



Battles Like These Don't Happen Every Day
The Forgotten Story of Alabama Vietnam
War Hero Robert Lee Hilley

*A soldier's letters home from Vietnam reflect one Alabamian's
final days—and his acts of courage.*

By Randy and Roxanne Mills



ALABAMA LOST 1,208 MEN IN THE VIETNAM WAR. Sadly, the in-depth stories of so many of these men have been lost or forgotten with the passage of time. However, we recently discovered Alabama native Robert “Bob” Lee Hilley’s story while working on another writing project about the Vietnam War. In 2005 we were given access to a large volume of letters that an Indiana soldier, Richard “Dick” Wolfe, and his family exchanged while he served in Vietnam. From these letters and other sources, we constructed the book *Summer Wind: A Soldier’s Road from Indiana to Vietnam*. In letters home Wolfe frequently mentioned Hilley, revealing how the two young men shared many days of hardship, fear, hope, and boredom before both men died while fighting side by side at the battle of Xom Bung on January 6, 1968. Other sources we uncovered and studied in writing the book—such as personal letters from other Alpha Company members, official documents, and personal interviews—helped fill out the story of Hilley’s last few dramatic and heroic hours.

Hilley was a dark-haired youth with a big smile and a shock of hair that always seemed to be hanging across his forehead. He was also typical of so many young American males in the late 1960s who lived in or near rural areas. Raised in Etowah County, Alabama, near the city of Attalla, he grew up loving muscle cars and all things mechanical, in addition to having a strong interest in hunting and guns. Not particularly interested in school work, Hilley dropped out of high school before graduating, and seeing he would likely be drafted, he volunteered for the army in 1967.



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE: *Bob Hilley (left) and friend Dick Wolfe pictured with captured enemy weapons. The many letters and photos Wolfe sent to his family in Indiana offer a powerful window into the lives of these two men and their Alpha Company comrades. (All photos courtesy Randy and Roxanne Mills unless otherwise indicated)* OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW: *Hilley was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his actions at the Battle of Xom Bung, Vietnam. (Public Domain)* ABOVE: *Bob Hilley squats in front of the mortar in which Dick Wolfe has just dropped a shell.*

Hilley arrived in Vietnam on March 1, 1967, and was quickly assigned to the 1st Division, the famous “Big Red One,” joining Alpha Company of the 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment. The Big Red One’s sector of responsibility in Vietnam included a dangerous area north of Saigon and west to the border of Cambodia. Alpha Company spent most of its time in the area of Highway 13, better known as Thunder Road because of the wealth of enemy landmines the Viet Cong (VC) planted nightly along its track. Hilley and his Alpha Company comrades lived in small primitive base camps in the isolated and rugged field. In these crude circumstances, a new soldier likely thought he had simply dropped off the face of the earth. As one Vietnam veteran who had spent time in the field recalled, “There was nothing familiar out there where we were, no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers.” To any American soldier, this remote and alien place was “an ethical and geographical wilderness.”

Hilley was only twenty years old when he came into Alpha Company, but his generosity, mechanical skills, and easygoing ways soon led to his being chosen as the leader of

a four-man squad in the mortar platoon. His primary role involved carefully and continuously resetting the angle of the mortar for each firing mission. Always light-hearted and joking, he told fellow Fourth Platoon members that his main ambition was to return home to Attalla after the war and use his hard-earned money to buy a revved-up new car to run whiskey. One Fourth Platoon soldier remembered Hilley as quiet but “a great guy, very cool and funny. He would do anything to help you.” Along with his natu-

ral demeanor, letters from a girl back home likely helped the Alabama soldier stay in relatively good spirits.

A new soldier soon learned the special lingo of the hardened old timers—terms such as FNG, di di, and DEROS. The latter eventually became supremely important to Hilley, as it denoted one’s “date of expected return from overseas.” Much has been written about how the DEROS process affected American soldiers’ overall fighting spirit. The policy deemed that soldiers had to spend a single year in Vietnam, and they were often excluded from combat as the time drew near

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for their leaving. Officers in the field usually respected this policy for both morale and practical reasons. Those soldiers who had a few weeks left in Vietnam were more likely not to take chances in combat, to the possible detriment of their fellow soldiers.

Hilley would also discover that the Vietnam War had a much different rhythm than other American wars he had heard about. Vietnam began with the promise of an enemy easily subdued and a people saved. It was presented as a modern, effective mobile war, with the sky filled by nimble darting helicopters that transported troops quickly to the field to overwhelm a surprised enemy. Over time, however, the war evolved into the bitter repeated story of taking a village, a hamlet, or a hill at a great loss of life, then giving up the hard-won ground shortly thereafter.

