commanded the company. Partain, the battalion commander, had departed, and his replacement objected to having a lieutenant leading a company when experienced captains were available. Matt became the unit's executive officer; Alpha's new commander was Captain Michael J. Kiley, West Point '64 and the winner of four Silver Stars during an earlier tour with the First Cavalry.

At 9:30 A.M., a scout dog with the company's reconnaissance squad pricked up its ears while nosing up a ridge. Almost immediately, from a range of only twenty yards, NVA fire raked the squad. Matt took command of the company's lead elements, maneuvering them around the left flank. After linking up with the men under attack, he tried unsuccessfully to seize the high ground above the enemy, who were entrenched in bunkers across the ridgeline. Kiley brought two other platoons forward, but when he began moving them up the hill, the NVA responded with grenades and recoilless rifle fire, killing two paratroopers.

Soon the Americans detected movement on both flanks as the enemy tried to surround Alpha and sever the company from the rest of the battalion. Kiley quickly ordered his men back 150 yards, below the field of fire from the bunkers. At eleven o'clock, he summoned air strikes. The fight dragged on sporadically for another three hours, as Bravo and Charlie companies arrived to reinforce Alpha. At two-thirty, the enemy broke contact, leaving four dead on each side.

A fragment from either a mortar or a grenade had nicked Matt in the hand. Though not serious, within hours the wound showed signs of infection. Kiley, who had taken shrapnel in the leg, went to the rear for treatment, leaving Matt in charge. When he returned and saw Matt's festering hand, the captain insisted that his XO get help.

So it was that Matt remained at the aid station near the firebase for several days. As a consequence, he missed the beginning of the most intense fighting of the war since the battle for the Ia Drang Valley two years before. For Matt Harrison, the painful nick in his hand proved to be immense good fortune.

Twelve miles southwest of Dak To and only four miles from the Cambodian border, in Area of Operations Hawk, rose yet another hill in the endless procession of green ridges. Topographically, this one was relatively benign, neither unusually high nor perilously steep. Botanically, it offered the usual triple-canopy welter of hardwood and bamboo. From the north, the hill sloped gently, providing a ramp toward the summit that was roughly a hundred yards wide; the ridge dropped sharply to the west and more gradually to the east. On the Army's 1:25,000 scale maps, the hill was known only by its elevation in meters: 875.

In late spring, the NVA had secretly prepared an elaborate nexus of interlocking trenches and bunkers along the crest of Hill 875, now neatly camouflaged by the fecund jungle. With as much as eight feet of dirt and teak logs for overhead protection, the fortifications were impervious to all but direct hits from the heaviest Air Force bombs.

On November 18, an eighty-man Special Forces team on the south slope detected the enemy entrenched on the top of the hill. Following two brief firefights, the SF team withdrew with ten wounded. The next day, after a medley of artillery shells and seventy high-explosive and napalm bombs, three companies of the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Infantry moved into position to storm the ridge.

The monsoons had passed and the morning dawned clear and bright, with temperatures heading toward the low 90s. With Charlie Company on the right and Delta on the left, the paratroopers began pushing up the north face of the hill in eight snaking columns at 9:43 on Sunday, November 19. Among those leading platoons in the assault were Buck Thompson and Pete Lantz. Each rifleman carried four hundred rounds of M-16 ammunition, and the grenadiers carried thirty rounds of high-explosive grenades and forty shotgun shells. Twelve hundred rounds were spread among the platoon for each M-60 machine gun, and every soldier had at least two fragmentation grenades, a smoke canister, and a trip flare. Some also carried claymore mines. As the paratroopers came to a clearing strewn with trees shattered by the earlier bombardment, one scout whispered to another, "I smell Charlies."

At ten-thirty, the NVA opened fire on the advancing columns. Specialist Four Kenneth Jacobson, the point man in Delta's second platoon, was shot three times and killed instantly. A medic who crawled up to help him was also hit and died a few minutes later. The Americans dropped their rucksacks and began to close up their platoons; the enemy intensified the fire with recoilless rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. Another medic was killed while tending one of the wounded C Company scouts.

