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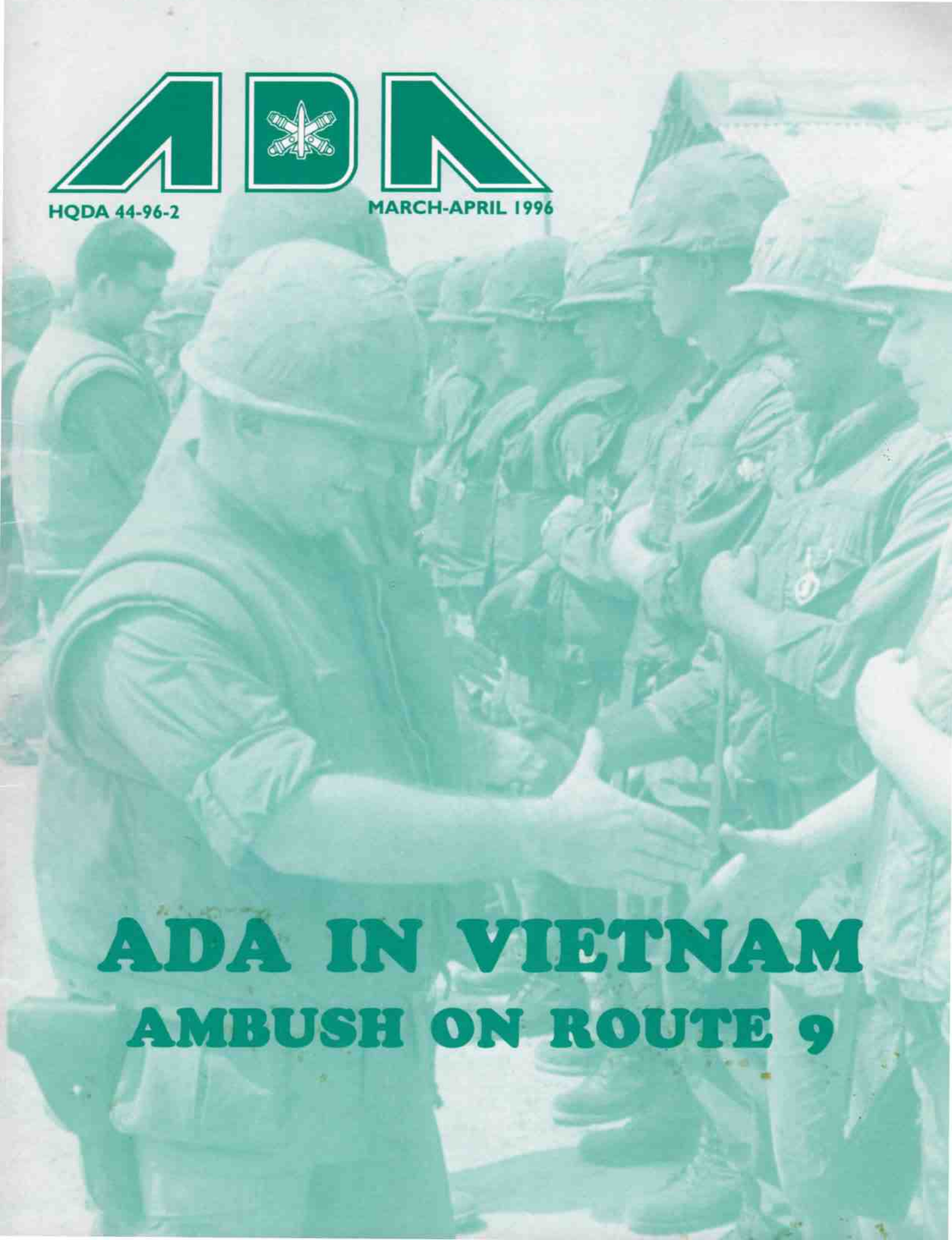

