



**‘I won’t leave
the old man
to die alone.’**

—SGT. ED EATON

This Month in NCO History

April 3, 1969 — An Army of one in the Mekong Delta

By Pablo Villa — NCO Journal

Sgt. Ed Eaton had one bad day at the shooting range en route to failing his first go-round at sniper school.

But difficult times never deterred Eaton, in fact, they helped him rise to the occasion. His upbringing in rural Oregon by a retired Marine father included regimented discipline. He joined the National Guard in 1965 while still in high school before joining the Army in 1968, eschewing the Marine Corps to pursue a career as a combat medic. But the Army had different plans, assigning Eaton to an infantry unit where he proved his mettle as a sharpshooter while working as a radio operator.

Eventually, he returned to sniper school and earned his certification as a scout sniper in time to join the 9th Infantry Division’s River Raiders — the 60th Infantry Regiment — which began operations in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta in September 1968. Eaton and his unit lived aboard the U.S.S. Westchester, where they engaged in swift air support missions throughout the vast river valley where more than half of the Southeast Asian nation’s rice is cultivated.

In the early evening hours of April 3, 1969, Eaton was quick to answer a call for volunteers for a mission led by

Capt. Mike Perkins. The team of Soldiers was to conduct a reconnaissance or search-and-destroy operation on a hamlet along a fork in the Mekong River, near Can Tho, where a heavy amount of radio traffic had been detected. The 10-man team had an hour to prepare before being airlifted by two Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, known as Hueys, and dropped into a rice paddy. Early searches yielded nothing more than villagers moving and working among the massive palm-thatched hooches.

After more than a half-hour on the ground, Soldiers sifting through a paddy uncovered what appeared to be a bunker. Perkins determined it was the entrance to an underground system of tunnels used by Viet Cong forces because of its sophisticated concrete and rebar construction. With darkness shrouding the area, and suspecting a large enemy force was present, Perkins ordered his team out of the area and radioed the helicopters to return. As the Soldiers moved toward the extraction point, they could hear the Viet Cong moving about in the rice paddies nearby. As the Soldiers boarded the helicopters, bullets began whizzing around them.

Two Bell AH-1 Cobra gunships provided cover fire as the helicopters departed but Perkins noticed one of his men on the ground. He ordered the pilots to return to the Soldier's position. The first helicopter touched down, the Soldier got in and it departed. In the havoc of the rescue effort, a Soldier from the second helicopter — the one carrying Eaton and Perkins — exited to lay down cover fire as his helicopter departed. Perkins realized this and ordered his pilot to return to retrieve the errant Soldier. As the aircraft lifted off again, enemy fire disabled the motor and the aircraft pitched and slammed violently to the ground.

The crash left the Soldiers on board badly injured and unable to move, except for Eaton. He climbed to the top of the downed helicopter as enemy fire continued to pelt it and manned the M60 machine gun. To his dismay, it wasn't operable. With an estimated 300 enemy soldiers closing in on their position, Eaton screamed at his fellow Soldiers to hand him their M16 rifles. He fired the weapons at various positions in the distance. Eaton eventually located his M14 sniper rifle. It had been damaged in the crash, the stock was broken off and his Starlight scope — a night-vision device — was askew. As a result, his shots were missing their mark. For a time, he alternately fired his sniper rifle and the M16s. Survivors of the battle say that intermittent shooting slowed the enemy's progress toward the helicopter because they believed there were multiple people firing at them.

Finally, Eaton fired a chance shot into a deep puddle of water while looking through his scope. The splash helped him gauge his shots, and he began to land deadly fire. The tide of the battle turned, and Eaton was able to

keep the enemy at bay. A helicopter arrived and most of the injured Soldiers were extracted. A second helicopter arrived and picked up the rest, except for Perkins, who was too injured to move. The aircraft had lifted off and turned when Eaton leaped out. Reports of the day quoted him as saying, "I won't leave the old man to die alone."

Eaton stayed with Perkins under the tail of the helicopter, picking off two Viet Cong soldiers sneaking around the aircraft's nose in the process. A helicopter returned to pick them up. This time, only Perkins was allowed to board, as there was not enough room for Eaton, so a scout exited the aircraft to wait with him. The two were picked up by a Cobra helicopter not long after and transported to a rice paddy 30 minutes away to await extraction by a Huey.

The pair were eventually returned to safety. Eaton had a broken back and a gunshot wound in his finger. His chin had been shredded by shrapnel. He had five rounds in his rifle left to hold off a horde of enemies. The ordeal, and several others throughout his tour in Vietnam, earned Eaton three Purple Hearts, three Bronze Stars with Valor device and various Army Commendation Medals. Eaton, now retired from the Army and the radio business, lives with his wife, Donita, in Bay City, Ore.

Despite all of Eaton's accomplishments, Perkins, who retired from the Army as a major, believes his comrade is deserving of far more for his bravery the night their helicopter went down. He resumed work five years ago on a campaign to award his fellow Soldier the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest honor. An active recommendation process for the award is being handled through the office of U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader, D.-Ore. ■



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