Both companies marked their positions with smoke as artillery and bombing sorties smashed the hilltop once more. After thirty minutes, the paratroopers began to crawl forward again. Several soldiers from Delta surrounded one bunker and heaved five grenades through the firing port; a moment after the detonations, the Americans dived for cover when several NVA grenades came flying back out in response, an indication that the bunkers were tied together by tunnels. Two U.S. artillery rounds fell short, wounding four men in D Company. One of C Company's platoon leaders was mortally wounded by automatic weapons fire; Pete Lantz threw an arm around the lieutenant and dragged him

down the hill as bullets and grenade fragments ripped the underbrush around them.

The attack stalled. After ordering a thirty-yard withdrawal, the C Company commander, Captain Harold Kaufman, drew his pistol and fired in the air several times to prevent the retreat from turning into a rout. Barely a grenade throw from the forward bunker, and under intense fire, both companies began to dig in, using their knives and helmets for shovels.

Farther down the hill, Captain Kiley had deployed Alpha Company in a U formation, with the open end toward the top of the ridge. When the shooting began, he ordered his weapons platoon to begin chopping a landing zone about a hundred yards from the fighting. A helicopter dropped a kit containing chain saws, axes, and crosscut saws.

Meanwhile, the NVA prepared to spring the trap. Undetected by the Americans, enemy soldiers crept down the western slope of 875 on trails, which had been built with neatly squared steps and handrails. Shortly after two P.M., they began inching back up the hill, approaching the paratroopers from below.

Forty yards from the landing zone, guarding Alpha's rear, four soldiers crouched next to the trail with an M-60 manned by Private First Class Carlos Lozada. Hearing the snap of twigs, Lozada peered around a tree and spotted a group of NVA soldiers with blackened faces and rifles camouflaged in burlap. "Here they come!" he yelled.

The first sweeping bursts of his machine gun caught fifteen enemy soldiers in the open and slaughtered them. In actions that would win him the Medal of Honor, Lozada provided covering fire from behind a log while the other paratroopers scrambled uphill toward the LZ. Then, stumbling backward up the trail, killing at least twenty NVA soldiers, he continued firing the M-60 from his hip until the weapon jammed. An enemy round slammed into his head, knocking him across the legs of another paratrooper, who screamed hysterically. One squad leader reached down and rolled Lozada face up in hopes that the enemy would see that he was dead and not mutilate his body.

The trap had been sprung, the noose cinched. As the enemy continued their heavy fire from the crest of 875, scores of NVA soldiers pushed against Alpha from two directions below, killing more paratroopers by the minute. Thousands of bullets tore the air, each with a sound once described as "the ripping of a silk dress." The Americans couldn't fire fast enough to cut down the swarming enemy soldiers, some of whom were shrieking and laughing bizarrely. One platoon leader named Tommy Remington, a friend of Matt Harrison's, was shot in both arms and both legs. Kiley, who had been wounded on the LZ during a mortar-

and-rocket barrage, dug in with a lieutenant, two sergeants, and two enlisted men near his command position. Charging from the west, the NVA quickly overran the little group, slaughtering Kiley and the five others.

Dragging some of their wounded — others had to be abandoned — the survivors from Alpha scrambled up the hill, yelling "Friendly! Friendly!" to avoid being shot by paratroopers in Charlie and Delta companies. Soldiers from the three companies quickly formed a defensive circle. If the north slope of 875 was a watch face, with the summit at twelve o'clock, C Company occupied the perimeter from twelve to five, D Company from seven to twelve, and Alpha from four to ten, overlapping the other two. At three P.M., an officer from C Company reported on the radio to the battalion firebase that they were surrounded by several hundred NVA. In the space of seventy-five minutes, the enemy shot down three helicopters attempting to drop ammunition and water. NVA soldiers shinnied into the trees for a better angle on the Hueys and the 250 encircled Americans, who lay crowded inside a wagon train circle perhaps seventy-five yards in diameter.

