1971 – 50th Anniversary - 2021
The Last Duster Battle of Vietnam
"Dusters Fight Alone"

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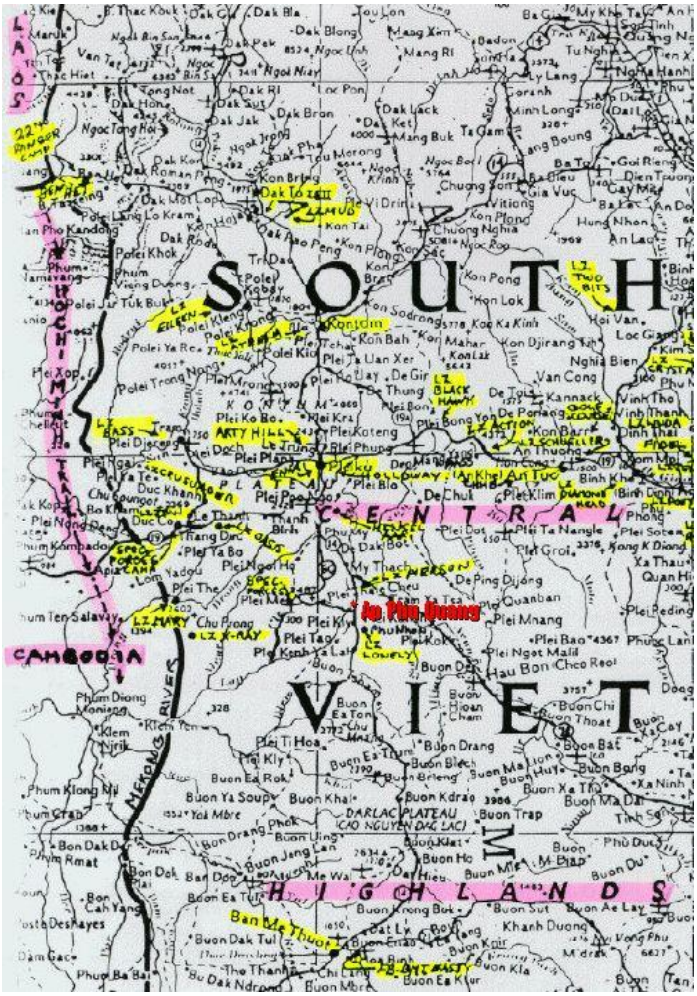
In previous newsletters I chronicled some of the early and consequential battles that US Army ADA units had participated in "from the Delta to the DMZ." The last newsletter reported on Lam Son 719 which also was 50 years ago and took place along the DMZ in which those northerly deployed Duster, Quad, and Searchlight units participated.

At the same time there were enemy actions occurring throughout the country and specifically in the western Central Highlands. Ironically one was in the same area that another famous battle was fought in 1965…the Ia Drang Valley.

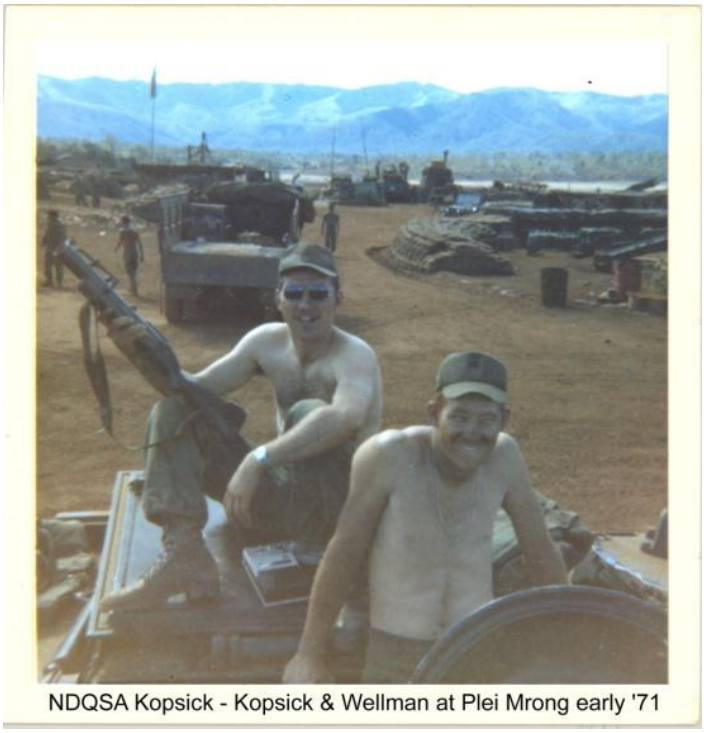
For several weeks in early 1971, the NVA were probing and attacking firebases in Vietnam along the border with Laos and Cambodia. Several were discussed previously like LZ Oasis and Phu Nhon (ref. Dan Ross).



