

LUTHER LEE SANDERS '64

Captain, United States Army



Before Texas A&M...

When anyone uses the term “Son of the Service”, think of **Luther Lee Sanders**. Lee was born in Colorado Springs, spent his childhood in several places around the world, and attended three different high schools before graduating from Vacaville High School, just outside Travis AFB, California.

At an early age, Lee learned the value and importance of non-commissioned officers in any organization – especially when it comes to maintaining “good order and discipline”. Lee’s father was a Chief Master Sergeant in the U. S. Air Force.



In fact, it was Master Sergeant Sanders who aimed Lee toward Texas A&M at an early age. Although there were no known connections between Lee’s father and A&M, somewhere in his career Sergeant Sanders developed a very favorable opinion about Aggies – favorable enough to insist that his son become one. When Lee was eight years old, Sergeant Sanders announced, “Son, when you go to college you are going to go to Texas A&M!”



CMSgt Luther Sanders

As often was the case, Master Sergeant Sanders was right!

While at Texas A&M...

In September 1960, **Lee Sanders** travelled from Vacaville, California to College Station where he enrolled as an Agricultural Economics major. Back then, Army cadets who were students in the College of Agriculture were assigned to Company D-1 or “Spider D”.

A few weeks into our Fish Year, Lee was one of several hundred who tried-out for the Fish Drill Team. Lee certainly knew how to do Drill and Ceremonies. When the selection process eliminated most of the hundreds who tried, Lee was one of the 44 freshmen selected. From that point forward until Mother’s Day, Fish Drill Team was a big part of Lee’s effort.



Class of '64 Fish Drill Team at Galveston

While at Texas A&M (Continued)...

Lee's Sophomore and Junior years passed quietly. As a sophomore, Lee focused on the "training and development" of the Spider D Class of '65 Fish. He was also active with the Former Fish Drill Team Association and the Agricultural Economics Society.

The Great TRIPOD Experiment: During their Junior Year, Lee and his classmates in Spider D happened upon an extraordinary opportunity to advance their knowledge of animal science and benefit all of mankind through a very simple but practical experiment. For several months, a stray dog, perhaps with a small presence of Golden Retriever in his pedigree, was seen around the Quad. Strays were not uncommon in the Corps area - someone was always willing to pet them or feed them. However, this stray became exceptionally well-known and popular with the cadets, probably because he had only three legs. "**Tripod**", as he was known, could be seen all around the quad, loping about on his three good legs, chasing a new-found friend or an opportunity for food.

The Animal Husbandry majors in Spider D wanted to give Tripod the opportunity to continue his distinguished bloodline, so they arranged an "encounter" with a female stray who also frequented the Quad. There was considerable discussion among the students regarding what this mating would yield. Would the offspring also have three legs? Or, was it possible that a 3-legged sire and a 4-legged dame might yield a 7-legged puppy? Do the math!

After eight or nine weeks, the "blessed event" happened in a Spider D dorm room as Tripod became the proud father of a puppy whose inherited features would guarantee she would never participate in the Westminster Dog Show. Those who put their money on the "4-legged" option prevailed. The news quickly spread around the Corps that we had a new pet - a puppy named "**Rangy**" which, we were told, is the sound a spider makes in the attack.

No one seems to know what became of Tripod and his off-spring, Rangy. They were seen around the Quad that Spring until Final Review, but they were not there when we returned in September.



A Not- So- Mean Looking Junior
Luther Lee Sanders



Lee as a Senior

Lee's Senior Year: The Corps, including senior Luther Lee Sanders, returned in September to find that more had changed at their school than the departure of Tripod and Rangy. The name "Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas" was gone and twenty seven newly- admitted coeds had arrived and were real.

Lee was busy from the start. Naturally, the last two semesters of the Ag Eco curriculum weighed heavily on his mind. But Lee also had Corps responsibilities. As Executive Officer of Spider D, Lee worked with David Lyons, his classmate and Company Commander, to build the outfit into a cohesive unit.

The first two months of the Fall Semester passed quietly and were soon forgotten. It would be the last ten days of November that everyone would remember.



Bonfire 1963

On Friday November 22d, as the Corps left Duncan Dining Hall after lunch, they learned of the assassination of President Kennedy. The news spread quickly and by 4 PM that afternoon, General Rudder announced to the leaders of the faculty and student body that bonfire must be cancelled out of respect.

Honoring...LUTHER LEE SANDERS '64

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On the following Tuesday, Texas A&M did something never done before – they honored a fallen President with a Silver Taps. Thousands of mourning Aggies gathered in silence and darkness at the foot of Lawrence Sullivan Ross. The Ross Volunteers fired a 21-gun salute, three buglers sounded Silver Taps from the roof of the Academic Building, and the thousands who had gathered around Sully turned and left as silently as they came.

The ultimate test of Aggie courage and determination came three days later on Thanksgiving Thursday when the Aggies and Longhorns met on Kyle Field. The 'Horns were the clear favorite – they came to College Station with a perfect 9-0 record and were ranked Number One in the nation, while the Aggie record was a paltry 2-6-1. But, in this game, records meant nothing.



