

Killed in Action to Missing in Death

KIA to MID

by Col. Douglas Mehle, C-1st44th 1970

Editor's Note: This story covers a 1999 visit by former Battery Commander Doug Mehle to Holly Grove, Arkansas, to pay respects to a soldier lost under his command. On October 3, 1970, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Olen Upshaw of Holly Grove was killed, and three of his crew members were wounded, when their C-1/44th Duster was struck by a command-detonated mine. The crew was providing security for a Hill 4-11 road-clearing operation approximately 7 kilometers west of Quảng Ngãi, Vietnam. Attached to the end of this archived account are historical records from the National Dusters, Quads, & Searchlights Association (NDQSA) archives, memorial comments from fellow soldiers, and photographs of SSG Upshaw from his tribute on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Virtual Wall of Faces.

SSG Olen Upshaw was killed in action in Vietnam on October 3, 1970, while leading his Duster in a road clearing operation. He was buried with full military honors in Holly Grove, Arkansas.

In 1999, I decided to visit SSG Upshaw's grave in his hometown of Holly Grove, Arkansas, a rural town with a population of approximately 750. Previously, I always used the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC to pay my respects to men like Sergeant Upshaw, but somehow I felt a strong need to visit his actual gravesite. With some difficulty, I finally found the Hayes Cemetery in Holly Grove. It was hidden in a tree area within a farm field off of a two-lane paved rural highway. The dirt road to the cemetery was barely visible from the highway. After driving about a quarter mile down the bottom- dragging "road"; it ended in an open area surrounded by trees. It looked more like a long- abandoned lot or junkyard than a cemetery. Grass was scarce, the ground was uneven among the various gravesites; there was no real road within the cemetery, and clearly the local farmers were using the land to store their trash such as large vessels of herbicides, etc. After searching the entire cemetery for Sergeant Upshaw's grave, I found no sign of it, although I did see a number of other veterans' stones and plaques in various states of disrepair. None of the veterans' gravesites had any of the traditional flag holders so common at other cemeteries.

I later met with Sergeant Upshaw's widow and told her of my difficulty in finding Sergeant Upshaw's grave. She led me back to the cemetery, telling me that she had not been there in a year and was afraid to return alone because of the snakes she encountered. She led me to the place where he was buried, but we could find no gravestone. After checking and rechecking there was still no sign of the gravestone.

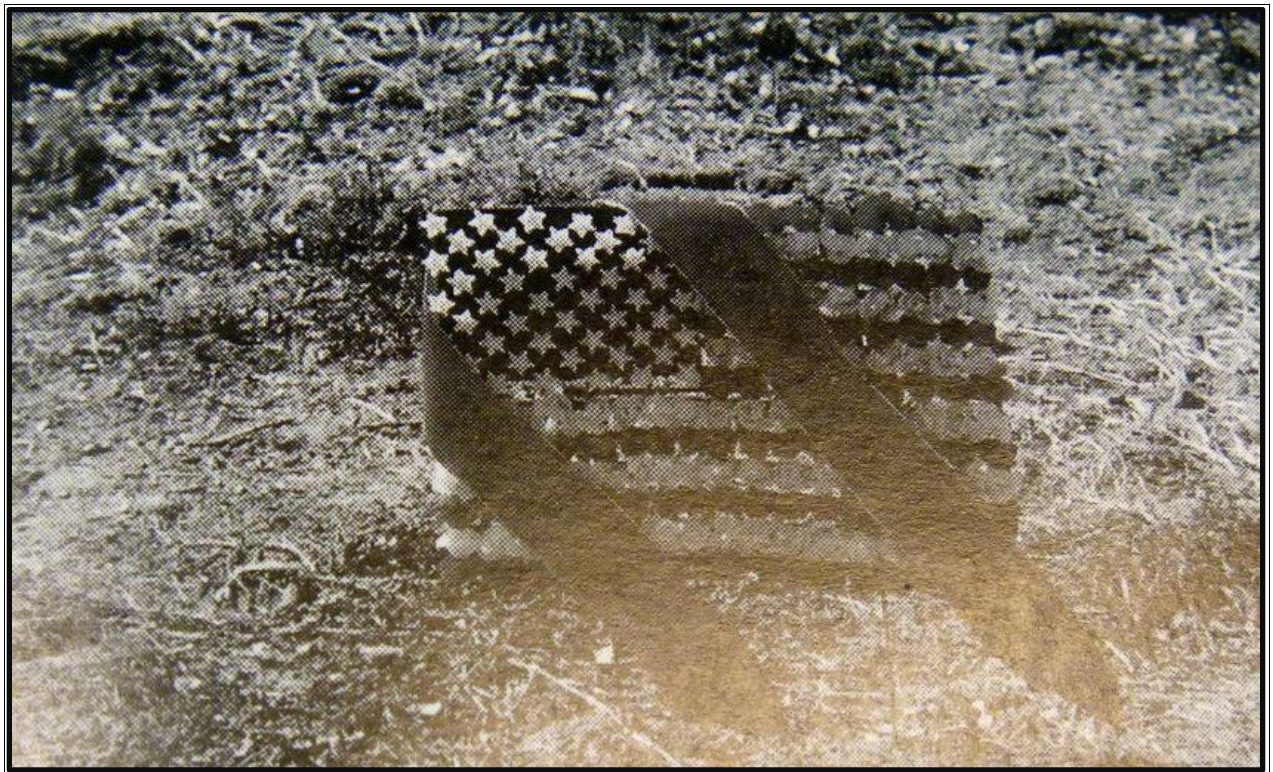
I had brought an American Flag made out of roses that had two ribbons affixed to it. One read: SSG Upshaw, "No finer NCO." The other read: "The Comanches" Vietnam 1970. I

brought it with the hopes that the cemetery management would let it stand next to his gravestone for a while. But it actually became a location marker where we believe he was buried.

As Sergeant Upshaw's commander in Vietnam, I told Mrs. Upshaw that he, like all of the other soldiers in my command, were like sons to me and that this lack of respect for one of our fallen heroes of that terrible war was shameful and unacceptable. Between Mrs. Upshaw and me, the gravestone was eventually found and returned to its proper place.

It is hoped that SSG Upshaw's grave will eventually be moved to a national cemetery, where his resting place will be properly cared for as he and his memory so richly deserves.

The Vietnam War, with all of its associated pain, continues on and on!



NDQSA webmaster's editor addition to Doug Mehle's archived story.

SSG Olen Upshaw's tribute on the virtual Wall of Faces, Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. <https://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces/53089/OLEN-L-UPSHAW/>



From the unit records: On 3 October 1970 at 0835 hours, a Duster from Battery C, while on a mine sweep operation from FSB 411, hit a command detonated plastic mine. Results were 1 M42A1 Duster combat loss, 1 US KIA and 3 US WIA.

SSG Olen Upshaw was the last soldier assigned to C-1/44 to perish in Vietnam.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial



OLEN L UPSHAW

Doug Mehle

God bless his soul and pray that the men WIA recovered as much as possible. SSG Upshaw was a dedicated soldier and outstanding leader. It was my honor to have served with him. Comanche Six, 1970

Rick Liebendorfer

Very few days in the past 50 years have I not thought of you and that horrible morning. Rest in Peace Birdbreast....



Dqs Historian

These flowers were placed in October 2017 along the road going into the FSB 4-11 location. The exact spot on that awful morning has been reclaimed by the jungle.

Harry Wilson

Although I wasn't in his section him and I were close friends, I think of him every day