

VIETNAM

The "Flaming I" At Getlin's Corner

By R. R. Keene

It was like so many days in country; hot enough for men to get first-degree burns off the flash suppressor of their M14 rifles.

The infantrymen of Company I, 3d Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment had been tactical, on the march and under the sun, for almost three days. Their canteens were empty, their lips were parched, and they could only swallow their thirst. The "skipper" warned them there would be no medevacs for heat casualties. They were

the bait on their battalion's sweep southwest of Con Thien and north of Cam Lo. For the most part they were well-seasoned combat veterans, albeit very young ones, which was not unusual in Vietnam.

While nobody likes being hung out as bait, it is not an uncommon tactic. "India" Co's skipper, Captain Michael P. Getlin, had seen telltale signs of the North Vietnamese Army being in force in the area. He knew they were biding their time, watching and waiting. Keying his radio, Getlin reported that contact was "imminent." Getlin wanted to consolidate his company and dig in, but battalion headquarters split the company into three ambush locations. Although Getlin voiced his concern, Marines

obey orders, and by all standards he was an outstanding Marine.

It was 30 March 1967, and the U.S. military had just announced that 274 Americans had died on Vietnam battlefields during the previous week, making it the deadliest span up to that point in the war. For the Marines on Operation Prairie III, the fighting and casualties were about to ratchet up even more.

"It was late afternoon and hot as blue blazes," said then-Corporal Jack Riley, a 22-year-old squad leader with 2d Platoon, which was setting up on what was marked on the map as Hill 70 when they came upon a tiny stream. "We let fire teams fill their canteens for the squads. Canteens



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

Inset: Then-1st Lt Michael Getlin transferred to 3/9 at An Hoa, was promoted to captain and took command of India Co in January 1967.

Below: Second Lt John Bobo was a down-to-earth leader. Bobo, holding the paper, shares a humorous letter from home with Marines of 2d Plt as they prepare to leave An Hoa and move north in late November 1966.



JACK RILEY

filled, we moved out, then we found a dead Vietnamese upstream."

"I was so thirsty, I didn't wait for the Halazone [water purification tablets] to kick in," said Joe Lempa, then a 19-year-old lance corporal and machine-gunner. "It was so hot everybody just used more Halazone and drank anyway."

It is remembered because it was the last event of significance before the killing started.

Riley said: "We were spread out almost two clicks [kilometers] with just one company. That's when three guys walked out of a tree line and out across an old bomb crater. Corporal Paul Arcand's 3d Squad challenged them. The NVA pointed their weapons at them." The Marines let loose with a hail of gunfire.

"We took them out. And that's when they let all hell loose," said Riley. "It was a typical NVA ploy: They would sucker you into a position they had pre-mapped where all their fire control and weapons were in place."

North Vietnamese mortar rounds left their tubes and "whomp!" the first rounds exploded starting the carnage. Riley stated, "They started walking their mortars over our hill." Then came the distinct chatter of AK47 rifles. "They immediately tried to use infantry to overrun us. We only had two squads protecting the hill."

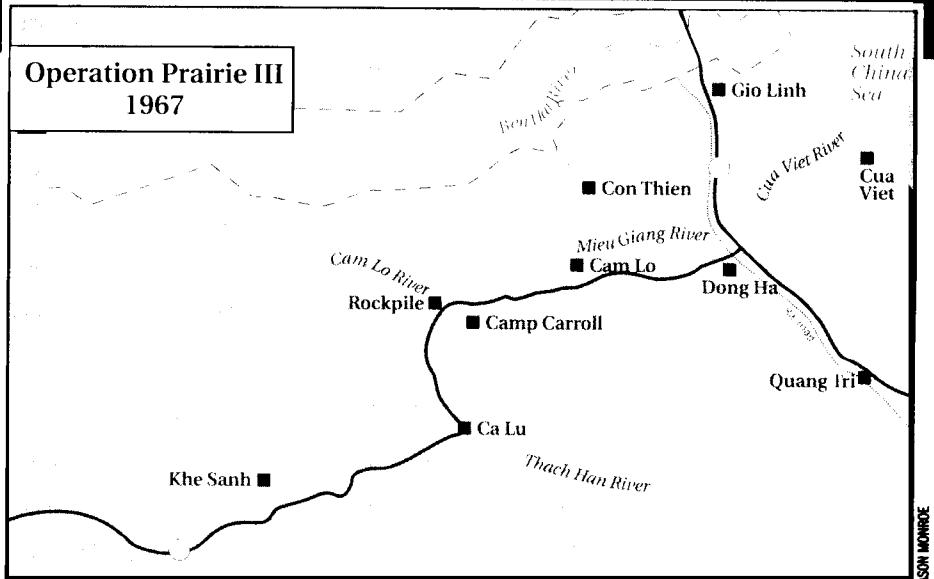
Lempa was with his machine-gun team: LCpl Tom Butt, the team leader; LCpl Sam Phillips, gunner; with Private First Class Billy Joe Hill humping the ammo. Lempa said: "They hit us full force at once with mortars and heavy machine-gun fire. We didn't know where they were or where they were coming from. We just hunkered down."