ADA IN VIETNAM

AMBUSH ON ROUTE 9

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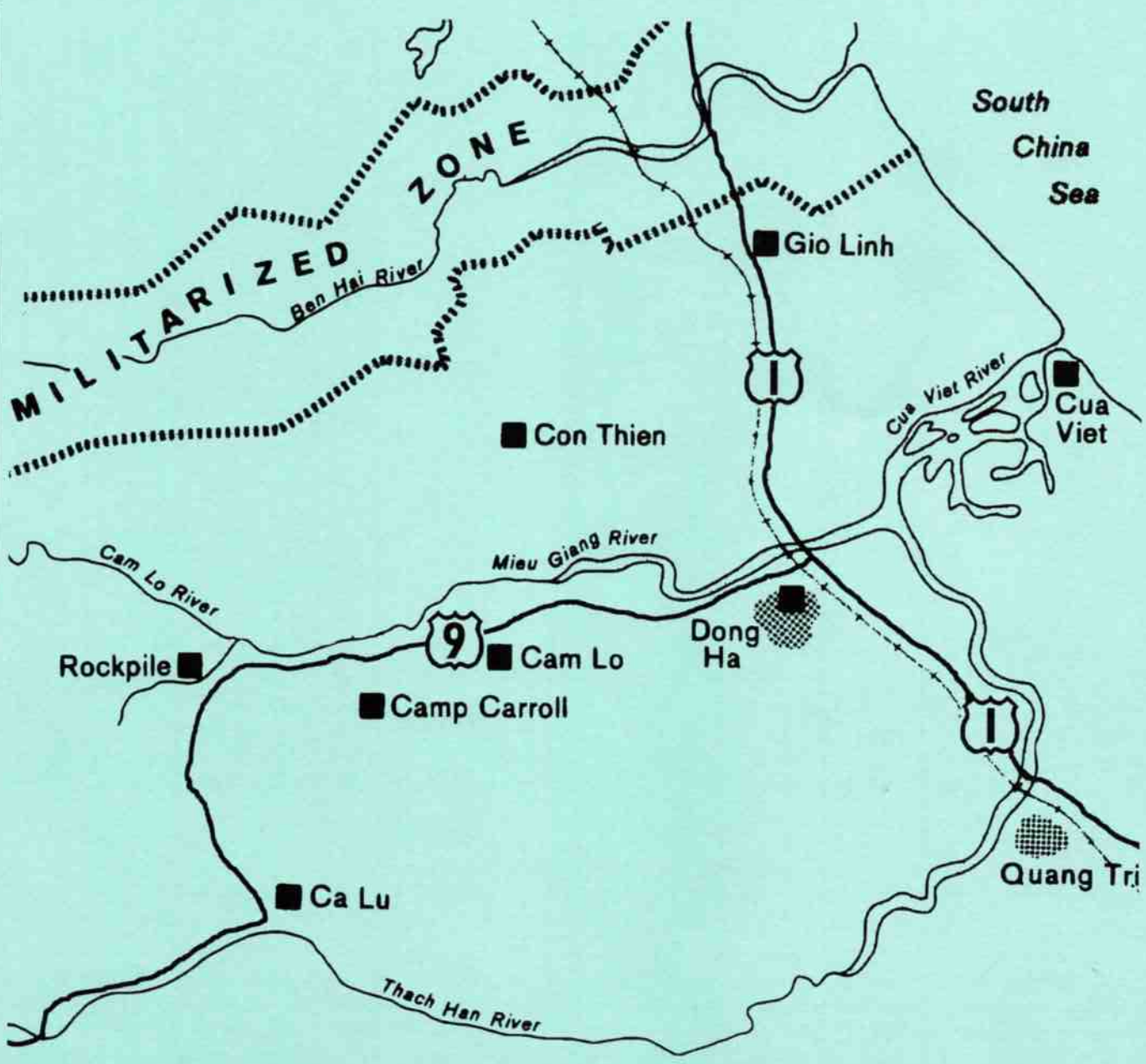
On Jan. 24, 1968, when North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments ambushed a U.S. convoy on National Route 9 in Quang Tri Province, the northernmost province of South Vietnam, three air defense artillerymen won Silver Stars. The desperate action on Route 9 is noteworthy not because it was unique, but because it was typical of the daring and determination routinely displayed from the DMZ to the Mekong Delta by the "First to Fire" branch's automatic weapons crews. The Duster, quad .50 and searchlight battalions that served in Vietnam never engaged a single enemy aircraft, but they nevertheless revived the fighting spirit of Air Defense Artillery, a spirit that had been buried for more than a decade in the concrete of Nike Hercules sites around the world.

Three automatic weapons battalions (1st Battalion, 44th Artillery; 4th Battalion, 60th Artillery; and 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery) served in Vietnam. With a personnel strength, counting attachments, of approximately 1,000, the automatic weapons battalion was one of the larger battalions in Vietnam. Each battalion had a battalion headquarters, four Duster batteries, an attached quad .50 battery and an attached searchlight battery. Each Duster battery had a battery headquarters and two firing platoons. The machine gun batteries had a battery headquarters and six machine gun sections, while the searchlight batteries consisted of a battery headquarters and three searchlight platoons.

The Duster was one of the oldest weapons in the Army inventory. Its ancestor was the M-19, which had turreted dual Bofors L-60 guns on a modified T-24 chassis. This was the "Flak Wagon" of the Korean War. The M-42 Duster, which had more power and more efficient sights, also had twin 40mm Bofors guns, but was mounted on a modified T-41 chassis. Some 2,625 Dusters were produced and reached the Army inventory by 1954. A modified version of the Duster, called the M-42A1, had a fuel-injected engine. This was the Duster that saw action in the jungles and rice paddies of Southeast Asia.

