

# 'A' Company Won't Go

Fifth Estate Collective

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"Over North Vietnamese radio the voice of 'Hanoi Hannah' constantly harangues the Americans: 'Don't be the last G.I. to die in Vietnam.'"

—Ian Brodie, *London Express*

"Battles for bunkers in the Song Chang valley are merely tactical moves in the President's strategy of retreat. He is asking Company A to fight for time to negotiate a settlement with Hanoi that will save his face, but may very well lose their lives. He is also carrying on the battle in the belief, or pretense, that the South Vietnamese will really be able to defend their country and our democratic objectives, when we withdraw, and even his own generals don't believe the South Viet Nameese will do it. It is a typical political strategy, and the really surprising thing is that there have been so few men, like the tattered remnants of Company A, who have refused to die for it."

—James Reston, *New York Times*

SONG CHANG VALLEY, Vietnam — "I am sorry, Sir, but my men refused to go—we cannot move out," Lt. Eugene Shurtz Jr. reported to his battalion commander over a crackling field telephone.

"A" Company of the 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade's battle-worn 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had been ordered at dawn to move once more down the jungled rocky slope of Nui Lon Mountain into a deadly labyrinth of North Vietnamese bunkers and trench lines.

For five days they had obeyed orders to make this push.

Each time they had been thrown back by the invisible enemy who waited thru the rain of bombs and artillery shells for the Americans to come close, then picked them off with deadly crossfire.

The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon, had been waiting impatiently for A Company to move out. Bacon had taken over the battalion after Lt. Eli P. Howard was killed in a helicopter crash with seven other men. Ever since the crash the battalion had been trying to get to the wreckage. On this morning, Bacon was personally leading three of his companies in the assault. He paled as Shurtz matter-of-factly told him that the soldiers of A Company would not follow his orders.

"Repeat that please," the colonel asked without raising his voice. "Have you told them what it means to disobey orders under fire?"

"I think they understand," the lieutenant replied, "but some of them simply had enough—they are broken. There are boys here who have only 90 days left in Vietnam. They want to go home in one piece. The situation is psychic here.

"Are you talking about enlisted men or are the NCO's also involved?" the colonel asked.

"That's the difficulty here," Shurtz said. "We've got a leadership problem. Most of our squad and platoon leaders have been killed or wounded."

A Company at one point in the fight was down to 60 men—half its assigned combat strength.

Quietly the colonel told Shurtz: “Go talk to them again and tell them that to the best of our knowledge the bunkers are now empty—the enemy has withdrawn. The mission of A Company today is to recover their dead. They have no reason to be afraid. Please take a hand count of how many really do not want to go.”

The lieutenant came back a few minutes later: “They won’t go, colonel, and I did not ask for the hand count because I am afraid that they all stick together even though some might prefer to go.”

The colonel told him: “Leave these men on the hill and take your CP-Command post element and move to the objective.”

The lieutenant said he was preparing to move and asked: “What do we do with the ammunition supplies? Shall we destroy them?”

“Leave it with them,” the colonel ordered.

Then Bacon told his executive officer, Maj. Richard Waite, and one of his seasoned Vietnam veterans, Sgt. Okey Blakenship of Panther, W. Va., to fly from the battalion base “LZ Center” across the valley to talk with the reluctant troops of A Company.

“Give them a pep talk and a kick in the butt,” he said.

They found the men bearded and exhausted in the tall blackened elephant grass, their uniforms ripped and caked with dirt.

“One of them was crying,” said Blakenship. Then the soldiers told why they would not move.

“It poured out of them,” the sergeant said. They said they were sick of the endless battling in torrid heat, the constant danger of sudden firefights by day and the mortaring and enemy probing at night. They said they had not enough sleep and that they were being pushed too hard. They hadn’t had mail. They hadn’t had hot food. They hadn’t had the little things that made the war bearable.

Helicopters brought in the basic needs of ammunition, food and water at a tremendous risk because of the heavy enemy ground fire. But this was not enough for these men. They believed that they were in danger of annihilation and would go no farther.

Maj. Waite and Sgt. Blakenship heard them out, looking at the soldiers, most of them a generation apart, draftees 19 and 20 with fear in their eyes.

Blakenship, a quick tempered man, began arguing.

“One of them yelled to me that his company had suffered too much and that it should not have to go on,” Blakenship said. “I answered him that another company was down to 15 men still on the move—and I lied to him—and he asked me, ‘Why did they do it?’”

“Maybe they have got something a little more than what you have got,” the sergeant replied.

“Don’t call us cowards, we are not cowards,” the soldier yelled, running toward Blakenship with his fists raised.

Blakenship turned his back and walked down the bomb scarred ridge line to where the company commander waited.

The sergeant looked back and saw that the men of A Company were stirring. They picked up their rifles, fell into a loose formation and followed him down the cratered slope.

A Company went back to the war.

## **Right on, Soldier [sidebar]**

WRIGHTSTOWN, N.J. (LNS)—“When tyranny is the law, revolution is the order.”

This off-the-cuff remark by Spec-4 Harold Muskat, made after receiving a 6-month sentence to the Fort Dix Stockade on charges of distributing Shakedown (the local GI anti-war rag) and missing reveille, got him another 30 days in the pound.

The brass who sat as judges in the recent court-martial twiddled their gavels and decided court wasn’t over. The presiding judge ruled that Muskat was in contempt of court and that the GI’s statement was “a direct affront to me personally and to the Army in general.”

The trial is one of a series of similar actions by the Army to silence opposition at Ft. Dix by imposing stiff stockade sentences for minor infractions of rules that are normally overlooked.

Of course, the Army is finding more and more use for regulations designed specifically to prevent soldiers from exercising free speech and reading a free choice of press. Muskat's conviction came from both directions at once.

Muskat's politics have come under Army fire before because he has been deeply involved in organizing work at Ft. Dix for some time.

Two months ago, another court-martial convicted him of distributing unauthorized material on base—it was *The Bond*, the American Serviceman's Union (ASU) paper—and hit him with a written warning and a \$25 fine.

The New Jersey State Police have since then harassed him for distributing *Shakedown* in the streets of Wrightstown while he was off-duty.

Muskat and the Ft. Dix coffee house staff recently filed a \$1,000,000 suit against the Dix brass and the New Jersey State Police citing a lengthy record of harassment and violation of rights supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution.

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