Hospital Corpsman Third Class Kenneth R. Braun had extended his field time as the 3d Plt corpsman and wasn't even supposed to be there. He was supposed to be on rest and recuperation leave, R&R. "Doc," at 18 years old, also was the most combat-experienced corpsman within the command group. Capt Getlin and Second Lieutenant John P. Bobo of Weapons Plt had asked for him to be in the command group on this operation. To Doc, both men were distinctly different but well respected by everyone. Doc wouldn't and couldn't let them down. "I told them if we are going to get into something, I'll go."

Capt Getlin looked at him and said, "I'll guarantee you we're gonna get into something."

Sadly, he was all too right. When the mortars and gunfire punctured the air, Doc Braun, like everyone, dove for cover.

Operation Prairie III 1967



"One mortar hit between me and another Marine," Braun recalled. "It stuck in the ground and, thankfully, it didn't go off. Things started getting hot and heavy."

Men in pain started screaming, "Corpsman up!"

"We went out and brought one or two Marines back," said Braun. "I was trying to set up a safe staging area where I could bring the wounded. Charles Dockery, who as a second class, was our senior corpsman. He, too, was combat experienced and knew what to do. He told me to get the



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

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—Cpl Jack Riley

seriously wounded Marines and bring them back; treat the others on the spot so they could keep firing. I never got back. I got cut off from Dockery. He got hit four, five or six times."

India Co was quickly giving back as good as it took, but the NVA force was massive and ready for blood. Jack Riley recalled: "My squad was fronting to the north. We were taking them out. It was pretty easy shooting. It was one of those rare situations where you actually saw them being stupid enough to attack in the open. My squad was literally stacking them up like stove wood."

Joe Lempa recalled: "Captain Getlin was left of Sam Phillips and me. The NVA were moving so close. I was gathering everyone's grenades and tossing them out. Billy Joe Hill was picking 'em off with his rifle, and Sam was hitting them with the M60 machine gun. Once I ran out of grenades, I just lay there with Sam and made sure the ammunition belt kept linked up." Links and brass casings piled up fast. "I think we had about 2,000 rounds. We damn near ran out of ammunition. With only one gun team on the hill, they had to keep moving to prevent the NVA from concentrating their fire on the only crew-served gun.

"Two NVA soldiers came up on our right flank. I yelled, 'Sam!' and threw myself over his back so I wouldn't have to shoot over him. I shot the two NVA in the chest. Seconds later Sam got hit in the leg, and he crawled to where Doc Braun was taking care of the wounded."

According to Riley, after the initial attack, Getlin still seemed confident that they could handle the attack without reinforcements. However, "that's when the mortars really started to rain on us and we started taking so many casualties."

The issue, however, was in doubt. With

Waiting on trucks to start Prairie III



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

These India Co Marines, LCpl Dave Gomez and Cpl Roger Turnquest, proudly unfurl their month-old guidon, "The Flaming I," just prior to the start of Operation Prairie III. Today it hangs beside a plaque commemorating 2dLt Bobo's Medal of Honor at the entrance of Bobo Hall, Officer Candidates School, Quantico, Va.

the company split, the NVA concentrated on the command element. NVA soldiers also were attacking India's 1st and 3d platoons now trying to come to the aid of the command group. On the northwestern perimeter, Marine riflemen and the rocket team were being riddled by fire from up close. By this time Riley had lost two men in his squad: PFC Ruben Armenta and PFC Larry Crumbaker.