With its high silhouette, open turret and bulky configuration, the Duster wasn't sleek or impressive-looking, but the infantry and cavalry recognized a good antipersonnel weapon when they saw one, and they liked what they saw. They put the Dusters to work as point security for convoys, assigned them the most likely avenues of approach to cover on perimeter defense and used them to conduct recons by fire. The Duster gunners, thus, added their firepower to the tremendous volume of fire American units expended in Vietnam. The NCOs and enlisted soldiers on the Dusters seldom saw their battery

Capt. V. J. Tedesco decorates soldiers of C Battery, 1-44 Artillery. Spec. 4 Joseph Belardo, wearing his Purple Heart, is second from right. Above, a Marine convoy moves along Route 9 just south of the DMZ.



headquarters or an air defense officer. They were orphaned out to mechanized infantry or armored cavalry outfits scattered the length and breadth of South Vietnam. They provided convoy escorts on the "Street Without Joy," circled the wagons with combat engineers in places like the Ia Drang Valley, conducted recons by fire for infantry heading into the Michelin Rubber Plantation and served with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the Third Marine Division in Northern I Corps.

Convoy duty was dangerous and nerve-racking. During World War II and the Korean War, U.S. convoys operated behind front lines with virtual impunity. Things were different in Vietnam: there were no front lines and VC or NVA ambushes were a constant threat along most supply routes. Ambushes posed a serious logistics problem since truck traffic provided most of the supplies for inland installations and combat bases. Military Assistant Command Vietnam (MACV) assigned routes red, amber or green classifications, with red representing the most hazardous.

Normally, the lead Duster, at or near the front of the convoy, covered the left side of the road while the rear track, at or near the end of the convoy, covered the right side. Truck-mounted quad .50s were positioned near the middle of the convoy. Dusters caught in an ambush pulled off the road,

traversed their guns and provided covering fire. The convoy's other vehicles, with the quad .50s blazing away in the center, accelerated to escape the kill zone. The tactic was effective, but it meant Duster crews spent eternities in the kill zone.

Sometimes, ambushes threatened to overwhelm even the combined firepower of the Dusters and quad .50s. When this happened, a reaction force would roll to the rescue out of a nearby base camp or fire base, as one did the day in 1968 that the NVA ambushed the convoy on Route 9.

In 1968, Quang Tri, along with Thua Thien and the Quang Nam, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces, made up Northern I Corps. The region, which stretched southward from the DMZ past Hue, Da Nang and Chu Lai, was later renamed Military Region One. Most of the civilian population in the region was squeezed onto a narrow coastal plain that lay between the towering mastiffs of the Chaine Annamitique to the west and the South China Sea to the east. The mountains, cloaked in triple-canopy jungle, were shrouded during the northwesterly monsoon with dark, menacing avalanches of clouds that could "sock in" mountain fire bases for weeks at a time. Ridges pushing eastward out of the mountain range to the sea dissected portions of the coastal plain into mountain-ringed valleys. The close proximity to the DMZ to the north and Laos to the west made it easy for the North Vietnamese to infiltrate entire regiments, and North Vietnamese artillery dug into the hills just north of the DMZ outranged American 105mm and 155mm howitzers. The five provinces at the tip of South Vietnam, which encompassed Hue, the A Shau Valley, Hamburger Hill, The Rockpile, Mutter's Ridge and Khe Sahn, accounted for more than 55 percent of America's Vietnam casualties.

