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A Virginian's First Views of Kentucky: David Meade to Joseph Prentis, August 14, 1796 edited by Harold B. Gill, Jr., and George M. Curtis III	117
The Kentucky National Guard in Vietnam: The Story of Bardstown's Battery C at War Anthony A. McIntire	140
The Impact of Race on Law in Kentucky: A Research Note Christopher Waldrep	165
Communications	183
Book Reviews	185
Book Notes	220

COVER: Four Kentucky National Guard officers, members of Battery C, Second Howitzer Battalion, 138th Field Artillery, pose in front of their unit crest on Hill 88, Firebase Denise, in South Vietnam. (l. to r.) Battery Commander, Capt. Lyle J. Thompson; Battery Exec. Officer, 1st Lt. Thomas R. Ice; Forward Observer, 2d Lt. Thomas (?) Clark; Fire Direction Officer, 2d Lt. Richard Pfeiffer. Photograph courtesy of 1st Sgt. Joseph P. Simpson.

The Kentucky National Guard in Vietnam: The Story of Bardstown's Battery C at War

by Anthony A. McIntire

The American public is confused about Vietnam. They know that the war hurt, and that they have been hard-put to find any meaning in it. It hurt Bardstown, Kentucky, for instance, the home of Battery C, Second Howitzer Battalion, 138th Artillery, Kentucky National Guard. Bardstown suffered probably the highest per-capita loss of any U.S. community during the war in Vietnam. Much of that loss resulted from a relatively obscure battle on Tomahawk Hill. The fight there did not materially affect the progress of the war. It did not alter any critical military balance. Numerous other fights dwarfed it. But the atypical story of Battery C shows that even with unit cohesion, homogeneity, élan, and proficiency — in other words, with many of the factors commonly listed as credits in World War II and debits in Vietnam — the military still had crippling problems. Chief among these problems was the soldiers' fundamental apathy for the cause. The pernicious results of the limited-tours policy followed logically from and contributed mightily to that insensibility. The story of Battery C helps to clarify some of what went wrong in Vietnam.

Over 2.1 million men served in Vietnam, but less than fifteen thousand men from America's National Guard saw active duty anywhere during that war. Fewer still served in Southeast Asia. In fact, only two National Guard units actually fought there, one of them Kentucky's Second Howitzer Battalion, 138th Field Artillery (543 men in Vietnam), also known as the Louisville Legion.¹

In the wake of the Têt Offensive of January 30, 1968, increased demand for American troops precipitated the call-up of National Guard units. On April 1, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford announced the summoning of over twenty-four thousand

The author is a doctoral candidate in recent American history at the University of Kentucky. He wishes to thank the people who consented to be interviewed for this project. Without them, it would not have been possible.

¹ *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1973*, Table 35, 31; Table 427, 271; *New York Times*, April 12, 1968; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1968.

reserve soldiers in thirty-four states. Of these, some ten thousand Army, Navy, and Air Force Reservists, along with a smattering of National Guardsmen, went to Vietnam. Nearly six hundred Kentucky Guardsmen received orders to report to Fort Hood, Texas, for further training.²

In Bardstown, the men of Battery C got the word. Bardstown, in Nelson County, had a population of about fifty-eight hundred people; the whole county had less than twenty-four thousand. The town is the center of a cluster of small communities — Bloomfield, Boston, Fairfield, New Haven, Cox's Creek — not far from Louisville. Known for its whiskey industry and as the site of Federal Hill, popularly called "My Old Kentucky Home," the area was primarily farming country, where people knew each other and families were related.³

The men of Battery C had joined the Guard for different reasons, and they saw their course more as alternative service than as what critics labeled a draft dodge. Donald Parrish joined the Guard so that he would be able to run the family business. Kent Bischoff recalls that he joined in 1963, before Vietnam was a concern, rather than be drafted. A friend who joined at the same time told him later, in Vietnam, "You know, we were both crazy . . . we could have gone in the Army in '63 and before the war ever started [we could have] been out in '65." Jody Haydon says that he has thought a lot about why he joined the Guard. His mother wanted him to, and he remembers that "those were tough times . . . you were faced with the fact that you might get drafted and then, getting out of college, what kind of job might you get? . . . a lot of decisions — big decisions." As it happened, he joined just in time for the call-up.⁴ One pair of researchers calls the draft system a "generation-wide scramble for survival." General Lewis B. Hershey, the man who supervised that clamber, also had a word for those difficult decisions — "channeling." American youth, by virtue of the draft, were forced to make career decisions so as to serve

² *Louisville Courier Journal*, April 12, 1968.

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population*, Vol. 1, *Characteristics of the Population*, Part 19, *Kentucky* (Washington, D.C., 1973), Table 9, 19-17, Table 10, 19-23; Donald Parrish interview, October 23, 1988, M.I. King Library Special Collections, University of Kentucky. Unless otherwise noted, all future text references attributed to Donald Parrish are from this source.

⁴ Jody Haydon interview, November 4, 1988, M.I. King Library Special Collections, University of Kentucky; Mr. and Mrs. Walter K. Bischoff interview, October 23, 1988, *ibid.*



Courtesy—Lt. Sgt. Joseph P. Simpson

Pfc Larry Keeling and S. Sgt. Joseph Ice fire their .50 caliber machine gun during a mock ambush at Fort Hood, Texas.

the social good. The National Guard was accepted service.⁵

Ordering the Guard to report created consternation and a run on the churches. Within three weeks of the call, six members of Battery C announced engagements to be married before the unit shipped out for Texas. Parrish comments that many of the couples had already planned marriage and just accelerated the timetable, although "I think maybe in a place or two they probably made plans rather quickly."⁶ Mrs. Kent Bischoff, one of the rushed brides, recalls sharing flowers with two other couples; the church did not have enough fresh white runners for the aisles so they turned over one from an earlier ceremony. "So I mean we were getting married left and right."