"It was getting close to being hand to hand," Riley said. "We were chest high in grass and firing out 360 degrees, killing NVA all around us."

"Their Chicom [Chinese Communist] grenades were coming at us," said Braun. "We were throwing them back, and they were throwing our grenades back at us."

Lempa remembers: "Captain Getlin was calm through the entire thing. He kept saying, 'Good job, Marines. Good job, Marines!' [He] yelled directions and pointed where to throw the next grenades."

Doc Braun also remembers seeing his company commander. "Getlin was fighting with his shotgun and killed a bunch."

The Marines saw at least six NVA soldiers felled by blasts from Getlin. He was hit but kept firing even after his shotgun barrel split. Although having suffered multiple wounds, the skipper got on his radio and called in artillery fire. He ordered Riley and his squad to attack back over the crest of the bullet-swept hill and provide security. At the same time, Bobo was trying to assist the rocket team and single-handedly prevent the command post from being overrun.

In came three more grenades. Getlin threw one back and was killed when a grenade that he attempted to retrieve and throw exploded.

Lempa said: "I was looking over to the left and saw he was dead. John Loweranitis was hit with the captain, and John went crazy."

Corporal John L. Loweranitis had been up and down the rank structure. Those



Cpl Jack Riley poses with a large chunk of an NVA 122 mm rocket that landed outside of Cam Lo.

who served with him say he was not a particularly sterling garrison Marine, but everybody wanted him around when things got hot. He had already been awarded the Silver Star. Joe Lempa said that when it came to fighting, John "enjoyed what he was doing." When the firing started, Loweranitis had fought his way through mortar and machine-gun fire, grabbing wounded Marines on the hill's slope and dragging them to safety. As the NVA assaulted, he calmly aimed his rifle and shot five dead.

"I think John got fed up with everything," stated Doc Braun. "He just got p----- off and charged them all right in front of us."

When Getlin ordered Riley to counter-attack, Loweranitis, a mortarmen who had fired all the rounds he had, and PFC Wallace Williams of the rockets section joined with Riley's squad. Williams was killed along with PFC Albert Anter and PFC Frank Thomas.

"Loweranitis continued attacking into the NVA position after I had placed my squad in position," said Riley. "He was killed."

Doc Braun stated: "I couldn't see what happened to him, but I could hear the rounds hitting. He tried to take as many with him as he could because he probably figured this was going to be it for us as we were running out of ammo and everything else."

If anybody in India Co could be described as well-liked, respected, obeyed and a leader all in the same breath, it was soft-spoken 2dLt John Bobo, 24, from Niagara Falls, N.Y. A solid 170 pounds and 6 feet tall, it is said by all that he had a command presence and proved in previous firefights to possess excellent instincts.

Doc Braun said, "Mr. Bobo always made it a point to walk around the perimeter and talk with the guys for a few minutes."

Cpl Jack Riley, who of all the enlisted men probably knew him best, said: "We trusted him with our lives. He really cared about every Marine and was the kindest person I ever met: a truly good person who never said a bad thing about anybody. He would always try to keep the morale up. The Marines loved him and would have followed him anywhere. Both [Bobo] and Getlin were outstanding officers."

The balance in the fight on the slopes of Hill 70 rested at the northwest sector of the Marine perimeter. If the NVA could overrun the bloodied and beleaguered few Marines from Wpsn Plt doggedly holding their ground, they'd have a conduit right up to the command post. It was at that perimeter where 2dLt John Paul Bobo made his stand.

Cpl Jim Blevins, the rocket team leader, and his loader, PFC Eddie Cannon, had been cut down by NVA gunfire.

"I couldn't figure what was wrong with [Eddie Cannon]," said Doc Braun. "He only had a little hole in his chest. I couldn't revive him. I turned him over and saw a big hole in his back."

Doc turned his medical attention to LCpl Tommy Butt, the machine-gun team leader who had been shot through the arm, but was still helping the lieutenant who was trying to get the 3.5-inch rockets into action. Bobo pulled a rocket launcher from the casualties and, with a few Marines, directed fire at the oncoming NVA.

"That's when a mortar round hit and took off Mr. Bobo's leg," said Lempa.