(generalized map not all locations are accurate)

Bravo Battery 4th/60th was headquartered at Artillery Hill just WNW of the city of Pleiku. That base had been there for several years, and B-4/60th was charged with protecting the roads, cities and firebases: as far north as Ben Het; eastwards thru the Mang Yang Pass; south towards Ban Me Thuot; and westward to the Cambodian border. The main E-W road was QL-19 and the main N-S road was QL-14. All the cities and bases there had seen attacks over the years especially the N-S bases as they were just across the border from the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

I was new in-country and was just assigned to B-4/60th in January 1971. Drafted, still not old enough to vote, I was the proverbial "stranger in a strange land"…and in an unpopular war that was already 6 years old. I remember riding in the Btry's APC to Plei Mrong during Tet with my bunkmate PFC Wellman. It was my first foray into the field.



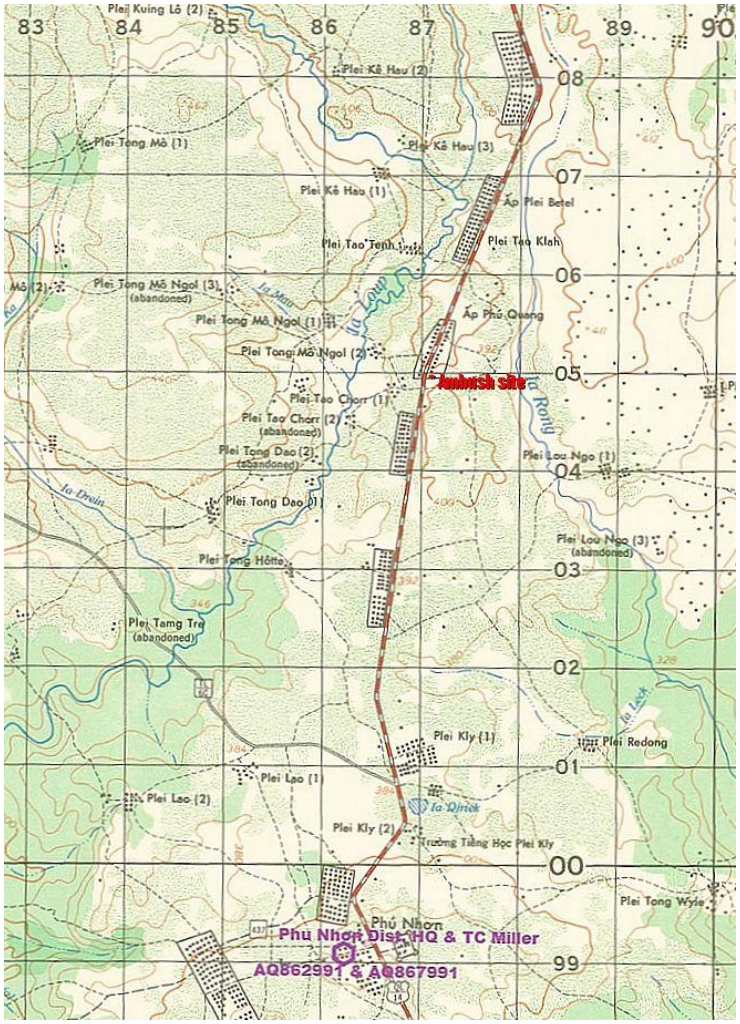
NDQSA Kopsick - Kopsick & Wellman at Plei Mrong early '71

Meanwhile, further south the firebase near Phu Nhon was under attack. The artillery unit (1/92d) and the Dusters (1-B-4/60) defended it but suffered many WIA and the death of one artilleryman PFC Tom C. Miller (for whom the base would be renamed). For a thrilling account of that nights actions follow this link (TC MILLER) For the next few weeks all the villages and bases along QL-14 were being attacked and access by road and even by choppers was either halted or severely curtailed.