The Class of '64 forms their last half-time tunnel

Any Aggie who was alive in 1963 can tell you the story. For the younger readers, all you need to know is the game was played on a cool, wet afternoon. It was a defensive battle and the Ags had Texas on the ropes well into the fourth quarter, until a very bad call on an obvious Aggie interception gave the ball and the victory to the Longhorns.

THANKSGIVING GAME 1963

FINAL SCORE

Aggies: 13 Horns: 9 Referees: 6

After Texas A&M...



The remainder of Lee's senior year passed quietly, and upon graduation Lee took a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Infantry. Lee quickly reported to Fort Benning for the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC), Ranger School, and Airborne training.

Thanks to the preparation we got from the Trigon, I was ready for IOBC. Most people do Airborne and Ranger in that order. I reversed them and did Ranger first. I'm glad I did because that made Airborne relatively easy.
Lee Sanders '64



Some join the Army to "See the World." Lee's first assignment did not take him that far. In early 1965, Lee finished his training, made the long trip across Fort Benning, and reported to the 11th Air Assault Division (AAD). The 11th AAD was completing Project TEAM (Test and Evaluation of the Air Mobility - a major study to determine the viability of the helicopter as a way to move troops around the battlefield. The test was so successful that, within months, the 11th AAD became the 1st Cavalry Division and deployed to Vietnam.



First Vietnam Tour: The Lieutenant Becomes a Pathfinder: Those who really know Lee Sanders realize he does not believe in doing things the conventional way. Thus, it should not come as a surprise to learn that when Lee joined the 11th AAD, he did not do what most infantry lieutenants do. Instead of becoming a Rifle Platoon Leader, Lee volunteered for a job that was exciting and dangerous – Lee would command a platoon of Pathfinders. After completing his training at Fort Benning, Lee joined his platoon of the 11th Pathfinder Company just in time to deploy to Vietnam in August 1965.



Pathfinders are specially trained soldiers who are inserted or dropped into place, often behind enemy lines, to set up and operate drop zones, pickup zones, and helicopter landing sites for airborne operation, air resupply, or other air operations in support of the ground unit commander.

Pathfinders played a big role in the parachute assault operations during WWII, especially at Normandy. Pathfinders from the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions jumped into Normandy just after midnight on June 6, 1944

In the early 1960's, it was clear that helicopter assaults would take the place of most parachute assaults. The Army's Test and Evaluation of the Air Mobility (TEAM) in 1962-65 showed the need for Pathfinders in support of airmobile operations.

The 11th Pathfinder Company (Provisional) was organized in 1964 in the 11th Air Assault Division and deployed to Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in 1965. Early combat operations of the 1st Air Cav showed a clear need for a Pathfinder capability in combat aviation units.

If he was looking for adventure, Lee Sanders' experiences as a Pathfinder during his first tour in the Combat Zone certainly met that need. The 1st Cav arrived in Vietnam in the summer of 1965, landing at Qui Nhon and deploying to the highlands north and west of the port.

After a series of lesser engagements, the division saw its first major battle in October when the 1st Cav broke the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) siege of the Special Forces camp at Plei Mei, pursued the NVA regiment that laid the siege, and caught them in the decisive Battle of the Ia Drang Valley. The division won the Presidential Unit Citation for this first campaign.

Lee and his Pathfinders were heavily involved in almost every air assault operation the division executed. During these early months, the Pathfinders were inserted by helicopter. That changed in early 1966 when 1st Cav planners decided to insert the Pathfinders by parachute.



When we did helicopter insertions, we would try to avoid detection by not going into wide open areas like rice paddies. If they were lucky, they could slip into a clearing in the jungle, drop us off, and depart without being noticed. Unfortunately, that did not always happen. So, after about six months, some of the battalion commanders decided that helicopter insertion of Pathfinders took away the element of surprise. They wanted to try parachute insertion to see if that would avoid detection and improve surprise.

Lee Sanders '64

In early 1966, the 1st Cavalry Division began parachute insertion of Pathfinder Teams to secure and prepare landing zones for helicopter assaults. If a helicopter assault was planned for first light, the Pathfinders jumped in the night before, an hour or two after sunset.

We realized that we needed to leave the aircraft at a lower altitude to avoid detection, so these were really low jumps – as low as 400 feet. That really causes the “pucker factor” to go way up. You don’t have much time to see if your main is open and OK.

But when you exit at 400 feet, you get below the top of the trees very quickly and avoid detection. The helicopters dropping us flew relatively slow to minimize engine and blade noise, and we used artillery to make noise a couple of “clicks” (kilometers) away so that our “slicks” (assault helicopters) would be undetected.

