road overlooking the ambush site. It had a small path leading up and down and was wide enough for our track vehicles. This position would give us an advantage if something should happen, and still let us be close enough to retrieve the wounded and dead.

The last radio communication I got from Towns was, “Joe, you guys better cover my ass. I’m short.” Towns was referring to his week or so left in country. Screaming into my radio headset, I begged the guys not to advance forward. “Johnie Towns, Billy Conley, are you crazy? The NVA have never done this before; stay the hell where you are, do not move and start shooting; you know better; we’ve done this a hundred times together; open up full auto and clear a path and then pick your targets. We will follow your lead and cross over your shells making a “Big -X - Killing Field” you know the drill.” The only response we got from the two officers screaming into their headsets was “Move Out!” It was the last communication we would ever get.



Lieutenant Steve Moore:

From the Hill, I could see one Marine Tank and one Duster advance towards the ambushed convoy, but I did not notice our other Duster or the other Tank move from their position on Route 9. On the radio, I could hear Belardo arguing about moving the lead Duster closer and into the main ambush area as the Marine Tank and one Duster advanced forward.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: It was not Americans, but NVA, who were hidden in the brush and in spider holes. They let the lead M48 Tank cross over the small bridge that went over the creek and then blasted it at point blank range with a volley of RPGs, killing Captain Kent and destroying his tank. Captain Kent lay dead across the front of his tank. Lt. Joeckel took immediate control of the M48. As he tried to reach for Captain Kent, he was shot through the face and lower jaw. Unable to speak, he wrote radio communications and map coordinates to be sent by his radioman to command at what he thought was Camp Carroll. But, actually he was giving the ordinances to our Duster.

Before Hardin's Duster could react, the next RPG team blasted them.

Squad Leader – Sgt. E5 Johnie Towns: I told Lt. Hardin that I was an experienced team leader and we should not be advancing into the main ambush site without clearing the area with our Twin 40mm, starting at 100 yards out and slowly hitting the area closer to the ambush site. I told him the other Duster would cross our field of fire making a big "X" killing field. Lt. we've done this many times together and it always works. Without an explanation he order our Driver to advance forward and follow the Marine tank. As we slowly moved forward NVA with RPG's came out of spider holes and blasted the Marine tank. We hadn't traveled 100 feet and a second group of NVA in spider holes with RPG's hit our Duster. The first RPG hit the turret on the left Gunners side. The second RPG hit the left rear of the turret by our Cannoneer who was standing loading the 40mm auto-cannon. Then there was another volley of RPG's hitting us from all directions. The Twin 40 guns now pointed grotesquely towards the sky. The fire from the explosions caught my clothes on fire and was burning my arms. I stood patting my arms to stop the fire. I now realized my Gunner Spec. 4 Jackie Gilbert was hit by the first RPG. The shell burned off both his arms. The second RPG hit Cannoneers Pfc. Shora Solomon and Pfc. Townsend. Solomon and a hole burned through both his thighs and Townsend was covered in shrapnel pepper wounds. Because of the heat from the RPG's they weren't even bleeding, just screaming in pain. I jumped out of Duster and got some morphine from our side locker and gave them each a shot. It happened so quick the Lt. Hardin didn't realize how bad we were damaged and the intensity of our wounded. I know prayed the Sam Lewis Duster would save us. I tried calling them on our radio but it was out of commission.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: It was over in less than a minute...the Tank and Duster never got a chance to shoot. The NVA were so brazen, they just stood in full view and fired repeatedly. We looked on in horror. I stopped counting as a minimum of seven RPGs hit each track vehicle. We immediately started killing the enemy we could see. In seconds, it became another full size ambush directed at us. RPGs and recoilless rifles and automatic weapons were now being fired at us from everywhere. NVA Sappers, swinging satchel charges, sprinted down the road in our direction. Chester and I dropped them with a quick burst of our M-16's. Sines screamed at me to get us up on that knoll to our right "NOW!"

Without our knowledge, our small React Force was going up against the North Vietnam Army's 320th Division's 48th Regiment and 52nd Regiment. Each enemy North Vietnam Army Regiment consisted of 10,000 to 12,000 enemy soldiers, fully equipped.

Squad Leader - Sgt. E5 Sam Lewis: We had Belardo quickly drive up onto the top of a small knoll to our right. Immediately, we opened fire on more RPG teams, killing the next four RPG teams we could see. Caution had to be taken because the remaining RPG teams were within feet of the destroyed M48 and Duster. Spec. 4 Belardo instructed the driver of the M48 Flamethrower Tank to follow him and take position on the small knoll overlooking the ambush site. Both tracks did "figure eights" to level any tall grass that could conceal the enemy and to give an area for the squad of Marines to dig in. As we drove up the knoll, we were firing at the NVA that were visible and instructed Marines that came with us to dig in and protect the west and south slopes of the knoll. It looked like Dante's Inferno as the Flame-Thrower Tank lit up the area. You could see burning NVA soldiers running and our 40mm tracers flying through the flames and exploding all around them. Hell was no longer biblical. Lucifer himself had arrived and we were the Archangels sent to stop him.

Up on the knoll, the destroyed tracks and convoy were slightly to the right, at our one o'clock position. Our field of fire was excellent. The terrain around the knoll was mostly low brush and grass. Directly across from us was Route 9 and an area about 200 to 300 yards wide that went north for about one-quarter mile to a small hedgerow along the Cam Lo River. This area was clear and had small clusters of brush. The small stream at the ambush site ran back north to the river.

Its eastern side terrain was hilly and covered with heavy brush. This area was known as "Mike Hill" because the Marines had lost many men from Mike Company on the hills in a previous battle. The south side of the bridge had similar terrain. At the bridge crossing stood a lone tree about seventy feet tall known as "Checkpoint 39", later to be known as "Ground Zero". The destroyed Duster was in close proximity to the tall tree. On the other side of the creek and bridge was the destroyed M48 Tank and convoy. To the right of our Duster was heavy cover and a steep drop-off ravine. The area behind our Duster was a sharp steady rise up to Camp Carroll and the Observation Post known as Hill 250.

Section Chief - Sgt. E6 Chester Sines: I requested reinforcements from Camp Carroll. Captain Easter, Charlie Battery, 1st /44th Commanding Officer, advised, "Hold position, recover men, casualties and equipment from ambush, return to Camp Carroll." I quickly made circles on our map of the grid coordinates of all the NVA positions we could see. I then had Belardo call them in to Lt. Moore first and then one at a time to the artillery FDC centers at Carroll, Con Thien, Rockpile and our Duster Headquarters Command Center at Dong Ha. We hoped to get some needed heavy artillery support. I had our Duster proceed slowly down the knoll towards the entrapped destroyed Duster and Tank hoping to extract all our men. We raked the area with 40mm and M60 machinegun fire. Spec. 4 Belardo repeatedly tried to contact the destroyed tracks via radio, but now only received radio microphone clicking. The other M48 gave rear security as the Marines hastily re-dug new fighting positions up on the knoll. Our Duster was now within 50 yards or less of the destroyed vehicles. NVA automatic weapons and machineguns now opened fire. When we got closer, we could see a few of our friends crouched behind the smoking Duster. Towns, Gilbert, and Solomon were still in the burning turret. Johnie Towns' clothes were on fire and he was patting himself furiously trying to put out the fire. Gilbert was bent backwards out of the Gunner's seat with his arms hanging off. Solomon was slumped to his right, screaming. One of the RPGs had burnt a hole through both of his thighs. The RPGs had decimated their Duster turret, but I thought none had hit the engine compartment. RPGs from across Route 9 were fired at us, but fell short of their mark or soared over our heads. A small group of NVA began to rush us, only to be killed by 40mm fire. NVA 57mm recoilless rifles began shooting at our Duster. More NVA started rushing from concealed positions along the road. The NVA were now alongside

our Duster, throwing grenades and satchel charges. Our crew was killing them at point-blank range. Fearing the loss of another Duster and its crew, I instructed Belardo to return back up the knoll. Belardo was unwilling to turn around and expose the Duster's sides or the engine, fearing an RPG or 57 recoilless hit would destroy or stall their un-startable Duster. He had Spec. 4 Earl "Tex" Holt use inter-track radio communications helmets and verbally guide him backwards and up the hill, until they were sure that turning around was safe.

Back up on the knoll, automatic weapons fire constantly strafed our Duster, and mortars were exploding at close range. I again radioed Carroll advising enemy action and requesting backup. Carroll advised me to hold position and sweep the area. The new 40mm cannon barrels, recently installed at Carroll, had not been completely cleaned and began to smoke profusely from the cosmoleen oil. We were forced to stop shooting the Duster as Belardo and Holt feverishly swabbed the barrels with the little reserve oil left on our Duster. Both of them were on the ground standing on empty 40mm ammo cans, reaching high with the cleaning rods, trying to clean the grease out of the barrels so we could continue fighting. Enemy bullets were hitting the ground all around them and bouncing off the Duster. We could see NVA soldiers running out in the open along the small stream and into the heavy brush at our eleven o'clock position, and along the stream that headed towards the ambush site. Finally, our Duster again began firing along the stream area, delivering effective fire on the advancing NVA. Large groups of NVA, dead and wounded, were now visible from the river to within 20 yards of the ambushed convoy. Dead NVA were stacked all around our Duster. NVA mortars again began landing in our Duster area. NVA automatic weapons and small arms fire were sporadic but heavy. Spec. 4 Belardo was advised to keep his track moving around the knoll and away from the Marine infantry and the other M48 tank. A moving target was not as easy a target.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I always carried Squad Leader Sam Lewis' small green book of secret radio codes on a cord around my neck. Sam always had trouble doing radio communication. The book gave me the radio codes for jets, choppers, artillery support and medi-vacs from all the surrounding combat bases command centers. As we drove up the knoll, Chester Sines made another call to

Charlie Battery Command up at Camp J.J.Carroll. Carroll was situated directly above us on a high mountain top plateau. Carroll was the central hub along the DMZ for all of the American large and small artillery. In addition, it was direct artillery support for all bases and combat encounters along the DMZ. At all costs, it could not fall into enemy hands. Sines reported our situation and requested additional support. He then asked me to take over the radio and notify him when Command called back. I adjusted my second radios frequencies to Louis Block's Duster up on Hill 250. Hill 250 was a hill top observation position outside Camp Carroll to the east and had a great field of view for what was going on in the ambush site. Louis told me that Lieutenant Moore was on the hill with them, helping direct his Duster and the Dusters at Camp Carroll where to shoot. I gave Lt. Moore our map position and several other map positions where heavy concentrations of NVA (The Enemy) were located. He had Block's Duster and the Dusters at Carroll redirect their support counter fire.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: We looked on in horror from Hill 250. The sounds of explosions and black smoke could be seen as the first Tank and one of our Dusters were destroyed. I got on the radio and advised command what we saw and asked if they had any other radio contact with any of our Dusters in the Reaction Force. I could now hear Sergeant Sines on Lou Blocks Duster radio advising us that both Hardin's Duster and the first Marine Tank had been destroyed. At that point he did not know the casualties and would try to assess the damage and retrieve everyone. He also advised us that he could see hundreds of NVA running from the Cam Lo River toward Route 9 and Carroll. Suddenly, he signed off and I thought they were hit. A few minutes later Belardo was on the radio advising me that they had just fought off a small ground attack. But, we all okay and would radio again.

I was advised that the Marine's 12th Artillery (FDC) Fire Direction Control, situated at Camp Carroll, would coordinate artillery with the other combat bases and do the initial firing at one map location. I got back on the radio and told Belardo to call me with adjustments to their firing as needed and then request "Fire for Effect and Sweep". It was amazing, because their first shot was on target. After a brief radio confirmation, they swept the area with a large volley of cannon fire. I was then notified again by the 12th Marines that they had adjusted other guns on

two additional coordinates and requested to shoot. This time two other areas were saturated with cannon fire. All guns stopped shooting and awaited further instructions. During the battle, we called for artillery support on different NVA positions at least an additional six to eight times.

