

“IF YOU WANT A GOOD FIGHT...”

UPI Combat Correspondent Joins the Cavalry

Text & Photos by Joe Galloway

FAVOR. Or maybe it was nice time. I walked out to the edge of the LZ. A trooper jumped out of a mortar pit about 25 meters away and dashed in my direction, diving beneath a bit of brush. All I could see was two eyeballs under the helmet. “Joe Galloway. Are you Joe Galloway from Refugio, Texas? Don’t you know me, man? It’s Vicente Cantu from Refugio.”

And so it was. We came from the same little oil and ranching town in south Texas. Graduated from high school in the same year, 1959.

In the blessed lull we stole five minutes for a class reunion. “Joe, this is bad shit. But if I make it I go home in two weeks. I’ll be in Refugio for Christmas.” He did and he was.

While the lull lasted, I walked another 20 or 30 meters and squatted down to talk to

some troopers dug in in some elephant grass; then as the sound of firing began picking up, I headed back to the CP. As I reached the anthill I heard someone in the command group scream, “My god, he’s unloading on us. Stop him, stop him!”

The Air Force officer handling forward air control began yelling into his mike and I looked up to see a Skyhawk nose up and a nice fat cannister of napalm separate and begin loblollying end over end straight at us. We froze. Quit breathing.

Nothing to do now.

The cannister went right over the CP and exploded between us and the troopers I had just been talking with minutes before. There was a wall of fire and then I could see our men dancing in that fire and hear their screams over the fire noise. As the blaze

faded to burning grass several of us ran into it. Someone told me to grab this man’s feet and help haul him back to the aid station. When I grabbed him the meat over his ankles twisted away in my hand.

Twenty meters and the CP would have been gone with CO, XO, air controller, artillery controller. And one reporter. Those burned men in the aid station would scream for hours. All the morphine in the world wouldn’t have stopped them. Most of the water we had brought in the night before still lay out in the LZ grass. It was partly to get away from those screams that I got up and made two trips out to haul water back to the aid station.

During another lull that morning, one platoon from 2/7 airlifted into the LZ and went straight into battle reinforcing Charlie

Just before 0700 8th Battalion, 66th PAVN, hit the southeast sector, slamming into Capt. Robert Edwards' Charlie Company. Although Edwards called for reinforcements, Moore held off committing his slender reserves in Charlie's sector, suspecting the PAVN might be hoping he would do that. Hal Moore was right. By 0715 another PAVN battalion was knocking on our eastern door, and half an hour later yet another tried the western sector.

We were catching it from three sides and those little RPGs were whizzing into the LZ and around the CP with monotonous regularity.

Suddenly in the middle of this, a Cav trooper across the LZ got up, wearing only a white T-shirt and fatigue trousers, and began walking slowly straight across the open LZ while bullets kicked up dirt around him and the RPG explosions rocked him. We screamed at him to get down or go back and finally our calls got through over the noise of battle. Slowly he turned to walk back and we could see that his back was shredded by shrapnel. The aid station was next to the CP and the stunned trooper was simply taking the shortest route.

Matt Dillon and I were both thinking on the same theme this morning: Up until now the greatest tradition of the 7th Cavalry had been built at a place called the Little Big Horn with Col. George C. Custer in circumstances uncomfortably similar to those we now found ourselves in.

About this time I was busy trying to see just how flat I could make myself and cursing the buttons on my fatigue jacket for costing me the edge. I felt a size-12 boot toe in my ribs and looked up to see Sgt. Maj. Plumley standing tall and grinning big: "Son, you can't take no pictures laying down there on the ground."

I decided Plumley was right. I also decided that our chances of coming out of this alive were somewhere between slim and nothing and with Plumley for an example I decided I would just as soon get mine standing up. I got up, ignoring the fire sweeping over us, and began taking pictures.

Midmorning of the 15th we got a lull. Air and arty had been making things hot for the PAVN. Or maybe it was rice time. I walked out to the edge of the LZ. A trooper jumped out of a mortar pit about 25 meters away and dashed in my direction, diving beneath a bit of brush. All I could see was two eyeballs under the helmet. "Joe Galloway. Are you Joe Galloway from Refugio, Texas? Don't you know me, man? It's Vicente Cantu from Refugio."

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UPI Combat Correspondent Joe Galloway at Da Nang Press Center complete with tools of the trade: a Nikon 35mm camera with zoom lens and the Carl Gustav 9mm Model 45 SMG, better known as the Swedish K.

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