From official records:

On the evening of 15 March at 2355 Hours, A North Vietnamese force of regimental size, initiated a sustained attack against Phu Nhon District HQ (Phu Nhon Summary). FSB T.C. MILLER, Attached Regional Forces, co-located U.S. Artillery forces 2nd Platoon, Battery C 1st 92nd Artillery and supporting Dusters of 1st Platoon section from Battery B, 4th Battalion, 60th Artillery. During the course of the initial

evening attack, the North Vietnamese forces attempted to overrun the position by utilizing sapper attacks, assaults by fire with 62 mm mortars, 120 mm mortars, B-40 rockets and ground assaults. The initial attack came from the southeast against the U.S. artillery sector of the perimeter held by the Dusters from 4th BN, 60th Artillery and C Battery, 1st BN, 92nd Artillery. The enemy was unable to penetrate this area due to the heavy volume of fire and the aggressiveness of the U.S. Soldiers in defense of the artillery sector. The main attack then moved to the east side, in the vicinity of the ARVN artillery. The enemy penetrated the wire inflicting damage to the facilities and causing causalities to the South Vietnamese defenders.



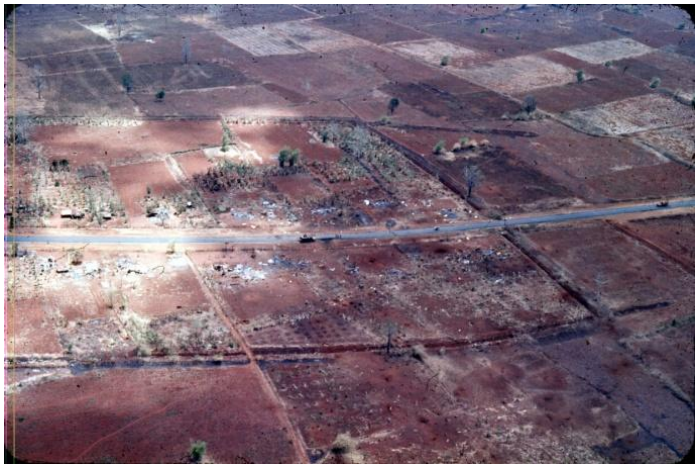
FSB T.C. Miller at Phu Nhon had been effectively cut off for weeks and successfully staved off a major ground assault on March 15-16 in large part due to the two B/4/60th Duster crews and the 1/92d Artillerymen defenders. At that time one Duster had a dead-lined engine and could not be moved and one of the guns on the other could not be fired. Enemy sappers entered the ARVN part of the compound but were stopped in the wire outside the US portion.

On March 16th or 17th the ARVN forces tried to open the road to Phu Nhon from the north. They fought their way south to the village of Ap Phu Quang a small village just north of Phu Nhon. This village was one of several villages along the roadway, but this one spanned both sides of the road, and was capable of creating a deadly cross-fire if occupied by the enemy. Which it was!

On March 16-17th an ARVN Cav and infantry unit, relief column trying to open the roadway to Phu Nhon was attacked at the south end of the village. They lost two APCs to RPGs and possibly recoilless rifle fire and a number of men were killed and wounded. Following command level discussions, a Duster lead strike force was given permission to try and rout the VC/NVA in an effort to bring much needed ammo and gun parts to the beleaguered southern bases. A convoy of four Dusters, five ammo trucks and three Quad 50s trucks from E-41st tried to reach them.

On March 18th, 1971, under the command of Bravo Battery Commander Captain Herbert J. Trexler Jr., and 1st Platoon Leader 1LT John D Bailey IV, four Dusters and an APC from 1st Platoon, B Battery 4th/60th cautiously entered the village of Ap Phu Quang (near the Ia Drang Valley) south of Pleiku along QL-14.

Ap Phu Quang was a small village on QL-14, and the road ran right through the town so there were huts on both side of the road. The NVA had barricaded the road on both ends making the village a defensive roadblock, even raising the VC/NVA flag in defiance. 1st Platoon Leader, 1LT John Bailey IV, took the lead Duster into the village and the APC was in third position between the four Dusters. The Quad 50s were sent back at the last moment since they were less armored. The ARVN troops, most following on foot, were supposed to follow on their flanks but could not keep up and barely made it into the village. So it was just some 30 men on four Dusters and an APC and a village full of entrenched and heavily armed NVA.



At the south end of the village right next to the burnt-out ARVN APC, the column was attacked. First by small arms fire from both sides of the road and then by whatever else they had; recoilless rifle, RPGs, machine guns and rifles. Within seconds B-141 "The Kind Murph" the second track in the column was in flames and the two men up front severely burned when a RPG pierced the internal 40-mm ammo well. The remaining vehicles returned fire with everything they had and in the frenzy had to breach the barricade on the southern end of the road and extract themselves and their wounded from the middle of the kill zone.