Just before five o'clock, a Huey from the 335th Assault Helicopter Company managed to drop a pallet of ammunition, but the supplies fell with a thud fifteen yards outside the perimeter, halfway between the Americans and the NVA. Peter Lantz and another lieutenant organized a recovery team. Dashing in and out of the perimeter, they had successfully collected most of the ammunition when suddenly Lantz jerked once and fell flat, slain by a sniper's bullet. The recovery effort was abandoned.

Also on the perimeter lay the brigade's Catholic chaplain, Father Charles J. Watters, who had hosted Jim Ford's visit to the 173rd two months earlier. A legendary figure who wore camouflage vestments and conducted Mass from an altar made of C-ration cases, Watters had won a Bronze Star in May for continuing to administer extreme unction to a dying soldier while under heavy enemy fire. Now, he behaved like a man possessed. Three times he shook off paratroopers trying to restrain him and scampered outside the lines to drag wounded men to safety.

At the firebase four miles away, alarm and confusion gripped the battalion command post. Between air strikes, the half-dozen howitzers at the base pounded the hilltop, but apparently to very little effect. Darkness was less than two hours away; a relief expedition would not be able to punch through until the next day, if at all. None of the fifty or sixty wounded could be extracted, and the survivors had run low on ammunition and water. The battalion commander knew that Kiley, as well as many other officers and senior NCOs, had been killed.

Matt Harrison understood at first hand how bad the predicament was on 875. His wound having healed sufficiently for him to rejoin the battalion, Matt had boarded a Huey earlier that afternoon, but as the helicopter neared the battle, it was driven away by a swarm of bullets ripping through the fuselage. Now, the battalion commander ordered Matt to prepare to assume command of A Company. But how?

Squatting next to a radio at the firebase, he tuned into the C Company frequency. A familiar voice came on the network.

"Buck?" Matt asked, pressing the microphone key. "Buck? Is that you?"

"Matt? Yeah, it's me."

Matt could hear small-arms chatter and occasional mortar explosions in the background.

"Buck, how you doin'?"

"Mmmm. I'm okay, Matt. I'm, uh, I'm hit, but I'm okay."

In truth, Buck had been hit three times. Wounded by small-arms fire during the morning assault, he was shot a second time while sprinting between the squads of his platoon, shouting encouragement to the paratroopers. Both times he waved away the medic who tried to help him. As C Company pulled back inside the perimeter, Buck was wounded a third time while carrying his platoon sergeant into the lines.

"Hey, Matt?"

"Yeah, Buck."

"Do me a favor, huh? If I get killed, make sure I get the Medal of Honor so my son can go to West Point."

What a character, Matt thought. Joking around at a time like this. You'd think he —

"Harrison, let's go." The battalion executive officer waved impatiently.

"Yes, sir. What's up?"

"You're going to rappel in on a Swiss seat."

In stunned disbelief, Matt listened to the harebrained plan. A Huey waited on the LZ near the howitzers. Someone — at "echelons above reason" — had decided to lower Matt and two others into the perimeter. The scheme sounded like a grotesque parody of *deus ex machina*. Helicopters at full throttle were not surviving the sleet of enemy fire; what chance was there for an exposed man dangling on the end of a rope? No chance, Matt knew, no chance at all. He was going to die. That was suddenly very clear.

In a trance, he walked quietly to the Huey and sat in the seat as though he were a condemned man in an electric chair. An irresistible fatalism swept over him. This was too preposterous even to protest. Duty had taken a strange and ugly turn, not simply asking but demanding the last full measure of devotion. He could picture himself swinging in a slow pendular arc above the trees as every North Vietnamese soldier within five miles took a shot at him. His hour had come round at last. The helicopter engine whined in preparation.

Then, at the last moment, a senior officer stepped forward. "Wait a minute," he ordered. "This is crazy. We're not doing this."