Lee Sanders '64



Exiting a Helicopter in a Training Jump



A Training Jump from a Chinook Helicopter

After they landed, the Pathfinders would assemble, determine that the landing zone (LZ) was secure, and do all the tasks necessary to prepare the LZ for the arrival of main force the next morning. All this, including the flying and the parachute assault was done in darkness, without benefit of night vision devices.

We have no information about the success or failure of these risky operations. We do know that Lee completed three successful insertions before his first tour in the combat zone was over. We also know that by 1968, parachute insertion of Pathfinders to help helicopter assault operations was no longer used by any of the units in Vietnam.

A P.U.C. and Three Stars for the Luther Lee: It is difficult to imagine how Lee could pack more thrills and adventure into a twelve-month combat tour. The Pathfinder operations alone would be enough to satisfy most adventure-seekers. But these adventures came at a time when the troopers of the 1st Cav Division were showing the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) that they came to fight in the highlands around Plei Ku and the Ia Drang Valley. By the time Lee was ready to go home, the division had won the rare Presidential Unit Citation (PUC), and Lee's Paratrooper Wings showed three small, gold stars, one for each combat parachute assault. Since WWII, only a handful of paratroopers can claim that distinction.



Presidential
Unit Citation



Author's Note: Any attempt here to re-tell Lee's amazing stories would fall far short of the target. For those who want to hear more, we recommend two solutions. If you are fortunate enough to spend some time with Lee, pull him aside, buy him a beverage, and let him tell you about things like the night parachute jumps into jungle held by the NVA or VC. If you can't do that, find a copy of [*Pathfinder: First In, Last Out: A Memoir of Vietnam*](#) by Richard R. Burns (2008).

Between Combat Tours...

Lee returned to the “States” at the end of his tour of duty and was assigned to the Ranger Committee at Fort Benning, training others in the skills he knew so well. From both the professional and personal perspectives, Lee benefited greatly from this assignment. Professionally, it allowed Lee to use his recent combat experience to train others. However, something happened in the personal side of Lee’s life that changed him forever. Lee met a wonderful woman and before he knew it, he was a married man!



Rangers and Romance at Fort Polk: Lee was at Fort Polk one weekend when, totally by chance, he met the woman who would play a huge role in the rest of his life. That woman, Margaret Sanders, tells it best:

We were at Fort Polk to visit my brother, Butch, who was there in Basic Training, and to deliver his car to him. We knew my brother was at Fort Polk but did not know what unit he was with.

When we arrived, the base looked like it was “dead”, so we went to the first office that was open and told them I was looking for my brother who is here for basic training. They asked what unit he was in, and I said all I know is that he is a paratrooper. The guy said “Lady, if your brother is new to the Army, he is not a paratrooper! We eventually found Butch and gave him his car.

Later that night, we were bored, hungry, and stuck in the motel without a car. We decided to walk down the road a ways to get a bite to eat. As we walked in the dark, a little red VW beetle made one pass, turned around, pulled alongside, and asked if we needed a ride. We politely refused, but the driver in the VW persisted, saying, “Ma’am, we are Army officers and you have no reason to be concerned about our intentions. We can’t afford to do anything to harm you. Now there is no guarantee that the next car that comes by will be so trustworthy. So, come on and jump in so we can get you where you want to go.”

I asked to see their ID cards and after much deliberation, we accepted his offer. They stayed with us through dinner and the one named Lee agreed to join us for Mass the next morning.

Later on Sunday, when we were ready to drive home, Lee asked if I would write him. I told he would have to write me first, which he did right away. As they say, the rest is history.

Margaret Sanders

Lee and Margaret were married after a short courtship, and the newlyweds began building their family. Despite their desire to make a house a home and build a family, these months just after Lee’s tour of duty with the 1st Cav had to be dominated by one concern. By 1968 it was obvious that the nation was at war, and an Infantry captain with a Ranger tab and parachutist wings would be one of the first to be called when second combat tours became necessary. That is exactly what happened.

Back to the Combat Zone....

Some guys who survived a dangerous and challenging first tour in Vietnam were able to parley their second tour assignment into a safe and comfortable staff officer position in some headquarters. But that is not the way our buddy, Lee did things.

In January 1969, just 18 months after completing his first tour, Captain Lee Sanders found himself again in Vietnam, this time with the 101st Airborne Division and commanding Delta Company, 3d Battalion, 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment – well known throughout the Army as the “Rakkasans”. Luther Lee was back, and someone should have warned the VC and the North Vietnamese Army!





RAKKASAN

The 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment (Rakkasans) got their nickname totally by accident during a tour of duty in occupied Japan just after the end of WWII.

A US translator dealing with local Japanese dignitaries did not know word for "airborne soldiers" when trying to explain what the 187th did. By mistake, he used the Japanese word *rakkasan*, which literally meant "*falling down umbrella men*".

Japanese who heard this, had a good laugh, and started calling the troopers by that nickname. The mistaken nickname soon stuck and became a point of pride for troopers in the 187th.

The Rakkasans regiment built a distinguished battlefield record as a glider and parachute regiment in WWII and the Ko-

The Screaming Eagles Move North...