When Hilley arrived at Alpha Company in early March 1967, the unit was beginning to see heavy action. The division operated in an area that had provided a refuge for Communist insurgents for over twenty years, and in February the 1st Division leadership decided to do something about it. The three-month period that followed witnessed one of the largest American operations of the war, Operation Junction City, and Alpha Company was right in the middle of the action. During the operation, Hilley and his Alpha Company comrades would leave their primitive company-sized base during the day to carry out physically draining sweeps, looking to find enemy supply caches but mostly trying to make contact with the enemy. The company experienced an increased number of casualties during this time, along with some success in finding large stashes of enemy supplies. Eventually, however, the savvy VC responded to Alpha Company's search-and-destroy tactic by staying out of sight during the day, melting back into the small villages that dotted the countryside, or hiding in remote, well-concealed bunker systems. They used brief sniper ambushes and short nighttime mortar attacks, as well as an array of booby traps, to harass Alpha Company and keep them off balance. This strategy was practiced throughout Vietnam, resulting in an American casualty rate that, according to Vietnam veteran and writer Tobias Wolff, seemed to take "one man at a time, at a pace almost casual."



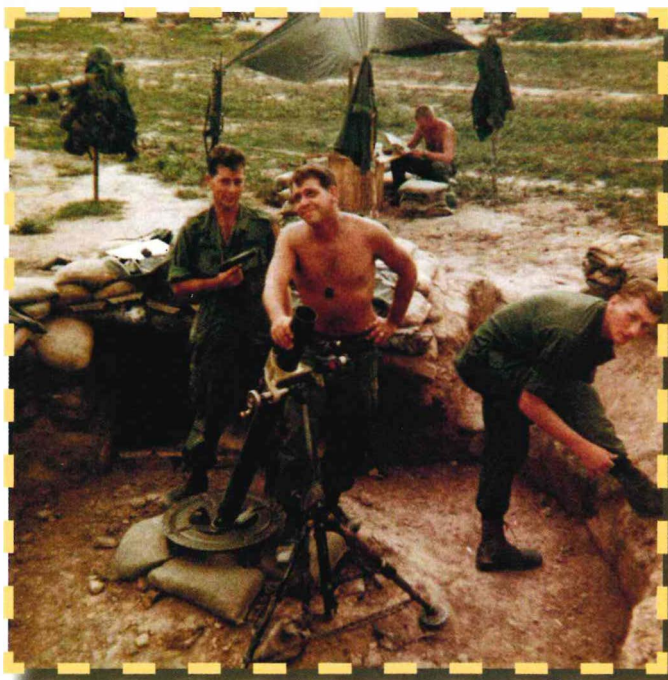
By the beginning of May 1967, Alpha Company saw less enemy activity, and a deceptive lull set in. A month later Hilley celebrated his twenty-first birthday. In early July several new men joined the company, including a soldier from Indiana, Dick Wolfe, who was assigned to Hilley's mortar squad group and whose arrival would have a great impact on Hilley's life. Wolfe frequently wrote his family and friends back home, sending dozens of photos with his letters. Taken together, these items conveyed in great detail the day-to-day aspects of combat in Vietnam. The harsh living conditions soldiers faced, for example, were mentioned in almost every letter Wolfe sent home. In one, he wrote:

Well, it is raining all the time now and muddy as hell. It is terrible. This is the first time I have been able to write for a while because our tent blew down in a rain storm the first day here and it leaked so bad the second day we couldn't get our writing paper out. We have walked through mud for three solid days now and it is getting old. I have walked through swamps filled with leaches [sic] and snakes you wouldn't believe. One we walked through last week was over waist high and murky with orange water. Talk about nasty.

ONE OF WOLFE'S FIRST LETTERS HOME ALSO dramatically described the typical frustrating fighting conditions he and Hilley experienced when trying to engage the enemy:

We went out today and got hit pretty hard. Usually we walk in but today we had a helicopter assault and Charlie didn't have time to run so he had to fight. We no more than hit the ground and got mortared and rocketed and small arms fire. We didn't have any holes to get into. That was bad. We caught three VC running through the jungle. A burst of twenty from an M16 stopped them dead in their tracks and we caught two more that surrendered. The rest got away. We were lucky—one casualty. Nothing serious. That's the trouble over here. You just can't see nothing. I was taking fire and naturally I shot back but you never find anything. I turned the barrel on my M16 white hot and smoking. Well, we swept the area and found nothing, as usual, so the choppers picked us up and away we went.

