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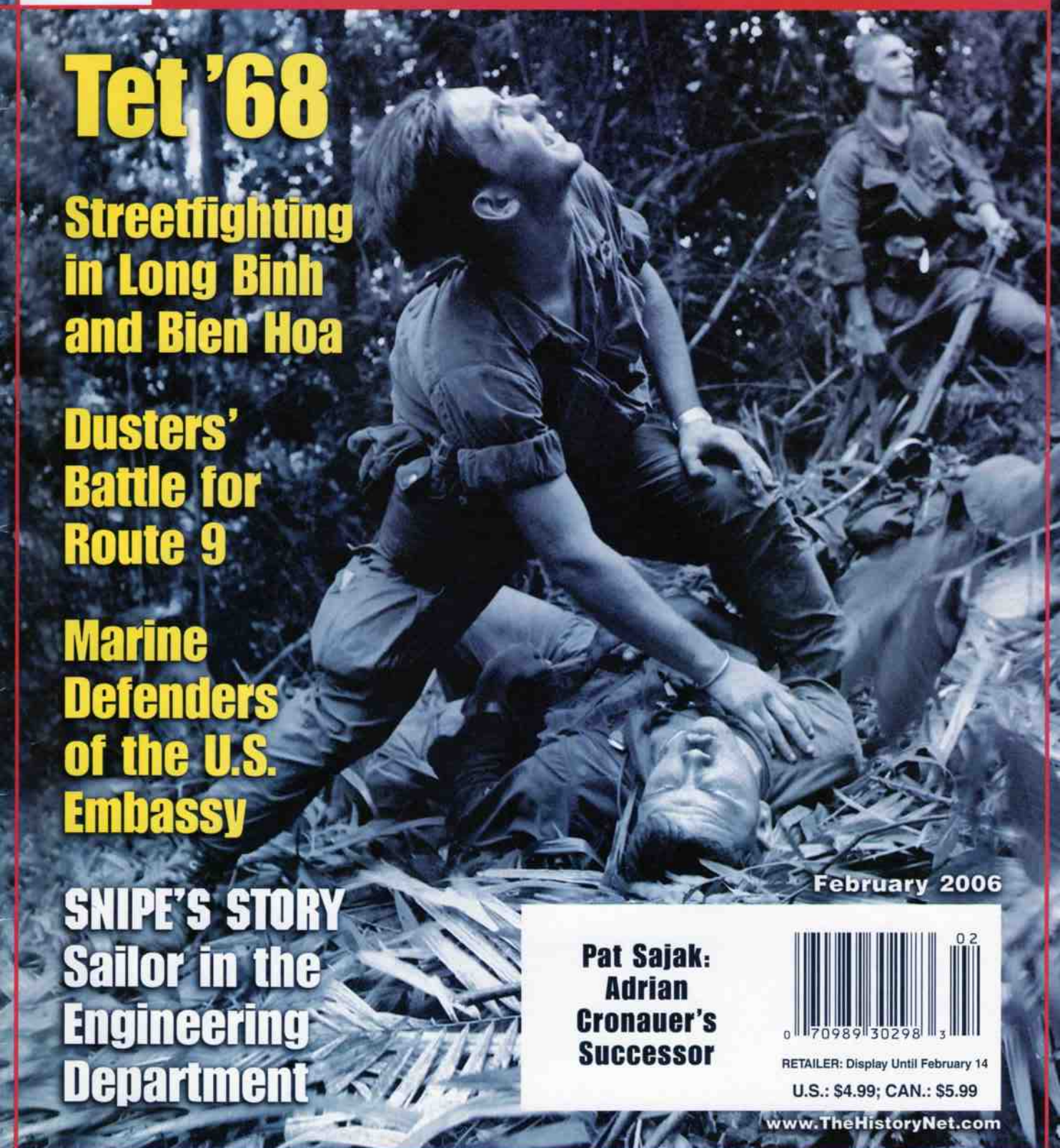

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Dusters' Battle for Route 9

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DUSTERS'

In the Tet battles along Route 9 and for Khe Sanh, the

BATTLE FOR ROUTE 9

the M-42 Duster crews of the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, became known as the 'last of the great gunfighters.'