Even the reprieve seemed surreal to Matt. Untying the harness, he climbed from the Swiss seat as dutifully and impassively as he had climbed into it, and walked away from the Huey to await further orders.

Back on Hill 875, a deep gloom sifted over the Americans as the sun set. Temperatures plunged as quickly as they had risen during the day, sinking toward the low 50s. The paratroopers huddled between one another's legs for warmth. Another artillery round fell short, killing one and wounding four in D Company. Someone called the firebase and asked them to please, *please,* add a hundred meters to the next salvo.

Periodically, the NVA walked five or six mortar bursts across the three companies. During the lulls, the paratroopers heard enemy snipers yelling derisively in the twilight, "Chieu hoi! Chieu hoi, you GI!" Chieu Hoi — Open Arms — was the amnesty program offered to NVA and Viet Cong soldiers who surrendered.

The American survivors wrapped their wounded in clothing and blankets scavenged from the dead, and laid them in shallow trenches, where they watched a full moon, orange and monstrous, float up through the trees. Buck Thompson, still alive despite his three wounds, lay among them.

What was he thinking? Certainly of Fran and the Deuce, who at six months looked more and more like his father. Perhaps he thought of his boyhood in Atchison, of the three-year-old in his cowboy costume who once sang "Pistol-Packin' Mama" for the railroad men in Thompson's Restaurant. Perhaps he thought of the Jayhawk pranks, of the swayback nag executed in the girls' dormitory, or the sorority queen taken to witness the hanging at Lansing. Perhaps he remembered the top bunk at Camp Buckner, where he nipped at his Cutty Sark and read *The Canterbury Tales* as Tom Carhart gawked with undisguised admiration. Or perhaps he recalled June Week and his wedding in the chapel, where he had barked his vows — Affirmative! — and later helped stamp out the flaming tablecloth at the Officers Club reception.

Whatever his thoughts, they were the final inner murmurings of a short and happy life that ended at precisely 6:58 P.M. At that moment, an American bomber streaked over Hill 875 from northeast to southwest, oddly contrary to the usual southeast-to-northwest vector that the

planes had flown all day. In the gathering darkness, the trapped battalion on the hill could hear the throaty scream of the jet as it roared directly overhead. At least one and possibly two large bombs whistled from the plane's belly, falling squarely in the middle of the C Company command post, where the surviving officers huddled near the wounded.

With a terrifying concussion, the explosions gouged a crater deep enough to bury a bus. Flame and steel ripped across the command post, severing heads, tearing arms and legs from their sockets, and flinging a geyser of dirt, blankets, and weapons high into the air. Hot shrapnel riddled scores of soldiers. Anguished shrieks of pain and panic swept like fire through the company.

The explosions killed forty-two men, including Father Watters. Forty-five others were wounded. Those who survived wept in outraged incredulity. Among the dead lay Richard William Thompson, apparently killed instantly by the blasts. Those who knew him would find it almost impossible to believe — and perhaps it surprised him, too — but even Buck was mortal.

At 7:30 A.M. on November 20, a relief expedition of ninety-six enlisted men and four officers from B Company of the 4th Battalion set out for Hill 875 from Firebase 16. The company, commanded by Captain Ron Leonard, shunned the trails and moved through the jungle on a series of compass azimuths in the same prudent diamond formation that had caused Leonard such trouble after the June 22 massacre.

Again, Leonard was told to expect an ambush. He also learned that most of the officers and NCOs of the 2nd Battalion were dead (including, erroneously, Matt Harrison). Fractured with the strain of the past twenty-four hours, at least one senior officer wept as Leonard's men pushed off, heavily laden with extra ammunition, grenades, and mortar rounds.

Leading the third platoon at the head of the diamond was another '66 graduate, Lieutenant Alfred Lindseth, a fair-haired farm boy from North Dakota. Al Lindseth had roomed with Tom Carhart when they were plebes, and, like Tom, he had volunteered for Vietnam. After a stint as a weapons platoon leader in the 173rd, he had grown bored tending the company's mortars and volunteered to lead an infantry platoon, in time replacing a lieutenant who was killed.