The Guardsmen of the Louisville Legion accepted the mobilization, but not without a legal fight. Their reluctance to go to Vietnam underscores one of the primary problems of the U.S. military in that war: many soldiers did not believe that the fighting in Vietnam was immediately necessary for American security. No one seriously accuses the Bardstown men of being radicals. Neither is their patriotism easily questioned. Rather, they, along with many other young American men, simply did not see a pressing need to fight, even though they might acknowledge a potential, *theoretical* menace in communism. From Americans called to service, the war generally elicited either unenthusiastic resignation, self-deception about the reality of going to Vietnam, or an active desire to avoid the fight if possible. Most of the men of Battery C and the rest of the 138th persisted in believing, until they were almost there, that they would never actually reach Vietnam. Others either resigned themselves to their fate, reluctantly in most cases, or decided to challenge the call-up in court. Over one hundred of the battalion's Guardsmen ultimately filed suit to stop their unit's activation.⁷ William Johnson, a leader of the movement, made clear the group's

⁵Lawrence Baskir and William Strauss, *Chance and Circumstances: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York, 1978), 35, 15-16.

⁶Bardstown Kentucky Standard, April 18, 25, May 2, 1968, cross-referenced with Battery C roster; Parrish interview.

⁷New York Times, October 18, 1968. The core of the legal question revolved around a 1912 attorney general's opinion that stated that the Constitution restricted state militia to executing laws, suppressing insurrections, and repelling invasions. To evade this, and to make the National Guard more versatile, Congress set up the Army National Guard in 1963 as a parallel institution to the State National Guards. Enlistment in one requires enlistment in

pragmatic, nonmoralistic, middle-American position. "We're speaking out not to oppose the war in Vietnam or America's participation in that war," he said; "we want to present the background of why our call-up was illegal."⁸

The men of Battery C each reacted differently to the legal efforts to keep them at home. Most remember the petitions, and some joined in. Kent Bischoff remembers the organizing meeting, but not who organized it: "We sat there and listened to them that night," he said. "We were interested enough to go and hear what they were saying," but he adds that he never gave the effort much chance of success. He did not join. Donald Parrish, on the other hand, candidly admits that he signed a petition supporting the drive, and he does not see any lack of patriotism among those who did so: "I always thought that justice really got interfered with because of politics in that situation." Today, however, Parrish objects to those interviewers who seem interested only in the petition: "I found that to be very distasteful and really did not want to participate" in anything designed to question the loyalty of the National Guard. Bischoff has been particularly irritated by reporters from the Cable News Network who "were trying to get out of someone an unpatriotic . . . interview. I'll say again, I would go if I was in the unit and I was called again, I'd go." Jody Hayden remembers that the interest lasted for a few weeks and then faded; "the word came back that we had no legal grounds." He adds, "I've often wondered about that though . . . it was never a declared war — for whatever that's worth." The men are loyal to the nation, but at the same time still believe — as they did in 1968 — that Vietnam was the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. In early October, the U.S. Supreme Court set aside court orders blocking overseas shipment of Reserve and Guard units. The Second Battalion arrived in Vietnam later that month. The legal effort ultimately failed two months later. On December 12, 1968, a Federal Court judge denied the petition of the 105 Guardsmen who protested their call-up to fight in a foreign war.⁹ The Supreme

the other, it was technically the Army National Guard that was mobilized. See the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 26, 1968, for more details.

⁸*Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 26, 1968.

⁹*Ibid.*, December 13, 1968. Interestingly, the Bathtown paper, the *Kentucky Standard*, did not report very much on the filing or progress of the lawsuit. See *Kentucky Standard*, September 26, December 12, 1968.



Courtesy of Sgt. Joseph P. Simpson

Two brothers, S. Sgt. Joseph K. Ice and 2d Lt. Thomas R. Ice, both members of Battery C, signed waivers relinquishing their rights to petition for deferments from possible assignment together in Southeast Asia.

Court refused to intervene despite the strong objections of Justice William O. Douglas.¹⁰

Certainly Battery C, though reluctant to go, went with amazing solidarity. Among the 108 men who left for Vietnam, the unit counted seven sets of brothers. According to U.S. law at the time, brothers could not be sent simultaneously to a combat zone; hence, fourteen of the men signed waivers while they were training that June at Fort Hood, Texas, so that they could serve together in Vietnam.¹¹

¹⁰New York Times, December 17, 1968.

¹¹Bardonia Kentucky Standard, June 20, 1968. Accounts of the number of brothers varied from seven to nine. However, I have compiled a list of men serving in Battery C and have gone over it with each of the interviewees in order to pinpoint specific relations among

Bardstown also prepared to send its men to Vietnam, but not without some comforts of home. The local weekly paper, the *Kentucky Standard*, reported that a drive to collect things for the men netted six old-style wringer washing machines, nine refrigerators, a commercial ice machine, chain saws, and assorted odds and ends.¹⁷ Lieutenant Tom McClure, writing the paper with the unit's thanks, reported that Battery C's morale was high.¹⁸ A month later, the Bardstown men scrambled into a Braniff International airplane bound for Vietnam. Jerry Janes remembers getting on the plane:

They told us we were going, but I don't think that any of us ever thought that we'd ever get to that point. In the back of our minds, we thought, well, okay, we were still stateside and we still had a close home connection, and we just never really thought that [it] was going to happen. I guess it dawned on me when we got to the Philippines, and I remember telling Jody Haydon that, you know, I believe we're going over there . . . I think it's true, I think it's right. He said, "I believe we are too."¹⁹

They flew into Da Nang, on the northern part of the South Vietnamese coast. All of the men seem to remember different things about their arrival: the heat, the smell, a surprise inspection — the bodies loaded into the plane behind them. Reality set in.