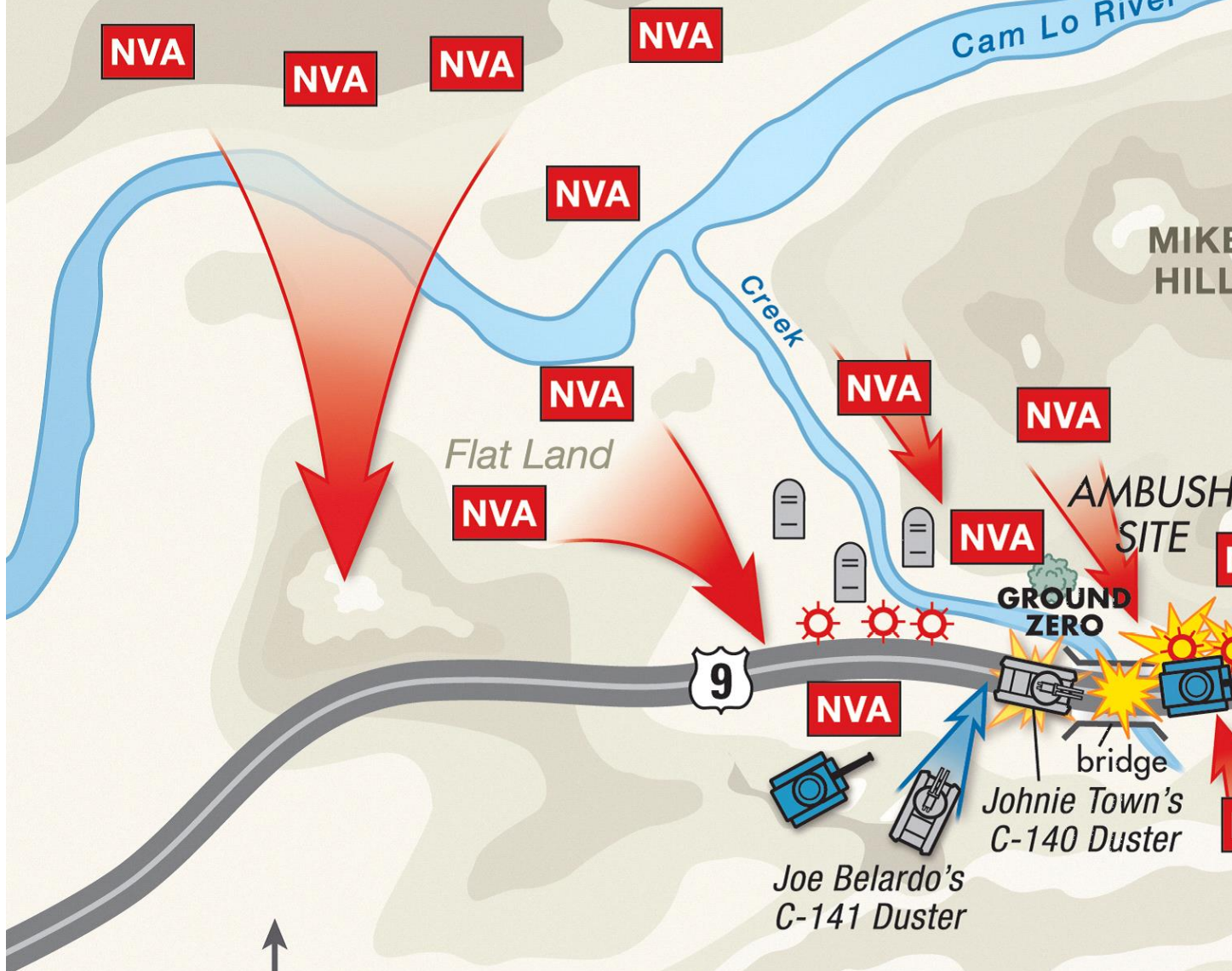
Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I requested the Dusters at Carroll and all artillery to stop all shooting when helicopters and jets finally arrived in the area. I needed clear radio contact with them to coordinate the bombing runs. The choppers first swept the area with rockets and machinegun fire and left. That was followed by the jet dropping napalm. We were so close you could feel the heat wave. Burning enemy soldiers were running in every direction. It was like a scene from a macabre horror movie. We took them out of their misery with a few well aimed rifle shots. I was getting dozens of calls from other Duster teams who wanted to disregard orders and come to our rescue. Sines got on the radio and advised them to stand-down and protect their positions. I was then advised to keep confusion to a minimum and try to coordinate all artillery and Duster fire power through Lt. Moore.

Chester, now satisfied that I gave FDC the correct positions, climbed up the back of the Duster. Standing brazenly behind the turret pointing at the NVA positions he could see so that our Duster could shoot the enemy with greater accuracy. As the American artillery shells began exploding everywhere, it just made the enemy run toward us even faster. They knew if they got close to us or the convoy, our large artillery could not kill them without killing us. I could not believe how many NVA were running at us.... it looked like a thousand.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: Easter told me to hold my position on Hill 250 and keep coordinating counter battery fire and await further orders. Within minutes, Sergeant Sines was on the radio with me, informing me of their new position and their situation. He gave me some map coordinates to shoot at and signed off. After a while, Specialist 4 Joe Belardo contacted me again with additional targets. Belardo continually contacted me with enemy targets over the remainder of the battle.

From Hill 250, we could see NVA boats crossing the river and their soldiers running in Camp Carroll's direction. I quickly adjusted all of our Dusters' fire power and swept the river area. The Dusters' 40mm decimated all their boats, and secondary explosions could be seen. Sergeant Sines advised Easter that they were outnumbered, almost out of ammunition, and possibly would be overrun.

Lower S.E. Slopes
of Big Dong Ha Mountain



Camp J.J. Carroll



CONV
Janu

A legend box containing four symbols: a tank, a camera, a gear, and a pill.

Squad Leader - Sgt. E5 Sam Lewis: The top of the knoll gave us a clear view of the battle area and the elevated firing advantage we needed. Large groups of NVA were running in all directions. As we fought off their attack, Sines was trying to see what needed to be done to retrieve the men from the ambushed convoy. All we needed was some immediate fire support and infantry. The NVA should not have been allowed to dig in and take ground. We desperately needed additional firepower and ammunition.

The M48 Flamethrower now took up position by the path that we made as we drove up the knoll. The Marines re-dug slightly to the left and rear of the M48. Sines, the sixth man of normally a five man crew, continually stood on the back of the Duster giving firing orders, exposing himself to enemy fire. Belardo began giving more artillery coordinates to the Fire Direction Control at Carroll and killing any enemy who got close to our Duster. The enemy could now be seen dragging their dead or wounded into the heavy brush.

Again, our Duster made another attempt to recover our friends and the men from the convoy. Sines, now as the driver, and Belardo standing in the TC hatch, advanced our Duster towards the destroyed convoy, raking the area with 40mm and M60 fire and throwing hand grenades. The NVA again charged our Duster. Sines stopped the Duster and was holding position. The Duster was now only a few yards from Route 9 and less than 30 yards from the Hardin/Towns destroyed Duster. The Duster was now shooting direct fire at the charging NVA. Belardo, exposing himself to enemy fire, now stood on the top front right corner fender of the Duster so he could see the other Duster. Only gunner Gilbert's head was now visible and not moving. No other Duster crewmen could be seen, we thought they all might be dead.

Sines was now shooting Belardo's M16 at the advancing NVA from the Driver's compartment. Belardo, now on the ground outside the Duster, had the front main door of the Duster open. This was a common combat practice for Duster Drivers. It was the only way to take the 40mm ammo out of the inside storage area and hand it to the loaders in the turret. Belardo, again continually exposed himself to enemy fire, repeatedly climbed in and out of the Driver's hatch retrieving 40mm

ammo and distributing it to the loaders in the turret. Belardo advised Sines that they were almost out of ammo. NVA RPGs, mortars and 57mm recoilless rifles began hitting close to the Duster. Sines instructed Belardo to get back in the Duster as they headed back up the knoll. Two other helicopters, that had been called to help, began shooting extremely close to the east slope of our Duster and advised us that a very large NVA force had crossed over Route 9 and was advancing towards us from the east and up to Camp Carroll. The helicopters continued to shoot into a small ravine that headed up to Camp Carroll and covered the eastern slope of the knoll. The M48 Tank was now out of machinegun ammo and incendiary flame. Its crew began using their personal weapons. Sitting motionless, the NVA stopped shooting at the M48 with mortars and RPGs, possibly thinking they had already scored a direct hit. The dug-in Marines, almost out of ammo, were using the Duster reserve M16 ammo stored in our side compartments,

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: As I adjusted the radio frequencies, Chester Sines made another call for choppers and air support. As our Duster shot the obvious enemy targets, Chester and I quickly made circles on my map of the grid coordinates of all the NVA positions we could see. Chester then climbed up the back of the Duster and again stood behind the turret pointing at the NVA positions he could see and screaming verbal commands where the Duster should shoot. I radioed Lt. Moore up on Carroll and gave him the grid locations of the enemy. Moore instructed me to radio the four Dusters, who were shooting blindly over our heads from Carroll, and give them targets. Their lines of fire now adjusted, they could sweep the NVA positions effectively. We then gave the same coordinates to the 105mm and 155mm artillery Fire Direction Control at Carroll. All Hell was breaking loose. Our artillery shells, which now began exploding everywhere, just made the enemy run toward us even faster. We were going to die. Our orders from Captain Easter at Carroll were vague and non-committal. Our crew to this day cannot understand "C" Battery's thinking, and that no other Dusters and Marines were immediately sent to help.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: At one point, the Dusters at Carroll were blowing the cannon breeches and warping their barrels. Sergeant Noel Brown was flown to the Rockpile to retrieve additional 40mm breech blocks so we could continue to defend Carroll. I prayed the NVA would not shoot the chopper he was on out of

the sky. We desperately need those Duster cannon parts to keep shooting. Thank God, his trips were successful.

Gunner - Spec. 4 Russia Holley: I remember how infuriated we all became at Captain Easter. It was a hard pill to swallow, knowing and feeling you were left to die. Our crew all agreed that we were not going to leave the ambush site without saving the other Duster crew. We thought, if we could fight long enough, Captain Easter would have to send help or body bags. But we were not prepared for the number of NVA we still had to fight. In all the other firefights I had been in, the NVA would try to hide and shoot, hit and run, killing and wounding as many of us as they could and then disappear back into the jungle taking their dead with them. This fight was completely different. They were well equipped with lots of firepower and were here to stay and fight to the end. You could hear their bugles and whistles blowing some kind on NVA commands. All of us knew they were headed for Camp Carroll and we had to stop them. If Camp Carroll fell into enemy hands, it would be the turning point of the war. Even though we were furious at Captain Easter, we all knew, as seasoned combatants, that Captain Easter could not and would not leave Camp Carroll undefended. He had to do what was best to protect Camp Carroll, and possibly sacrifice a few good men. *Us!*

Cannoneer - Spec. 4 Earl Holt: We all knew we were in deep trouble when the NVA bugles and whistles started blowing. Any weapon we fired was effective in killing or wounding the enemy. There were so many NVA that firing one to two 40mm rounds would injure and or kill many enemy soldiers. We would no sooner shoot at one group and another group popped up. As we went from group to group, the first groups we shot could be seen dragging their wounded into the cover of nearby brush or dragging them by a short piece of rope tied to their leg. By the time we traversed back, most of the bodies had disappeared from sight. The NVA did not stop coming, and we did not stop killing them.

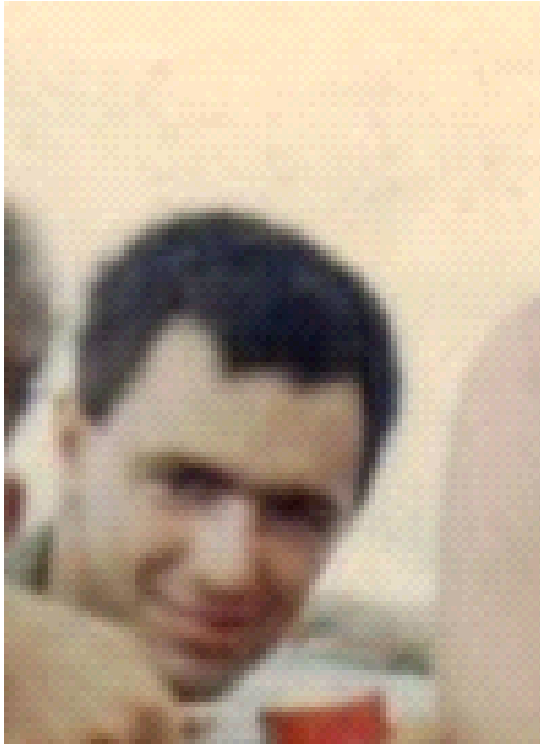
Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: If the NVA got below the line of sight of the 40s, I shot them with my M-16 or .45 pistol or Earl shot them with the M60 machine gun. Cannoneer Dave Lewis was now having trouble handling all this death and had to be constantly encouraged to fight or die. The crew was in disbelief when Captain Easter repeated he was not sending help or ammo. Camp Carroll had to be held at all cost. Chester got on the radio and was screaming at him. His screams went unanswered. We had killed or wounded the entire first wave of NVA we could see on each side of the ambushed convoy. As the Duster shot, I just kept doing my job: drive, send radio communications, give firing grids to the artillery, direct the jets and choppers, and shoot my M-16 at any NVA who were getting close to our Duster. It was very eerie how cold and methodical we had become. There were times when we just stopped and waited and nobody was shooting. We just sat there like there was no war. Chester or I constantly had to get on the radio and tell the “Bird-Dog” spotter plane that was flying over the area to “go away.” We knew he was just trying to help us, but his plane was in the way of the 40s and our artillery shooting at the enemy from Carroll. We were afraid he would be blown out of the sky by one of our shells. Plus, he was in the way of the jet bombing and napalm runs we were trying coordinate. We were glad when he finally left.