With Lindseth in the lead, Bravo Company took the entire day to reach the base of the besieged hill. The toppled trees and debris from the bombs and artillery shells reminded Lindseth of the rubble of a collapsed twenty-story building. At an abandoned NVA base camp, they passed dead enemy soldiers — blasted to pieces by artillery — in a heap

of bloody Chinese dressings. Moving cautiously through the position once held by Kiley's Alpha Company, they saw the ground on both sides of the trail carpeted with dead Americans and North Vietnamese. Some of the paratroopers had small holes in their foreheads, the mark of an execution. The relief column passed Carlos Lozada, slumped on a cairn of spent M-60 casings, still clutching his jammed machine gun. Lindseth had never seen more than one dead American at a time; here, dozens covered the ground.

At five P.M., unmolested by the NVA, Leonard's company pushed into the 2nd Battalion's perimeter. The survivors cried with relief at the sight of the rescue party, and the paratroopers distributed food, water, and ammunition.

An hour later, a single Huey — the only helicopter to get in on the twentieth — swooped down in a fusillade of enemy fire. Five of the most seriously wounded were hoisted aboard as three officers jumped from the bay, including Matt Harrison, who had orders to take command of A Company and "exploit the tactical situation."

Crawling among the 2nd Battalion in the fading light, Matt scanned a scene even more ghastly than the ambush in June. Later, he would describe it simply as "the third circle of hell." Bodies and pieces of bodies lay strewn across the enclave. Curses and moans poured from the wounded. NVA snipers, having crawled within twenty-five meters of the Americans, periodically sprayed the American position with gunfire. Enemy mortar crews had moved so close that the Americans could hear the *pumpf!* of rounds leaving the tube, followed a few seconds later by a jarring explosion on the ground or in the tree branches overhead.

Among the wounded, Matt found Tommy Remington, the lieutenant who had been shot in both legs and both arms. "Matt," he asked, "do you have a canteen?"

Another lieutenant lay next to Remington, his intestines spilling out. Again and again he whispered, "I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die."

Spotting an Alpha trooper huddled behind a log, Matt crept over to him.

"Where's our line?" he asked.

The soldier stared blankly for a moment, as dumfounded as if asked to explain a principle of quantum physics. "Shit," he replied at last, "I don't know."

After passing out ammunition and food, Matt helped to slide some of the dead into body bags, including Kiley, Lozada, and the torn corpse of Buck Thompson. Before long, a wall of stacked bags stood four feet high.

Two other companies from the 4th Battalion arrived around eight, following the route blazed by Leonard and Lindseth. Now the better part of two battalions had squeezed into an area slightly larger than a football field. The paratroopers dug in behind the barricade of shattered trees, firing their rifles and heaving grenades at any shadow moving beyond the perimeter. The enemy, evidently realizing that the Americans had been reinforced and were well fortified, chose not to launch a full-scale attack, but the sniper and mortar fire continued almost without pause.

In the middle of the night, Lindseth, lying behind a log, heard the wounded man next to him begin choking in a raspy death rattle.

"Medic!" Lindseth yelled. "Medic!"

Hollow-eyed with fatigue, a medic stumbled over and tugged the poncho from the wounded soldier. In the moonlight, Lindseth was horrified to see that there was nothing below the soldier's waist; both legs had been severed at the hip. The sight seared itself into Lindseth's memory, as the medic injected another syringe of morphine. A few hours later, the soldier died.

The next morning, Tuesday, November 21, the artillery firebases began a six-hour bombardment of Hill 875; the Air Force dropped fifteen tons of high explosives and seven tons of napalm on the crest of the hill. While Matt continued to reorganize Alpha Company and evacuate the wounded, three companies of the 4th Battalion planned a counterattack. Shortly after three P.M., they stormed out from the perimeter but covered less than ten yards before being pinned down. The paratroopers found it impossible to crawl under the fallen trees covering the hillside, and any effort to scoot over the logs offered the NVA a clearly silhouetted target.