About the time that Lee took command of Delta Company, the 101st Airborne was moving its headquarters to the sprawling Camp Eagle, just southwest of the ancient capital of Hue and about 45 miles northwest of Da Nang. The new location would put the 101st in an excellent position to launch a campaign to control of the strategically important A Shau Valley, only 30 miles to the west.



Earlier in the summer of 1968, 101st Airborne welcomed a new commander, as **Major General Melvin Zais** replaced **MG Olinto M. Barsanti**. Zais was a veteran of WWII and Korea.

In WWII, General Zais Commanded the 3rd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. Later, he was executive officer of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Zais gained extensive experience clearing Nazi forces from the mountains and valleys of Italy and southern France. He also was an airborne unit staff officer in the Battle of the Bulge.



MG Melvin Zais,
Commanding General,
101st Airborne Division

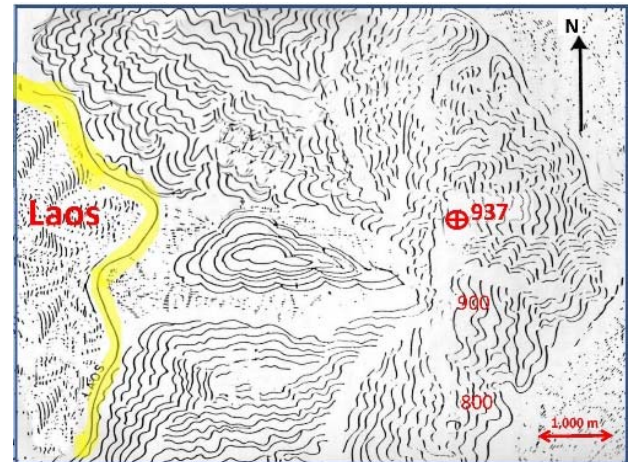


A Small Portion of the 101st Airborne Basecamp at Camp Eagle

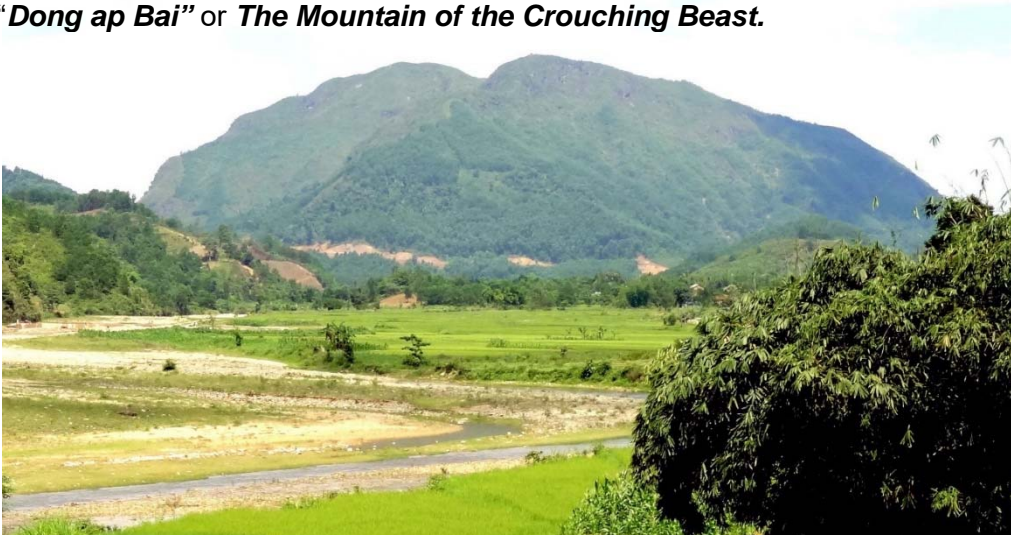
Military analysts and historians have carefully studied the WWII experiences of General Zais to understand his performance as Commander of the 101st Airborne in the early months of 1969. In 2012, U.S. Army Major Kelly Boian did a detailed comparison of Zais' experience in Southern France and his performance in first big battle in Vietnam. The title of the study written by Boian - *Major General Melvin Zais and Hamburger Hill* – brings us to the next important episode in the career of Captain Luther Lee Sanders.

The "Hill"...

On a map it was called "**Hill 937**". The topographic maps used by military planners showed a small mountain between the A Shau Valley and the Laotian/Cambodian border labeled Hill 937, reflecting the altitude of the crest in meters above sea level.



The local natives took one look at the profile of the hill and called it "**Dong ap Bai**" or *The Mountain of the Crouching Beast*.



Dong ap Bai as it appears today

But, to the American troopers who fought there... and came home to talk about it, the place will always be known as...

Hamburger Hill.



Some Notes to the Reader

This article does not present as a detailed account of the military operations to seize Hill 937 in May 1969. There are many published sources that better serve that purpose. These include:

- Several books of varying quality and accuracy, and at least two Fort Leavenworth studies of the battle and its commanders.
- A computer game based on the battle.
- A full-length motion picture.
- An episode of Colonel Ollie North's "War Stories".