There were dead NVA everywhere. It looked like over five hundred, just in the area north of the convoy. Even though the artillery, jets and choppers helped kill the enemy, it felt like just we six and a handful of Marines did most of the killing. I thought we were winning because they had stopped removing their dead from the battlefield. There would be a pause for a few minutes and then they would start coming again and we would start shooting. With each pause, they would rush a little slower, disappearing behind every piece of brush, bush or crevice. It was the most I ever shot my M-16 and .45 pistols. It was the first time I had emptied all my two ammo bandoleers of M-16 ammo and had to reload several more times.

One of my jobs was to keep the enemy from getting close or onto our Duster. Our Duster killed most of the NVA that ran up the hill towards our Duster and Camp Carroll. To our right was a steep ravine. Because the Duster guns could not shoot that low, Earl Holt used the M60 and I used my M16 and threw grenades, killing any NVA coming up and out of the ravine. We had to stop the enemy from getting to Camp Carroll using the ravine as cover. I would run to the edge of the

ravine as Earl covered me with the M60. I would throw a handful of grenades down into the ravine and shoot any NVA I could see and then sprint back to the Duster. As the NVA chased me Earl shot them. It became our cat and mouse game. The crew in the turret had their job to do and I had mine. As the turret crew shot the 40s, Earl and I killed any NVA that got close to our Dusters. Earl counted 49 dead NVA stacked like cord wood between the ravine edge and our Duster on the knoll. Earl and I were always a great team. I never counted, but I know only dead NVA were left on that hill. Any NVA that moved, I shot again. Bodies and parts were strewn everywhere. Our constant training in our off times made the difference in our survival. The numerous firefights we had already been in made us the most seasoned Duster crew and one of the best in the 44th. We did not have to yell orders; we all knew our jobs and could fill any other position when needed. Even with all our efforts, the NVA continued to get close to our Duster and we kept killing them.

Squad Leader - Sgt E5 Sam Lewis: I had radioed Command at Carroll and advised them of the situation. We were not prepared for the number of NVA we had to fight. They seemed to be coming out of the cracks in the earth. I was amazed at how easy it was shooting them. It was a slaughter, but neither side gave an inch. In all the other firefights I had been in, the NVA would try to hide and shoot, hit and run, killing and wounding as many of us as they could and then disappear back into the jungle taking their dead with them. This fight was more like the January 13th firefight outside the Rockpile with India Company 3rd Battalion 9th Marines. They were well equipped with lots of firepower and were there to stay and fight to the end. They were probably the same NVA unit. The only difference this time we could see thousands of NVA. All of us knew they were headed for Camp Carroll, and we had to stop them.



Dusterman - Spec. 4 Donald Wolfe:

The day was very hectic and confusing. Dustermen and Marines were running around, crazed with killing the NVA and keeping Camp Carroll from being overrun. Everyone chipped in and helped load the ammo trucks, we took turns in the Duster turrets, acting as loaders, gunners and traversing the turrets. Some of the Dustermen manned the perimeter wire positions and killed any NVA that approached the camp. The NVA were shooting at us with rockets, artillery and mortars, adding additional American wounded and dead to the already chaotic situation. None of us had ever seen a complete platoon of now eight Dusters shoot all at once at the enemy. It was a sight no Dusterman or Marine at Camp Carroll or anywhere else in the world had ever seen. It is something I will never forget. All you could see was a wall of 40mm tracers in the sky. It looked like we took a big red crayon and drew a continual red line from the Dusters barrels to the exploding 40mm rounds hitting their enemy targets. Smoke from the Dusters auto-cannons filling the air made our Dusters look like metal dragons breathing fire. In just one brief minute, the eight Dusters fired 1920 rounds. They continued to shoot for

hours. I would not want to be the enemy on the receiving end of thousands of high explosive 40mm shells exploding all around them.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: To avoid being hit by NVA artillery, I drove the Duster in a sporadic stop-and-go all over the knoll. It was impossible, as we dodged artillery, not to run over some of the NVA bodies we had killed on our knoll. On the east side of the creek, towards a very rounded top hill we called “Mike Hill”, we could see a small group of NVA advancing toward the convoy. We shot at them with our M60 but could not shoot the 40’s because the shrapnel from them would hit the convoy. Out of nowhere, a small group of villagers and Montagnard people started running across the battlefield, heading for their homes at Cam Lo. It was amazing, everyone stopped shooting. It caused a semi-pause in the battle. We screamed and yelled for them to run as fast as they could and get out of the way. The NVA seemed to be regrouping. We were almost out of ammo and still hoped for relief. Because we could not shoot, the NVA began feverishly picking up their dead and wounded, and disappeared with them back into the brush. They had to know we were low on ammo, but they did not risk the test under fire. Our 40mm ack-ack guns had ripped them virtually to pieces. We now just stared at each other and waited. As the NVA ran out from their cover, we shot them with our M-16s. If we had been given the ammo we requested, this would have been the only time we could have evacuated the men trapped in the ambush. As history was being written, the wait for ammo was too long and neither side was retreating.

The Marines we had carried on the back of our Duster had to constantly move their positions. The NVA artillery were honing in on them and blowing them to pieces. It was a horrible sight. I gave them the extra bandages and morphine I stored in our side compartment. Only a few Marines remained alive.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: I left the hill and returned to Carroll and requested that we send in a better equipped Reaction Force and rescue everyone caught in this giant ambush. My request was denied. These Dustermen were my men, my responsibility. I had fought alongside of them and could not believe nothing was

going to be done to rescue my men. After a lengthy argument, which started to become very ugly, I was ordered to return to Hill 250.

Before returning to Hill 250, I radioed Colonel John House at Duster Headquarters at Dong Ha and informed him of the situation. He asked me to stay in contact with him every half hour or less if the situation worsened. House was not happy. I told Easter that I would take two Dusters and an ammo truck and move slowly to the ambushed convoy, killing all the NVA as we proceeded. From the field I would be able to adjust counter battery fire with great effectiveness and return with our stranded Dustermen and the convoy. Hopefully, I would not be too late and they would still be alive. Easter told me that was not an option. There would be no more vehicles leaving Carroll.

Cannoneer - Spec. 4 Earl Holt: We had stopped shooting the 40mm, because we were down to only a few clips of 40mm ammo. We shot our M-16 and took turns shooting the M60 machine gun. It was an awful feeling, this waiting to die. I began to wonder how I would die and what gook was finally going to kill me. I reminded everyone of our promise to each other: let me die if I'm dismembered, put me to sleep with morphine or kill me if we're going to be captured. I kept telling myself "*I'm not going to let them take me alive.*" Our situation was not very good. The phrase "*Wha'd'ya think?*" must have been said a thousand times. Nobody really gave a shit what we thought. I thought we were just NVA bait. We were out of ammo and going to be overrun. Joe laughed and yelled "*Wha'd'ya think guys – we gonna die?*" as he shot one of the NVA charging our Duster with a satchel charge bomb. I had been praying outloud and privately to God for hours hoping he would hear my prayers and answer my "*Wha'd'ya think?*"

Dusterman - Spec. 4 John Huelsenbeck: *At the motor pool, a few Dustermen had assembled and told Captain Easter they were volunteering to take a truck load of ammo out to the Dusters in the valley and to notify them that they were coming. Before Captain Easter could say no, Don Wolfe, Bob Williams and a couple of other Duster guys and Marines drove out of the motor pool and headed to the ambush. My team just kept doing their job.*

Dusterman - Spec. 4 Donald Wolfe: I was approached by a Marine Lieutenant who was looking to put together a volunteer force to bring ammunition to his

Marines and our Dusters caught in the middle of the ambush. Before I knew it, I was sitting with six Marines and two other Duster guys on top of our ammunition truck holding a M60 machinegun. Dusterman Bob Williams was driving and a Marine Lieutenant was in the seat next to him. The road leading out of Camp Carroll to Route 9 was about a mile long, all downhill. Bob had the pedal to the metal and the truck was bouncing down the steep sloped road at full speed. At the bottom of the road, there was a 90 degree turn, left or right onto Route 9. We turned right, as the truck fish tailed and almost flipped over. As soon as we turned, we had enemy contact. Small arm bullets were pinging off the truck and ammo cans. To make a smaller target, we all laid as flat as we could on the ammo cans. The ammo cans were already wobbling, shaking, pinching and squeezing our body parts black and blue. We just kept shooting and fighting our way to the ambushed convoy and our Duster brothers.

Lieutenant Steve Moore: One of our soldiers ran into our Command Bunker and advised us that a Marine officer had rounded up a few volunteer Marines and Duster guys and one of our trucks full of ammo took it down to the ambushed convoy. He said Bob Williams and Donald Wolfe commandeered one of the trucks and left camp with the Marines. Needless to say, both Easter and I were furious. Carroll was now getting hit by NVA rockets, mortars and ground forces.

I quickly returned to Hill 250, knowing I had a better chance of protecting Williams and Wolfe from the Hill. I could not see them from 250 and climbed the lookout tower to get a better view. They could not be seen.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I received a call from Lt. Moore saying that an ammo truck driven by Bob Williams with Don Wolfe and a squad of Marines had just left Camp Carroll and would try to get to us with our needed ammunition.

Squad Leader - Sgt. E5, Sam Lewis: Lt. Steve Moore was now up on OP Hill 250 with Lou Block's Duster crew. Hill 250 overlooked the ambush site and had the best field of view. Chester and Belardo again coordinated the counter battery fire against the enemy with Moore. Moore knew what to do and would give us all

the protection he could. There was only one problem. They could visually see us but could not lower the guns enough to clear the enemy that surrounded our Duster and the convoy area. Like the other Dusters at Carroll, they could only shoot and cover an area about three-hundred yards from us and out to the Cam Lo River and slopes of Dong Ha mountain.

I had commandeered the Hill 250 position in the past and knew a few tactics we used to protect some of the Marine patrols in the valley. I got Louis Block on the radio and told him to drive his Duster out of his parapet position and drive down the slope of the hill towards the barbed wire that surrounded Hill 250. This way he could shoot a lot closer to us and give us better protection.

Belardo advised the crew that Lt. Moore told him that Wolfe and Williams and some Marines were heading for us with a truck load of ammo. Our crew agreed that we could not let our friends, who were coming to help us, drive the ammo truck into the main ambush area below our knoll and be killed. Plus, we could not risk driving our Duster back down onto Route 9 because we now had no more 40 ammo and could not take or fight back another direct NVA assault. The ammo truck driver, Bob “Willy” Williams, and Don Wolfe, riding shotgun with an M-60, didn’t know exactly where we were. One of us had to try to get to them before they drove directly into the ambush site and were killed.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I told Chester that I would make the needed run down the hill and fetch the ammo truck. He was the extra man and that left the Duster with a full crew and the needed leadership. Plus, I was a lot faster than the other guys. I filled my pockets with grenades, wrapped two bandoleers of M-16 ammo around me, attached my bayonet, checked my .45 pistol, and descended down the hill. I thought if I went on an angle, away from the ambush site, and yet towards the Rt. 9 road I would go somewhat unnoticed by the NVA and stop the truck before it got too close. I used all the little things they teach you in boot camp: running in a zigzag, low crawling, rolling, and counting before you throw the grenades, shooting single shots and short bursts, and bayonet training. As I ran down the hill, my pants were falling off from the weight of the grenades. I guess I was a little overloaded and had to hold my pants up with one hand and hold my M-

16 with the other hand. I finally stopped, hid behind a thick bush, pulled up my pants and tightened my belt. As I turned to continue down the hill, standing right in front of me, no more than twenty feet away was an NVA soldier in full battle gear, helmet and crisscrossed bandoleers covered with grass. He was holding his AK47 down around mid-thigh. Strapped to his back was an RPG. We just stared at each other. I noticed he was just a young boy, maybe fourteen to sixteen tops. There was no time to aim and I knew I had to knock him down. One shot in his stomach and he flipped backwards on to the ground. I was afraid he would yell and give my position away, so I stepped on his chest and killed him with a thrust from my bayonet into his throat. I knelt next to him holding my hand over his mouth, making sure he would not yell or make any sounds. I took his AK47 and his two remaining clips of ammunition. I slipped the strap of my M16 across my chest, with my rifle now diagonally across my back. The M16 when fired sounded a completely different than their AK's. I hoped, by shooting his AK, my position would not be given away.