By Joseph Belardo and Colonel Vincent Tedesco, U.S. Army (ret.)

In January 1968, the DMZ was caught in the grip of the northwestern monsoon. Toward the west along Route 9, the slow rolling hills pushed upward into majestic mountain ranges. The close proximity of the DMZ to the north and Laos to the west made it easy for the NVA to infiltrate the area. They took advantage of this season and positioned their artillery north of the DMZ, hoping to outrange the American guns. Digging into the hills along Route 9, they perched for an assault on the combat bases along the DMZ. Camp J.J. Carroll was their primary target. The heavy artillery at Carroll provided direct support from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. Taking Carroll would be a great victory for the NVA.

Left: An NVA soldier's remains serve as a grim road marker some weeks after the ambush that that soldier and his 320th Division colleagues tried to spring on a U.S. Army convoy along Route 9 on January 24, 1968. **Above:** Specialist 4 Joseph Belardo poses on the turret of *Grim Reaper*, M-42 Duster C-141 of Charlie Battery, 1st Battalion (Automatic-Weapons) (Self-Propelled), 44th Artillery.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOSEPH BELARDO

The DMZ was cold, wet and windy—and it was home to Charlie Battery, 1st Battalion (Automatic-Weapons) (Self-Propelled), 44th Artillery, a Duster unit. Charlie Battery's headquarters was at Camp Carroll, with the battalion headquarters at Dong Ha. Carroll was centrally located along the DMZ on Route 9, in the northern sector of I Corps. The 1-44 also had two units attached: Battery G, 65th Artillery (quad-.50 machine guns), and Battery G, 29th Artillery (searchlights). The 1-44 task force came under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Division.

The M-42A1 Duster was a twin 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun mounted in an open turret on top of a post–World War II M-41 light tank chassis. The guns could shoot 240 high-explosive rounds per minute. Each HE round had a bursting radius of approximately 100 feet. The Duster also mounted an M-60 machine gun, and carried hand grenades and the individual weapons of the crew. In an antipersonnel groundfire role, the Duster was one of the most powerful weapons in Vietnam.

On January 13, 1968, a small convoy out of Camp Carroll headed west on Route 9 in the direction of Ca Lu. At the rear of the convoy was Duster C-141. After reaching Ca Lu, the Duster was scheduled to return with another convoy back to Carroll. The outbound convoy was made up of some 15 Marine trucks and a few tanks. The convoy first stopped at the Khe Gio bridge outpost, dropping off men and supplies, and then continued to the Rockpile. There, the convoy regrouped with India Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines (3/9), and proceeded to Ca Lu.

As the convoy turned into a curve in the road about halfway to Ca Lu, the area known as Ambush Alley, the NVA made one of their first large attacks of January 1968. Using command detonated mines, the NVA blew up the ammo truck and a lowboy. The trucks came to a scattered halt all over the road. Marines seeking cover started jumping off the vehicles, only to land on antipersonnel mines and be tossed into the air like rag dolls. The enemy hit the convoy with automatic weapons, mortars and RPGs. Duster C-141 started shooting but was unable to clear the area close to the convoy because of the mix of NVA and Marines. Knowing they would be killed if they stayed close to the convoy, the Marines were forced into the heavy brush. The NVA then moved onto the trucks, trying to finish off the Marines.

The Duster standard engagement procedure was to shoot close, sweep quickly out about 100 meters, mow the middle ground, start all over and quickly select targets. The Duster crew was now forced to shoot over the heads of the Marines at NVA along the ridgeline on the north side of the road. Wounded and dead Marines were scattered everywhere. The crew could only advance the Duster a few feet before stopping to remove the injured and dead Marines in its way. As the Duster's 40mm rounds cleared a path for the


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Duster C-141 immediately opened fire, killing four RPG teams, but then had to slacken fire because the remaining RPG teams were within feet of the two crippled tracks.

