

PFC Louis Willett '63: Fifty Years Since Heroic Acts in Vietnam

by Ret. US Navy Capt. Larry Seible '63

It's hard to believe that our friend, fellow classmate, and Stanner was killed 50 years ago, 15 February 1967, in Vietnam. PFC Louis Willett, a most distinguished Molloy graduate of 1963, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 1968. Here is the story of Louis' heroic actions in that battle.

As with all major traumatic events in a person's life, every man who was present in Landing Zone (LZ) 501N in the republic of South Vietnam on the morning of February 15, 1967 can tell you exactly what he was doing when the first shots rang out and exactly how he reacted. Experiences like this are forever seared into a person's mind. For the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, their day of reckoning had begun.(1)

Early in the morning, PFC Louis Willett was on a security patrol when his squad encountered a large North Vietnamese enemy force. They were immediately pinned down by overwhelming fire power from the heavily camouflaged, prepared forces. The intensity of the enemy fire would not allow the squad to return fire or commence retreating. PFC Willett, with complete disregard for his life, rose to his feet and by expert use of fire and movement gained a position affording him a clear field of fire on enemy positions. Placing highly effective fire upon the enemy, PFC Willett suppressed the enemy sufficiently to allow his company to reorganize and begin movement toward the perimeter.

The squad leader directed PFC Willett to return to the squad's position. PFC Willett, realizing that his position was vital to the safe withdrawal of his squad, chose to remain in his position.

The enemy, realizing that their position was untenable as long as PFC Willett remained in that location, directed their attention on his position. PFC Willett fell with multiple wounds and the full force of enemy weapons was brought to bear on the squad once again.

Struggling to regain his footing, PFC Willett, although in great pain, once more employed his weapon with consummate aim and suppressed enemy fire a second time, enabling his squad to withdraw to the eventual relative safety of the perimeter. Although directed to return to his squad again, PFC Willett, from his position, motioned the squad to the rear. PFC Willett knew full well that his refusal to return to the squad would deny him an avenue of escape. Placing the lives of his comrades above his own, PFC Willett, when last seen, was moving painfully from position to position, engaging the enemy at close quarters, and continuing to provide cover fire. He was mortally wounded in his efforts.

The initial contact by PFC Willett and his squad denied the enemy the element of surprise and their delaying action enabled the perimeter defenses to delay and be prepared for the infantry assault that followed. (2)

Dennis Witt, a member of Charlie Company, states almost 50 years later, "I did not personally know Louis Willett who was in 1st platoon. However, even though I didn't know him, he affected my whole life. I know absolutely that I owe my life to Louis and his team. If they had not surprised the enemy just

before they were ready to launch their surprise attack on us, I, and maybe the whole company, would not have survived. The start of Louis' firefight gave me just enough of a warning to get to cover behind that bunker. If not for that warning, I know I would have been one of the first casualties of that battle. Also, if Louis and his team had not surprised the enemy when they did, the 100 of us in the Company could very easily have been overrun before we knew what was happening. So we all owe our lives to Louis and his team.

Per **Lt. Col. Ed Northrup**, Commanding Officer of Charlie Company: "There are no plan(s) on 15 Feb 2017. Normally the men from C Company remember, via email that specific day, not only because of Louis, but also because of the difficulties of trying to survive, as they recall the intensity of the situation for us all. Frankly some do not speak or talk of it. (*Lt. Col. Northrup to this day carries a piece of paper in his wallet with the names of the men he lost while in command*)

Per **Dennis Pepe** (Molloy Class of 63), Louis' longtime best friend: "Louis was a voracious reader of history, mostly civil war during grammar school and studied Stonewall Jackson. Walking home from school he would talk about the battles as if he was there with wide eyes and animation. He was preparing for his destiny from a very young age. There is a novel in my head about his life that I hope to write: *The Legend of Gooba Lou*. **Alan Peschler**, our grammar school classmate, used to call Louis a legend in his own time; it's fitting that it became a reality." Dennis goes on to say "Louis' memory and spirit are never far away from me."

PFC Louis Willett, Medal of Honor recipient, may he always be remembered for he is a True American Hero.

Note (1) Roger Hill – Foreword – Battle Report

Note (2) DA638 – Recommendation for award, Heroism submitted by Captain Ed Northrup Jr.