Readers who want to know more detail about the Battle of Hamburger Hill might want to check out the following:



1. **War Stories with Oliver North - "War Stories Investigates: The Real Story of Hamburger Hill"**, produced in 2006 by Fox News Channel. Ollie North does a fine job of describing the battle and the hardships our soldiers experienced. Colonel North introduces Lee Sanders as "the Commanding Officer of Delta Company and Texas Aggie". Lee appears on camera several times.



2. **Hamburger Hill, May 11-20, 1969** by Samuel Zaffiri.



3. **Major General Melvin Zais and Hamburger Hill** by Major Kelly O. C. Boian
This monograph presents a detailed tactical summary of the battle.

Honoring Lee and Margaret Sanders: Rather than compete with these sources, this article focusses on the recollections of Lee and Margaret Sanders. The original slideshow and interview of Lee and Margaret was built around a series of questions designed to help us "see" the Battle of Hamburger Hill through their eyes, with Lee describing what he saw on the side of the mountain and Margaret describing her "battle" nine thousand miles away from Hill 937.

The interviews of Lee and Margaret collected more than an hour of their responses to questions. A full transcription of their responses would produce an article that would be much longer than the longest "Tribute" we have produced. To prevent this, we have included only carefully selected portions of the interviews.

The Battle of Dong ap Bai or Hamburger Hill...

Early in Lee's tenure as Commanding Officer of Delta Company there were rumors of a pending offensive to establish control over the A Shau Valley and stop the flow of men and material through the valley to population centers further the south. For years senior US commanders had hoped to accomplish this. By mid-1968, these commanders thought the time had come. North Vietnamese and Vietcong units had suffered heavy losses during the Tet Offensive. By late 1968 and early 1969 it was clear that the American and South Vietnamese forces should pursue and strike before the enemy could recover from their losses.

Question: When did you take command of Delta Company?

What was the condition of Delta Company when you took command?

Lee: Right at the first of the year (Jan 1969). A very good buddy of mine from the Florida Ranger Camp, Harvey Watson, had Delta Company before. We had a very simple change of command ceremony. Harvey, the First Sergeant and I talked for a while about things I needed to know as commander. When the time came, Harvey stood up, took the company guidon from the First Sergeant, and handed it to me. At that moment, there at Firebase Rakkasan, I became Commanding Officer, Company D, 1st Battalion, 187 Parachute Infantry.



The company was in pretty good shape. Harvey did things a lot like I did, so there were very few things that changed after I took command. As usual, the company was at about 70% strength. We should have had 125 men. We seldom got above 70 men.

Question: How early did you learn about the operation?

Lee: About a month after I took command, General Creighton Abrams flew in from Saigon to consult with our division, brigade, and battalion commanders. When that happens, you know something big is in the plans.



Birthday Celebration
in the Jungle

Company commanders were not included in these Abrams meetings. A day or so later, I asked my battalion commander "What the hell is going on?" He explained that we were going into the A Shau (Valley) and the Rakkasans would have a big role. The division would deploy its command and control closer to The Valley and that Our Firebase Rakkasan would be the division forward CP (Command Post).

That's about all he said, and it was unclear what our specific mission would be. I really did not learn the specifics of the operation until four days before the air assault. Even at that point, the "higher ups" seemed to take a low-key attitude about the operation as if it were a routine air assault that was "no big deal" because we knew the A Shau was "hot" with enemy.

Question: What intelligence information did you have the when you began the operation?

Lee: We knew this was a big NVA logistics concentration point for weapons, ammunition, supplies, and even fresh troops just in from North Vietnam. We knew that there was at least an NVA regiment there – the 29th NVA Regiment. We knew they were well dug-in, but maybe not as fortified as we found them to be. We knew the terrain would be against us. The slopes were often steeper than 45 degrees and the jungle canopy was thicker than we had ever seen.



I think we underestimated the enemy's desire to stand and fight. The higher-ups expected them to give us some resistance and then withdraw across the border to Laos.

Question: Margaret, a question for you. Were you aware that Lee and his Delta Company were involved this big operation?