The letters illustrate how Wolfe and Hilley became good friends. Wolfe voiced his great concern to his family, for example, over some sad news his new friend had received: "By the way, Bob Hilley, a buddy I told you about who I sleep with



OPPOSITE PAGE: Bob Hilley, top left, and some of his mortar crew. ABOVE: Hilley playfully points a pistol at his friend, Dick Wolfe. ABOVE RIGHT: Hilley, Fernando Carson, and Wolfe prepare their sleeping quarters at a small fire base.

in our tent, got a Dear John letter yesterday. I sure felt sorry for him. He is a really nice guy and I try to help him whenever I can." In another letter, this one to his brother, Joe, Dick speaks of Hilley again and of the unexpected dangers Alpha Company men occasionally stumbled upon:



Well Joe, I guess you have been looking at the pictures I send home all the time. A friend of mine, Bob Hilley, takes black and white pictures and talk about combat looking. I carry my camera wherever I go in an extra ammo pouch in a plastic bag, even on patrols. Hilley and I also found a 155 [artillery] round booby trap today. It would have made a fine picture but I was out of film. Sorry.

The budding friendship is also seen in the great number of photos Wolfe sent home to his family. In many of these snapshots, Wolfe and Hilley are often shown goofing around in their crude Alpha Company base camp. These posed photos actually belied the dangers the young soldiers faced, perhaps as an attempt to reassure family back home.

By November Alpha Company was seeing more aggressive enemy activity. This trend continued into December 1967, as Hilley's magical DEROS date was growing closer. Just before Christmas, Wolfe wrote his brother, Joe, about a mortar fire support mission and Hilley's part in it:

We got a new sight for our mortars with the numbers on it backwards. The sarge tried to explain it to us but finally

The company commander, waving a sheet of paper he had just received, patiently pointed out that the date was incorrect and that the company was short and needed his presence.

walked off and said, "I sure hope we don't get a fire mission tonight," and just laughed. Reading the sight numbers in the dark is hard enough for Hilley but when the numbers are backwards, damn! Of course, we got a fire mission. Hilley finally gave our backward sight to Sergeant Leftwich at 2 or 3 in the morning and told him we weren't going to use ... [it]. Haha.

By this time, constant patrolling in the daytime and mortar firing missions at night were wearing the mortar platoon out. After returning from an especially long, grueling tramp, Wolfe wrote his mother, "This is the tireddest I've been for a long time. Ambush all night. 100 percent awake. Then, 9 clicks out and 10 clicks back through rice paddies and jungles. But I figure I'd better write." Wolfe wrote his last letter to his family just before he left for the fateful Xom Bung search-and-destroy mission. Alpha Company members assumed the sweep would amount to a relatively safe patrol, the company having seen no sign of the enemy a few days before in the same area.

As was often the case, Hilley's name pops up in the letter.

Hilley is leaving tomorrow to go home. But they got his DEROS date mixed up. They have him down for 7 days left in country. We hope he makes it. He's about to go wild. Phase I is on the radio, Oldies but Goodies and I have a radio Hilley gave me.... Get this. In two days we are going to air assault to have an ambush in the Iron Triangle. Sounds like a thriller. "OH!" Hope I break a leg between now and then. If we get hit, there won't be any help. We will be too far from camp. Well, time to pull guard.

ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 6, 1968, HILLEY, Wolfe, and the rest of Alpha Company began what everyone hoped would be an uneventful search-and-destroy sweep near the small village of Xom Bung. Hilley had hotly argued with the company commander about going on the march, pointing out that he should be excused due to his DEROS date. The company commander, waving a sheet of paper he had just received, patiently pointed out that the date was incorrect and that the company was short and needed his presence. Several other soldiers tried to ease Hilley's worries, noting aloud that

the company had patrolled the same area three days before and had not seen a single sign of the enemy's presence. Hilley finally relented, but he fumed as he boarded the helicopter. The sun was just appearing on the eastern horizon as the helicopters began lifting Alpha Company into the air.