Within minutes the southern half of the village was destroyed and one Duster lay burning. All told 11 men would receive wounds with five being very severe requiring a DUSTOFF call to go to the 71st Evac hospital in Pleiku.

As a direct result of the actions of the Duster strike force, the VC/NVA forces were either destroyed or routed from the village and the local region further westward in the Ia Drang Valley. These actions effectively ended the month-long siege of Phu Nhon and the enemy's offensive.

I know of no other Duster battle that involved only four Dusters and no other supporting units. I do not know of any other instance when a Duster unit's battery commander led his troops in an actual ground battle. Both Trexler and Bailey were awarded Silver Stars while several Bronze Star and other valor medals we awarded to the participants.

This image is of the B-4/60th "impact awards" ceremony held at Weigt-Davis. Hanging from the foot locker is my cassette recorder, and I still have an audio recording of the awards ceremony. Who knew I would be the historian 50 years later??

AMBUSH DETAILS

One of the best descriptions of the battle can be seen in the Silver Star citation for 1LT John Bailey:

"For gallantry in action while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam; First Lieutenant John D. Bailey IV distinguished himself while serving as (First) platoon leader for Battery B 4th Battalion, 60th Artillery. Four of his eight dusters were the main part of a combat assault force given the mission of routing a reinforced North Vietnamese Battalion occupying fortified bunkers in the southern portion of the village of Ap Phu Quang. In order to accomplish this, First Lieutenant Bailey rode in the lead element directing the destructive fires of his elements both by radio and hand signals thus exposing his body countless times to blistering enemy fire. He also used his M-79 and was

credited with killing two enemy snipers. In an attempt to get his dusters out of the kill zone he ordered the lead element to break down a potentially mined barrier at the south end of the village and then to direct suppressive fire for the other elements. As the last duster of his pulled by his position, First Lieutenant Bailey left the comparative safety of his duster and on foot completely exposed to enemy fire, placed his guns in position, to bring maximum fire on the enemy. Although wounded he pointed out enemy positions to his men and not until these positions were silenced did he move back to the safety of the dusters First Lieutenant Bailey's actions in the face of the enemy are in keeping with the highest military traditions and reflect great credit upon himself, his men and the United States Army." Note: I actually typed this citation as I was a battery clerk at the time.

The fourth vehicle in the reaction force, was track B-141, it was the first to be hit by enemy fire and was quickly disabled. On the track were the squad leader SGT Robert Kube as left cannoneer, SP4 Gerald Timothy as right cannoneer. The gunner/elevation tracker was John Cooke from MA. The right side azimuth tracker was Anthony Squadrito, a 17 year-old kid from NY called "Mr. Chips". The driver was Robert Doyle and the TC was SSG Charles R. Carey. "The Kind Murph" was named for SGT Murphy who was a prior squad leader on B-141, a black Sgt from Baton Rouge LA who rotated out after Christmas 1970. SP4 Dale Stiebritz was the original driver of B-141 but was switched to track B-132 shortly before the battle.

When the column stopped they immediately came under fire from both sides of the road. Gerald Timothy remembers the 50-cal (manned by Trexler) from the APC returning fire immediately. B-141 only fired about 12 rounds (the shells in the loaders) because as right cannoneer Gerald Timothy was putting the next clips into the loaders he was hit in the arm and then took another round through the back that came out the front. Left cannoneer, six-foot three inch tall Robert Kube was also wounded at this time. Loaders were largely exposed an unprotected and were prime targets of the enemy.

The track was then hit point blank by RPG fire that pierced the right side of the hull and exploded the ammo cans in the storage area. The driver Doyle and TC SSG Carey were severely burned when the ammo inside exploded. The track was dead on the road and almost all of the crew wounded. The remaining crew (Cooke, Squadrito) and wounded (Carey, Timothy, Kube and Doyle) were relocated under extreme enemy fire to the crowded APC with the assistance of one of the APC occupants (see next story). The remaining Dusters continued to return fire even after leaving the village to the south. The column then relocated to the staging area north of the village. There were two DUSTOFFs for the most severely wounded who were sent to the 71st Evac hospital in Pleiku. Doyle was the most severely of the wounded and was sent to Japan within 48 hours. Carey remained in Pleiku a few days still in excruciating pain from his burns. In the medical ward was Army nurse Leslie Taylor from CT who tended to the wounded. Timothy says that he would later meet her stateside.