As I was coming down the hill, I came to an area that rose up and hid behind some bushes to pull up my pants again. As I fixed my pants I heard talking on the other side of the hill. Crawling up over the small hill I could see below me a group of NVA soldiers hiding in an old bomb crater going over a map with a tall soldier in a khaki uniform. I had seen, after several other battles, dead enemy with the same uniforms and was told that they were Chinese advisors. I had no choice but to slowly low crawl to the outside edge of the bomb crater and lay under an overhanging big bush. I now could hear Vietnamese language, and what I thought was French, being spoken. Trying to stay unnoticed, I shimmied further up under the bush. Strained, I looked up over my shoulder and could see the tall guy in the beige uniform talking, pointing at a map and pointing up the hill. I counted another four or five standing NVA. I had no way of seeing if any more NVA were in the crater. I pulled the pin of one grenade and tossed the grenade over the hill. I closely watched the grenade as it slowly sailed through the air and prayed I had given it a good enough toss and that it wouldn't come back down on top of me. The sound of the handle flying off the grenade made them all look up. I quickly ducked and followed with one more grenade. After the explosions, I quickly crawled up over the hill. The small group of NVA lay dead and wounded in the small depression. Without counting them or searching them, I quickly shot them in

the head. They were caught completely off guard. I thought there might be some good intelligence information on them, but the grenades and blood had destroyed everything. After a very quick search, I could not find anything I thought could be of any importance. But, I did notice that a few of them were wearing NVA officer's belt buckles with a star in the center. The Chinese guy had a belt buckle with a two stars. In a shamefully demented way I wanted to take their buckles, but knew there was no time and continued my run down the hill to Route 9. Things were so crazy and confusing going down that hill. I could hear NVA yelling and screaming, their whistles and bugles blowing. I would run a few yards and hide behind some cover before advancing again. My heart was pounding out of my chest as the NVA walked past without noticing me. I shot the little bastards in the back. It was too late to change my mind or direction. I was now over a couple hundred yards from my Duster. I just shot at anything that moved or I thought was moving. To this day, I don't think they were prepared for one Army idiot assaulting them.

The AK had a knife style bayonet and on a few occasions I jumped out from behind my cover and hit the NVA with the butt of the rifle, stabbed and then shot. When I finally used up all the AK47 ammunition, I just quietly placed the rifle on the ground and grabbed my M16. The M16, being a very light weapon, made the butt almost useless, as I had learned in a few other firefights. The old heavy M14 rifle was a much superior weapon when it came to close contact fighting.

When I got to Route 9, I took cover in the drainage ditch on the south side of the road. I wasn't sure what to do and was exhausted. My mind told me not to make any noise and take time to regroup. This was the first time I was ever alone in Vietnam, and the first time I had done anything like this. I was not in the infantry. All kinds of crazy thoughts ran through my mind. Should I advance west towards the approaching ammo truck, did I miss the truck, or wait for it to arrive? I didn't know what to do. How many more gooks could I kill before they killed me? I had a good view up Route 9 and was concealed from view, so I decided to wait. I heard the truck approaching and started heading west up the ditch, hoping to see the truck before the NVA, wave it down, and head back up the knoll with the ammo truck to our awaiting Duster.

Within minutes, I saw six NVA soldiers on the other side of the road walking slowly in a crouched position towards my direction. My heart was pounding out of my chest. They had no idea that I was sitting less than a 100 feet from them. Trying to be a smaller target, I lay on my belly in the prone-position. Occasionally, they stopped and ducked their heads like turtles and crouched as Moore's 40s from Hill 250 and Camp Carroll artillery hit the areas behind them. They just pointed up at Camp Carroll and again started moving forward slowly, using hand signals. They had grass sticking out of their helmets and waistbands, with bandoleers around their chests. They were now about fifty feet away and almost directly across from me. I held my breath and took aim at the NVA soldier in the middle of the group. As the next volley of artillery exploded, I shot the gook in the head. He just dropped as his helmet flew through the air. The rest quickly ducked. I think they thought they were shot at from our group on the knoll or hit by the shrapnel from the exploding artillery. They had no idea how their friend got killed and they seemed not to care. I was amazed that they never ran to or even gave any real aid to their fallen comrade. One of them took his gun and ammunition and the others took something out of his rucksack. They were hard Sons-of-Bitches. They never made the next 50 feet or knew who shot them. Hearing a lot of shooting and explosions from the direction of the ammo truck, I ran down the road and took cover again in the ditch about 100 feet from the approaching ammo truck. I could see the ammo truck now stopped and being riddled by NVA heavy weapons fire. Now, NVA artillery and RPGs started exploding all around the ammo truck. At first I could not see any NVA. All I could see was dirt and dust from the explosions and my friend Donald Wolfe on top of the truck blasting away with his M60. There was another explosion and Don and a few other guys were blown off the truck. I thought they were killed.

Spec. 4 Donald Wolfe: As we turned into the bend in the road, we saw a platoon of NVA soldiers running at us. We all opened fire, killing the NVA we could see as we sped east on Route 9 towards the ambushed convoy. Bob and I knew Route 9 well and had an idea where our Dusters and the convoy were located. Again, NVA were everywhere; this time in greater forces. We now were getting hit by machinegun bullets plus small arms. RPGs and recoilless cannon shells were flying over our heads and exploding all around us, showering us with hot shrapnel. There was a big explosion and the truck came to a grinding halt. I found myself on the

ground with the M60 on my chest and a couple Marines lying next to me. All of us were wounded. I knew I had been hit in the legs and knee. Instantly, the other Marines were lifting us off the ground and placing us back on the truck, yelling “shoot – shoot”. My instinct to survive had me shooting my M60 at the group of NVA charging our truck. More and more explosions landed all around the truck. Luckily, none was getting a direct hit on our truck. The Marine Lieutenant yelled “there are too many NVA!! Turn the truck around and head back to Carroll”. Bob turned the truck around through a hail of enemy artillery and bullets. All I heard was another explosion and woke up in the medivac station in the back of Carroll with bad knee and leg wounds. They took me by chopper to Delta Med in Dong Ha. After being bandaged up, they transported me to the 44th Battalion Headquarters on the other side of Dong Ha. At Battalion Headquarters, an officer who I thought was our Battalion Surgeon, was concerned about my injuries and gave me a little R& R at our Duster Delta Battery stationed in Phu Bai. I returned to Charlie Battery on the 27th. The guys filled me in on what happened during the rest of the big battle. I could not believe what happened and how many NVA they told us we killed.

After I left Vietnam, it was twenty five years before I spoke to another Dusterman, who just happened to be Joe Belardo. The following year I met a lot of my Duster brothers from that battle at a Duster reunion in Washington, DC.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I now could see the NVA rushing the truck from across the road. Another group of NVA charged the truck from my side of the road. Donald and other guys who were wounded and blown off the truck were now being lifted and thrown back on the truck. Donald grabbed his M60 and started shooting again. Then there was another explosion and I saw Donald collapse and fall on his M60. All I could do was pick off as many NVA as I could with my M-16. I looked on in horror, crying and watching from my hiding position, as my friends got hurt and maybe killed trying to help us and save Camp Carroll. Unable to fight their way past the NVA, Bob Williams quickly turned the truck around and drove back to Carroll. I gave them all the cover I could with my M16 and threw my last grenades. I felt totally helpless and ashamed that I could not help them. I quickly turned around and started back towards the hill.



Dusterman - Spec. 4 John "Tank" Huelsenbeck:

About an hour later, Bob and Don rode back into the motor pool. Don was wounded; the other guys were all shot up. The truck looked like Swiss cheese. We were all amazed that they even were able to get back to camp. Don was taken to the aid station.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: The first ammo truck never did get through. I was bloody from what I thought were cuts and scrapes from running through the brush and crawling past the dead NVA. It was more frightening to run back up the hill. I encountered no NVA as I ran back down the road to the path heading back up the hill. I had a problem getting back up the hill because the Marines were shooting at anything or anybody coming up that hill. They thought I was an NVA soldier and started shooting at me. Constantly, I yelled my name, "New Jersey," and any other American name I could think of. As I ran and crawled back up the hill, I rested and took cover next to the dead NVA, using their bodies as a shield and protection from now both the NVA and Marine bullets. I could feel the bullets hitting their

bodies and feared they would come through and kill me. If any of the NVA I was hiding behind were still alive or even moaned, I would kill them with my hunting knife before advancing up the knoll. It was hard getting back up the hill. Their smell still lingers in my nose. How odd....

I did not shoot them because I had already shot up thirteen of my fourteen magazines of M16 ammunition and worried I would not be able to defend myself if attacked by a group of NVA. Or, if I started shooting, the Marines would think I was shooting at them and really open up with everything they had and kill me. When I was finally close enough for the Marines and my Duster brothers to get a good look at me, I stood all the way up in the “*I surrender*” position, with my rifle over my head. I walked slowly up the center of the path, screaming my name and silently praying on the inside not to be killed by my fellow Americans or the NVA. I never held my breath so long. I was covered in blood and dirt and cuts and scrapes from running through the brush and killing the NVA. My comrades finally motioned to me and waved me up the hill. I ran like Hell. I told my crew what happened, than swapped positions with Sines, and started driving again around the knoll. I then called Camp Carroll to find out *WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?*

Cannoneer - Spec. 4 Earl Holt: The Marines, who were with us, wanted to withdraw up the hill and go straight to Outpost Hill 250 or Camp Carroll. NVA artillery, RPGs, and recoilless cannon shells were now landing everywhere. Sines convinced them to hold on a little longer. The waiting seemed endless. The radio crackled, full of chatter. Duster crews from the Khe Gio Bridge, Rockpile and Ca Lu were calling and volunteering to help their friends. It was pure chaos and had become out of control. Radio language was now on a first-name basis.

Squad Leader - Sgt. E5 Sam Lewis: About three or four hours into the battle, we were contacted by a jet pilot who said he would be arriving at our site and to double check his bombing coordinates. Joe quickly responded and asked him to drop his load on the north side of the river where a large group of the enemy was crossing. We didn't hear the jet coming – he came in low from the east following the river. He dropped a few bombs and radioed us that he was making a second run because he had visual enemy contact. On his next approach, he dropped his bombs to the far right of his first bombing run. We all cheered as the bombs exploded. We

never knew the size of the bombs or how many he dropped. He signed off on the radio and flew away. We thought this was the beginning of a Reaction Force coming from the Dong Ha direction. About a half hour later, we received another call from a jet pilot. This pilot told us he was first going to make a few runs over the ambush site. He made two passes over the ambush area. We could see that he was carrying napalm. On the next pass, he dropped napalm behind Mike Hill and the flammable explosion extended to the west, just past the creek to about the center of a big flat open area. We could see what we called "The Pill", a long silver canister, tumbling through the air. We could feel the heat, even though it was several hundred yards from us. He made another pass and dropped the last napalm about a quarter mile to the west of the first target, but up on Dong Ha Mountain. The pilot made no other calls and flew off.

Dusterman Spec. 4 John "Tank" Huelsenbeck: As the Dusters continued to shoot into the valley, my ammunition team continued to fill the trucks with ammo and keep the Dusters shooting. Chester and Joe, down in the ambush, repeatedly requested ammo and reinforcements. Everyone started to wonder what was going to happen to our friends being killed down in the valley. Our Captain and the other officers told us to stand tall to our positions because Camp Carroll was supposed to be attacked by a full scale NVA Division. These guys were my good friends and the situation was driving all of us crazy. Command was not making a decision about saving our friends or the Marines or the convoy caught up in the ambush. We knew some of them were already wounded or maybe dead. But no names were mentioned.

Section Chief - Sgt. E6 Chester Sines: Our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel John House, ordered all radio frequencies cleared and exclusively used for battle communications. Thank God. House's courageous orders brought the battle back to military standards. He was sending Reaction Reinforcements from Dong Ha with a senior officer. We thought that LTC House's brave combat decision was going to save everyone in the kill zone. I gave credit to the Colonel for a decision that could possibly have saved hundreds of Americans and Camp Carroll.

Dusterman - Spec. 4 John “Tank” Huelsenbeck: Several hours had now passed and no one was talking about sending a Reaction Force from Camp Carroll to relieve the ambushed convoy. When we could, we all put our ears to the radio and listen for any signs of life from our ambushed friends. They were still giving NVA targets to Lt. Moore, so we knew they were still alive. Again and again, Chester or Joe radioed and requested ammunition and reinforcement. Nothing was happening. A few of us decided that we were going to bring them ammo.

A Marine officer from the 4th Marines arrived at our position and advised us that he had a group of volunteer Marines that were willing to bring ammo and reinforcements to the ambushed convoy. Several of us told him we would go with them and to meet us at the main gate. One of our guys took one of the ammo trucks and went with the Marine Lieutenant to get the other Marines. I got an M60 Machinegun out of supply and a couple cans of ammo, made sure the truck had a PRC 25 radio that worked, jumped in and drove my ammo truck with a few other Dustermen riding on top of the ammo to the main gate. I was one of the few Dustermen in camp who had done this routine many other times. I was combat experienced and the guys riding shotgun trusted me with their lives. Dustermen and Marines stranded in the valley needed the ammunition we carried and our physical support. I should have done this hours ago.

