

MISSOURI STATE SOCIETY DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Proudly Honors



WARREN SCOTT COONCE

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

JUNE 1957 – NOVEMBER 1960

UNITED STATES ARMY

MAJOR (O-4)

JANUARY 1965 – AUGUST 1981

WOUNDED IN ACTION JANUARY 13, 1967

as

PURPLE HEART PATRIOT

AUGUST 2025

Honoring His Service and Sacrifice

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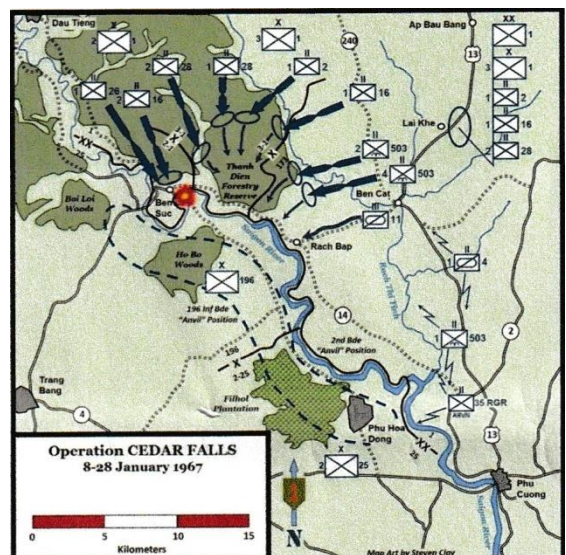


An excerpt from Warren Scott Coonce's journal:
Operation Cedar Falls, Jan 8 – Jan 20, 1967.

Friday, January 13, 1967, just another day of patrolling. My mission today was to pick up where I had left off the previous day. Bravo Company's 1st and 2nd Platoons would be patrolling the same general vicinity to my south. After eating a hasty breakfast, we again departed early, hoping to beat the heat. Since I had used my primary Radio Telephone Operator (RTO) for the last few patrols, I decided to give him a rest and take only the Artillery Forward Observer (FO), who also served as my alternate RTO. In the event of a firefight, he would also be useful calling in fire support. I also left behind my 3rd squad leader. This is the same overzealous squad leader who initiated the ambush the previous day. Since I was leaving one squad back each day, it was his day to remain in camp. As we were leaving, he said something to the effect that he hoped I wasn't superstitious. Not me. Soon, we were past the rice extraction Landing Zone (LZ) and moving farther down the trail. We had been on patrol for less than an hour when we heard a heavy firefight off to my left. Due to its closeness, I knew it had to be either the 1st or 2nd Platoon. The radio operator was already listening to the communication traffic between 1st Platoon and Bravo Six. I halted our forward movement, expecting to receive new orders at any minute. Sure enough, Six radioed and told me that Bravo 1-6 was pinned down and that I was to proceed to his assistance as soon as possible. I took an azimuth on the sound of gunfire, quickly briefed the platoon, and set out through the jungle in single file towards the firefight. At first, without a trail, the going was difficult, and we did not make good time. We soon came across a trail that was going in the same direction, and due to the expediency of the mission, I elected to follow it. I knew better than to follow a trail, but the sound of the firefight was becoming more intense, and I needed to get to L-6's location as soon as I could. We were on the trail for less than 30 minutes when all hell broke loose. I had approximately six soldiers in front of me. My point man was followed by a machine gunner and his assistant. They had walked within 30 feet of a bunker complex before they saw the bunkers, and the enemy saw them. They opened fire at the same time, the point man firing into the first bunker, and at the same time, the enemy machine gunner opened up on him. The point man and the machine gunner, and