Marines from the road to the ridgeline, the crew positioned the vehicle so they could fire on both the north and south sides of the road.

Reinforcements from Ca Lu and the Rockpile responded. A three-quarter-ton supply truck, driven by Spc. 4 John Rowe from the Rockpile, replenished the Duster with ammunition. On every trip back to the Rockpile, Rowe's truck carried back the dead and wounded. Medic James Butler gave aid to the injured. Two other Dusters from the Rockpile arrived on the scene in the meantime. Not sure of the locations of all their troops, however, the Marines ordered the other Dusters to stand down. The Marines finally regrouped, then killed and cleared out the NVA. Duster C-141 returned to the Rockpile, its rear deck covered with the dead and wounded. During the battle, the Marines had suffered 22 men killed and 60 wounded.

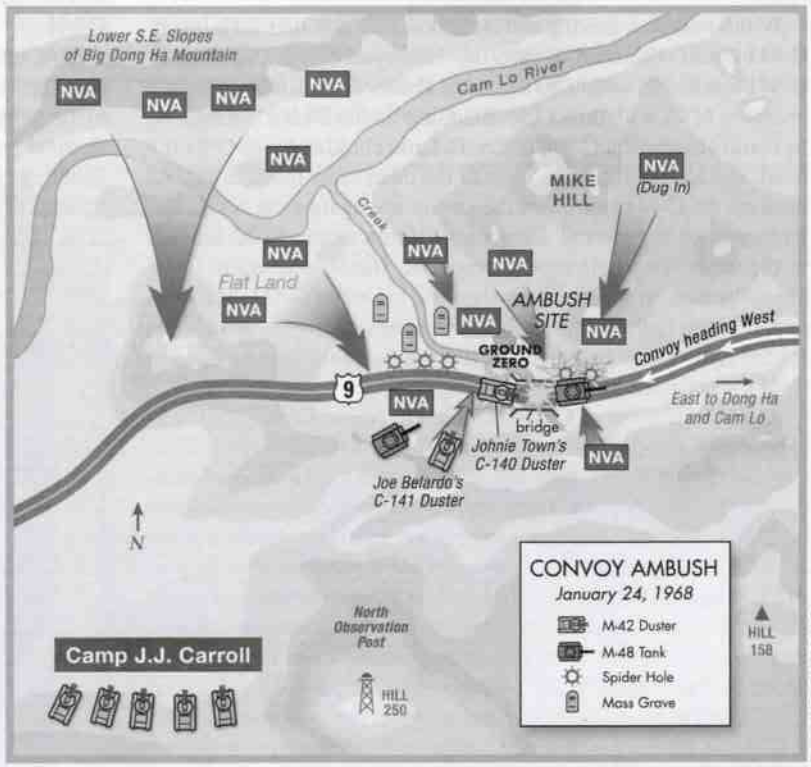
Nine days later, on January 24 at 1130 hours, a convoy out of Cam Lo headed west on Route 9 for Camp Carroll. As the convoy approached a bridge that crossed a minor tributary of the Cam Lo River, the NVA attacked, overrunning the Americans immediately. Within five minutes the observation post on Hill 250 outside the northeast corner of Camp Carroll detected the explosions along Route 9 and observed large numbers of enemy advancing toward the convoy and Camp Carroll. The observers also saw NVA infantry crossing the Cam Lo River in boats. Five Dusters at Camp Carroll promptly took up positions along the perimeter and engaged the NVA, eventually shooting more than 8,000 40mm rounds.