Timothy has some diminished lung capacity but is otherwise well.

SSG Charles R. Carey, in command of B-141 was severely burned when the internal ammo was ignited by an RPG round going through the track. He did have his flak jacket and commo helmet on but was burned over the rest of his body. He remembers falling to the black pavement after someone got him and the

driver out of the front of the track. Even severely burned he clearly remembers he had to clear a jammed M-60 for either Schroder or Norsweather in the APC. He stayed a few days at the 71st Evac in Pleiku before being sent stateside. Many years later he met up with another participant, SFC Hershel Brown, at Ft. Sill, OK.

The following is another account of the battle aftermath from PFC Bert Wellman Jr. who was the driver on the lead ammo truck I rode in that was staged north of the village. When the tracks and APC returned with the wounded, he retrieved SP4 Timothy from the APC. He had a sucking chest wound and Wellman put the initial bandages on Timothy. Wellman said that this guy did not look very good at all. "I could hear the air exiting his wounds. I did not think he was going to make it."

For some reason I personally do not have any memory of the events after the battle specifically when the wounded were brought back to the staging area, even thought I was there. There are other things I remember but not this one which might be some sort of mental defense mechanism.

Timothy did survive and Wellman did visit him in the hospital in Pleiku, before he was shipped home. Wellman and Schroder were later sent as crew replacements to LZ Lonely after the battle.

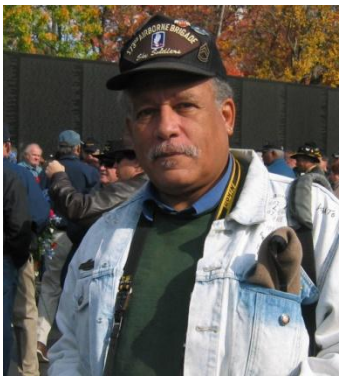
All the wounded recovered eventually and were glad to reconnect with others from the battle years later.

At the Charleston Reunion in 2006, there was a reunion of some of the participants including (l to r): Cpt. H.J. Trexler; Lt John Bailey; Dan Ross (who was at Phu Nhon); Robert Doyle, Paul Kopsick and Charles Cary.

The 'Phantom' Combatant

When I started to do the research on this battle two decades ago I was trying to identify all the men involved and which vehicles they were on. I had interviewed several men and acquired a lot of photos (many used in this article).

One big question was trying to identify the other black NCO that rode in the APC. I had interviewed Cpt. Trexler along with SSG Fred Norsweather and PFC Jerry Schroder who were in the APC. They confirmed that there was a black SGT in the APC with them but they did not know (remember) who he was. My AIT buddy PFC Jerry Schroder (d.'06) did give me an important description about him that would later prove critical in identifying him.



In 2005, a black vet came up to me at The Wall on Veterans Day and says that he once "pulled some guys out of a burning Duster." It did not mean anything to me at the moment until he mentioned the words "Ap Phu Quang." Bingo! For years I had been trying to locate a specific black SGT that rode in the APC in the battle. No one knew who he was but from Schroder and Norsweather's comments they did remember that he was packing a unique handgun, a chrome-plated Colt .357 Magnum. If this person was for real, he had to answer only one question.

I asked him, "What type of weapon were you carrying that day?" "What was I carrying?" He thought about it for a second and then said, "A chrome-plated .357 that my buddy threw to me as we pulled out of Weigt-Davis."

This man, SGT Daniel J. Goode, was with the 20th Engineers and had volunteered to ride shotgun in the APC as it headed out the front gate. EUREKA! I have finally found the missing man and to my surprise he was not a Dusterman.

Under enemy fire Daniel left the APC and ran to the burning B-141. Using his hat to protect his hands, he opened the front hatch and pulled SSG Charles Cary and SP4 Robert Doyle from the burning front compartment.

I personally remember still seeing a part of SSG Cary's burned flesh on the rim of the TC's hatch days later.

It turned out that a few days after the battle Daniel Goode was injured at Weigt-Davis base camp and got sent home before knowing what had happened to the men and before any awards were handed out. In my interview with him years later he said that several months later back at home he received a Bronze Star in the mail for his actions.

For years he had been trying to find out about the event and after 34 years he just happened to locate the one and only guy who understood the details of his story in a crowd of thousands of Veterans at The Wall. Sure glad I wore my Duster jacket that day. That was the same day that LT Steve Moore made his first trip to The Wall to view the names of the men he lost that were under his command.