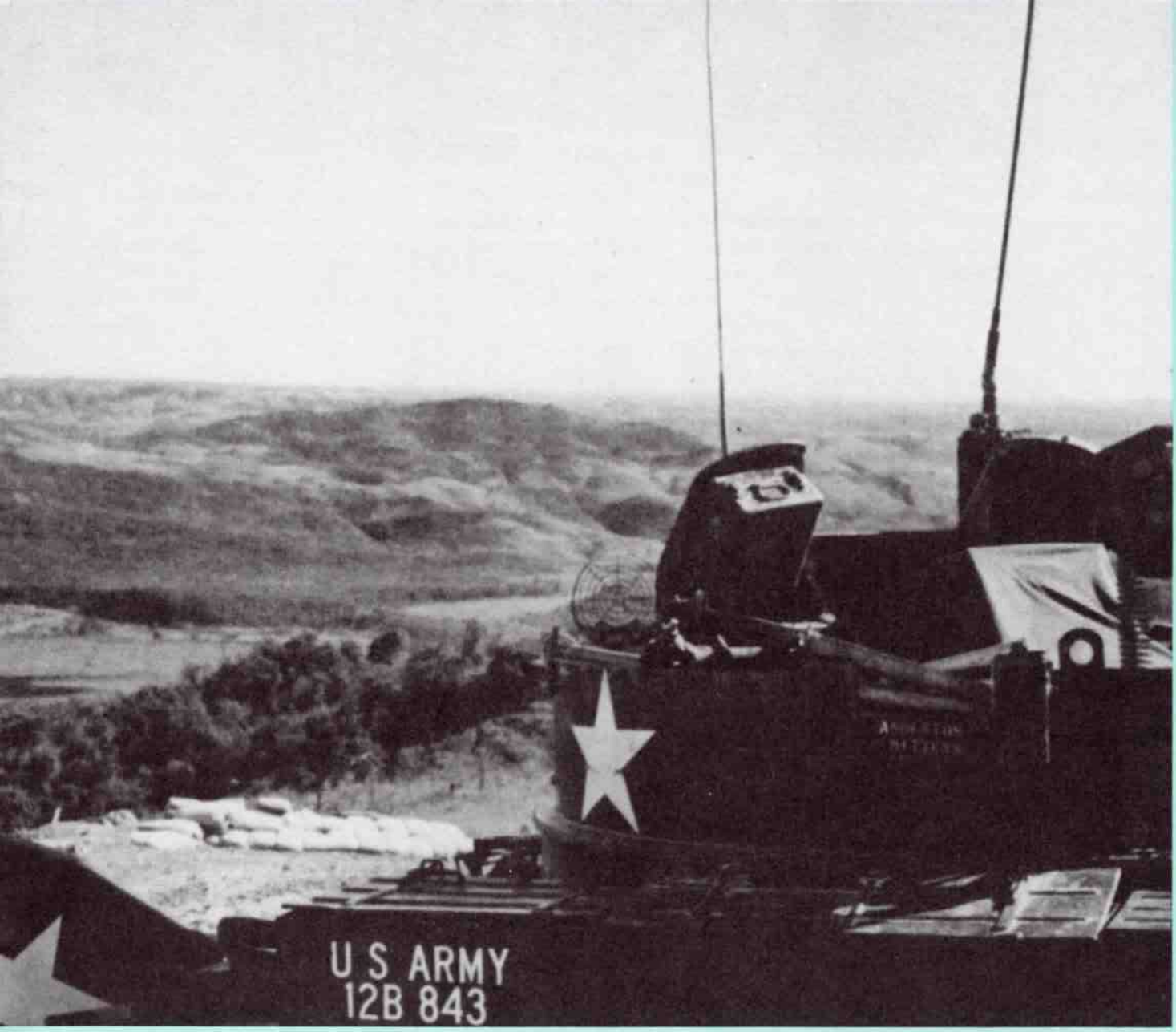
In January, the northern provinces, caught in the grip of the northwestern monsoon, were cold, wet and windy. Duster and quad .50 crewmen assigned convoy or reaction force duty along Route 9 wrapped themselves in ponchos to ward off the chill. Route 9 originated at Dong Ha on Highway 1 adjacent to the South China Sea. Roughly paralleling the DMZ, it wound its way west through battle-scarred mountains past Cam Lo and Camp J.J. Carroll, which everyone called, simply, Camp Carroll, to the besieged Marine combat base at Khe Sanh.

Route 9 ran through the center of "Leatherneck Square," a rough rectangle formed by Marine combat bases (see map at left). C Battery's OP reported large numbers of NVA regulars moving along this ridgeline above the ambush site.

Capt. V. J. Tedesco and his first sergeant, pictured above, observe air strikes pounding North Vietnamese positions near Khe Shan. Duster crewmen often occupied ridgetop OPs (see photo top right).

At 1140 hours on Jan. 24, 1968, a two-and-a-half-ton truck traveling from Camp Carroll to Cam Lo along Route 9 received small-arms fire. An Army vehicle following the truck received mortar fire as well as small-arms fire. The occupants of both vehicles, upon reachingCam Lo, warned a convoy pulling out of Cam Lo for Camp Carroll that Route 9 had been interdicted, but the Marine captain in charge of the convoy disregarded the warning. The NVA regulars hidden in the hills overlooking Route 9 ambushed the convoy as it approached a bridge across a minor tributary of the Mieu Giang River with small arms, automatic weapons, recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortars. The convoy halted and the troops, shocked by the intensity of incoming fire, took cover along the road.

The C Battery, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery (Automatic Weapons) (Self-Propelled), observation post (OP) at nearby Camp Carroll, the 4th Marine Regiment's combat base, observed large numbers of enemy moving along the river and ridge lines north of the ambush site. The antiaircraft artillerymen manning the OP were unaware that an ambush was taking place, but could see NVA infantry crossing the Mieu Giang River in boats and the flash and smoke of firing. The OP requested permission to fire on the enemy and the request was granted by the 4th Marines. At 1145 hours, five Dusters located along the camp's northern perimeter opened up, expending about 8,000 40mm rounds in 15 minutes. An



aerial observer reported excellent target coverage and three secondary explosions.