After its arrival, the Louisville Legion was attached to the 101st Airborne Division in the northernmost military district in South Vietnam, the infamous I Corps. Close to North Vietnam, I Corps had a reputation for bloody action. The battalion set up headquarters at Camp Eagle in Phu Bai, some forty-five miles north of Da Nang. Jody Haydon remembers the regular U.S. Army base camps: they "were almost like a big Boy Scout outing. I couldn't believe how big it all was, how many people there were, the waste of material things." Kent Bischoff recalls the unit's first night at Camp Eagle: "There was an 8-inch firing battery right

members of the unit, I count nine sets of brothers, but only record seven as having gone together. Numerous cousins, in-laws, and so forth also went together.

¹⁷Bardstown *Kentucky Standard*, September 12, 1968; Parrish and Bischoff interviews.

¹⁸Bardstown *Kentucky Standard*, September 19, 1968.

¹⁹Jerry Janes interview, November 11, 1988, M.J. King Library Special Collections, University of Kentucky. Kent Bischoff also remembers that "it didn't really hit me till we landed in the Philippines. . . . It hit me there that we were an hour and a half from Vietnam. . . . I'm going."

across the hill from us, and . . . about the time we got sound asleep — maybe 2:00 or 1:00 in the morning — they'd fire a mission. It would pop those tin roof huts . . . I knew then we were getting it, this was the last day of my life. . . . We gradually worked into it."

The battalion then set up its artillery batteries along strategic Highway 1, Vietnam's main north-south artery. From there its big 155mm guns could hit targets nearly ten miles away; they fired in support of infantry units. Battery C initially operated from a base on Hill 88, a small rise overlooking the flats near Highway 1. Parrish recalls, "We drove there on Thanksgiving Day in the rain. And that was scary because it was new territory, unknown, and a long ways from where everybody else was, and I thought to myself, 'why are we going down there?'"

From the start, Battery C distinguished itself. The men all remember a close-knit, friendly group that differed drastically in that respect from most of the army units. Parrish, for one, cites the hometown camaraderie as one of the reasons that "for four or five weeks out of our one-year tour of duty there, we were named the top firing battery . . . in all of Southeast Asia." The "weekend warriors" basked in their accomplishments, collecting letters of praise such as the one from Major General John M. Wright of the 101st Airborne Division headquarters, who thanked the unit for "accurate, timely, and effective fire."¹⁵ As Captain Tom McClure wrote to the Bardstown newspaper, "We hear comments from the infantry like, 'How do you get those people to work like that?'"¹⁶ And Sammy Filiatreau, a forward observer from the unit, recalled the accuracy of the fire from Battery C. With other units, he said that he had to leave leeway for errors, but with the National Guard batteries he came to expect pinpoint accuracy. They never disappointed him.¹⁷

¹⁵Major General John M. Wright, Jr., 101st Airborne Division, to Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 138th Artillery, Kentucky National Guard, October 13, 1969, 2d Battalion, 138th Artillery, KARNG, folder entitled "138th HQ File," Military Records and Research Branch, Frankfort.

¹⁶Tom McClure to editor, *Bardstown Kentucky Standard*, February 27, 1969.

¹⁷Robert S. Filiatreau interview, November 22, 1988, M.L. King Library Special Collections, University of Kentucky. Filiatreau and Battery C men Samuel R. Boone and David L. Clark went on the longest forward observer mission in the battalion: forty-seven days in the field. "Kentucky Gunners Find Action," *The National Guardsman* (May 1969), 40.

The men give various reasons for their proficiency. It was certainly a homogeneous group, unusual when compared to the run of army units in Vietnam. They were brothers, in-laws, school friends, cousins. "Whenever it came time for a job to get done," Parrish recalls, "everybody pitched in and saw to it that the job got done, and got done well and got done quickly." As Jerry Janes puts it, "I think that, indirectly, everybody was looking out for everybody else." Unlike men in the regular army, the Guardsmen would still be around their fellow servicemen when they returned home; there was no anonymity behind which to shirk. They were also several years older than the average Vietnam soldier. Combat soldiers in Vietnam averaged just over nineteen years old, whereas the men in Battery C "had a little age on them," as Janes recalls. Most were twenty-three to thirty years old. Janes was one of the babies of the unit at twenty-one. As he insists, "that older head makes a difference." Furthermore, the battery had an unusual number of college-degree holders, Jody Haydon among them. Most army units could not boast of that advantage.¹⁸

From Hill 88, Battery C made occasional forays to other places. It participated in operations such as NEVADA EAGLE, KENTUCKY JUMPER, RICHLAND SQUARE, and others with the 101st Airborne.¹⁹ These "shoots" typically lasted a day or two and involved only part of the unit. Battery C also was sent, at first for temporary duty, and later for an extended stay, to a fire base called Tomahawk.²⁰

The men like to remember the good times, fleeting and impressionistic as they now seem, and their recollections illustrate the high morale of the unit. Jody Haydon tried to explain: "Always playing pranks on one another; just anything to make the time go by. Making up tales . . . play[ing] cards, basketball (had a goal . . . set up), volleyball." Don Parrish remembers with glee one outing to the food supply warehouse at Phu Bai. The operators — friendly National Guardsmen — told them, "you'll find the good stuff over there," and then went about business elsewhere. Of course the men

¹⁸For statistics on age, see Josephina Carl, *Lives After Vietnam: The Personal Impact of Military Service* (Lexington, Mass., 1983), 2-3. The average age of World War II soldiers was twenty-seven.

¹⁹Wright to 138th Artillery.