Flame throwers were ineffective; few Americans knew how to operate them and someone had forgotten to send the igniting strikers anyway. At one point, Lindseth collected ten LAWs — light antitank weapons that resembled small bazookas. Standing exposed between two trees, he fired them in quick succession at a nearby bunker. But the LAWs exploded harmlessly against the outer wall of thick teak logs; the six-inch firing ports in the bunkers were too narrow to be penetrated. After two hours and more than fifty casualties, the attack was aborted. Only the extraordinarily high percentage of duds among the NVA's Chinese-made grenades kept the toll from being even higher. The Americans dug in for a third night on 875, singing an old paratrooper song to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic": *Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die . . .*

On Wednesday, November 22, both battalions pulled back a hundred

yards down the hill. Rather than attempt another assault, the Americans spent the entire day and succeeding morning smashing the hill with air strikes and artillery salvos. Every four or five minutes, F-100 and Phantom jets streaked past at five hundred feet, dumping silver napalm canisters, which turned the remaining teak trees into giant candles. Matt watched in awe as high-flying B-52s flattened the adjacent hilltops. Without warning, like Gomorrah revisited, an entire ridgeline would erupt in a roaring escarpment of flame and black smoke. At the base of 875, a steady convoy of Hueys evacuated the wounded from a small landing zone supervised by Lieutenant Peyton Ligon, yet another classmate from '66 who had arrived with the 4th Battalion. Along with fresh troops, the helicopters brought several squads of journalists who had insisted on being allowed to cover the battle at first hand.

Shortly after eleven the next morning, the Americans counterattacked again. Three companies from the 4th Battalion surged toward the top of the hill. "Now I want you to get up there," someone yelled, "and get them sons of bitches!"

But there were few sons of bitches to get. During the night, most of the NVA's 174th Regiment had melted away into Cambodia. The Americans kept a curtain of mortar fire falling twenty-five yards in front of their line as they crept up the hill. Al Lindseth, moving up the left side with Leonard's Bravo Company, leaped into a bunker and was surprised by how deep and sturdy it was. Spotting a dead NVA soldier in one corner, Lindseth kicked him in the head to be certain that he wasn't shamming, then pressed on.

A few moments later, Lindseth's platoon sergeant, who was carrying forty pounds of satchel charges, was hit by a B-40 rocket. The explosion atomized the sergeant, blew Lindseth through the air, and wounded Captain Leonard in the left calf. Spotting a muzzle flash from an adjacent ridgeline, Leonard called in an air strike. After the Phantom dropped its payload, a spectacular secondary detonation lasted for several minutes; apparently a fuel or ammunition dump had been hit.

Twenty minutes after the assault began, the first paratroopers reached the top of 875, yelling "Geronimo!" and "Airborne!" The crest was blackened and blown bald by five days of bombardment. The Americans found few enemy bodies, but a revolting stench hung over the hill, mingling with the acrid odor of shattered earth.

On the heels of the paratroopers came the journalists. "Hey, Lieutenant," one reporter called to Lindseth, waving a whiskey flask, "how'd you like a drink?"

"Damned right," he replied.

Crawling into a bunker, Lindseth took a swig from the flask and was

suddenly horrified when the walls of the bunker collapsed around him. For a moment he was certain that he was about to be buried alive but the cave-in covered him only to the waist and he was able to claw his way back to the surface.

As Matt Harrison trudged up the hill, he passed a television reporter who stood before his cameraman, speaking into a microphone.

"Today is November 23, 1967," the reporter intoned, "Thanksgiving Day on Hill 875."

My God, it *is* Thanksgiving, Matt thought. A sharp, hot streak of anger flashed through him. This bastard, he thought, is using us as a backdrop for his report. There was something almost sacrilegious about it. They had fought the battle of their lives here, and the reporter's flat recitation diminished the agony and sacrifice of the past five days.