At 1315 hours, the 4th Marines organized a reaction force of one Marine platoon supported by two M-48 tanks and two of Charlie Battery's Dusters commanded by 1st Lt. Steve Hardin. At 1330, the relief column stopped 100 meters from the ambush site to direct fire against enemy positions on the ridges. The Duster crewmen could see American wounded and dead lying in the kill zone, but there were no NVA in evidence. One tank and one Duster proceeded into the kill zone to extract the wounded. As they neared the ambush site, NVA infantrymen armed with RPGs suddenly popped out of concealed positions. A volley of RPGs quickly put both vehicles out of action. Two antiaircraft artillerymen aboard the Duster were seriously wounded and four received minor wounds. Hardin, riding on the disabled Duster, called Camp Carroll for assistance.

The remaining Duster, commanded by section chief Sgt. Chester Sines, and the other M-48, a flame-thrower tank, took up a position on a small hill overlooking the convoy, Hardin's destroyed Duster and the disabled M-48 tank. Sines' Duster immediately opened fire on the RPG teams dug in along the road. The handful of Marines that had been riding on the tops of the Duster and M-48 dismounted, dug in and covered the west and south slopes of the hill. At 1345 hours, Sines requested reinforcements from Camp Carroll. The base camp advised: "Hold position. Recover men, casualties and equipment from ambush. Return to Carrol."

Sines' Duster proceeded slowly toward the entrapped convoy. The NVA opened fire on the advancing Duster as it neared the ambush site with RPGs, recoilless rifles and mortars. Supported by the M-48's machine gun and flame thrower, Sines' Duster momentarily held its ground, raking enemy positions with its 40mm guns, and then moved to within 50 meters of the convoy. Unable to disperse the concentrated

The Dusters of C Battery, 1-44 Artillery, escorted convoys and provided firepower for quick reaction forces.

NVA RPG teams, Sines decided to withdraw to the hilltop and regroup. At 1415 hours, Sines' driver, Spec. 4 Joseph Belardo, radioed Camp Carroll that ammunition was down to 60 40mm rounds. They would not abandon the convoy, said Belardo, but expected to be overrun. "Awaiting reply," he signed off.

Conserving its 40mm ammunition, the Duster continued to spray the area with its M-60. The crew called in artillery fire and directed air strikes on the NVA positions.

Camp Carroll radioed that a resupply truck, driven by Spec. 4 Robert Williams, was on the way. The truck, said Carroll, was carrying infantrymen as well as ammunition.

Fearing the ammo truck would run into the NVA, Belardo proceeded alone down the west slope of the hill, hoping to intercept the truck before it reached the kill zone. Firing his M-16 rifle and throwing grenades into enemy positions, Belardo made his way to Route 9. After a short wait, he realized the truck wouldn't be arriving. It had run into a second ambush sprung between Camp Carroll and the ambush site. Williams was among the few who weren't wounded. Returning to the Duster, Belardo saw the situation atop the hill had grown more desperate. The Duster crew radioed the base camp that they were almost completely out of ammunition.

Camp Carroll dispatched a second ammunition truck with Marine Cpl. Roger Blentlinger's weapons team aboard. Belardo again descended the hill to intercept the second ammunition truck. Reaching Route 9, he engaged and dispatched one of

the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Hastily moving west on Route 9, Belardo waved down the second ammo truck and directed it to the waiting Duster.

Resupplied with ammunition, Sines directed fire at NVA soldiers who had now crossed the river and were moving in his direction and toward Camp Carroll. Sines estimated that hundreds of NVA had taken up positions along the eastern and western slopes of the hills north of Route 9. The Duster crew had fired about 2,200 40mm rounds, along with small arms and M-60 machine gun fire, and the M-48 tank had continually raked enemy positions with its machine gun. NVA bodies lay everywhere. Sines estimated that more than 250 NVA had been killed in action.

Sines now directed the Duster to once again move toward the ambushed convoy. As they approached, two 40mm rounds unexpectedly jammed in the breech. The crew worked frantically, but was unable to clear the jam. With the Duster's 40mm guns suddenly silenced, emboldened NVA RPG teams scored a hit, wounding Belardo and squad leader Sgt. Sam Lewis. Simultaneously, the jammed 40mm rounds exploded in the breech, wounding Pvt. Dave Lewis and wounding Belardo for a second time.

Sines advised Camp Carroll of the Duster's condition and received orders to return to the base camp. The soldiers and Marines placed the wounded inside the Duster and M-48. With the Marines lying on the decks of the Duster and M-48, they departed the hilltop at 1700 hours. Sines drove the Duster with Belardo at the M-60 and Blentlinger throwing grenades. With the ammo truck in the middle and the M-48 bringing up the rear, they blasted their way through enemy positions and slowly returned to Camp Carroll. Later that evening, they medevaced the wounded to Dong Ha and Da Nang.