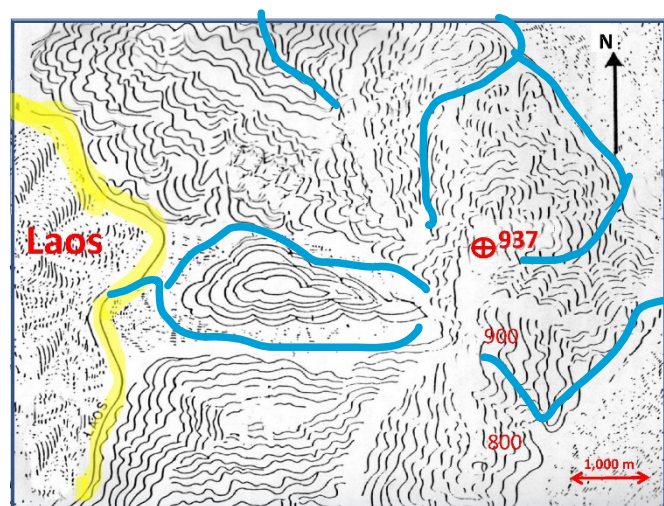
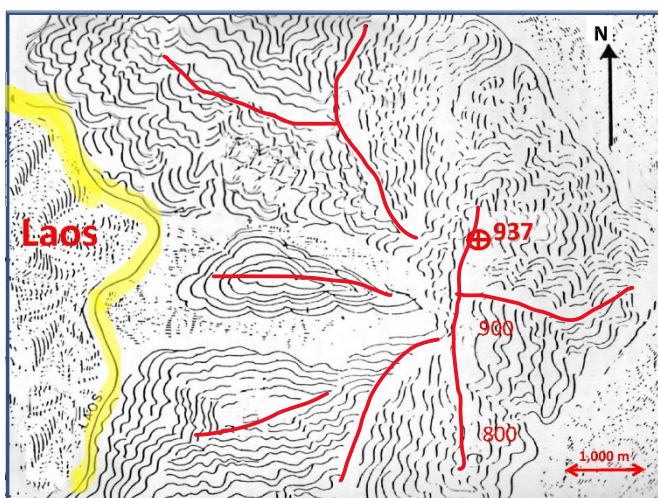
Margaret: When Lee and Delta Company were out in the jungle, I could expect to receive a letter from Lee maybe once a month. And of course, Lee never said anything specific about their operations in his letters. I think I got one letter before going into the A Shau Valley. and then one later just before the Hamburger Hill operation began. But the letters did not reveal anything about the planned operation.

By the time I realized the Rakkasans were in a big battle, Lee was already on his way home as a casualty. We relied entirely on television and radio for our news. We were not with other military families. We were with family and friends, but they were certainly not “military” and could not appreciate what was happening or what we were experiencing. Our community was not like San Antonio where almost everyone understands what is happening.

While we are on this subject, I am so glad that the Army has improved how it handles the wartime stay-behind family issues. In our time, we were on our own. Spouses and families were isolated. There was no official communication between the Army the wartime families.

Now, when a soldier deploys to the combat zone, his family can stay on base with neighbors who can help because they know what is needed.

The Terrain: Looking from a distance, Dong ap Bai is obviously a very steep-sided mountain. What you cannot see from a distance is that the mountain consists of a series of sharp ridgelines separated by deep, steep-sided tropical ravines with flowing water at their bottom. As the planned their attack, U.S. Commanders showed they realized the ridgelines (shown in red in the left diagram) were there and could be used to lead to the mountain crest of the. The diagram on the right shows the trace of steep-sided tropical ravines. These ravines proved to be formidable obstacles to U.S. forces trying to maneuver into position to make their assault. On more than one occasion, Lee Sanders and his Delta Company found themselves stuck in the north-south ravine just northwest of the Hill 937 crest.



Maps of Hill 937 showing Ridge Lines — and Deep Ravines with Flowing Water —

Add exceptionally thick, triple canopy jungle to this daunting topography and it is easy to see how the US forces found the terrain to be as formidable an enemy and the NVA 29th Regiment. Paratroopers repeatedly found them-



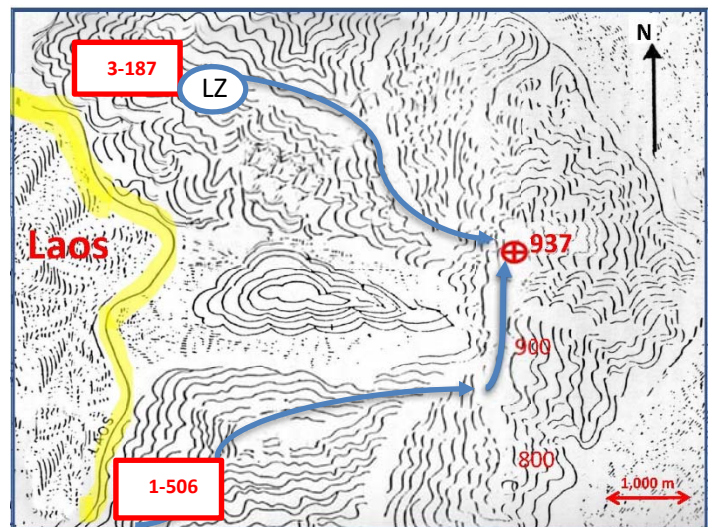
selves climbing steep inclines, often turned to mud by monsoon rains, while under intense fire from AK-47s, automatic weapons, and rocket launchers high above them. This rugged terrain and vegetation also proved difficult for important helicopter support such as ammunition resupply and casualty evacuation.