his assistant went down, fatally wounded. At the sound of the incoming machine-gun fire, I knelt to get lower and immediately called for my radio man. The platoon was already returning fire in the direction of the bunkers. From our position, we could not see the enemy positions. They rose approximately one foot above ground level with slots cut at ground level for their rifle positions. I had the handset in my hand and was getting ready to notify Six that I had engaged the enemy and could not make it to assist 1-6, when I found myself being propelled rearward, falling flat on my back. I lay there, dazed, looking skyward, wondering what had hit me with such force. I could hear the steady chatter of incoming machinegun fire ripping into the brush and trees and the outgoing return fire. The gunfire seemed to be miles away, but I could see the leaves and parts of limbs falling to the ground around me, cut down by the enemy's steady rain of bullets. I knew I was wounded, but did not know the extent of the damage. I could not feel any pain, only discomfort and a strong throbbing in my left leg. I regained my senses and called my squad leaders to my location. One of them had been wounded in the same burst of fire that had hit me. I ordered them to maneuver to the left and right while I remained in the center and continued returning fire. One of my Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) was walking through the trees, dazed and somewhat oblivious to the firefight. I couldn't understand how he could remain upright and not get hit. He was quickly pulled down by another soldier. I called for my RTO, my medic, and the grenadier. The RTO and grenadier had taken off to the rear when the firing began. They both returned, crawling... all the way. I directed the grenadier to attempt to get close enough to put some rounds into the bunkers. He started crawling towards the front. I was informed the medic had been wounded when he had attempted to help the lead personnel. I was wounded in several places, but the bleeding had already been stopped by the quick action of a Squad Leader who had put tourniquets on my right arm and left leg. By now, another squad leader was wounded. I told him to stay down and try to help the others. By that time, the RTO had contacted Six. The squad leader who had remained at the river location came on the radio frequency and requested to bring the tracks forward to assist me. Six came on the air and disapproved it, indicating that the tracks had to remain in their security location. Probably a wise decision in that they would have been good targets, in that they had a minimal security force. We continued in our attempt to maneuver against the bunkers, but the enemy machine-gun fire was effective in keeping us pinned down. We had to try again. I immediately requested artillery fire support. Six passed me off to the Company's FO. The Battalion's Artillery Aerial Observer (AO) came on the net and indicated that he was in a helicopter, somewhere overhead, and would be directing the artillery fire support. All I had to do was "pop smoke", activate a smoke grenade, and he would verify my location based on the color of my smoke and then direct the fire. I popped smoke, he found it, and then he lost it due to the height and thickness of the foliage. I popped smoke again, same drill, over and over again. I popped smoke after smoke after smoke. By the time the smoke drifted to the top of the dense jungle, it quickly dissipated. It wasn't long before I had exhausted my quantity of smoke grenades. The enemy fire remained heavy. The squads that I had directed to maneuver left and right to hit the enemy from their flank both returned. The bunker complex was in a triangular shape, with well-fortified bunkers at each corner of the triangle. My grenadier returned with a sheepish look on his face. He had crawled from the rear location to my position and then to the bunkers under the heavy fire before he realized that in the confusion of the battle, he had lost his ammo bandoleer.

I was out of smoke grenades, and I needed artillery support immediately. I informed the Area of Operations (AO) that I wanted a marking round based on the coordinates that I had already given him. In less than no time, a marking round was on the way and exploded overhead, approximately 100 meters to my front. Perfect. It confirmed my location. I requested they drop 50 meters (move the rounds' impact in my direction) and put one on the ground. It was on the way in no time. I was not prepared for the nearness and loudness of the explosion when the round hit the ground. Splash, it made an ear-deafening explosion! I



directed my squad leaders to get the squad prepared to move to our rear when the next rounds came in. I called the AO and requested the artillery to fire for effect, meaning that six rounds would be on the way. Splash and more splashes, accompanied by the deafening explosions. I gave the signal for the first squad to back out while the remaining squad continued firing. When they had retreated a short distance, they stopped and returned the fire, covering my withdrawal. I had to be assisted by two of my soldiers. I had received two bullets in my right arm and significant damage to my left leg. The medic, unconscious from a head wound, required more assistance. As we began our withdrawal and made our way to the rear, I dropped the artillery fire another 50 meters and continued firing for effect with the artillery barrage. Using a tactic I had learned earlier, I began to walk the artillery fire back and forth from my right flank to my rear, providing cover as we made our way to safety. As we continued our movement to the rear, I continued to work the artillery to escort us away from the enemy. As I neared the area of the main trail where I had earlier entered the forest, I was told that "Dust Off", the medevac (medical evacuation) helicopter, was en route to my location. The AO came on the radio frequency and stated that gunships had arrived and wanted to cease the artillery fire to let the gunships take over. No problem, I was happy to let them take over. The adrenaline was starting to wear off, and I could start to feel the pain building in my right arm and left leg. I established a hasty perimeter and waited for the gunships. I then radioed Six to notify him that I would be evacuated and the Second Squad leader was taking over. The gunships were soon overhead, raining rockets and machine gun fire on the now easily identifiable locations. They were easily identifiable because the incoming artillery fire had opened the area significantly. From Battalion's location to our rear, the elite Recon Platoon, the Battalion Headquarters' "Palace Guard", and their heavily armed tracks, arrived and took up security positions for the incoming Dust Off helicopter. Soon, the helicopter was on the ground, with the crewman waving for us to get on board as fast as we could. There were only four wounded significantly enough to be Medevac'ed (medically evacuated): myself, two squad leaders, and my medic. The medic had been wounded in the head and was the most seriously wounded. As the helicopter lifted off and headed for the nearest Evacuation Hospital, I felt a feeling of remorse and disappointment. My first major firefight, and in my mind, I had failed while getting three of my soldiers killed. I still felt no major pain. Within minutes, the helicopter was setting down again, landing at Cu Chi. My wounded medic was put on a stretcher and quickly taken inside. The two walking wounded were led inside, and two of the hospital medics attempted to help me. Noticing my leg wound, one medic grabbed me by my left arm while the other took hold of my right arm. When I was being assisted out of the jungle, I had used the help of my strongest soldier, using him as a crutch on my left side while I held the radio handset in my right hand, directing the artillery fire. Now, with two men trying to hold me upright, I felt for the first time the extent of my pain. As the medic on my right attempted to hold me upright, the pain was almost unbearable. I told him to forget it while I hobbled inside with the aid of the medic on my left. Inside, I was quickly placed on a table and was surrounded by nurses and doctors. The nurses began cutting off my uniform, what was left of it, while the Doctors were evaluating my wounds. I was told to relax; the needle was on its way, and soon I would feel no pain. Sure enough, some kindhearted Samaritan stuck a needle in my arm, and I could see the lights slowly getting dim. I awoke hours later. The Doctor was there and told me that the arm wounds were only flesh wounds and that they should heal without any difficulty. The leg wound was significantly damaged by shrapnel, and if skin grafts were required, I might require evacuation to Japan. But first, I had to be evacuated to the 36th Evacuation Hospital at Yung Tau, where more experienced surgeons could evaluate me. I was to be evacuated immediately. I ask for the status of my wounded medic. I was told that he had received immediate care within the capability of this field hospital, but that due to his wounds, he was immediately being evacuated to Japan. As I lay there waiting to be put on the airplane for Yung Tau, Bravo Company's Supply Sergeant and Mess Sergeant came to see me. They had been stationed at Cu Chi with the rest of the logistical support units for this operation. They had also heard the firefight over the radio and knew the wounded would be brought to this hospital. The Supply Sergeant was carrying something I could not identify from my position on my back. He held it up for me to identify it. He had retrieved my flak jacket from the nurse. Both were telling me how lucky I had been. I inspected my jacket; it had been hit numerous times by the enemy fire. Two bullets had hit me in my right chest and were deflected by the flak jacket into and through my right arm. Several other bullets had hit me in the left chest and struck the M16 rifle magazines (bullet holders) that were in the left pocket. One bullet had deflected off the jacket and grazed my left elbow. The bullets that hit the magazines caused the bullets to explode, and the resulting explosion and shrapnel had caused the major damage to my lower left thigh,