Roger Blentlinger the Marine from the Water Point met us at the gate, followed by our other truck and a load of Marine volunteers. Captain Easter tried to stop us, but there was no stopping us now. Dustermen never leave Dustermen on the battlefield. Maybe the Captain never heard that rule – he was never in combat.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: Roger Blentlinger, radioed our Duster to say that another Reaction Group of all volunteers put together by him and John Huelsenbeck was coming from Carroll. With them were two truckloads of ammo, a squad of Marines, and our Medic James “Doc” Butler. “We’re not exactly sure where you are or what your situation is, but we’re coming down. Hold tight, buddy, and give us a sign where you guys are.” I radioed back and spoke with Huelsenbeck and told him where I would meet them on the road. He was a fellow Road Warrior and knew the location. I radioed him again and gave him a different radio frequency to use. We all knew each other and did not need or want to use proper military radio language. I also told him to bring water and tell Roger to bring binoculars.

Marine - Cpl. Roger Blentlinger: I was the Marine in charge of the Water Point at Camp Carroll. That day I was at the top of the hill waiting for a fellow Marine to start the water pump that was outside the perimeter wire at the bottom of the hill about a half click from the wire. We were low on water. I realized there was no water coming and I never heard the pump start. Concerned, I got some perimeter security Marines that were available and we went down to see what was wrong. As we went down the hill in assault formation, we got within site of the pump. My Marine assistant was sitting there looking at the pump. We did not see anything that was wrong. I walked up to him and said "Is there a problem?" He said he could not get pump to start and the carburetor might be flooded with fuel. After a few adjustments, I got the pump started. The pump was used to pump water up to Carroll and fill the tanks at the Water Point, so I could process potable water for the combat bases along the DMZ. As we went down the hill to the pump, we could hear the sounds of rockets and mortars and saw a few Dusters lined up the northeast side of the camp and shooting into the valley in front of Camp Carroll. The Dusters shooting was somewhat of an everyday occurrence and I did not think much about it. Although I did notice that they were directing a lot of firepower in one direction. When we finally got back up the hill, we then realized that something was drastically wrong. There were now four or five Dusters in a row shooting and the Duster out on top of Outpost Hill 250 was also shooting. Curious, because I was good friends with lots of Duster guys and shared the Water Point Position with the crew of the Duster called the Grim Reaper, I ran over to Charlie Battery's area. After a lot of inquiring, I was told that two Marine Tanks, two Dusters, and a handful of Marines went to help an overrun convoy and one of the Dusters was the Grim Reaper. One of the Tanks and one Duster had already been destroyed. No one seemed to know what Duster had been destroyed. I asked if they were sending another Reaction Force and was advised none were going. Needless to say this pissed me off along with a hundred other guys yelling and volunteering to go save their friends. I then noticed a 2 ½ ton flatbed truck full of 40mm ammo heading towards the main road leading out of Carroll. I sprinted to the truck that was now parked by the main gate. There was John Huelsenbeck, who I knew very well from the Dusters, sitting behind the steering wheel. Next to him were a M60 and five or six cans of ammo on the floor. Sitting on the 40mm ammo in the bed of the truck were two more Duster guys I did not know. John had a radio and was trying to contact Joe Belardo and the crew of the Grim Reaper. He told me the Duster's crews, the convoy, and all the Marines and their Tanks were in a lot of

trouble and would not survive if they didn't get more ammo and reinforcements. At that time, I did not know that there was a first truck that had tried to get them resupplied and could not get past the NVA. The truck got all shot up and a few Duster guys got wounded. John turned to me and said - Our friends are "Done" if we don't try to save them. A few minutes later a truck from the 4th Marines arrived, full of more 40mm Duster ammo and about a dozen Marines.

I got on the radio and, after several attempts, got ahold of Joe. Between John and Joe, a rendezvous place was established. I ran back to my bunker and got the water and binoculars that Joe requested. All of a sudden, their Army Captain who was in charge of the Dusters drove up to the trucks in a jeep. He ordered all of us to stand down and return to our positions and refused to allow the trucks or anyone to go down to the ambush site. He stated that he had a greater responsibility to assure that Camp Carroll was not taken by the NVA. He would not send any more support, meaning any more Dusters or personnel. I asked him if that meant us Marines and ammo trucks sitting there. He stated that he would not assign any Duster troops for the trucks. I said if there were only Marines to take the truck to the ambush site would that be a solution. He said NO. I informed him that I was a Marine and not subject to his orders. I asked John to start the truck and move to the ambush site. I yelled to the Marines in the other truck to saddle up, we had a mission to complete. The Marine Lieutenant in command of the other truck yelled "saddle up, we're going". Unfortunately, I do not know any of their names because they were at the camp a short period of time. I did not see any of them after that day. The Captain said he would bring charges against me and the others if it was possible. I still cannot believe that - he believed I was subject to his orders. Maybe I was, but I didn't give a shit. I know John and the other Duster guys could care less about the Captain's orders. They were going to save their friends or die trying. We headed to the ambush at full speed.

This was a special day, among many we experienced together in Vietnam. Supporting the brotherhood of warriors that we loved more than our own family!!! Many things are hard to recall after all these years, but that day will last in my memory forever. The rest of the story belongs to one crazy, brave son of a bitch, my friend - Joe Belardo, who I love like a brother, as I do Earl Holt and Big John "Tank" Huelsenbeck. We shared many times together; the ultimate experience that few men do willingly, offering without question, the ultimate sacrifice for the other.

Squad Leader - Sgt. E5 Sam Lewis: The NVA had now moved really close to the knoll. Because we had no 40mm ammo, we could not stop them. We were saving the balance of our personal ammo for a face-to-face confrontation. We did not want this ammo truck and volunteer rescue team to run into the advancing NVA. This was going to be our last chance. One more time without hesitation Belardo said he would go get the truck and ran down the hill again towards Route 9. We did not want any more of our friends to be killed and we desperately needed 40mm ammo to keep the NVA from getting up to Carroll.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: This time I took one of the small paths back to the road. I was running so fast that my forward momentum was causing me to stumble. As I ran and stumbled down the hill, an NVA soldier came out of nowhere and attacked me from my back right side. As he jumped on me, he tried to stab me with his knife and ended up hitting my M-16. His next swing cut my left wrist. My rifle fell out of my hands as I grabbed his hand and arm that was holding the knife. We went falling and rolling, head over heels, down the hill. I never let go of his arm or the hand holding the knife. The NVA soldier was kicking and screaming. We both fought for our lives. I never said a word. I held him as tight as I could and wrapped my legs around him as we wrestled on the ground. Holding his knife hand, I punched him with my other hand as hard as I could. It lasted only a few minutes. With his own knife I slit his throat, holding his mouth closed so he could not scream. I was on my back and his back was on my chest. I was struggling to get him off my chest and back up on my feet. Out of nowhere, another NVA soldier was standing over me aiming his SKS rifle at me and fired off a few shots as I kicked him in his shins. The bullets whizzed past my head as he poked at me with his screwdriver type pointed bayonet. All I could do was keep kicking at him and slashing at him with his friend's knife. Finally, as he thrust his bayonet at me, I was able to grab the end of his rifle. He quickly pulled the rifle out of my hand and thrust again sticking me in my lower forearm with his bayonet. The bayonet, being skinny like a flat head screwdriver, went through my forearm by the top of my right wrist just under the skin and came out about an inch from the first hole. He started shooting his rifle, the bullets flying over my forearm. I was now trying to get on one knee and keep him from killing me. He kept lunging forward as I was trying to raise my right arm with the bayonet sticking in it. As he

lunged forward the knife in my left hand just stabbed him in his stomach. It wasn't planned, it just happened that way. As he fell backwards, the bayonet came out of my arm. Scrambling for my life, I climbed on top of him and pushed on the knife as hard I as could. When he stopped wiggling, I got off him. I recovered my M-16 and shot him in the head. Frightened out of my mind and trying to catch my breath and get my bearings, I ran over to the first guy and shot him in the head. In my haste to get away from the enemy, I lost my bearings and was nowhere near my original goal on the road. Instead, I was now running full speed toward a ledge about six feet high overlooking Route 9. I had no choice and leaped off the ledge like a flying squirrel sailing through the air. I landed on my ass in front of the approaching ammo truck, only to be shot at by Roger Blentlinger. *Thank God he raised his weapon at the last second and took his finger off the trigger.* John Huelsenbeck stopped the truck just short of running me over. I was partially under the front bumper. I directed them back to the top of the knoll, taking the same path back I took on my first run. The ammo truck was followed by another ammo truck full of Marines. The front tires of the ammo truck got stuck in a small ditch and leaned to one side. Because of all the weight of the 40mm ammunition, John could not get the truck out of the ditch. The truck full of Marines and more ammo could not get around the first truck. All the Marines started jumping out of the trucks.

Huelsenbeck, a seasoned Road Warrior, took control and got the Marines in a fighting position. Accompanied by four Marines, we ran together up the hill to get the Duster and pull out the truck. My Duster crew could not believe what had just happened and headed down the hill. Since we were out of 40mm ammo, our Squad Leader Sam Lewis, using the M-60, blazed a trail with the four Marines riding on top of our Duster shooting their M16's. The Marines on the knoll gave us as much cover as possible. As we hooked up our tow cable to the truck, Sines quickly explained the situation to the Marine Lieutenant.

Finally back on top of the knoll, with our new supply of ammo and reinforcements, we started to shoot back at the advancing NVA. As we shot, the reaction crews refilled the Duster with 40mm ammo. They could not believe how many NVA we had killed. NVA bodies and body parts were everywhere.

Everyone was screaming and yelling and cursing and crying. In true Duster Gunfighter Tradition, our crew stood brazenly, defying the NVA to kill us. We were the “Grim Reapers – The Thundering Herd of the 44th”. Enemy bugles and whistles blowing added an eerie soundtrack to the killing of other humans, as NVA bodies were mutilated by our high explosive 40mm shells. The Marines fired their M16s at any NVA who came close to our position and charged the NVA who got too close.

Doc Butler started administering aid to the wounded Marines. Quickly he bandaged them up and gave morphine shots to those wounded more seriously. Butler grabbed two Marines and had them collect the killed in action and place them in one area and cover them with ponchos. Repeatedly he ran back and forth across the battle field checking on the wounded and all the Americans in his care.

Blentlinger, using the binoculars, was trying to spot any NVA movement out towards the river line about a thousand feet away. As he spotted the NVA, he pointed out their positions and, between him and Sines, we would take aim and eliminate the targets. We were just trying to keep them off the convoy and as far away from our position as possible. Blentlinger started screaming that he saw an elephant carrying all kinds of ammo and RPGs to the NVA dug in the hills. Nobody believed him and in the heat of the battle we all started laughing. Blentlinger kept on insisting that he saw an elephant loaded with all kinds of NVA weapons. We just kept on laughing. Lewis grabbed the binos and looked where Blentlinger was pointing. He spouted something in his Native American Indian language and then started screaming for us to shoot the elephant. None of us knew where this elephant was and asked for better coordinates. Grabbing the binos we took turns looking at the elephant and getting a better idea where to shoot. Lewis sat back down in his Squad Leader seat and traversed the turret and lined it up on the elephant that was standing way off by the river. With Blentlinger on the binoculars, Holley, our Gunner, raised the guns and fired one 40mm shell. We all followed the tracer to its target. Blentlinger started yelling “down - down – lower - lower”. The third shot hit the elephant and secondary explosions lasted for about ten minutes. We all cheered!! You would have thought we had killed the whole NVA Army, not an elephant.

Our Duster was now in a stationary position. We just stood there doing our jobs as the enemy bombs exploded around us and endless bullets pinged off the Duster. We all knew this could be our last day on earth as each man made constant eye contact and stood tall to his task of killing. Sines, now on the radio, was informed that a relief force from Dong Ha was being sent to rescue the destroyed convoy, the Marine Tank, and Lt. Hardin's Duster with Johnny Towns' crew. But, they never mentioned us. Sines looked at me and said, "I don't think the reaction force even knows where we are, or even that we are here at all." I got on the radio and asked for another sit-rep and got the same answer. I then called again and tried to get the radio frequency of the approaching Reaction Team and their call sign. John Gunesch, the radio operator, advised us that he had orders not to communicate with us, because the Captain did not want to compromise the mission. All radio frequencies had been changed. Sines and I scrolled through all known frequencies and could not connect with Command at Dong Ha. We couldn't believe what we just heard. It didn't matter. We would be dead by the time they got here. All we wanted to do was tell the reaction force not to charge into the ambush site and where the enemy was now situated. We were never given the opportunity and knew in our hearts that another Duster crew was being sent to their death.

Our Duster crew was exhausted. To give each other a physical break, we switched and did each other's job. I climbed into the turret behind Lewis who was now in the Gunner's seat and started to load the 40s. The guns were really hot and the 40s were self-detonating as they entered the firing chamber. Constantly, Holt and I took turns reaching into the red hot breaches and un-jamming the stuck 40 rounds, the hot shells and loading chambers burning our fingers and arms. Holt said he thought we might have some oil in the outside storage compartment or on the trucks. Giving his loading task to David Lewis, he went for the oil. Huelsenbeck and Blentlinger handed us ammunition from the two ammo trucks position behind our now stationary Duster. The other guys on the truck continued to open the ammo cans and replenish our Duster with ammo. We continued to pick off enemy 57 recoilless cannons and RPG teams, their shells flying over our heads like giant smoking bottle rockets.