Capt. V. J. Tedesco, the 1-44 Artillery liaison officer, was in the officer's club at Dong Ha drinking a cold beer when word came that Charlie Battery was in deep contact on Route 9 and needed bailing out. At 5 feet 7 inches, Tedesco was about the same height as Audie Murphy, the legendary but diminuitive combat infantryman who parlayed fame as World War II's most decorated soldier and baby-faced good looks into a movie career, but there the physical similarity ended. The burly, cigar-smoking antiaircraft artilleryman looks more like a miniature version of the middle linebackers that his alma mater, Penn State, was famous for producing than a matinee idol. His contemporaries called him "Vinnie," and he was to endure "short jokes" made at his expense throughout his career, even at the end when he wore a full colonel's insignia and commanded a brigade, with gruff good humor. Perhaps the Silver Star he was to win that afternoon made the good-natured hazing easier to bear.

As liaison officer, it wasn't Tedesco's job to take out the Dong Ha reaction force, but the reaction force commander couldn't be located. At 1730 hours Tedesco led two Dusters and two truck-mounted quad .50s to the rescue. The following morning, he described the action in a tape made for his wife Suzanne.

"I don't know where to start to tell you, Suzanne, about what happened yesterday, well last night, to be exact," Tedesco said. "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 try to relieve a convoy that had been ambushed on that road, and they were in deep contact. They needed help and Rick Taylor wasn't around. He is the reaction force commander; I'm the alternate commander. Rick wasn't around, so it was my job to take the reaction force in there and try to bail Charlie Battery out.

"We left Dong Ha about 5:30, or 1730, and it took us a half hour to get out to the ambush site," he continued. "I had with me two Dusters and two quads. I was in the lead Duster, the quads were in the middle, and there was 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. Later, I found dead lying on the front deck of the tank. There were four trucks and a jeep in the convoy, lined up straight down the middle of the road. 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. The people from the convoy were hiding against the vehicles and against the sides of the road; not doing anything very much but looking very horrible and scared and frightened. I saw, farther up the road and across a little bridge, Charlie Battery's track off to the side of the road. 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 pulled off the side of the road and proceeded toward Charlie Battery's track to find out what the story was with them and to give them any support we could.

"As we started moving along the road," Tedesco continued, "we had to pull way off the road into the bushes because there were so many wounded all along the side of the road. They were dragging wounded out from in front of our track as we rolled. I noticed a man lying right under us, and before I could stop the driver, we rolled right over him. He's dead now. I know he's dead. I just hope he was dead before we rolled over him. We caught him right below the buttocks and right across the legs. I don't know if that was enough to kill him or not. He was dead when we did finally get out of the area. We moved back on the road and across the bridge, and I moved my track off the road to my right and saw where the fire was coming from. We were receiving sniper fire, and the Air Force was putting air strikes into the area."

Tedesco directed the track commander, SSgt. Vincent DeSantis, to return the fire raking the column. DeSantis had been assigned to a Hawk missile battery at Cam Ranh Bay, a relatively safe job. Hoping to get closer to the action, he kept putting in paperwork for a transfer without success. Finally he

The Duster wasn't sleek or impressive-looking, but the infantry and cavalry recognized a good antipersonnel weapon when they saw one, and they liked what they saw.

met a sergeant who worked in personnel assignments and, a couple of weeks later, found himself on a Duster in Northern I Corps. "The crew," he said, "taught me everything I needed to know. I learned on the gun." With DeSantis directing fire and loading the guns, the Duster delivered effective fire against the automatic weapons, recoilless rifle and mortar positions in the surrounding hills.

Tedesco left the track and ran across the road to Charlie Battery's track, looking for the officer or NCO in charge, hoping to find out what had happened. He found Harding and discovered three of Hardin's five-man crew had been wounded when RPGs had slammed into the track. Sgt. Gilbert in the turret had had both arms blown away by the first RPG. The gunner, Pvt. Solomon, had been wounded by the second RPG. The explosion had ripped the muscles, tendons and flesh from the back of his legs. Then the track has taken two more RPG hits in quick succession. Marines who had been riding on Hardin's track were also wounded. Nearby, a Marine lieutenant, 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.

Running in a low crouch across the road, Tedesco re-crossed the bridge and made his way past the main body of the convoy, past the knocked-out tank to where he had left the two Bravo Battery quad .50s and rear Duster. He directed their fire on the hills on either side of the road, at the same place the

infantrymen were placing their fire and where the sniper fire was coming from. Satisfied the rounds were on target, he moved back down the line, trying to find the officer in command of the convoy.

