

When it's all over, friendship is all we have

by *SFC (Ret.) Phil Tegtmeier*

A soldier sat in the shadows. The jungle canopy and night sky made him hardly visible. Numbed after four days and nights of non-stop fighting, SFC Gary L. Littrell took out a cigarette and, against all the rules, lit it, drew deeply, and released a cloud of smoke into the night.

A voice with a shadowy figure attached emerged from the underbrush that had been shattered by the violent passing of bullets and shrapnel. In Vietnamese, with an obvious Northern accent, the voice asked, *May I have a cigarette?*

Without blinking, the one soldier gave the other soldier a smoke.

Thank you, the voice said, and the figure melted back into the jungle.

"It was just two professional soldiers looking each other eye-to-eye," Littrell said. The experience was one not detailed in the history books that describe the actions that earned Littrell the Medal of Honor in April 1970. The sergeant first class, who went on to become a command sergeant major, spoke to the members of Sergeants Major Course Class 53, at Biggs Army Airfield Aug. 22, trying to pass on to a new generation of leaders a verbal history of what combat is truly like, not how it reads in the books.

Those books tell how Littrell, an advisor to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's 23rd Ranger Battalion, spent four days near the Cambodian border with the unit he advised. The Rangers,



CSM Gary L. Littrell

all 473 who went into the fight, ended up surrounded by two North Vietnamese regular Army regiments supported by a battalion of sappers, or combat engineers. When mortar rounds that opened the fight took out all the officers, Littrell took command of the situation. Four days after going into the jungle, he came out again leading 41 walking wounded down from the hilltop position they had stubbornly defended against more than 10-1 odds.

"We were credited with the annihilation of two NV regiments," Littrell told the class, "but that wasn't the real story. All I knew was that I would soon be out of ammo, that I had faced death in the eye, and I had told myself

that within minutes or within hours, I would be dead and it would be okay."

Instead of dying, Littrell and the beleaguered remnants of a proud unit escaped when the enemy finally faded back into the jungle on the fourth night. But the subsequent pullout would not have succeeded if not for the intervention of a close friend of Littrell's who, without authorization, called in air strikes to clear the jungle in advance of the withdrawal of Littrell and his men.

"At the time I had harsh feelings about it, that my men had gone through all that they had but they couldn't get helicopters to lift us out or artillery fires to cover our ground withdrawal," Littrell said. "But later I understood because, while we were now out of contact, other soldiers were in contact and they

could use the support that we would have drawn from them."

Littrell's message was simple in the end. He came into an Army where training consisted of preparing to look good on Saturday inspections in the early 1960s. Today, he sees an Army of high-tech weaponry and battle-focused training. But he said that his Army and today's Army really are the same when everything else is stripped away.

"I got out of that jungle because of a friend. And friendship is still everything."

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