Lieutenant Steven Hardin took command of two Dusters that headed for the ambush site. The crew of Duster C-140 consisted of squad leader Sergeant Johnnie Towns, gunner Spc. 4 Jackie Gilbert, driver Spc. 4 Billy Conley, and cannoneers Pfc Shora Solomon and Pfc Richard Townsend. The crew of Duster C-141 consisted of squad leader Sergeant Sam Lewis, gunner Spc. 4 Russia Holley, driver Spc. 4 Joseph Belardo, and cannoneers Spc. 4 Earl Holt and Pfc David Lewis. Section chief Sergeant Chester Sines also went along.

At 1200, two Marine M-48 tanks and a platoon of Marines linked up with the two Dusters at the main gate of Camp Carroll, and the infantrymen climbed aboard the four tracked vehicles. Upon reaching the ambush site, the relief force stopped within 100 meters and engaged any enemy they could see. As Duster C-141 and one M-48 held fast, the other M-48 and Duster C-140 with Lieutenant Hardin advanced slowly and cautiously toward the bridge. The first M-48 had just crossed the bridge and the Duster was approaching it when NVA suddenly ambushed the two tracked vehicles with volleys of RPG fire and satchel charges. Both tracks were instantly out of action. The crew members of the M-48 were all either dead or seriously wounded. The crew of the Duster had two seriously and three lightly wounded. Squad leader Towns remained standing in the turret of the burning Duster, firing the M-60 machine gun at the rushing enemy. Solomon had lost the back of his legs, and Gilbert had lost both arms from the RPG fire.

Duster C-141 immediately opened fire, killing four RPG teams, but then had to slacken fire because the remaining RPG teams were within feet of the two crippled tracks. Duster C-141 and the other M-48 tank took up positions on a small knoll overlooking the ambush site. The Marines dug in and covered the western and southern slopes of the knoll. By 1315 the two operational tracks had moved to the south side of Route 9, about 100 meters off the road and above the ambushed site. Sergeant Lewis' field of fire was excellent. The terrain around the knoll was mostly low brush. Directly across Route 9 was an area about 300 meters wide that ran north for about one-quarter mile to the Cam Lo River. The hill on the eastern side of the stream was known as Mike Hill. At the bridge crossing stood a lone tree about 70 feet tall, later known as ground zero.

At about 1330, Sergeant Sines radioed back to Camp Carroll for reinforcement. Captain Lloyd Easter, the C Battery commander, ordered, "Hold position, recover men, casualties, equipment and return to Carroll." Duster C-141 proceeded slowly toward the crippled convoy, with the M-48 covering the rear security. Belardo repeatedly tried to contact the destroyed tracks via radio but only received radio microphone clicking. As Duster C-141 reached within 50



Opposite top: Route 9, along which a convoy westbound from Cam Lo to Camp Carroll triggered a major NVA attack. **Opposite bottom:** A Duster sitting atop the outpost on Hill 250, northeast of Camp Carroll, points its guns north, overlooking the ambush site. **Above:** Based on a diagram drawn by a member of Charlie Battery, this map shows the site of the ambush and the battery's various actions on January 24.

After reloading, Duster C-141 fired an additional 2,000 40mm rounds, but the rate of fire had been so high that the 40mm cannons were red-hot and smoking. They began to jam.

meters of crippled Duster C-140, NVA automatic weapons and machine guns opened fire. RPGs that fired from across Route 9 fell short of their mark or soared overhead. Large groups of NVA rushed forward, only to be killed by 40mm fire. Mortars began landing next to Duster C-141, pelting the crew with hot fragments, forcing them to withdraw back up the knoll. The operational M-48, meanwhile, had taken up a position on the western slope of the knoll.

With Sines now driving and Belardo in the commander's hatch, C-141 again advanced toward the destroyed convoy. As Duster C-141 reached to within 30 meters of Duster C-140, it engaged the charging NVA with direct fire. Standing on the Duster's fender so he could observe the C-140 better, Belardo could only see Gilbert's head. He was not moving. None of the other crew members could be seen. As C-141 continued the steady fire against the NVA, Belardo was on the ground distributing 40mm ammo to the loaders in the turret. Two helicopters arrived on station and began firing along the eastern slope, extremely close to Duster C-141. The helicopter crews radioed that the NVA were advancing toward C-141. As the helicopters continued to fire into a small ravine close by, C-141 was forced to return to the knoll.