It was getting dark, but for Doc Braun and the Marines, time was becoming inconsequential. Wounded and with adrenaline pumping, they felt as though time was going in slow motion.

The NVA were deftly exploiting the weakness of that sector of the Marine perimeter, which had taken heavy casualties. Second Lt Bobo was holding them at bay with deadly rifle fire.

"Had he not, they would have been right up our backs with nothing to stop



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

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them," said Riley.

Joe Lempa's machine-gun team was down to him and Billy Joe Hill. "The adrenaline keeps you so alert you catch every moment, but after Sam got hit and it started getting dark, you seem to lose some of that. I got so scared I was shak-

ing. I thought we were going to die that night."

Company First Sergeant Raymond G. Rogers Jr. was painfully shot up. Earlier, when Capt Getlin was killed, he used grenades and rifle fire to keep the NVA's heads down as he made his way to his skipper's position. Now, he was among the first to reach 2d Lt Bobo, who told the senior staff noncommissioned officer to prop him into a firing position.

Doc Braun reached Bobo, grabbed someone's web belt and threw a tourniquet around the bloody and slippery mess that was left of Bobo's leg. Doc torqued the tourniquet down about the size of his wrist. He stuck the lieutenant with a dose of morphine, marked his forehead with an "M," and got ready to move him out of the line of fire.

"He told me, 'Doc, let me die fighting here.'"

Joe Lempa remembers it. "Lieutenant Bobo said, 'Leave me here!' He just wanted to be propped up against a tree. He pushed his stump down in the dirt to help stem the bleeding, and he kept shooting."

Doc Braun answered the wounded officer: "This is Doc, and you're not going to die fighting here. Come with me, and



Second Lt John Bobo, far right, observes as members of the 60 mm mortar team fire off old ammunition. The team was noted for its skill at hitting close-in targets without sights. During the battle at "Getlin's Corner," PFC Raymond Lloyd, in the center with his right arm raised off his knee, ran into the pitch-darkness with a flashlight to wave in medevac helicopters.



India Co battle-zeros its newly reconditioned M14 rifles at a range on Okinawa prior to returning to Vietnam. SSgt D. Dotson, covering his ears, is with GySgt Francis Muldowney, kneeling with helmet. "Gunny" Muldowney also was awarded the Bronze Star for action at "Getlin's Corner."

everything is going to be OK."

Riley said: "Doc wasn't going to leave anybody and was going to drag Mr. Bobo over the crest of the hill while my squad laid down a base of fire.

"He dragged him about 15 yards when I heard an AK47 on full automatic. I turned around and saw an NVA. I shot him through the heart. I didn't know he'd shot Doc Braun three times and shot Lieutenant Bobo."

Doc remembers Bobo's death: "The rounds came right through his chest. I

saw his eyes, and I knew right then he was gone. I also knew I was gone because of the way I was hit. The last conscious thing I said to myself was, *I wonder how my wife is going to do.*"

First Sgt Rogers was now in command of India Co, at least what was left of it. (Capt Ralph Pappas, the forward air controller, was the only other officer on the hill, and he had been killed early in the battle.) Rogers' assumption of command required him to crawl over open ground to reach a radio and re-establish contact

with the battalion. The NVA soldiers were relentless and still coming. He needed more artillery and air support.

Jack Riley had managed to revive and patch up Doc Braun whose back and shoulder were ripped open. About that time, HM2 Chuck Dockery showed up and was pulled into what was now a small perimeter. He had been pinned down and almost shot to pieces, but went right to work. He eventually would lose both legs.

Braun recalls Riley saying to him: "I don't have anything to patch you with." He then took battle dressings off some of our dead Marines because they didn't need them anymore.

"We crawled into a briar patch. By now it was dark and the NVA were still looking for us. We were pretty much out of ammo and could hear them within a few feet. We could hear them shooting those left out in the field alive."

With their ammunition nearly gone, 1stSgt Rogers was calling for artillery strikes directly on their own positions. Braun explained, "We figured if they were going to kill us, we would take as many of them as we could with us."

Battalion headquarters refused.

Rogers kept working the radio and reached a Huey gunship, call sign "Deadlock Playboy," from Marine Observation Squadron 2, piloted by Capt Chris Bradley, on station. Deadlock Playboy made three strafing runs, firing rockets and machine guns at the advancing NVA reserve company. In between, Rogers led six wounded Marines to a covered position and helped them establish a hasty defense.