The Rakkasan Plan: LTC Honeycutt's plan for his Rakkasan battalion was simple and straight-forward. An intense air bombardment and artillery prep would soften the enemy position before the air assaults began. The battalion would air assault to seize an LZ about 4 km from the crest of Hill 937. The battalion would secure the LZ, then move east southeast along a prominent ridgeline to the crest of the hill. A sister battalion, 1st Bn 506, would approach the objective in similar fashion from the southwest.

Question: Describe how the initial air assault operation went.

Lee: As I understood the operation, we would do the air assault, quickly get off the LZ, and establish security for the battalion base camp. However, when we made the air assault, there was one sniper about 400 m out taking shots at us. He was going pop... pop! It seemed to me they were baiting us, hoping to lure us to come up the hill. They knew how the American Army always attacks. So, we took the bait and headed up the hill.



Initial Concept of the Operation

Question: What problems did you encounter during the first 2-3 days?

Lee: As we got about halfway up The Hill, my point team reported that they saw an enemy element moving down a minor trail to the left. Delta Company got strung out quite a bit in the thick jungle and Bravo Company and the Battalion Command Group were coming up on my rear elements. So, at some point, Honeycutt (the Battalion Commander) decided that this was where he would put the battalion command post. There was a flat and open piece of ridgeline that was perfect for the CP.

We started setting up security for the command post and B Company passed through and moved on up the hill. They had not gone a 100 meters and all Hell broke loose as they walked into an enemy unit in well prepared positions and determined not to move. This was a relatively large enemy unit that ironically turned out to be the 101st brigade or battalion.

At that point we exchanged rolls with B Company - They took the point and we became guardians of the battalion command post. That meant that spent the rest of the day setting up the LZ and processing B Company's wounded.



The next morning, B Company continued the advance and again ran into heavy resistance blocking the ridgeline. This time they called for helicopter gunship support. The gunships showed up promptly and began their target runs – but instead of hitting targets out in front of B Company, they fired directly into Delta Company and the Battalion Command Group. In thirty seconds, Delta had one dead and 23 wounded, and the

Command Group lost just as many. Sadly, that would happen again to B Company twice in the next two days. I have always been suspected that someone in B Company had their coordinate system 180 degrees off. It was just two consistent.

Lee is Wounded

On Day Three of the operation, Lee Sanders was seriously wounded as he led Delta Company in an assault of the enemy defensive positions near the crest of Hamburger Hill. Lee provided a detailed description of what happened that day to Michael Lee Lanning for his collection of stories about Texas Aggies in Vietnam.

Question: What do you remember about the time you were “hit”?

Lee: It happened on Day Three of the battle. Day Two was not a good day. On Day Two we did the Friendly Fire incident; Delta Company tried to maneuver around to the left and got tangled up in a deep ravine; and we had a helicopter take a direct hit and fall on our troop. So, we were hoping that Day Three would be better.

We opened our attack at 9:00 a.m. after a thirty-minute artillery bombardment. Our route began with a 200-meter advance up a 20-degree slope that was almost devoid of cover or concealment. Then we faced another 100 meters at a 45-degree slope to reach the top and overrun the NVA defenses.

As I continued up the hill, machine gun and AK-47 bullets broke the sound barrier around me, making a near-continuous ripping and cracking sound. Bullets struck all around us. There was no place to hide or take cover.

Suddenly a 7.62-mm machine-gun bullet struck me high on my right arm, where it attaches to the shoulder, and exited six inches above my elbow. I not only felt the bullet; I heard it. It sounded like a wooden bat hitting a hardball. Blood gushed and at times spurting from the entry wound. In addition to breaking my arm, it had severed my brachial artery. I immediately realized, with no doubt that I had been seriously wounded and initially thought my arm had been completely blown off.

A medic crawled over to me and said the wound was too high up the arm for him to apply a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. At this point, I entered into my first of many negotiations that day with God. He could have my arm if he just let me live.

This was about the time I lost all color vision and my world became black and white. It looked as though my negotiations had failed. Death seemed close.

Letting go, I said to God, "Here I come, Lord." I felt no fear. It seemed that I was stating a simple fact.

Lying near me, my Radio Telephone Operator (RTO) look me over, checked my wounds, and told me I was hit bad. That was not news, but his voice shook me out my conversation with God.

I knew I had to stop the bleeding, or I would die. With nothing else available or in mind, I stuck my left thumb into the entry wound and pressed upward as hard as I could. The pressure immediately stopped the spurting blood. Color came back in my eyesight, giving me a glimmer of hope that I might live. Only later did I learn that my thumb had pressed against the brachial artery, resulting in the formation of a blood clot that plugged the artery and saved my life.

My RTO dragged me twenty meters down the hill, to a larger bomb crater. He pulled me into the crater, making sure I had the best cover possible from the hail of enemy bullets that continued to cover Hamburger Hill. Upon seeing there was nothing else he could do for me, he headed back up the hill into the fight. I probably owe my life to this brave man.