At 1415 the crew of C-141 reported to Camp Carroll that they were down to 60 rounds of 40mm ammo. Unless they were resupplied immediately, they would be overrun else forced to abandon the stricken convoy. Then jets arrived on station, and the crew of C-141 directed airstrikes on the NVA positions. Suddenly out of nowhere a small group of villagers ran across the open field of fire heading west toward Cam Lo. The Dusters at Camp Carroll also had to stop shooting to avoid hitting the helicopters or jets. Sines again radioed Camp Carroll, reminding them of the ammo situation. Forty to 50 NVA lay dead in the immediate vicinity of C-141, and many more were dead between Route 9 and the river.

Captain Easter radioed that ammo truck driver Spc. 4 Robert Williams along with Spc. 4 Donald Wolfe and four other volunteers would try to bring ammo forward. Hoping to intercept the truck before it blundered into the ambush kill zone, Belardo proceeded down the knoll to Route 9 to guide the ammo truck back to Duster C-141. As Belardo moved down the knoll, he continually exchanged fire with the NVA. The Marines gave him covering fire. When he reached the road, Belardo crouched in a drainage ditch. But as the ammo truck approached, he could see it being riddled with automatic weapons fire, which wounded Wolfe. The ammo truck was forced to return to Camp Carroll, and Belardo withdrew back up to the knoll.

At 1500 a second Duster ammo truck plus a truck full of Marines left Camp Carroll for the scene of the battle. In radio contact with Spc. 4 John Huelsenbeck and Marine Corporal Roger Blentlinger, Belardo advised them where he would meet them on the road. As Belardo again moved down the hill, the Marines and Duster C-141 on the knoll could provide very little covering fire because of the ammo situation, and the Marines and Duster were not giving support fire because ammunition was very low. Wounded, Belardo continued to fight his way down to Route 9 and moved hastily west, waving down the approaching trucks. Riding on the running board, he then directed the trucks up to the knoll.

As the ammo truck drove up the path, it slid into a ditch and bogged down. The Marine truck was unable to push it out. Mortar rounds began landing all around the two trucks. Huelsenbeck shouted for the Marine lieutenant to move his vehicle up the hill and have his men dig in and lay down support fire. Huelsenbeck, exposing himself to enemy fire, positioned the Marines for maximum support, while Belardo ran back up the hill through the mortar barrage and reported the situation to the crew of Duster C-141.

Holt, meanwhile, used the M-60 to lay down supporting fire for Huelsenbeck and Blentlinger as they fastened C-141's tow cable to the ammo truck. As the truck was winched up the knoll and positioned behind the Duster, the Marines secured the path back to Route 9. Replenished with ammunition, Duster C-141 again opened fire on the advancing NVA, with the crew rotating positions to give each other breaks from the constant action. Lewis took

Left: Belardo, shown in 1967, was awarded a Bronze Star with V Device for his actions during the ambush. **Right:** The battle left Belardo's Duster worse for wear and all of its crew wounded, though miraculously no one was killed.

over as gunner; Belardo and Holt loaded; Holley traversed the turret; Pfc David Lewis manned the M-60; and Huelsenbeck and Blentlinger passed the 40mm ammo to Belardo and Holt, forming a human chain from the ammo truck to the Duster. Duster C-141 first cleared the ravine leading to Camp Carroll and fired as close as possible to the crippled convoy. The NVA returned fire with mortars, RPGs and 57mm recoilless rifles, and began crossing the river in large groups.