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

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—“Doc” Kenneth R. Braun



COURTESY OF GEORGE WADDELL

It is March 31, 1967, the morning after the fight, when this UH-34D Seahorse from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362, the "Ugly Angels," lifts out the last of the wounded, including Cpl Jack Riley. LCpl Gale Weller, who took this photo, later was awarded the Bronze Star for valor during the previous night's fighting.

"That helicopter pilot saved our a--," said Lempa. "We'd have been overrun for sure. First Sergeant Rogers told Jack Riley to counterattack with his squad because he saw the NVA were about to mount another attack on us."

"Also, the NVA had captured several Marines and had their hands wrapped up with comm [communications] wire," said Lempa, who went on to explain that it was the gunships who made an escape possible by keeping the NVA at bay and away from their prisoners.

The first sergeant then got "Puff the Magic Dragon," the Air Force AC-47 Skytrain, with three 7.62 mm miniguns, on station. Puff went to work, raining what looked like molten lead from the aircraft's left portals.

Rogers called for medevac helicopters. The chopper crews could see only tracers and flashes of explosions in the darkness. First Lieutenant Richard I. "Butch" Neal, an artillery forward observer, led India's 1st Plt after its commander, 2dLt John Prickett, had been seriously wounded by machine-gun fire. The 1st Plt established a landing zone and linked up with 1stSgt Rogers and 2d Plt's two squads. Then 1st Plt, with a reinforced squad from 2d Plt, commanded by 2dLt Dan Pultz, fought its way to consolidate with 2d Plt.

"PFC Raymond Lloyd ran out in pitch darkness with a flashlight and waved the helicopters in for a landing," said Lempa. "I thought that was one of the bravest things I ever saw."

"I also remember that Corporal Riley was shot up. He didn't leave on a medevac chopper until the next day. He stayed with us though he had three wounds."

By dawn it was over. The sun was once again hot enough to cause a burn from exposed metal while the thirst of those still alive was slacked by a resupply of potable water. The NVA pulled its usual vanishing trick, but left 67 dead on a finger of a grassy hill just north of a dried-up rice paddy that was now being called the battle for "Getlin's Corner."

The Marines solemnly retrieved their dead. Additionally, they captured two NVA, some heavy machine guns and automatic weapons, but at a price in a war where casualties were becoming heavier every week. India Co grieved its losses: 15 Marines killed in action, including the company commander, FAC officer and the weapons platoon commander; 47 more were wounded, including the company first sergeant.

The battle—although only mentioned in a few paragraphs of the Corps' history—



COURTESY OF JACK RILEY

According to those who knew him, Bobo loved children. Here, he poses with them during a medical civic action program visit to a village near An Hoa. It is a pleasant picture, before the Surgeon General's warnings about cigarette smoking, and a preferred image by which to remember John Bobo.

is disproportionately marked by its awards for valor:

One posthumous Medal of Honor:
2dLt John P. Bobo

Four Navy Crosses: Capt Michael P. Getlin (posthumous), Cpl John L. "Jack" Loweranitis (posthumous), HM3 Kenneth R. "Doc" Braun and 1stSgt Raymond G. Rogers Jr.

Enough Silver Stars, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts to weigh down a field marching pack

But body counts and even medals are no measure of the courage common throughout the fighting in Vietnam at places such as Hill 70.

The survivors and many of the families of those who didn't survive gather for a reunion once every other year. In August 2008, they met at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., where they ate at the Offi-

cer Candidates School mess hall named after John P. Bobo and presented the company's beloved "Flaming I" guidon for display.

Such gatherings make it impossible for any of them to forget—not that they ever would—the events of March 30th and 31st in 1967 just south of the Demilitarized Zone, Republic of South Vietnam.

Joe Lempa said: "Someone asked me how I can remember the many names of the guys that were killed. I've always thought it would be disrespectful to forget their names."

Author's note: Four other Marines not listed in the story were killed in action at Getlin's Corner: Cpl Walter J. Nerad Jr., Cpl David A. Siemon, LCpl Roman R. Villamor Jr. and PFC Donald W. Krick Jr. Their fellow Marines who survived did not want their names to be left out.