"There were two officers, a Marine captain and an Army lieutenant present," Tedesco said. "All they could do was hide up against the track. There were wounded all over the place. Suzanne, it was horrible. People dead and wounded all over the place. There was a warrant wounded and in a very complete state of shock. It was almost impossible to get them to move off the road, set up some security and try to get the convoy functioning. Anyway, when I saw that these two officers weren't very willing or capable of taking command, I took command of the entire convoy. And my first problem was trying to get the wounded out. We got on the horn and notified Carroll what the situation was, the fact that we needed infantry security and needed aircraft in to evacuate the wounded."

While Tedesco was busy trying to reorganize the convoy, the NVA concentrated their fire on Bravo's lead Duster. Seriously wounded in the back, De Santis refused medical aid and continued to direct his crew's fire and load the guns. Then, an RPG struck the rear of the turret, killing a cannoneer and wounding the rest of the crew. Wounded a second time, DeSantis continued to refuse medical aid and, with bullets showering all around him, began evacuating the casualties from the stricken vehicle.

"I moved back down the road across the bridge and headed to my track to try to find out what was going on," said Tedesco, "and I noticed that my track — the track I had come in on — was not firing," he continued. "As I crossed the bridge someone called to me from the bushes on the bank of the little stream the bridge goes over. And it was the sergeant [DeSantis] who had been aboard the track. He had taken a small arm sniper round in his back and fragments in his arm. Two of the other three people who had been in the tub with the sergeant were both wounded and in the bushes with him. We didn't know where the fourth man who had been up in the tub was at the time. We later found out later that he [Spec. 4 Billy Strickland] had been killed.

"The sergeant told me that they had been hit," Tedesco continued. "I ran around to the front of the track to try to get to the radio to let them know we had lost another track, and I saw a horrible, horrible sight. The driver, the man who had driven me in there, had apparently been sitting with his head out of the hatch when an RPG or an aerial bomb, I'm not sure which one it was, landed near the track, and it just blew shrapnel and debris all over his face and shoulders and neck. I thought the man was dead. As of now, he's still alive. He's still in critical condition but they think he might pull through now. The radio was out of action, everything was covered with blood. I moved across the road back to Hardin's track again, trying to get medical aid for the guy in the track, in case he was still alive, and for the sergeant and his people.

"Meanwhile, all of this time I ran across more and more wounded, more and more dead and more and more scattered groups of infantrymen; trying to organize them, trying to move them," he continued. "We had a medevac chopper come in, and we started taking small arms all over the place. I ran over to the chopper and got him out of the area before he got downed right in the middle of our area, so we'd never get anything in or out. This went on and on and on, Suzanne, just on and on and on. I kept moving up and down the convoy, kept calling for the infantry. I kept calling for the artillery. As it started getting darker, I kept calling for illumination."

The illumination rounds, bursting high overhead, released parachute flares that bathed the terrain in an eerie orange glow. Tedesco knew the NVA might use the cover of darkness to move in for the kill.

"Finally," he continued, " I decided we were going to load all the wounded on the two quads and on the tracks and make a run for it. Well, we had gotten one of the quads loaded with wounded when two Seabee trucks came in to help us on their own, and we got the dead and some more wounded loaded on those two trucks. They headed out under the protection of the quads with wounded on it, and then, all of a sudden, the choppers started coming in. The choppers started landing all around us, taking out the wounded.

"Now that the wounded were going," Tedesco said, "my main concern was my two tracks that were out of action. I moved back across the bridge. There were at least 50 civilians in the area. We had fired over their heads to keep them down. We weren't sure whether they were VC or what they were doing. We had a Marine sergeant covering them the whole time with a machine gun. We finally got some trucks in and got the wounded moving out on the trucks, and then the helicopters came in and we kept evacuating. We started pulling back toward the main convoy, evacuating all the wounded with us, picking up all the weapons. I left Lieutenant Gregg, one of the officers from Bravo Battery, in charge there, and he saw to it that the wounded were medevaced.

"Hardin and I returned with a bunch of Marines to secure our Dusters," he continued. "This was my main concern now. What were we going to do with the Dusters? I didn't want to leave them to the enemy. I requested permission to destroy the Dusters, and this permission was denied by battalion. They said the relief column was on their way."

A third reaction force commanded by Capt. Charlie Vickers, the 1-44 Artillery S-4, roared out of Dong Ha. The reaction force consisted of 1-44 personnel acting as infantry, two Dusters from A/1-44 and two quad .50s from G/1-44, and four ammunition-laden five-ton trucks from Headquarters and 1-44's Headquarters Battery. They reached the ambush site at 1900 hours.