just above the knee. One enemy bullet had penetrated two layers of flak jacket, tumbled, and penetrated the last layer of cloth, with the base of the bullet extending approximately 1/16th of an inch through the last layer. This last bullet had struck me with enough force to leave a permanent scar on my left chest. (I still have this bullet.) If not for that flak jacket, I would not have made it out of the jungle. The Supply Sergeant asked me if I wanted to save the jacket. I replied No, just get me a new one before I return. He had also retrieved my helmet and pistol. By then, I had been given another shot

for pain, and I was slowly starting to black out again. I was in a dazed euphoria when I was put on a stretcher and taken to the C-130 for the ride to Yung Tau. I was still feeling disappointed because of my wounds, and that I had to leave my platoon under these conditions.

Yung Tau is located south of Saigon on the coast of the South China Sea. In addition to being the home of the 36th Evacuation Hospital, it was also popular as one of the country's most popular rest and recuperation (R&R) sites. Before the war, it was a well-known international vacation area. The beaches were beautiful, with white sand and clean, with a warm ocean for swimming. Rumor had it that it was also an R&R site for the enemy. Inasmuch as Yung Tau was rarely attacked or mortared, there appeared to be some truth to this rumor.

I don't recall the flight to Yung Tau, nor being admitted into the hospital. After being there for about two days, several surgeons came to see me to discuss my situation. As they saw it, I had two choices. My left leg had lost a good deal of muscle due to the shrapnel. Some of the fragments would never be removed. They could send me to Japan, where I could undergo skin grafts, or I could remain at this hospital, and the Surgeons would stretch and pull my thigh skin together to close the wound. The second alternative would leave an ugly scar, four to five inches in length. I had not notified Judy or my parents that I had been wounded. I did not want them to worry about me. Also, by going to Japan it would require that I be transferred back to the States after I recovered. Under this last scenario, I would not get any credit for the time I had already served in Vietnam. So, all things considered, I decided to have my leg sewn up by the local surgeons. Once the decision was made, the surgery was accomplished, and I began the task of slowly recuperating. As soon as they could, the two squad leaders who were wounded in the same firefight and evacuated to Yung Tau with me began to visit regularly. Their wounds were not as serious, and they were more mobile. They would sneak contraband to me until I was able to get out, contraband such as bourbon hidden in a Listerine bottle.

This improved my morale slightly. I couldn't drink too much since I was on antibiotics and pain killers, but it was there if I wanted it. After I was taken off medication, an occasional nip would help me fall asleep, at least I thought it did. After about two weeks, my squad leaders were shipped back to Dau Tieng. They had been my source of contraband and information from the outside world while they were there, and I hated to see them leave.

We received our Purple Heart Citations while in the hospital. We were all brought into the Hospital Commandant's office, and he made the presentation. The ceremony seemed somewhat hollow at the time. I had been in Vietnam for a little over a month, and I had been awarded a Combat Infantryman's Badge and a Purple Heart.

Sometime during my stay at the hospital, we were visited by several professional football players and Nancy Sinatra. She wasn't too impressive. Most of us were more interested in talking with the football players. The football players were more interested in learning how it felt to get wounded. Everything considered, it was a thoughtful gesture, flying halfway around the world to visit wounded soldiers. But this was 1967, before the general attitude and support for the war deteriorated.