²⁰Parrish and Buschhoff interviews.

from Battery C pillaged some of the officers' stores: "We went over there and we got hamburgers and buns, and I don't know what all. . . . [We] found a refrigerator some place that wasn't being used, took a wire rack out of that and got a barrel and made a grill." They had a party for everyone. Haydon recalls their attitude: "Stealing wasn't stealing in the army. It was survival of the fittest."

Another source of fond recollection came from a special project spearheaded by Tom McClure. Virtually all Vietnam veterans who have written accounts of the war mention the children, the orphanages; most recall trying to do things to help. Battery C was no exception. The Guardsmen usually tried to avoid contact with the Vietnamese civilians ("I didn't trust them," says Jody Haydon), but they made a big exception for the children in a Catholic orphanage near Huế. McClure wrote the Nelson County Jaycees asking them to help with a project to collect clothing for the kids. The group responded by calling for clothing ("only summer clothing is wanted") to be brought to the United Methodist Church in Bardstown. The people there donated some five hundred pounds worth and sent it to Vietnam.² Parrish recalls that it "was really the most touching thing that we did the entire year . . . to see all those kids. . . . There [were] kids there with legs blown off and faces mangled, and all that kind of thing." Haydon recalls it as a moving experience. He still has Christmas cards that he bought from Vietnamese nuns trying to raise money.

The story of the orphanage is just one example of the ties that connected the Guardsmen with home. Among the good things, they especially remember the mail. "Everybody's always homesick in the service," Parrish recalls. "I don't care how much they try to tell you otherwise." And a letter that arrived out in the field "was the little piece of home that would come to meet you." The newlywed Bischoffs wrote each other daily. In fact, the only day Mrs. Bischoff recalls skipping was the day she gave birth to their first daughter; her husband says that receiving her letters was the "highlight of the day." Many of the Guardsmen also sent pictures, sometimes even movies, of where they were, or what they were doing, and the folks at home kept pace by sending little tidbits of luxury in CARE-like packages.

²Bardstown *Kentucky Standard*, January 30, 1969.

This network not only reached from Bardstown to Vietnam, it also worked within Nelson County. Mrs. Bischoff recalls wives' interrelations: "It was unbelievable how many of us were pregnant at this same time, and it was a big support system. We had baby showers one right after the other . . . it kept us all in touch." They also shared letters, pictures, and movies. Whenever any of the wives got a letter, she would phone everyone whose spouse or son or brother was mentioned in the missive. "Cause," she explained, "you'd want them to do the same for you." The women periodically would meet at a local drive-in, where the owner would set up a projector and screen so they could share movies.

But the network encompassed more than just the wives and families helping each other. The entire community helped. From donated appliances to clothing projects to a Jaycee-ette Christmas gift project, Nelson County showed its appreciation for the men in arms.²² It also helped on an individual, personal level. As Mrs. Bischoff says:

To focus in on what a small community can do for you, now, this is really, really nice. He sent me . . . [a portrait painted on silk] for Christmas. Well, it didn't come. Well here we were Christmas Eve, the post offices are closed, and you can imagine — I'm pregnant and depressed. When the post office gets it up there and they realize that it's for one of us girls, and where it's from, they send a guy out in the middle of the night to deliver the picture. And I mean, where else would you get that kind of treatment?

Battery C knew that the support and camaraderie it experienced were not the usual fare. The regular army formed most of its units out of whatever men it had available; as people rotated out, new ones came in. Consequently, there was little continuity or unit cohesiveness. Parrish remembers most army units as "a mish-mash"; he explains, "you've got some good people and you've got some bad people, and some of the bad include some of the screw-ups." As for Haydon, he recollects age as the primary difference between the Guardsmen and regular army soldiers. "A lot of the other fellows were just drafted right out of high school or whatever the case might be — eighteen, nineteen years old." These soldiers were usually "looking for action in whatever form. . . . I'd never

been around marijuana to speak of before, and certainly never been around the other drugs." The army's extensive drug problem among encamped units in Vietnam is well documented.²⁵ The men of Battery C do not recall any significant drug use among the Guardsmen, although they do admit that some tried marijuana.

Even some of the other National Guard units did not have the kind of support and élan that Battery C experienced. Parrish remembers that "the guys from Louisville [the Service Battery] had nothing because that community is too anonymous, it's too big." The Guardsmen might know each other, but families did not, and there was no community that knew all of them. Hence Battery C, almost unique among units in Vietnam, had a number of advantages: age, education, family ties, community support, relative sobriety, homogeneity. They worked well and efficiently together, and generally outperformed the army units around them.

The U.S. military, however, had no choice but to undermine Battery C's advantages. Vietnam was a war of containment within the context of the cold war. The object in Vietnam, therefore, was not the defeat of the communist enemy in North Vietnam, but his containment — indefinitely. U.S. soldiers could not have sustained morale if they had been drafted for the duration of such a war. And voters in the U.S. would also be loath to sacrifice their sons, husbands, brothers, and friends for that kind of war, especially when others, given exemption from the draft, were not required to make any sacrifice. Therefore, the military instituted a 365-day tour of duty to sustain morale at the front and to spread more equitably the burden at home. Each soldier knew that he would have only one year in Vietnam.

As a result of the rotation of personnel, the army faced the prospect that one year after the arrival of the Louisville Legion, its departure would leave the area it served without effective, practiced artillery support. To soften the impact of the battalion's exit, the army instituted what it called "infusion." This program involved uprooting some of the Guardsmen and distributing them throughout other units in the country; at the same time, it necessitated replacing the Guardsmen who were shuffled out with regular GI's. The army could thus avoid having an entire battalion-level operation disrupted when the Guardsmen left.

²⁵See, for example, Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978).