SGT Dan Goode, 20th Eng, SP4 Jerry Schroder and Lt John Bailey

Ironically on this very same day at The Wall, I met with another friend, Dennis Murphy (B-4/60) and he told me he came down from NY with his buddy, John Cooke .

I was to meet with them after the ceremony but when I went to look for them, they had already left. A month later I tried and contacted Dennis Murphy and he told me that John Cooke had passed away suddenly. What I did not know at the time, was that this John Cooke was the gunner on B-141 that fateful day. Had I met with them and learned that John was on B-141, I would have found Daniel in the crowd and reunited them after 34 years …at The Wall!

Fate is a very fickle thing, so many coincidences, yet so many missed opportunities.

Thank you again, SGT Daniel Goode of the 20th Engineers. We protected your unit and you fought side-by-side with us. This is what true brotherhood is.

BATTLE FLAG

After the battle, the enemy's battle flag was presented to Cpt. Trexler and LT Bailey along with other items recovered from the battle. Each surviving track took a photo of the men with the captured flag.

The flag remained in the battery commander's office for the rest of the year above a table with all the other "war trophies." I always wondered what happened to it. Was it sent back to Ft. Bliss or returned with the 4/60th colors? I asked Trexler and Bailey but they did not know. They said it was still there when they left in mid-1971. Where could it be?

The battle and the flag were often discussed among B-4/60th veterans at many of our reunions but no one had any idea where it was or what happened to it.

Fast-forward 40 years to 2011 and the Boston reunion. I am sitting at my station doing historian stuff and one of the ladies from the front table comes over and hands me a plain manila envelope that someone dropped of that was for the historian. I was real busy so I put it in one of my many piles on my tables. It was not until the last night of the reunion that, as I was packing up things, I found the envelope again and I opened it. Cool, another Viet Cong flag being donated to my archives. It was the second one left with me this trip along with an original Duster yellow triangular "kill-flag". I have observed that some guys are uneasy about having these types of items and just want to pass them on anonymously.

As I opened the flag from the unmarked envelope, a small piece of paper falls out. I pick it up and it is a small crude drawing of a Duster that was covered with clear tape. In the center of the Duster is written "B-141." I immediately freeze…I am only one of a handful of people that had any chance of knowing the significance of this scrap of paper and this specific flag. If you look at the top photo on this page you can see a small white speck in the center of the yellow star. I remember seeing it in 1971 when I was in the BC's office. It was the sticker representing B-141 that the captain used to show the position the Dusters on his big wall mosaic of topographic maps. Captain Trexler took it off the wall and put it on the flag. He also had commemorative black flags made up with the words "B-141" in white letters. Every track flew one for the rest of the year.

I also recognized the VC flag as being from the battle by several distinctive tears, holes and bloodstains. **This was the long lost Ap Phu Quang battle flag**! How did it get here? Who dropped it off? How and where did it survive? I scrambled around trying to identify who dropped it off, but no one at the reunion took credit or responsibility for the anonymous donation. In the chaos, I actually lost the tiny Duster scrap of paper and I was besides myself. I tore everything I had with me apart (which was a lot) but could not find it (until I got home). Whew!

It would be several weeks before I would finally identify the person that had it, LT Wayne Brzezinski. Wayne took over first platoon from LT Bailey and was still around when the battery deactivated in December 1971. Cpt Fejfar (who replaced Trexler), like Brzezinski, were not around for the March battle and were not tied to this trophy in any way. It was just an enemy flag. It turned out that since Wayne was the last Platoon Leader of 1-B-4/60th, he was given possession of the flag.

He kept the envelope in a drawer in a chest in his basement. When his basement got flooded, he was cleaning out the chest of drawers he found the envelope and upon opening it, just then, realized what it was. I had been talking about the flag for years and when he saw the little B-141 Duster, he now knew what it was. Wayne was a little embarrassed that he did not know that he had it all this time. I am sure he knew I would not rest until I figured out what happened, so when, by process of elimination I asked him again, he came clean.

I am so glad that this final piece of the research puzzle has been found and can be put into its proper place in history.

So as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the last Duster battle in Vietnam we have much to be thankful for. All the B-4/60th men survived the battle and the enemy was dealt a critical defeat that they would not recover from… while we were there.

"First to Fire…Last to Leave…Brothers Forever!"