Our single Duster “The Grim Reaper” had fired over four-thousand 40mm shells at the charging NVA soldiers. Evident by the empty 40mm brass casings left all over the battlefield.



Sam Lewis yelled “Duck” as he saw another NVA run-up and shoot his 57 recoilless directly at us. The enemy shell hit the ground next to our Duster. The exploding shell hit us with hot shrapnel and debris. I thought the skin was burned off my body by the explosion. I stood there frantically patting my chest, arms and face. There were at least three or four more explosions from other NVA Recoilless and RPG teams. The turret where Sam was sitting was full of small holes. I remember being thrown on top of the 40mm breech by one of the explosions and trying to sit up. As I sat there trying to regroup, an RPG hit and penetrated the turret next to Sam Lewis and then it hit the breech of the 40mm cannons. There was a horrific noise as both our cannons exploded.

I now found myself on top of Sam with a long thin toothpick piece of metal from my own guns sticking out of the right cheek of my ass. It was hard to regroup. My ears were ringing and I was dizzy from the explosion. I was trying so hard to remember where I was and what had just happened. In a blurry daze, I pulled out the piece of shrapnel from my ass. Standing, I felt something hit me in my left underarm, twisting me in a bent position over the edge of the turret.

Struggling to stand, I looked around. An NVA soldier had run up to our Duster and was shooting his pistol at us. One of his bullets pinged and ricocheted off the turret hitting me in my left underarm. John Huelsenbeck jumped up and killed him. Then there was another explosion and another. At first I saw none of our crew, except for Sam Lewis, and thought the explosions had killed the rest of the crew. Then I noticed John Huelsenbeck and Roger Blentlinger shoot their M16s and kill a few more NVA rushing our Duster. David Lewis was standing on the edge of our Duster covered in blood with a long piece of shrapnel sticking through the bridge of his nose and blinded by the blood in his eyes. He slowly fell backwards between the Duster and the ammo truck. I thought he was dead. No one else was in sight. Another explosion and the rest of the crew and guys were blown off the Duster and ammo truck. I was still trying to regroup and orientate myself and was really groggy. It felt like all my corpuscles were exploding inside me. Everything was going in slow motion. All of this was happening in less than five minutes. As I bent over, trying to keep from fainting, I noticed Sam was now slumped over the Gunner's turret crank. Our helmets had been blown off by the explosions. The skin on the side of Sam's head had been peeled off to the back of his head. I thought he was dead. Blood was everywhere and all we could hear was screaming and yelling and the faint distant sound of more NVA whistles and bugles. Hot shrapnel peppered us as the NVA shells continued to explode all around us. I knew we got another direct hit and I saw another small hole smoking hole in the turret in front of Sam. One of the RPG's had passed in front of him and hit the side 40mm breech. *Years later Sam Lewis would die from continual strokes due to the traumatic brain injuries from this battle.*

I soon realized that the blood dripping on Sam's head was mine. I now thought the enemy had blown out my brains and shot me full of holes, and that I had lost my right eye because I could not see out of it. Smoke was coming out of me and my flak jacket, but I had no pain.

I started patting myself again like a madman, trying to put out the unseen fire. As I patted myself, I felt long slivers of shrapnel sticking out of my face the corner of my right eye. I pulled the long sliver out and for some strange reason I examined the piece and felt the hole it left in my head. I put my finger in the hole next to my right eye and it felt like a giant cave and my finger tip was touching my brains. I really thought they had blown my brains out. Then I realized there was another

long thin sliver sticking out of my mouth. It had blown out a few teeth and was sticking into the roof of my mouth. It was hard to pull it out because its point was stuck in the roof of my mouth and between two teeth. Again, in my mental stupor I examined the end of the shrapnel. I then started choking on my own blood and realized there was another skinny piece of shrapnel sticking out of my right nostril. With a quick pull, it was out. Again I examined the end of the piece of shrapnel and thought I had pulled half my nose off. I started screaming and cursing, but blood from my nose and mouth was choking me and causing me to throw up. The turret was now swinging wildly and filled with smoke. I thought it was on fire, so I pulled the turret fire extinguishers. Yanking Sam out of the Gunner's seat and holding onto the hot 40mm barrels, I jumped off the Duster with Sam on one shoulder. As I ran with Sam slumped over my shoulder, I shot at the NVA running towards me. A Marine helped us and dragged us away from enemy fire to the back of the trucks. Our medic James "Doc" Butler quickly revived Sam with mouth to mouth, and a Marine applied bandages to my head, arms and chest. The bandages covered both eyes and I could not see any of my friends and thought they were all killed or severely wounded. Knowing we were now going to be completely overrun. Panicking, I ripped off the head bandage and climbed back into the turret. Quickly I examined the 40mm guns realized they were totally destroyed and blown to pieces. Alone and crazed, thinking this was my last stand on earth I took the M60 machine gun off its turret mount and started shooting at the NVA I could see charging our position.

After about fifteen minutes, Holt, Huelsenbeck, and Blentlinger joined me in the turret with their M-16s and extra cans of M60 ammo. I was thrilled to see them, I thought they were all dead. Things were happening faster than most of the other guys could react. I think we were all in total survival mode and running on adrenaline from the final fear of dying. We all now fought like wild savages, each of us screaming, howling, laughing and cursing as we fed off each other's courage.

Holt, Huelsenbeck, and Blentlinger made sure I didn't run out of M60 ammo, taking turns refilling my machinegun as they shot their own M16's. Hacking at any NVA trying to climb onto our Duster with our machete and entrenching shovel. As we killed the enemy, Sines and the Marine Lieutenant ordered the others to collect all the dead and wounded and put them on top of the M48 tank or on the two trucks. Duster Gunner, Spec. 4 Russia Holley helped PFC David Lewis into the TC

Hatch area of our Duster. Sines radioed Carroll advising them we were hit and could no longer effectively fight. The Duster was out of commission, almost everyone was wounded or dead and we would try to get back to Carroll or die trying. There was no response on the radio. Chester tried several times and finally got a response. In his haste, he called most of us in as “Killed in Action”. We were now unable to recover the other Duster and M48 Tank or the convoy guys still stranded at the ambush ground zero area. Chester, now as the Duster Driver was *screaming*, “*Prepare to fight your way through the advancing NVA, we’re going back to Carroll or die.*” To this day, we don’t know how we did it. Maybe it was the additional three thousand 40mm shells we fired point blank at the advancing NVA. Hundreds of dead NVA lay in our path as we blasted our way through the advancing NVA, down Route 9 and back to Camp Carroll. Chester just drove over any NVA in our path. As we entered the main gate of Camp Carroll we all were now totally out of any kind of ammunition. Our Duster, M48 Tank and trucks covered were covered in burnt umber color of dried blood from our brave wounded and dead Dustermen and Marine Brother’s.

Lieutenant L. Steve Moore: Again, I was on the radio with House and advised him the seriousness of Carroll’s situation. I was now told that John Huelsenbeck, with a Marine officer and a squad of Marines, was heading to the ambush site with two truckloads of ammunition. I knew if any soldier was going to get through the NVA, it would be John Huelsenbeck. I headed back to Charlie Battery’s Command Center. As I headed back down the hill, an NVA mortar blew me off my feet and peppered me with small pieces of shrapnel. Back at the Command Center, I informed Captain Easter that we were now killing NVA at the perimeter wire of Carroll and that he had to get on the horn with Colonel House and request a Reaction Force from Dong Ha immediately. Without hesitation, he requested support from Dong Ha. I also told him that he better pray that Huelsenbeck’s two ammo trucks got to Sam Lewis’s Duster so they have enough firepower to keep the NVA from getting any further up the hill and into Carroll.

House advised Easter that he was sending a helicopter for me and expected my full cooperation and a complete situation report. Before the chopper arrived, Easter was advised that a special Reaction Force, commanded by a Captain Tedesco, would leave from Dong Ha with all the Dusters and Quad 50s needed to quell the ambush. I went to Dong Ha and gave my report, never to return to Camp Carroll.

At Dong Ha, I was sent to Delta Med and got patched up by the medics and returned to Colonel House for more discussions.

I was sent south and rotated home a few days later. It was thirty years later, at my first Duster reunion in Washington , DC and the first person I met was Joe Belardo and learned that Dusterman John “Tank” Huelsenbeck” and his volunteers made it through to the ambushed convoy and final outcome of that battle, the battles that followed and the number of enemy killed. Minutes later I reunited with John Huelsenbeck, Don Wolfe and a dozen other guys from 1st Platoon. I was proud to be Charlie Batteries - 1st Platoons Lieutenant and to have served with the bravest men on earth. That day we shed both tears of joy and sadness as we pressed our hands against our friends names engraved on the “WALL”.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: When we finally got back to Carroll, the first thing we did was insist that Sam and David and the others get immediate medical help. We then tried to get more Dusters and Quad-50 machine guns to go back down to the ambush and retrieve our friends. We ran around, crazed with the lust to fight and to kill more enemy and save our friends. Sines advised us that we were ordered to stop and stand-down. The reaction force from Dong Ha had arrived at the ambush site. We all went crazy, screaming and yelling how we wanted to be the ones who saved our men, our friends. The rescuers should have been from Charlie Battery, not some reaction force guys from Dong Ha. We had fought so hard. We had killed so many. We had shed our blood. They kept insisting I get medevac’d, and we insisted on seeing Captain Easter. Finally exhausted, I sat on the sandbag wall by Paul “Boston” Conley’s tent and bummed a cigarette and some water. Paul just stared at me and patted my back. I was not trying to be a martyr or a hero. I knew I was wounded, but I thought, not that bad, and just looked like shit. Doc Butler was now covering my forehead, right eye, and forearms with field dressings and telling me he wanted me medevac’d. A bandage was wrapped tight at my left armpit where I was shot by a ricochet. One tooth was broken off and a little blood was coming out of my ears, eyes and broken nose. The back of my flak jacket was hanging off, and my clothes looked like shredded wheat covered in blood. My butt felt like a pincushion from my own Duster blowing up and peppering my ass - “the final insult.”

I was very lucky that my wounds were not life threatening. I looked a lot worse than I felt, but really was in shock and running on adrenaline. Being covered in an extra layer of dirt and black ash, from the exploding NVA shells and our own 40mm rounds exploding, made me and my other Duster crewmembers look like someone who just walked out of Hell.

Captain Easter finally met us outside the Command Bunker. He just stood there, staring at us in disbelief. We must have been some sight. I thought he was hoping we died and he wouldn't have to face us. I will never forgive him for telling us how to report what we did and saw. He did not want the other men to think Carroll would really be overrun and instructed us not to upset everyone and to say very little. He ordered us to say that we had encountered a small group of NVA, and that our guns had jammed and blown up before we could rescue the other Duster.

For some stupid reason, or maybe because of all the confusion, we let him have his way. *He was the Captain.* The jamming and blowing up of our guns would be our only recognition. We were then accused of abandoning our comrades and running back to camp during a firefight. Now in his Command Bunker, he interrogated us as if we had done something wrong. Everybody in the Bunker was shooting questions so fast that we could not reply in time. *My heart was broken.* We sat with our heads bowed in disbelief, giving the tribunal one-word answers we thought Easter wanted us to say. I wanted to explode and beat the shit out of all those guys.

I thought they were supposed to be our friends. *Who the hell did they think they were?* They had no clue what we had done, what had happened, or what was happening down at the ambush. They were twisting the truth to save their own chicken-shit butts and poor combat decisions and terrible leadership. It was now late, so I finally asked to be transported to the medivac station. A chopper took me to Delta Med in Dong Ha.

DONG HA – HEADQUARTERS 1st /44th and 3rd MARINE DIVISION

CAPTAIN VINCENT J. TEDESCO REACTION FORCE

Meanwhile, while this battle raged. Captain Vincent. J. Tedesco, the 1st/44th Artillery Liaison Officer, was in the officer's club at Dong Ha drinking a cold beer, unaware that one of his combat batteries was in a hellacious firefight on Route 9 below Camp J.J. Carroll. Word came that Charlie Battery and their Marine Reaction Force, trying to rescue an overrun convoy, was in very deep contact with the NVA and needed help. It wasn't Tedesco's job to take out the Dong Ha Reaction Force, but normal Reaction Force Commander Captain Fredrick Taylor was on another battalion mission.

Captain Tedesco, without hesitation, took control of the Reaction Force. Quickly, he assembled a full complement of Dusters, Quad 50 Machine Gun Trucks, and 1st/44th Army personnel then proceeded to the ambushed convoy.



Captain Vincent J. Tedesco:

That evening I could not fall asleep, I decided to describe the action in a tape recording made for my wife Suzann:

"I don't know where to start to tell you, Suzann, about what happened yesterday or should I say last night. I guess I'll start from the beginning. I was over in the club around a quarter to five when we got word that Charlie Battery was in contact with the enemy on Route 9 between Cam Lo and Camp Carroll. They had gone to retrieve a convoy that had been ambushed on that road, and they were in deep contact. They needed help and Fred Taylor wasn't around. He is the Reaction Force Commander; I'm the alternate Commander. Since he wasn't around, it was my job to take the Reaction Force in there and try to bail out Charlie Battery.