Strategically, in consideration of the nature of the war and the lack of public support, the military had no choice about rotation. But that policy hurt the war effort. Military critics malign the twelve-month limit, although none doubt that it did boost morale — albeit in a personal sense, not a collective one. One critic succinctly noted, “We don’t have twelve years’ experience in Vietnam. We have one year’s experience twelve times over.”²⁴

Tactically, the army also had little choice about infusion, given the rotation policy. But these programs hurt Battery C’s effort. Battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cundiff said at the time that “infusion *is* something we can live with”;²⁵ however, he had to admit later that most of the battalion’s accomplishments took place before infusion.²⁶ It simply hurt combat effectiveness.

Jerry Janes remembers infusion as “a sad time.” He (and it would seem all of the men) did recognize the program as necessary at the time, and today everyone believes that Bardstown’s losses in Vietnam would have been greater had the program not been in effect. Still “we hated to see it happen.” He says that morale began to drop as the infusion program evolved. Haydon recalls a sort of resignation; the unit accepted the new people, and the Guardsmen who left “didn’t look forward to shipping out to other units, but accepted it.” He says that the men who came into Battery C found the presence of the Guardsmen in Vietnam somewhat humorous — the “weekend warriors” were on duty in Vietnam. Parrish is more emphatic about the detrimental effects of infusion on Battery C’s performance: “I do know that when some of these Regular Army guys were on guard duty that there was a lot of sleeping going on; I know that for a fact.” Haydon maintains that the National Guardsmen, by contrast, were cautious on guard duty, that they looked out for each other. The GI’s infused into Battery C were not “bad” soldiers; in fact, Bischoff remembers them as being well above par for the army in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the infusion program worked against Battery C. The newcomers could not replace the friends from home. The spell was broken.

²⁴Ibid. 118.

²⁵“Kentucky Gunners Find Action,” 40.

²⁶Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cundiff to Colonel Shelham, Department of the Army, Office of Reserve Components, December 20, 1972 (copy), in author’s possession.

Another policy worked to the detriment of Battery C, that of rotating company and battery commanders at six-month intervals. The regimen made sense to the military, which perceived a need for as many experienced company-level commanders as possible, but it often degenerated into "ticket punching"—an officer's accumulation of command tours to aid in future promotions. To the men on the guns, this parade of commanding officers—some of whom no doubt were thinking largely of their careers—did not help. One battery commander, an enthusiastic army man named Lyle Thompson, had gone out in a small helicopter to scout for targets—in a dense fog. The chopper crashed, presumably after being hit. Thompson died. As Jody Haydon recalls, "He was a real gung-ho type fellow, which is a shame, it really is . . . shouldn't have been flying in that kind of weather."²⁷ A quick sequence of commanders replaced Thompson; Bischoff generalized that they were more interested in body counts of enemy dead than doing mundane things such as "getting that perimeter in shape."

With infusion well under way, Battery C moved to Tomahawk Hill in May 1969, this time to set up a permanent fire base. But it was not the same unit that had set records from Hill 88. Parrish describes Fire Support Base Tomahawk as a position in relatively low ground between a mountain range and a rise that overlooked rice paddies and the South China Sea. Bischoff recalls arriving there. The place, he says, was a "garbage dump." Highway 1 passed just to the east. The base perimeter was a rough oval with the guns ranged around it; each gun crew had a bunker nearby. On the east end of the oval, at the top of the rise, the 101st Airborne maintained a small base of its own out of which infantry units operated; it also had a guard bunker on the other end. The mess hall and maintenance building hugged the perimeter on the southeast end, while the nerve center of the battery—Fire Direction Control, the Communications bunker, the Executive Post—formed the northeastern section. Pictures of the hill reveal rugged terrain, with foggy haze blanketing the rice paddies below. As if portending trouble, the advance party received incoming mortar rounds on its first night at Tomahawk.²⁸ But Battery C soon

²⁷Haydon interview; Battery C, 2d Battalion, 138th Artillery, Unit History filed by Thomas F. Ballard, January 29, 1971, Military Records and Research Branch, Frankfurt.

²⁸Haydon interview.

installed itself and began routine firing missions.

Perhaps they became lax. If so, Battery C was certainly no more so than the rest of the army in Vietnam; the point is that policies and circumstances had eroded that special élan, that unique edge they enjoyed when they arrived. The Second Battalion had taken very few casualties. Battery C lost Harold Brown on June 11, but that was while he was away with another army unit. They also had lost Captain Thompson. But that was the extent of their casualties to that point. And the officers, heads no doubt spinning from the revolving door of command, did not do more than organize a minimal perimeter. Bischoff recalls that, as supply sergeant, he had obtained all sorts of "extras" to fortify the position — Phu gas (a type of napalm), claymore mines, rockets, mines, and so forth — that would have been used in the days when the Guard unit was at its peak. Instead, they stayed piled up in one place, unused.

On the night of June 19, 1969, most of the men crowded into the maintenance building to watch the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*. Things seemed to be going well for the battery. Only a few days before they had staged their raid on the officers' club supplies and had a barbecue party. That night they had a new, first-run movie to watch. (The film had been in Bardstown only five months before.)²⁸ A heavy rain poured down outside.

Unknown to the men, specially trained soldiers from the Seventy-second Sapper Company, Fourth North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment, wearing only underwear, guns, ammunition, and explosives, used the cover of the heavy rain to slip through the base perimeter and hide. As the 101st Divisional Command put it, "Enemy elements — as was indicated in later prisoner of war interrogation and captured documents — had made a thorough reconnaissance of the fire base for several days to detect weak spots in the perimeter's defenses."²⁹ None of the men has any doubt about why: Battery C had caused a lot of trouble for the Vietcong and NVA, and they simply decided to take the unit out of action.³⁰

²⁸*Ibid.*; Parrish interview; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 144; Bardstown *Kentucky Standard*, December 1968 - January 1969 movie advertisements, *passim*.