Once airborne, some of the Alpha Company men dangled their legs off the choppers' sides and smoked as they watched the green jungles and brown rice paddies slide by. From above, the scenery below was deceptively peaceful and idyllic, the distances lost in blue mist. The helicopters were in the air for about twenty minutes before they began their circling descents. Stomachs now tightened, and certain parts of the landscape caught the soldiers' attention. Below lay a geometric-looking set of rice paddies that bordered a patch of jungle. A rough, sinister trail snaked up a hill past a dilapidated-looking cemetery and disappeared into thick foliage. Immediately to the company's north loomed a larger, heavily tangled vegetated area of jungle, brown in many places in the hot dry season. An ugly muddy river, barely a stream, meandered nearby. Though hostile resistance was not expected, the soldiers still breathed quiet sighs of relief when they saw white smoke being popped, signaling it was a safe landing zone.

The Alpha Company commander decided to take one small turn from the previously quiet visit to the area, signaling the men to start up the narrow winding trail seen from the air, a path that disappeared into a ragged line of trees. The company formed into two columns and slowly moved away from the rice paddies and toward the jungle, Hilley and Wolfe walking next to each other, their platoon at the rear of the company march. As the company moved deeper into the thick vegetation, the mortar platoon was ordered to spread out and take a static position to guard the company from an attack on the rear. Shortly after this, the rest of Alpha Company had the worst fate an American patrol could experience in Vietnam—walking unexpectedly into a well-hidden and well-entrenched Viet Cong fighting complex, one they had just missed a few days before.

Once the shooting began, Hilley's platoon continued to maintain a static defensive situation while the rest of the vulnerable American troops hurried back through the mor-



Aerial view of the Xom Bung battlefield where Bob Hilley and Dick Wolfe died fighting off a large group of converging VC. The narrow path Alpha company followed from the rice paddies into the jungle tree line can be seen in the upper right.

tar platoon, fleeing to the relative safety of the nearby rice paddies. The enemy, twice the number of Alpha Company and having the element of surprise, moved to outflank the Americans, hoping to overrun them and wipe them out.

At some point, the battle exploded in intensity, the enemy's flanking movement finally coming together like a hammer blow, leaving the sharp smell of cordite permeating the air and creating earthshaking levels of gunfire and grenade explosions. From seemingly every direction came the clamorous screams and cries for medics. According to Hilley's Silver Star citation, "with complete disregard for his own safety," Hilley suddenly charged forward, laying down deadly "covering fire" against the enemy to aid his Alpha Company comrades as they tried to escape to the rice paddies. His fire was so effective that it stopped the enemy advance cold for a short while. But Hilley wasn't finished.

The DEROS could have caused Hilley to be more than cautious; but instead, upon hearing the sounds of wounded soldiers crying for help, he "immediately rushed to their assistance, knowing that artillery support fire and air strikes would soon be called on the area and worked feverishly to treat and prepare the wounded for evacuation." As the pitch of the battle continued to increase, Hilley "took an especially exposed position where he could better direct

effective cover fire upon the enemy, while his wounded comrades were evacuated."

Just as the brunt of the company finally gathered behind the safety of rice paddy berms, the enemy hit the still exposed Fourth Platoon with its greatest blow. One eyewitness, Fourth Platoon member Scott Washburn, reported, "It was as though the earth had opened up and was on fire. The sound was deafening and the smell acrid and the intensity of battle immediate. It was all pretty hectic—loud, smoky, tracer rounds everywhere, fast, sudden and explosive—with RPGs, mortars and

grenades going off." Washburn watched in horror as Hilley, Wolfe, and several others "went down almost instantly."

Late in the day, after American firepower finally drove the enemy off the battlefield, the dead were recovered. Among those killed were Hilley and Wolfe. Alpha Company's main radio man, John Chomko, summed up the furious struggle in a letter he wrote to his sister the next day: "It was a hell of a fight and there were a lot of men who did brave things. These kinds of battles don't happen every day, and I don't plan on being in another one like this."

Hilley was brought home and buried at Oak Hill cemetery in Attalla, Alabama. A short April 16, 1968, article in the *Gadsden Times* reported the story of Hilley's brave actions. Like all those who die young, he was never able to experience the many adventures one has during the longer journey of life. This type of loss is captured by Vietnam veteran Tobias Wolff's words about the best friend he lost in Vietnam:

He will not know what it is to make a life with someone else. To have a child slip in beside him as he lies reading on a Sunday morning. To work at, and then look back on, a labor of years. Watch the decline of his parents, and attend their dissolution. Lose faith. Pray anyway. Persist. We are made to persist, to complete the whole tour. That's how we find out who we are.

Wolff believed that the stories of those who perish in war must be remembered and told. In that process, men like Hilley and their courageous actions continue to offer meaning to future generations.

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