"Well, about 7 o'clock, or 1900, it was getting pretty dark, and I was just about to say to hell with battalion and blow them [the Dusters] anyway, when I saw the headlights of the relief

column," Tedesco said. "Charlie Vickers had come in with the relief column. Once Charlie got there with his extra force and his people, things cleared up pretty quickly. We got the rest of the wounded out and as many of the dead as we could get out. Steve Hardin started my original track and found it could run, and he drove that out. Charlie brought one of his tracks across the bridge and hooked the Charlie Battery track (Hardin's original track) up with the tow cable, and we towed that out, with Charlie covering my withdrawal with one of his tracks that was still operational. And finally at 1930, or 7:30, we left the ambush site.

"We moved out to Cam Lo at the district headquarters there," Tedesco said. "There we left the vehicles that weren't operative, and with the help of the Huey gunships we came the rest of the way back into Dong Ha. We got back to Dong Ha about 10 o'clock, or 2200 hours. It was a very, very horrible — unbelievably horrible — experience. I don't guess I will ever forget the sight of that guy's body going underneath the track or the look on the face of that poor kid that was driving me after I got back to the track and found that they had been hit. I didn't sleep very much . . . in fact, I didn't sleep at all last night."

The 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines Regiment, moved in to secure the ambush site, standing watch through the night over the dead and disabled vehicles. Following the ambush, the survivors discovered that they had gone up against elements of the NVA's 320th Division's 48th and 52nd Regiment. Total friendly casualties were seven killed in action, 42 wounded seriously enough to require medical evacuation and 13 with minor wounds. 1-44 Artillery had committed 11 Dusters, five quad .50s and 152 soldiers. They had fired 11,628 40mm rounds and 28,000 .50-caliber rounds.

After the battle, someone — not the Duster crewmen — placed an NVA skull atop a mile marker adjacent to the ambush site, then added a helmet and a pancho. The macabre scarecrow stood along Route 9, symbolizing the savagery of combat in Northern I Corps. Weeks later, the NVA dead were buried in a mass grave on the west side of the stream north of Route 9.

Tedesco, Hardin and DeSantis were awarded Silver Stars for their part in the action. C Battery initiated paperwork to decorate Sines' crew. They had been told to expect, at a minimum, Silver Stars, and were disappointed to receive only Purple Hearts. The paperwork, they were told, had been fouled up. Their first-person narrative accounts of the action had not been rewritten, as required, in third person. The paperwork, they were promised, would be rewritten and resubmitted, but nothing ever came of it, except that PFC Earl Holt, the driver on Sines' track, received an Army Commendation Medal with a "V" device. Tedesco became C Battery's commander in time to pin on the Purple Hearts.

The 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, was the first automatic weapons battalion to reach Vietnam, arriving in November 1966. It was to become one of the most decorated artillery units in history. Upon its arrival, the battalion was assigned to support the 3rd Marine Division in Northern I Corps. 1-44 established its headquarters at Dong Ha Combat Base near the junction of National Highway 1 and Route 9, approximately 10 miles south of the DMZ. The battalion's fire units were deployed from Phu Bai in the south to Giolinh and Conthien in the north and Khe Sanh in the west. The battalion participated in Operation Pegasus, which broke the siege of Khe Sanh. C Battery led the Pegasus task force into Khe Sanh on April 15, 1968. 1-44 was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and the Valorous Unit Citation for its defense of Quang Tri during the Tet Offensive of 1968. The battalion became part of XXIV Corps Artillery and moved to Da Nang in 1970. It took part in Operation Lam Son 719, 720 and 810. The battalion came under control of the Da Nang Support Command just prior to its departure from Vietnam in 1971.

After Vietnam, the Army mothballed the quad .50s and searchlights and turned the Dusters over to the Army National Guard in the early 1970s. The last National Guard Duster crewman graduated from the U.S. Army Training Center, Fort Bliss, in October 1988. "You're part of history, there will be no more after you," Lt. Col. Daniel Ruiz, a training battalion commander told them. The last Duster firing took place in 1993 when the South Carolina guardsmen conducted their last annual service practice with Duster.

The automatic weapons battalions and the air defense artillerymen who served on them won't be forgotten by the field artillerymen who watched a quad .50 stop a sapper attack in the wire, by the cavalry platoon leader who rallied his platoon while Vulcans stood off an enemy ambush or by the infantrymen who embraced the Duster leader who broke through to the infantry position early one morning.

The automatic weapons battalions fired more than four million rounds of Duster ammunition and more than 10 million rounds of quad .50 ammunition. They participated in every major American campaign during the conflict in Southeast Asia. Some reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

Each battalion won either a Presidential or Meritorious Unit Citation. The soldiers who served in them won more than 450 medals for valor and earned more than 1,000 Purple Hearts.

But they were never able to stop the flow of communist replacements down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, make front page news as often as the peace demonstrators, convince people back home that Vietnam might be worth the price they paid, or make South Vietnam over in the image of America.