²⁹"Operational Report - Lessons Learned. After Action Report," 101st Airborne Division, 10-11, Box "Vietnam," Melvin Zais Papers, Manuscript Archives Division, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

³⁰Parrish interview.

"This was probably the unit that was doing the most damage to them . . . I know of one twenty-four hour period on Hill 88 they fired a thousand rounds; that's a hell of a lot of ammunition," Bischoff points out. And, of course, the layout and location of Tomahawk, bordered as it was by high ground, no doubt provided further incentive to strike.

The sappers waited until the early-morning hours. Tommy Raisor, on duty in Fire Direction Control (FDC), had gone about his normal routine. Just after 1:30 A.M., he got up and turned off the generator that had been recharging the radio batteries; when he did so, several lights in the compound went out. The NVA knew the base routine, and as he went back into the sleeping bunker adjoining FDC to wake up the next shift, outside a red flare shot up into the night sky.³² Meanwhile, David Collins had gone to the mess area for coffee that the cooks left out at night. He may well have been the first to realize that something was amiss, that there were people nearby him who were not Americans. Just before the red flare went up to signal the attack, he apparently tried to sound the alarm.³³ The NVA shot him down. The attack began, at 1:45 A.M. As Raisor reached down to awaken Donald Parrish, "all hell broke loose."³⁴ Jody Haydon remembers waking up in the FDC sleeping section to the sound of people yelling and screaming; he says it was more nightmare than reality for a few moments. Guardsmen tumbled out of bed while other men from the unit ran into FDC for safety.

Within moments, sappers used a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) to blow up the 101st infantry position on the western end of the perimeter. The RPGs resembled bazookas and could even penetrate armor plate, meaning that they could knock out the howitzers. But over in Number 1 Gun, Janes assumed that they were taking mortar fire. "We took three rounds in the side of this gun, . . . one of which was an RPG round. We took two at the bottom of the track, and I thought, 'God, these mortars are close.'" When he reached out to close the turret hatches and button up the gun, he saw the attackers. "I pulled the hatch on and told the guys,

³²*Ibid.*; Donald Parrish interview [conducted by Terry L. Birdwhistell, 1985], Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, M.L. King Library Special Collections, University of Kentucky (hereafter Parrish interview [1985]).

³³Haydon interview.

³⁴Parrish interview; Parrish interview [1985].

"Gooks in the perimeter, get your rifles." At that point, Number 1 Gun had three explosive rounds and two illumination rounds, so they quickly fired both of the illumination rounds — straight up. As he recalls, "we were punching rounds in that tube as the breech was slamming on it and the tube going up." With some light overhead, Janes peered out of the hatch: "There were gooks, gooks were all over the place."

The Number 1 crew had to evacuate their gun. They had run out of ammunition and had no viable targets. Even worse, they were taking direct RPG rounds. If one of them penetrated and detonated a remaining powder charge, the men would be incinerated in a flash. As Janes recalls, two of the men did not want to leave and would not open the rear door. He said, " 'We've got to get out of this gun, got to get out!' Because there were powder charges in it and we didn't have any rounds, we couldn't fire it. If we [had] stayed in there and . . . taken the right hit, wouldn't any of us [have] got out of there." They escaped, and the other men made it to a nearby bunker, but a satchel charge thrown by one of the NVA soldiers exploded close enough to leave Janes himself dazed. He somehow wandered into a pile of barbed wire near the bunker. With only a .45 caliber pistol, he looked up and saw three NVA on the other side of the wire. Fire from Ronald E. Simpson of Number 3 Gun saved his life.

Meanwhile, when the firing started, Section Chief Jim Moore woke up instantly and ran for his gun, Number 3. Then the crew buttoned up the gun and started firing, again assuming that the explosions were mortar rounds. But after only a few rounds, Moore realized that this was no mortar attack. Like Janes, he knew then that he would have to evacuate the gun. Yet, even as he pushed his men out the door, the NVA got a good hit with an RPG. It barely penetrated the armor, but the hot metal touched off one of the powder charges stored inside. The resulting flash explosion blew up the gun and burned virtually all of Moore's body. Somehow he lived through it, and one of his men led him to Fire Direction Control.³⁵ Parrish recalls his arrival:

Somebody had led him in, and I could tell — you know there was just virtually no light other than the gun flashes — and I could tell by the shape, the

³⁵Janes, Bischoff, and Parrish interviews.

shape of the body who it was. . . . I knew there was something wrong, but I couldn't tell what it was. And as I touched his back, his skin came off on my hand and that smell hit me like you wouldn't believe. And he said to me, "Donald, I'm burnt up."

Haydon strained to convey the essence of the fighting: "There was so much havoc and gun burst, and there was just so much excitement until daylight." He took a machine gun and stood by one of the two doors to FDC; he simply fired toward a breach in the perimeter. "We might have been doing all the shooting ourselves, I don't know . . . you were just shooting into the dark. It was like, the lights were just like you were in a room with thousands of flash bulbs going off. And you couldn't see anything long enough to see if it was a good guy or a bad guy, so you just [shot]." Tommy Raiser stayed at the radio all night calling in support; helicopter gunships came and added to the noise and flashes. Parrish remembers seeing the NVA sappers running from point to point within the perimeter throwing satchel charges at bunkers and shooting the RPGs. He also recalls that when they built the FDC bunker into the hillside at Tomahawk, "we all agreed that we needed to go one more layer of sandbags on the roof. Curious thing is that the two required layers were not enough." Two direct hits on the FDC roof tore through two layers of sandbags; the third held. "It was quite a noise inside," he says, and one 12 x 12-inch beam splintered under the impact, but it did not fall.