After reloading, Duster C-141 fired an additional 2,000 40mm rounds, but the rate of fire had been so high that the 40mm cannons were red-hot and smoking. They began to jam and cook off. Holt and Belardo repeatedly reached into the cannon breeches with their bare hands to remove the hot 40mm rounds before they self-detonated. At one point, two 40mm rounds were jammed half into the breech, and Holt stepped out of the turret, hoping to find oil on the trucks with which to loosen the jammed rounds. NVA fire rocked the Duster and the ammo truck. Lewis, seeing an NVA 57mm recoilless rifle fire, yelled, "Duck!" The first rounds hit the ground next to C-141, and the explosions threw Holt, Huelsenbeck

and Blentlinger to the ground. Pfc Lewis was hit in the face by fragments.

Two more NVA rounds hit close by, seriously wounding Lewis in the head and leaving him unconscious in the gunner's seat. Belardo was thrown on his back, lying over the gun breeches, with head, chest and arm wounds. The two rounds in the breech exploded, which wounded Belardo again and sent him flying on top of Lewis. Holley was also thrown on top of Lewis, between the Duster and the ammo truck, but was not wounded. Still conscious, Belardo thought the Duster had taken a direct hit. With C-141's turret in flames and filled with smoke, Belardo left the Duster with Lewis on his shoulder and moved behind the ammo truck.

Medic James Butler quickly moved in to help. Belardo refused aid, climbed back into the turret and started firing the M-60. Huelsenbeck, Holt and Blentlinger returned to the turret and frantically tried to fix the 40mm cannons. Unable to return the guns to service, they grabbed M-16s and fired at the NVA from the turret.

Carroll. Once they reached the base, the wounded were medevaced to Dong Ha and Da Nang.

Meanwhile, at 1730, Tedesco and the reaction force reached the ambush site. The following morning he described the action in an audiotape he made for his wife Suzann: "I don't know where to start to tell you, Suzann, about what happened yesterday; I guess I'll start from the beginning. We left Dong Ha about 1730, with two Dusters and two Quads. I was in the lead Duster, the Quads were in the middle, and one Duster in back. As I approached the ambush I saw a tank off to the side of the road knocked out of action, dead lying on the front deck. There were trucks and a jeep in the convoy, every one of them knocked out. Those still alive were hiding against the vehicles and along the sides of the road. I saw, farther 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. We drove past the tank and proceeded toward Charlie Battery's track.

At about 1600 hours, as the battle raged, Captain Vincent J. Tedesco, the 1-44 Artillery liaison officer to Dong Ha, was in the officer's club there drinking a cold beer, unaware that one of his battalion's units was in a hellacious firefight. When word came down that Charlie Battery was in heavy contact on Route 9 and needed help, it wasn't Tedesco's job to take out the Dong Ha reaction force—but the usual reaction force commander, Captain Fred Taylor, was otherwise committed.

By around 1700 hours, Sines radioed Camp Carroll that they would try to withdraw to the base camp. They departed the knoll with all the wounded loaded on the M-48, the Duster and the trucks. Holley held onto Sam and David Lewis. Sines drove Duster C-141, Belardo manned the M-60, and Huelsenbeck, Holt and Blentlinger fired their M-16s and threw grenades as they tried to plow their way through the enemy positions to get back to Camp

"We had to pull way off the road into the bushes because there were so many wounded and dead along the road. The enemy was constantly shooting at us. The Air Force started pounding the area. The other track commander, Staff Sergeant Vincent De Santis, was delivering effective fire against the NVA positions in the surrounding hills.

"I left my track and ran to Charlie Battery's track. I found Hardin and discovered Hardin' s crew had been wounded when RPGs had slammed into the track. Spc. 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 Private Solomon's legs. Marines who had been riding on Duster were also wounded. Suzann, it was horrible. People dead and wounded 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 com-

After the battle, the survivors learned that they had gone up against elements of the 48th and 52nd regiments of the NVA's 320th Division.

mand what the situation was and that we needed infantry and choppers.

"The NVA now concentrated their fire on the other Duster, wounding De Santis 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, [Spc. 4] Billy Strickland, and wounding the rest of the crew. Wounded a second time, De Santis continued to refuse medical aid and began evacuating casualties from the stricken vehicle.