I have no idea how long I lay in the crater, but from the timeline of the battle it must have been about three hours. I passed in and out of consciousness. When awake I thought about trying to rejoin my company, but that was an impossibility. I knew that one of my lieutenants had assumed command when I fell and was leading them up the hill. I also knew that more of my soldiers were falling dead or wounded.

The pain was nearly unbearable. I had never experienced such intense pain. It centered at the point where the bullet had shattered the bone. It felt like white-hot fire with spasms that radiated up my shoulder into my neck. I tried to adjust my body position, but the slightest movement sent shock waves of increasing pain across my body.

At long last, Charlie Company came up the hill to reinforce what remained of Delta. One of their lead soldiers rushed forward with an ammo resupply. As he leaped into my crater, while he was in midair, a bullet hit him like a hammer in his leg.

More Charlie Company soldiers came forward and laid down suppressive fire so that I and the newly wounded soldier could evacuate. I stood in the crater facing the continuing enemy machine-gun fire. Ignoring shouts to "get down," I made my last aggressive gesture in combat. I shot the finger at those who were trying to kill me.

I had passed the mental point of caring about anything - even my own life. All I could do was stumble down the hill. I made it about ten meters past the Charlie Company line before losing consciousness again and collapsing on the trail. When I awoke, a medic was giving me shot of morphine. When I opened my eyes, he said, "We thought you were dead."

Sometime later I was carried farther to the rear and placed on a Medi- vac chopper. As we lifted off to the hospital, I experienced a sense of pure euphoria. I had survived. I was going to live.

Lee Sanders
*Texas Aggies in Vietnam – War Stories edited by
Michael Lee Lanning (pp 102-104)*

Question: Margaret, when and how did you learn that Lee was wounded?

Margaret: I don't remember the exact date. My brother Dale was a student Texas A&M and we went to pick him up and bring him back to Louisiana. I first went over to Kyle, TX to visit Lee's grandfather.

We spent the night in Kyle. When I woke that morning the very minute my feet hit the floor I felt that something had happened.

While we were driving that day all these thoughts kept entering my mind. Was he going to be OK? How badly wounded he was?

Driving from College Station to Louisiana, the haunting question changed to: "Would Mother try to keep it from me? How is the notification going to happen?"

When we got home, nothing happened. Mom said nothing because she knew nothing. However, after a short while the telephone rang, and I knew right away what it was. Lee had been wounded and the Army sent the notification telegram to Lee's dad in Colorado because I was supposed to be there at my home of record.

HOMEcoming AND RECOVERY

Luther Lee Sanders' improved dramatically the moment his "Dust-Off" helicopter dropped its nose and turned east from *Dong ap Bai* toward the Evacuation Hospital at *Phu Bai*. In that instant, he had left behind the cracking sound of small-arms fire and the thud of the impact of a mortar round. No longer would a dark night in the jungle or the "swoosh" of an RPG stir his adrenalin. In an instant, the Dust-Off quickly delivered Lee into the skilled and caring arms the finest military medical system ever known.

But that does not mean that Lee's personal battles and challenges were over. Despite all these improvements in his life, Lee now found himself on the long, sometimes painful, and often daunting journey to recovery.

As difficult as that journey would be, Lee had one huge advantage – he would never be alone and he would never be without help and encouragement from Margaret – the woman he stopped his red Volkswagen to help one night in Fort Polk.

A REUNION MENDS SOME HALF-CENTURY SCARS

For four days this past May, 40-50 Rakkasans, all veterans of the Battle of Hamburger Hill, gathered in Clarksville, KY and nearby Fort Campbell to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Battle. Lee Sanders was one of them.

The old veterans enjoyed an exciting program of social events, equipment demonstrations, sporting events, and patriotic ceremonies arranged by the City of Clarksville, the United States Army, Fort Campbell, the 101st Airborne Division, and specifically, the 3d Battalion, 187th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

All the events in the program were well-received by the veterans, especially those that highlighted young soldiers currently serving in the Rakkasan Battalion. But there was one event that will be remembered by everyone, young and old, who participated.

After a full day of activities, the bus carrying the veterans of Hamburger Hill stopped outside the closed doors of one of the giant hangers on the Fort Campbell flight line. The veterans were asked to dismount from the busses and stand in a loose "formation", wondering what would happen next. They would not be disappointed.

On someone's signal, the huge hanger doors slowly opened. From behind the doors came music from an Army band and the swelling roar of a large crowd. Above the crowd was a banner that proclaimed, "**WELCOME HOME**". The band's best efforts were drowned out by the enthusiastic shouts by children of Fort Campbell, each waving small American flags.

At first the old veterans were surprised. Then the emotional gravity of the event struck many of them, prompting watery eyes and rubbery legs that were unable to respond to the desire to step into the hanger. Many tried to hide their tears, while others swallowed their pride and went for their handkerchiefs.

When these veterans returned from Vietnam fifty years ago, the best they could hope for was to be ignored. All that is now forgotten. The heroes of Hamburger Hill have received their long overdue "**WELCOME HOME**".

Welcome Home, Lee Sanders!