The men recall their thoughts during the attack. Parrish thought, "My God, are we going to get out of this?" He saw over forty people, many wounded, crowded into the FDC bunker, one of the few bunkers that survived essentially intact. Haydon, for his part, believed that most of them would die.

The firing lasted until morning, although the NVA no doubt pulled out some time before light. Both Parrish and Janes recall a captured NVA lieutenant who said that they originally planned to use three hundred men. Janes is certain that had they used that many they could have wiped out the entire base and everyone there. In actuality, they attacked with an estimated 150 men and did much damage. The lieutenant also reported that the NVA commander had fired a green flare, signaling retreat, even while the sappers were still wreaking havoc.

With dawn, and the end of the fighting, medevac helicopters flew the many wounded, included Jerry Janes, to hospitals. The

wounded veteran now recalls that the attendant on the helicopter wanted to take his rifle, but after all he had gone through without a rifle in hand, Janes was not about to surrender it. He was still scared. When the man told him that he would be going home, Janes would not believe the news: "I didn't think it [my injury] was as bad as it was." Finally, when he was persuaded to take a shower, he found out how badly he was hurt; he was then willing to let his gun out of his sight and ready to believe that he would be sent home.

The NVA sappers killed David Collins. Jim Moore, burned severely, died three days later on a hospital ship off the coast near DaNang. Ronnie McIlvoy was blown up by a satchel charge. Ronald E. Simpson, after having saved Jerry Janes with his cover fire, was himself killed. Luther Chapel, in from Battery A, also died from gunfire. (Jim Ray had been killed with another unit prior to Tomahawk.) Overall, five Guardsmen and four other army men died that night; nineteen Guardsmen and twenty other army men were wounded. The attack on Fire Support Base Tomahawk claimed forty-eight casualties — roughly 50 percent of the soldiers there.³⁶

After the attack was essentially over, but with everyone still cooped up in FDC, Parrish recalls that he heard Jody Haydon say, "This is really going to kill Bardstown."³⁷ He was right. Mrs. Bischoff remembers it vividly:

The day we found out that they had been hit, it started real early in the morning. I was living alone with my infant daughter, and we lived next door to one of the boys that was hit and his brother was killed — Wayne Collins and his brother David Collins. His [Wayne's] wife Mary was living at home with her family, and very early in the morning — it surprised me how early they started coming around, maybe six o'clock — the youngest daughter came over and knocked on my door and woke me up. Of course it scared me . . . she said, "I just have to get away from home, things are so bad, everybody's crying. . . ." That was the first clue I had that there was trouble, and of course she told me that Mary's husband had been hit and that Patsy's husband was dead.

Mrs. Bischoff called her best friend — soon to be Jerry Janes's wife — who had discovered something in a newspaper, an inci-

³⁶Parrish interview; Harold Loy to editor, *Bardstown Kentucky Standard*, July 17, 1968.

³⁷Parrish interview; Parrish interview (1995).

dental mention that Tomahawk Hill had been hit. Further news was unavailable. She explains the feeling: "For lack of a better way of describing it, and I've never thought of it before, but it would be like if you were sitting there and you knew the atom bomb was headed your way, and you just sat there. . . . You were frightened that somebody was going to pull in the driveway." The army officers, traveling in pairs, made three stops that morning. They stopped personally to inform relatives of a death; injuries warranted only a telegram. Fortunately, Mrs. Bischoff got a letter from her husband — "[I]t was just a two-line letter telling me that he was all right, but that something horrible had happened and he would write as soon as he could." The wives stayed by their phones, and "nobody left their house the entire day."

Confusion reigned in the community for several days. On June 26, the *Kentucky Standard* still did not have accurate information. One of the dead was listed as missing; another man who had died was listed as injured. But the feeling came through. The newspaper succinctly reported that "hearts are heavy here." By July 3, the next issue, the story was complete. Three bodies had already been returned, and two more were expected soon. Nelson County flew its flags at half-mast for the memorial service scheduled on the Fourth of July, and Bardstown Mayor Guthrie Wilson and County Judge James Sutherland declared a week of mourning.³⁶

CBS television filmed the memorial service held in the Bardstown High School auditorium. More than eight hundred people packed in to pay their respects to the dead and sing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." David Collins's grieving widow probably drew the most sympathy; their son was born just a few days before the service, ten days after his father's death at Tomahawk. Mayor Wilson read the names of those from Nelson County who had died in Vietnam — an honor roll, he called it — and Judge Sutherland read the eulogy. He solemnly concluded, "None of us shall ever forget what they did there."³⁷

Bardstown buried its dead, and Battery C came home a few months later. They spent the months after Tomahawk in relative security at the base near Phu Bai, essentially counting down the days. But not much of the original unit remained by then. Alto-

³⁶*Bardstown Kentucky Standard*, July 3, 1969.

³⁷*Ibid.*, July 17, 1969.



LEGEND

INDEX	POSITION	INDEX	POSITION
A	Artillery Command Post Bunker	J	Personnel Bunker
A1	Perimeter Bunker	K	Personnel Bunker
A2	Perimeter Bunker	L	Personnel Bunker
A3	Perimeter Bunker	M	Five NVA KIA
A4	Perimeter Bunker	N	One NVA PW
A5	Perimeter Bunker	O	One NVA KIA
B	Mess Hall	P	One NVA KIA
C	Maintenance Tent	Q	Personnel Bunker
D	Medic Bunker	R	Motor Park
E	Personnel Bunker Gun #2	S	Personnel Bunker
F	Fire Direction Control Bunker	T	M577 Command Post Carrier
G	Executive Officer's Post	U	Personnel Bunker
H	Communications Bunker	V	Personnel Bunker
I	Perimeter Bunker	W	Sapper Attack Route
I1	Perimeter Bunker	X	Sapper Attack Route
I2	Perimeter Bunker	Y	Sapper Attack Route
I3	Perimeter Bunker	Z	Sapper Attack Route
I4	Perimeter Bunker	aa	Personnel Bunker
I5	Perimeter Bunker		
I6	Perimeter Bunker		

gether, Nelson County lost sixteen of its young men in Vietnam, possibly the highest per-capita loss suffered by any community in that war.⁴⁰

Perhaps the tragedy of fire base Tomahawk could not have been prevented, but surely the factor contributing most to the disaster illustrates a major part of the army's weakness in Vietnam. The war could not generate enthusiasm among soldiers, as demonstrated by the lawsuit. Even Jerry James, who was not a party to that case, expressed the muted feeling: "I was a red, white, and blue guy. I felt this is what I've got to do. I really didn't want to, but this is what I got to do, so I'll do it." Such were the limits of ardor in one of the best combat units in Vietnam.