We left Dong Ha about 1730, and it took us a half hour to get to the ambush site. I had two Dusters and two Quads 50s with me. I was in the lead Duster, the Quads were in the middle, and one Duster in back. When we approached the ambush site, I saw a tank off to the side of the road. Apparently knocked out of action, it was abandoned. I saw a dead Marine lying on the front of the Tank. Later, I found out he was the officer in charge. There were trucks and a jeep in the convoy, every one of them knocked out. The jeep had been knocked out by an RPG, which is similar to our bazooka or 3.5 rocket launcher. Those still alive were hiding against the vehicles and along the sides of the road, not doing anything very much but looking very horrible and scared and frightened.

I saw, further up the road across a little bridge, Charlie Battery's Duster. The guns pointed crazily up at the sky, the hatch in front was open and nobody was visible around the track. I took my track, and we drove past the tank and proceeded toward Charlie Battery's track trying to find out what the story was with them and to give them any support we could.

As we started moving along the road, we had to pull way off the road into the bushes because there were so many wounded and dead along the road. We had to drag the wounded and dead off the road before we could move forward. The enemy was constantly shooting at us. We finally could move back on the road and crossed the bridge. I moved my Duster off the road to my right and saw where the enemy fire was coming from. We were receiving sniper fire, and the Air Force was putting air strikes into the area.

I directed the track commander, SSgt. Vincent DeSantis, to return the fire on the enemy that was raking our relief column. With DeSantis directing fire and loading

the guns, their Duster delivered effective fire against the NVA automatic weapons, recoilless rifles and mortar positions in the surrounding hills.

I left my track and ran to Charlie Battery's track. I started looking for an officer or NCO in charge, hoping to find out what had happened. I found Lt. Steve Hardin and discovered three of Hardin's five-man crew had been wounded when RPGs had slammed into the track. Spec. 4 Gilbert had both arms blown off by the first RPG. The second RPG had blown off the muscles, tendons and flesh from the back of Pvt. Solomon's legs. Marines who had been riding on Duster were also wounded.

Nearby, a Marine Lieutenant Terry Joeckel, who could not speak because his lower jaw had been shot away, was calmly writing down grid coordinates on a piece of paper. He passed the piece of paper to his radio operator, who called in the fire mission.

Suzann, it was horrible. People dead and wounded were all over the place and in a complete state of shock. It was impossible to set up security or try to get the convoy functioning. I got on the horn and notified command what the situation was and that we needed infantry and choppers.

Running in a low crouch, I crossed the road and re-crossed the bridge and made my way to the destroyed convoy. I passed the main body of destroyed trucks, past the knocked-out Tank to where I had left the two Bravo Battery Dusters and G65 Quad 50's and the rear Duster. They directed their fire on either side of the road, at the same place the infantry were placing their fire and where the sniper bullets were coming from. Satisfied their rounds were on target, I moved back down the line, trying to find any officer in charge of the convoy.

There were two officers, a Marine Captain and an Army Lieutenant present. All they could do was hide up against the track vehicles. There were wounded all over the place. Suzann, it was horrible. There was a wounded Warrant Officer in a very complete state of shock. It was impossible to get them to move off the road, set up some security, and try to get the convoy functioning. When I saw these two officers weren't very willing or capable of taking command, I took command of the entire destroyed convoy. My first problem was to get the wounded out. I got on

the horn and notified Carroll what the situation was, and that we needed infantry security and choppers to evacuate the wounded.

The NVA now concentrated their fire on the Bravo lead Duster, seriously wounding DeSantis in the back. Refusing medical aid, he continued to direct his crew's fire and load the guns. Another RPG struck the rear of the turret, killing one of the Cannoneers, Spec. 4 Billy Strickland, and wounding the rest of the crew. Wounded a second time, DeSantis continued to refuse medical aid, the bullets showering all around him. He began evacuating casualties from the stricken vehicle.



Sgt. Vincent DeSantis

Staff Sgt. Vincent DeSantis: I was part of “B” Battery, 1st Bn/ 44th ADA and our battery was located across the road from the 1/44th ADA Battalion Headquarters at Dong Ha.

It's a bit after 3 PM and my crew and I were in the motor pool doing maintenance, just trying to get through the end of the work day. My Platoon Sergeant ran up to us and told us there was a fire-fight down the road and to get my track to the main gate and wait for the rest of the reaction force to form. My track was the first track to arrive at the gate so we became the lead track in the reaction force. It normally takes six men to properly man a Duster, at that moment my crew complement was: me, SSgt. Vincent DeSantis as Squad leader. My Driver was James Carr, the Gunner was William Swartz, but I still can't remember the name of the azimuth tracker. I would usually be the right gun loader, but at that moment we did not have anyone

to load the left gun. At that time, the battery was a bit understaffed. As my track moved to the main gate, I saw a large group of soldiers assembled there. We stopped at the gate and I told Carr to shut the engine down to save fuel. The radios were on but we heard no radio traffic related to the incident. We were the lone track at the main gate. Since we were one loader short, I made eye contact with a soldier and asked him if he was a Dusterman; he said he was. I told him I was short a loader and asked if he wanted to join my crew. He said yes. I helped him onto the track and when he was in the tub we did a hand shake. I thanked him for joining my crew. He told me his name was Strickland. PFC Billy L. Strickland from Hendersonville, NC. He replaced my Duster crewman, had been recently injured along with three others on January 14th when we hit a landmine on the way to replace a crew at Cam Lo.

I remember vividly that Strickland had a great smile.



Billy Strickland

Strickland was very brave man to join my track that day; he did not know me or any of the guys on my crew. I told him I did not know where we were going or what we were going to do but we did know we were going into action. He simply said “OK, Sarge” and took the left loader seat behind the gunner.

We were joined by Reaction Force team leader Captain Vincent Tedesco. Tedesco sat in what’s called the TC Hatch, next to the Driver. After a while the reaction force left the camp and headed west towards Camp Carroll. We had no idea what to expect or what enemy forces we would encounter. We slowly approached what looked like a completely destroyed convoy. Blown up trucks were spread across the road and all was very quiet except for artillery flying over our heads from Camp Carroll and

hitting Dong Ha Mountain to our far right. For whatever reason my track slowly preceded into what seemed like the center of this massive ambush. We pulled off the road into a small clearing and Captain Tedesco advised us that he would proceed on foot to access the situation and see if there were any survivors. As soon as he left we began to take enemy fire. I felt a sting in my back and realized I was hit by a sniper round. I directed Strickland to man the M-60 machinegun and to fire into the wood line. My idea was with Strickland firing the machine gun into the tree line to protect us; the azimuth gunner and I could load the 40MM and get the guns back into action. I was about to direct the azimuth guy to rotate the tub around when an RPG hit the gun tub just above the Driver's position. The explosion was deafening. A bright light and the fire ball filled the tub. I felt the heat of the fire ball on my arms. After the fire ball burned out, I checked myself to see if I was in one piece. There was no panic from the gun crew. I called out to the crew, the gunner Swartz said he was ok, the azimuth tracker said he was ok. I looked across to Strickland, he was sitting on his loader seat very still, and his head was down. I reached over to him said his name and shook him twice... he was dead. Now unable to man the guns, those of us able to move left the track and returned to the road and back east out of the kill zone. To this day, not a day goes by that I do not think of Billy Strickland. God bless him.

Captain Vincent J. Tedesco:

I moved back to my track trying to find out why my Duster wasn't firing. The Duster Squad Leader told me they had been hit. I ran around to the front of the track to get to the radio and let them know we had lost another track, and I saw a horrible sight. My Driver, Spec. 4 Carr, who had driven me into the ambush with his head sticking out of the hatch, was hit in the face and head when an RPG or aerial bomb landed near our track. It blew shrapnel and debris all over his face, shoulders and neck. I thought he was dead. He's in critical condition, but I think he might pull through. As of now, he's still alive. The radio was out of action and everything was covered with blood. I was now trying to give and get medical aid for him, Sergeant DeSantis, and everyone else.

I moved back across to Hardin's track again, trying to get some kind of aid for all the wounded. Each time I ran back and forth trying to give aid and reorganize the men, there were more and more wounded and killed.

Finally, a medivacs chopper came in, and then we started receiving even more automatic fire and RPG's. All the enemy now concentrated their fire on the

approaching chopper as he tried to land. I ran over to the chopper and got him out of the area before he got shot down in the middle of the convoy. This went on and on and on, Suzann, just on and on and on. I kept moving up and down the convoy, kept calling for infantry and artillery.

As it started getting darker, I called for illumination. The illumination rounds bursting high overhead, released parachute flares that bathed the terrain in an eerie orange glow. I knew the NVA would use the cover of darkness to move in for the final kill. I just kept calling for illumination as we waited for reinforcements and another Reaction Force.

Finally, after waiting for hours for help, I decided we were going to load all the wounded on the two Quad 50 trucks and the tracks and make a run for it. We had gotten one of the Quads loaded with the wounded when two Seabee trucks came in on their own to give us help. We got some more wounded and some dead loaded on their trucks. They headed out under the protection of the Quads. All of a sudden, the choppers started coming in. The choppers started landing all around us, taking out the other wounded.

Now that the wounded were leaving, my new concern was the tracks and trucks that were out of action. For some unknown reason there were at least 50 civilians huddled in the area. We fired over their heads to keep them down. We weren't sure whether they were VC – NVA or what they were doing. We had a Marine sergeant covering them the whole time with a machine gun.

Hardin and I returned with a few Marines to secure our Dusters. I didn't want to leave the destroyed tracks for the NVA. I requested permission to destroy the Dusters, and Battalion denied this permission. They said a relief column from Dong Ha was on its way.

A third Reaction Force commanded by Captain Charles Vickers, the 1st / 44th Artillery S-4, departed Dong Ha and headed to the ambush site at full speed. They consisted of two Dusters from Alpha Battery, two G65 Quad 50s, and four ammunition-laden five-ton trucks carrying 1st / 44th Headquarters Battery clerks, cooks, drivers, and mechanics, acting as infantry.

Well, about 1900 hours, it was getting pretty dark, and I was just about to say “To Hell with Battalion” and blow all the destroyed vehicles, when I saw the headlights of the relief column.

Once Vickers arrived with his extra force, things cleared up pretty quick. We got the rest of the wounded out and as many of the dead as we could find. Hardin got my original Duster started and he drove it out. Vickers brought one of his Dusters across the bridge and hooked the destroyed Charlie Battery (Hardin/Towns Duster) up with a tow cable, and towed it out. With Vickers’ team covering our withdrawal, we finally left the ambush site.

We started pulling back, evacuating the wounded and picking up all the weapons. I left Lieutenant Gregg from Bravo Battery in charge of the area. We moved out to the Cam Lo Marine Compound with the help of the Huey gunships and got back to Dong Ha at about 2200 hours. It was a very horrible -unbelievable- experience. I don't guess I will ever forget the sight of that battlefield or the look on the face of that poor kid that was driving me. I didn't sleep at all last night. The Marines moved in and secured the ambush site.

A month after the battle, I became the new Battery Commander of Charlie Battery. I would ride the road with my men, get to know them personally and was proud to lead them into Khe Sanh. All those who rode the infamous Route 9 remember the fighting men of Duster Charlie Battery.

DELTA MED – DONG HA and RETURNING TO CAMP CARROLL

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I arrived at “D” Med in Dong Ha sometime around two in the morning. I tried to find my wounded crewmembers and asked one of the Corpsman what happened to the first wave of wounded. He told me they might have been shipped out, either to one of the hospital ships, the *Repose* or the *Sanctuary*, or to the hospitals in DaNang. Finally, I saw the crew from Johnie Towns’ *Duster*. It was hectic and noisy, doctors screaming orders trying to save lives. Johnie just stood there with powder burns down his side. He looked like a burnt marshmallow. He was trying to get the best aid he could for his injured crew. I assured him that everything was going to be okay. We hugged and he thanked me for saving them. He told me we were the ones who kept the NVA off them. Johnie was a great soldier and a natural leader. He stayed with his men to the end. Wounded and dead soldiers from the Reaction Force lay next to Gilbert, who had lost both his arms, and Solomon, who had big holes through both his legs. Vince DeSantis, a former “C” Battery person, had been shot in the chest and had additional upper body wounds and didn’t look too good. I gave each of them a few words of encouragement and a hug. A few others I did not know were waiting for treatment. I was deeply saddened when I learned that Billy Strickland was killed. DeSantis said that an RPG had smoked their Driver named Carr. I looked around, but could not find him. I then went over to Graves Registration and found some of my dead friends, said a prayer, and gave them Last Rites. Standing outside and alone, crying, I was enraged to see all of my friends lying there wounded, mutilated or dead. After a while, I was treated and sent to the Marine NSA hospital in Da Nang. I spent a few days in the hospital because of head and body injuries and got some needed body repairs before being allowed to return to Camp Carroll. I never again saw the wounded guys from Johnie Towns’ crew or Tedesco’s Reaction Force.