Matt shook his head. From the breast pocket of his fatigues he pulled a roster of paratroopers still missing from the 2nd Battalion, American men reduced to a scrawl of surnames and serial numbers. Among those on the list was *Lantz, Peter J., 1st lieutenant*. Where was Pete? Matt wondered.

A few yards down the hill, he noticed a small mound beneath a charred bush. With one of his sergeants, Matt hiked back down the slope. The mound was a man all right, though he was burned far beyond recognition. Matt nudged the figure with his boot. "I think it's a black guy," the sergeant said.

Then Matt saw the left hand, now clenched in a blackened claw. On one finger was a jade ring, which Matt instantly recognized as Pete Lantz's distinctive wedding band. Once again, Matt helped lift one of his classmates into a body bag. Of eight men from the class of '66 who had joined the 2nd Battalion five months earlier, four were dead and two had been badly wounded.

Big Chinook helicopters began to descend on the landing zone that had been cleared on the crown of 875. The crews, cheerfully wishing everyone a happy Thanksgiving, unloaded thermite containers full of hot turkey, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce. Filthy, exhausted, and ravenous, the paratroopers sat in the ashes and bolted down the meal. Then, less than an hour after the hill had been taken, the evacuation began in a dreary drizzle. The living sometimes sat on body bags in the crowded Chinook bays, joking bleakly about "the dumb dead fuckers" and "the KIA Travel Bureau."

After first stopping at a nearby firebase, the soldiers returned to Dak To. The 173rd held the traditional paratrooper memorial service with the boots of the dead arranged in a neat row, as though mocking the daily foot inspections.

Obsessed as ever with hard numbers, the Army began to tally the price of Operation MacArthur: 151,000 artillery rounds; 2100 tactical air strikes; 257 B-52 strikes; 40 U.S. helicopters lost. An estimated 298 NVA soldiers had died during the five-day fight on 875; U.S. losses were 107 killed, 282 wounded, 10 missing. Of the 101 men in Alpha Company on November 19, 28 were alive on Thanksgiving.

One paratrooper had a more succinct summary when asked by a reporter what had happened. "What the fuck do you think happened?" he replied. "We got shot to pieces." As the reporter began to scribble in his notebook, the soldier added, "Make that 'little pieces.' "

Even before Hill 875 was completely abandoned by the Americans on November 24 — title reverting once more to the jungle and the NVA — there were pointed questions in the press and in the ranks about the strategy, the tactics, the cost. Once again the initiative in this war of attrition lay with the enemy, who decided when to fight, where to fight, and when to slip away. As so often happened now in Vietnam, Americans had fought and died valiantly for a meaningless terrain feature that was seized only to be immediately relinquished. The battle was a Pyrrhic victory once defined by Churchill as "bought so dear as to be almost indistinguishable from defeat."

More men had died in five minutes at Verdun or Antietam than had died in five days on Hill 875, but this anonymous ridgeline in Asia was of a piece with those more celebrated fights, a horrific drama of bravery and cowardice, leadership and obedience, lucidity and confusion, death and sweet life.

Matt Harrison, Al Lindseth, and the others who survived were proud of what they had done. They had slugged it out, boot to boot, with a worthy opponent, finally driving him from the field in search of sanctuary. William Westmoreland, in Washington for another official visit, explained the battle as "the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy," marking a juncture in the war "when the end begins to come into view."

Perhaps so. But those riding away in the twin-rotored Chinooks that Thanksgiving afternoon had to wonder whether the flinty nihilism that caused them to slander "the dumb dead fuckers" on the floor was really the feeling of victory.

The first Western Union telegram arrived on Saturday morning, November 25, at the Urstadt house in Carmel, New York, where Fran Thompson and her young son had been living since Buck left for Vietnam.

DON'T DELV BTWN 10PM & 6AM DON'T PHONE

Mrs. Frances Thompson.

The secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your husband, First Lieutenant Richard Thompson, has been missing in