Then, with a good unit in operation, and proficiency and accuracy prevailing, the army had to undermine the foundation of that unit's performance in order to operate within the parameters of cold war strategy. The army required seasoned commanders, so it needed to rotate them. And it also had to have experienced enlisted men, which meant that it had to have infusion. But one cannot place all blame for the tragedy at Tomahawk on that program. In the short run, at least, everyone figured that it cut Bardstown's losses by half. Nonetheless with more people concerned about their neighbor's safety, and with commanders more sensitive to their men than to body counts, it seems plausible to argue that the NVA attack might have been less successful.

The failure at Tomahawk ultimately stems from the nation's inability to see war in Vietnam as a vital interest. And inasmuch as infusion contributed to the disaster at Tomahawk, that debacle resulted, not from a failure of will on Battery C's part, but from the *nation's* lack of will. Critics within the military establishment point to the nation's lack of resolve, and the refusal or inability of politicians to "mobilize public opinion" and "invoke the national will."⁴¹ Such critics believe, among other things, that President Lyndon Johnson could have obtained a declaration of war in 1965

⁴⁰The names are listed on the monument at the courthouse in Bardstown. The per-capita losses of Nelson County, Kentucky, are approximately equal to those of the Irish enclaves of South Boston. Hair-splitting statistical analysis is stymied by problems of the definition of "community." In reality, it is pointless. Both communities lost men at a rate close to twenty times the national average.

⁴¹See especially Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1984).



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES ARMY VIETNAM
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY COMMANDING GENERAL
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96319



AVHGC

25 October 1969

SUBJECT: Letter of Appreciation

Commanding Officer
4d Battalion, 118th Field Artillery
(180 SP)
Louisville, Kentucky

1. The officers and men of the 4d Battalion, 118th Field Artillery were called to active duty from their civilian occupations in the Louisville, Kentucky area on 11 May 1968. The efficiency for which your unit had previously been noted was soon displayed on active duty. From your accomplishments as a National Guard unit, through your duty stations with the XXIV Corps, Republic of Vietnam, your professional attitude and high standards of performance were continually maintained.

2. From the time the first rounds were fired on 11 November 1968, the 4d Battalion provided effective and responsive artillery support for the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in combat operations such as Nevada Eagle, Helical Bats and Kentucky Jumper. With your firing batteries deployed at various fire support bases such as Azalea, Sam and Tomahawk, your ability to function as a team greatly enhanced the overall support effort in I Corps Tactical Zone and reflected most favorably on the ability of National Guard units to meet effectively the challenges of a combat zone.

3. You departed the United States Army Vietnam on 12 October 1969 to return once again to your civilian lives. The manner in which you performed your duties is highly commendable and is in keeping with the highest traditions of your unit, the State of Kentucky, and the United States Army. I thank you for your efforts, sacrifices, and accomplishments in answering the call to active duty.

Frank T. Milbren
FRANK T. MILBREN
Lieutenant General, US Army
Deputy Commanding General

of 1966, an act that would have energized the nation.

Such a stand assumes first that Congress directly represents the explicit intent of the people. That is hardly the case in reality, where the people are not exceedingly explicit. Rather, Congress balances the desires of competing interest groups in very large — and certainly heterogeneous — districts. Only the most vocal groups are heard most of the time. Second, such criticism fails to recognize that the people are independent actors, not simply putty to be molded by leaders in Washington. Criticism of the president for failure to “mobilize public opinion” and thereby unify the nation assumes that somehow he *could* have done so. What if the people simply refused to be molded? Third, these critics neglect to point out that, when given a choice at the polls, the people consistently voted for the perceived peace candidate. In 1964, they rejected the warhawk Barry Goldwater, and in 1968 they voted for Richard Nixon, who claimed to have a peace plan. (Hubert Humphrey’s campaign began to gather momentum in the closing weeks of the 1968 campaign, only after he began to take a peace stand.)

What went wrong inside Vietnam, and why the nation did not mobilize fully for war, are perhaps not the most relevant questions in regard to America’s military failure there. A more important inquiry is why the American political system propagated a war that Americans ultimately did not want to fight. As a case in point, while Battery C did not oppose the war, it certainly did not care to support it either. Like present-day critics, political and military leaders of the Vietnam era apparently mistook, with tragic results, the lack of opposition among such groups to mean outright support. This politics of acquiescence cannot be the foundation for something as serious as a war; consent cannot be construed as approval. The story of Battery C would ultimately lead one to question America’s military effectiveness in wars of containment which lack a clear and present danger to unify the nation.

As for Battery C, the men express some bitterness about the experience. In the words of Jody Haydon, “when you see people hurt, *why* is a real big word.” But he also says that he would not trade his war experiences for anything. In the end, Haydon’s ambiguity reflects that of the United States before, during, and — now — after the fight in Vietnam: “I don’t feel it’s for me to say whether it was right or wrong. After all these years, I’m still not sure. . . . I just accept the situation: it’s history.”