Cannoneer – PFC Thomas Wright:

This January 24, 1968 battle was already raging for many hours as the NVA continually tried to overrun Camp Carroll. A small convoy had been attacked and overrun on Route 9 in front of Camp Carroll and Outpost Hill 250. Camp Carroll deployed the 1st Reaction Force, which ended up battling the North Vietnam's 320th Division, 48th and 52nd Regiments. This became the largest battle in 1st /44th history.

Because the 1st Reaction Force was being overrun by the thousands of NVA soldiers, a 2nd Reaction Force, commanded by Captain Vincent Tedesco, was deployed from Dong Ha Combat Base.

The enemy forces were determined to take Camp Carroll, which would make overrunning and taking the Khe Sanh Combat Base very easy. The 1st Reaction Force had already killed hundreds of enemy soldiers before being destroyed. The 2nd Reaction Force called in for reinforcements, of which I was one of the volunteers. We were the 3rd Reaction Force commandeered by Captain Charles Vickers.

Captain Charles Vickers was the 1st 44th S-4 officer. We departed Dong Ha Combat Base and headed to the ambush site at full speed. Vickers' Reaction Force consisted of two Dusters from Alpha Battery and two Quad 50 machinegun trucks from G65 Artillery. Four ammunition-laden five-ton trucks carried 1st 44th Headquarters Battery clerks, cooks, drivers, and mechanics, acting as infantry.

I was one of the volunteers on Captain Vickers Duster and was one of the Cannoneers (40mm auto-cannon loaders) up in the turret. Vickers was riding in the Track Commander's hatch situated to the right of the Driver. It was around 19:30 hours when we arrived in the area of this battle. We could see the wounded and dead lying all over the ground and in the drainage ditches alongside the road. The first thing we came to was the 2nd Reaction Force who had positioned themselves along the road by the previously destroyed vehicles. Captain Tedesco, who commanded the 2nd Reaction Force, was running all over shouting out orders. I was amazed he wasn't shot and killed. In less than 15 minutes, we started shooting at enemy targets and getting hit at the same time by their automatic weapons. Enemy RPG's and mortars started landing all around us from both sides of the road. Our Duster and the other Duster quickly swept the area with a full automatic burst of our 40mm ack-ack guns. Each Duster shot 240 – 40mm high explosive rounds a minute. I and the other loader frantically humped ammo to keep up with the guns. The NVA continually charged us, trying to silence our Dusters. Our 40mm rounds ripped them to shreds. Before I knew it, I was shot by a sniper. His bullet hit me in the center of my head, thankfully hitting my helmet. It sent me flying over the turret edge and knocked me unconscious. The other Cannoneer helped me get up. I was dazed and felt like my head was ripped off. It was our job to keep shooting and stop the enemy from taking Camp Carroll. The Duster was now picking targets and shooting both barrels single fire. This gave the other loader a few minutes to take care of me. The bullet had pierced my helmet right above my forehead and went through my helmet liner, rotating around the helmet and piercing the back of my skull. It then continued to spin around and finally stopped when it hit the helmet liner rivet. The other loader was amazed that I wasn't dead. Because of the fear of dying, I had no choice but to continue to load the 40mm auto-cannons and shoot the M60 Machinegun. The bullet ended up falling down into my shirt. The other loader wet a rag and wiped my head. There was no time on a Duster for true medical attention. The Duster was a crew-served weapon and gave you no choice but to continue to fight, even if you were wounded or killed.

It was getting dark and Vickers requested artillery illumination. As we continued to fight, the illumination started lighting up the area. We could see NVA soldiers running for cover. There was no cover from our high-explosive 40mm rounds traveling at them at 1,000 miles an hour. Choppers started arriving to remove all the wounded. The NVA tried to shoot them out of the sky. Our Reaction Forces were effective enough to kill the NVA who were trying to shoot down the choppers. Several truckloads of Seabees from Cam Lo Marine Compound started arriving for additional support. They instantly loaded their trucks with the wounded and dead. It was a gruesome sight. The Quad 50 trucks

and our Duster started loading the dead on the back of our trucks and Dusters. Lifting those poor Marines Killed in Action was a mental task from Hell. We quickly dropped them off at Cam Lo Compound and returned to the ambush sight to load the wounded and take them back to Delta Med in Dong Ha. It was now 0100 hours January 25th.

The Marines were sending in a 4th Reaction Force called "Darting Star". When we arrived at Delta Med with the wounded, Captain Vickers had me stay and get my head some medical attention. At Delta Med, I saw Joe Belardo from Charlie Battery who was in the 1st Reaction Force. Joe looked like hell with field bandages on his head, face, shoulder and arms. He had been shot, bayoneted in the arms, and his Duster hit by an RPG. We were all on an adrenaline rush and helped unload the wounded and dead. One of the doctors had us sort them by injury and who needed medical help first. Then, we sadly had to carry the dead to the place known as Graves Registration. We had to identify the KIA's we knew, and I was very sad when we found our buddy, Billy Strickland, killed. Joe and I cried as we carried him to Graves Registration. Joe had me get a wet clean cloth, and he wiped Billy's face clean. Joe turned to me and said "We do this for his mother, get me another cloth" and we cleaned the faces of a few Marine brothers. You have no idea how my heart was broken. I had never done anything like that and still live with those faces all these years. We then found our wounded Duster friends, Vince DeSantis, Johnnie Towns, Jackie Gilbert and Shora Solomon.

Because Joe had multiple wounds, they loaded him on chopper and flew him the NSA Hospital in Da Nang. It would be years before I saw Joe again at my first Duster reunion. A Corpsman grabbed me and had me wait in the triage area. A nurse and another corpsman finally washed me up, shaved my head, and cleaned me up, adding a few steri-strips and glue to my wound. They then told me to report back to my unit's Medic or Battalion Surgeon. Back at Battalion Headquarters in Dong Ha, I got a new set of clothes from supply. As if nothing happened, I was back on guard duty the next night and never received my Purple Heart.

Driver - Spec. 4 Joe Belardo: I flew back to Camp Carroll on a chopper from Dong Ha. Since I was now considered to be "The Walking Wounded". I had to report the Command Bunker where I met Captain Easter on the outside of the Bunker. Now he accuses me of prematurely pulling the fire extinguisher in the turret during the battle. This was the straw that broke my back. Seven months of blood and guts came to a head. How could I be so stupid as to think the Duster was on fire, when the Duster was only missing half its turret and only the 40s were blowing up and burning?! We still had half a tank of gasoline. What did he think,

gas wouldn't burn? I went berserk and totally out of control. As he ran into the command bunker, I was screaming how I was going to kick his sorry fucking ass across the DMZ. I now stood in front of the Command Bunker, screaming obscenities. "You can give me all your shit missions, but I am not going to let you accuse me or my crew of any other wrong doings." I bellowed. "You can kiss my Italian ass. Come out of the Command Bunker, you chicken-shit-mother. We did all your dirty work. It's time for you to get a little bloody. No guns, no knives, no sticks, and no stones, just simple hand-to-hand, man-to-man, "up front and personal." I'll show you what it's like to get a real ass kicking. I'll give you a beating that you'll remember for the rest of your life. Then you can give yourself a Purple Heart and a medal. All I wanted to do was what I called "*play*" and I was real good at "*playing*." I was no longer going to allow him to break our spirit or accuse my crew of something we did not do or deserve. They sent big Dave Woods out to try to calm me down. Dave and I were friends from boot camp. I told poor Dave I was not in the mood. He did not want a piece of me, not today or any day. After a short conversation, he finally convinced me to walk back to my bunker and not kill the bastard. When I got back to my bunker the men were shocked to see me, they had heard I got sent back to the states. They informed me that Easter had them in daily tribunals about the ambush. They also learned that Easter never told the main Reaction Force from Dong Ha that we were still left on the ambush battlefield.

The following week Captain Easter shockingly promoted me to Squad Leader and two days later was relieved of his command. For some stupid reason I felt bad for the Captain. Captain Vincent Tedesco became our new Battery Commander. When I told him that we were the Duster in the 24th ambush he was shocked, confused and asked hundreds of questions and wished Easter had done his job and gave us his radio frequency and call sign. Knowing what the ambush conditions were like would have saved many lives. Captain Vincent J. Tedesco was the best Captain Charlie Battery ever had and those who served under him called him a true "Dusterman" and it was an honor to serve with him.

ENTERING DARTING STAR – FOURTH REACTION FORCE

Third Marine Division Commander, General Rathvon Thompkins, received the ambush reports and paced in his headquarters bunker at Dong Ha. The ambush situation on Route 9 in front of Camp Carroll was dire. The North Vietnamese could not be allowed access to Camp Carroll. They had to secure and hold Route 9 from Dong Ha to the Khe Gio Bridge. He would place all the bases along the DMZ on a 100% alert. The commander keyed his radio handset, and transferred the battle-toughened 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines into the valley with orders to clear the ambush site and reopen Route 9.

Lieutenant Colonel Lee Bendell, Battalion Commander, whose call sign was Darting Star, arrived at the ambush site sometime after 1900 hours and found that Captain Tedesco's earlier Reaction Force had already evacuated the wounded and, he concluded, all of the dead. Darkness was falling and moving with only one of the Battalion's Companies, Mike Company, was a tough rigorous job. The Colonel established a night-time defensive perimeter along a ridgeline overlooking Route 9. He positioned his force to screen Camp Carroll from any addition NVA patrols. As the night passed, they encountered sporadic enemy fire. At dawn, January 25th, Mike Company, under Captain Raymond Kalm, began to sweep the valley and the hill up towards OP Hill 250 and Camp Carroll.

There were dead NVA all along the road. Thousands of Duster 40mm brass ammunition casings from the original ambush covered the hills and road. The Colonel knew the fighting was fierce. Hundreds of dead NVA covered the hillsides from the low flat area leading from Route 9 to the Cam Lo River. At the ambush site, they discovered four more dead Marines from the previous day's action. They dealt with the bodies, and then cautiously proceeded to move west to east and east to west.

While patrolling near the still abandoned vehicles scattered along the road, automatic weapons fire tore through their ranks. Two more Marines were instantly killed. Two more fell wounded. However, Mike Company was prepared to earn their pay. They gained fire superiority and attacked with aggressive fire-team maneuvers. The end of the brief action eliminated nine enemy soldiers. One NVA light machine gun was captured.

Darting Star then ordered Captain Kalm to advance his company to a small hill just north of Route 9, about a thousand meters east of the contact site, set up a

defensive perimeter, and wait while the battalion's two remaining rifle companies choppered in. In a swirl of red dust, several battle-worn CH-46s touched down on the valley floor and disgorged India Company, commanded by Captain John L. Prichard, and Lima Company, led by Captain John L. McLaughlin. H&S Company also flew to the scene. By mid-afternoon, nearly eight hundred Marines had established a three-company perimeter along both sides of Route 9 and tethered to Mike Company, which had dug in on the strategic high breast shape hill known as Mike's Hill.

Total friendly casualties from the first, second, and third Reaction Force were 17 Killed in Action and 55 Wounded in Action. 1st/44th Artillery had committed eleven Dusters, five Quad 50s and 152 soldiers. They had fired over 25,000 40mm shells and 28,000 .50-caliber rounds.

Marine casualties' from the Darting Star Four Reaction Force were 80 Killed in Action and 44 Wounded in Action.

After the battle, the Marines placed an NVA skull atop a mile marker adjacent to the ambush site. The macabre scarecrow stood along Route 9, symbolizing the savagery of the ambush. Weeks later, we helped bury about four to five hundred NVA dead in two "L" shaped mass graves along Route 9 and parallel to the creek. More NVA dead lay across the river and were unable to recover and bury and left to rot in the sun.

On February 1st, Spec. 4 Billy Conley, Driver on Lt. Hardin's and Sgt. E5 Towns Duster, said goodbye to his Camp Carroll comrades. It was his last day in country. As he passed the ambush site, he was killed by a sniper.

On February 2nd, an NVA attack on Cam Lo Marine Compound destroyed two G65 Quad 50s, killing my friends SSgt. Hollis Hale and Spec. 4 Johnnie Sheares.

Again our Duster Reaction Force would come to the aid of our men and the Marines.

Lt. Hardin, Sgt. DeSantis and Captain Tedesco were awarded Silver Stars for the January 24, 1968 battle.

In 1997 and 2002, the Army awarded Sgt. E6 Chester Sines, Spec. 4 Joseph Belardo, Spec. 4 Earl Holt, Spec. 4 John Huelsenbeck, Sgt. E5 Johnie Towns and Marine Cpl. Roger Blentlinger the Bronze Star with "V" Device.

The "Esprit De Corps" of the tenacious fighting men from the 44th was the reason Camp J.J. Carroll was not overrun on January 24, 1968.

NVA Road Marker left at the site of the January 24, 1968 Ambush