"I moved back to my track trying to find out why my Duster wasn't firing. As I ran around to the front of the track to get to the radio and let them know we had lost another track, I saw a horrible sight. My driver was hit in the head when an RPG landed near our track. It blew shrapnel and debris all over his face, shoulders and neck. I thought he was dead. 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 De Santis and everyone else.

"We continued to fight off the NVA and finally got our first medevac chopper. As the chopper was landing, all hell broke loose. The NVA concentrated all their weapons on the chopper. I waved the chopper off before he got downed right in the middle of our area. I kept moving up and down the convoy trying to motivate the men and give combat assignments.

"As it started getting dark, I called for illumination. The illumination rounds burst high overhead bathing the terrain in an eerie orange glow. I knew the NVA was going to use the cover of darkness to move in for the kill. Two Seabee trucks came in to help. They loaded some of the dead and wounded. All of a sudden choppers started coming in again, landing all around us, and started taking out the wounded.

"My main concern now was the tracks 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. 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.

"Hardin and I returned with a bunch of Marines to secure our destroyed Dusters. I requested permission to destroy the Dusters, and Battalion denied this permission. They said another relief column was on their way. A third reaction force commanded by Captain Charlie Vickers, consisting of 1-44 personnel acting as infantry, two Dusters from A/1-44, two Quad-50s from G-65, and four ammunition trucks headed out from Dong Ha. It was pretty dark and I was about to blow the destroyed Dusters, when I saw the headlights of the relief column. Once Vickers got there things cleared up pretty quickly. Hardin found my original track could run and drove it out. Vickers hooked Hardin's original track up with the tow cable, and towed that out. Finally [we] left the ambush site.

"We moved out to Cam Lo with the help of the Huey gunships and got back to Dong Ha at about 2200 hours. It was a very horrible—unbelievably—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 and secured the ambush site."

Captain Vincent Tedesco awards Belardo a Purple Heart for the wounds he sustained during the ambush. Tedesco would later receive the Silver Star for his role in the battle.

After the battle, the survivors learned that they had gone up against elements of the 48th and 52nd regiments of the NVA's 320th Division. Total friendly casualties were 17 killed and 55 wounded, with the 1-44 Artillery committing 11 Dusters, five quad-.50s and 152 soldiers to the fight. They had fired more than 25,000 40mm and 28,000 .50-caliber rounds. The Marines placed an NVA skull atop a mile marker adjacent to the ambush site. Weeks later some 400 NVA dead were buried in mass graves along Route 9. A few days after the ambush at the river, NVA attacked Cam Lo and destroyed two quad-.50s. Again, a reaction force from the 1-44 came to the relief of the Marines.

When the 77-day siege of Khe Sanh started on January 2, 1968, two Dusters, two quad-.50s and a searchlight team from the 1-44th were on the perimeter of the Khe Sanh base. In March and April 1968, Dusters and quad-.50s participated in Operation Pegasus, the joint 1st Cavalry Division/Marine relief force that opened Route 9 to Khe Sanh. Dusters would be the last element to leave Khe Sanh when it was abandoned in July 1968.

Tedesco, Hardin and De Santis were awarded the Silver Star for their actions in the river ambush. In 1997 and 2002, Sines, Belardo, Holt, Huelsenbeck, Towns and Blentlinger all received long-overdue Bronze Star medals with V Device. The 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, the "last of the great gunfighters," participated in every major combat operation in I Corps and was awarded both the Army and the Navy Presidential Unit Citations, the Valorous Unit Citation and the Meritorious Unit Citation. ☆

Joseph Belardo is the founder of a custom metal fabrication company. He was on the crew of Duster C-131, the last M-42 to leave the Khe Sanh base. Vincent Tedesco retired from the U.S. Army as a colonel. For additional reading, see: On Air Defense, *by James D. Crabtree; and* Mounted Combat in Vietnam, *by Donn A. Starry.*