

MAMBO ON HILL 167

By LTC Baltazar (Bart) Soto (Retired, US Army Reserve)

First Lieutenant Walt B. Clark was Platoon Leader of the 2nd Platoon of "C" Company "Borinqueneers". He had recently graduated from the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina and Infantry Officer Basic Course. The young 21-year old Clark looked at his assignment as a challenge in leadership, since he was selected to lead these mostly Spanish-speaking soldiers from the tropical island of Puerto Rico. Many officers at the time thought it was the kiss of death to be assigned to the Puerto Rican Regiment. The critics mockingly called the regiment the "seeexxy feeeth" trying to imitate the Spanish accent of most of the unit's Puerto Rican soldiers.



Ever since he had first taken command of the 2nd Platoon, in March 1952, Lt. Clark wanted to instill in his men aggressiveness - "the spirit of the bayonet". He always had a kitchen grinding stone present so his men could sharpen the 10 inch blade of their bayonets and insisted they carry their bayonets with them at all times. He even ordered his men to sleep with their bayonets affixed to their M-1 rifles. Finally after months of outpost duty he and his platoon would get the chance to attack. The mission was conceived on short notice. The orders were to: "raid Chinese outpost positions on Hill 167 in stealth and darkness, capture prisoners and leave a squad of volunteers on 167 to observe Chinese Main Line of Resistance (MLR) area – squad to remain for 48 hours".

Clark's Platoon mission would be to actually go into the objective, seize the hill, and take the prisoners. The rest of the company would provide suppression, security, and support. Third Division had taken no Prisoners of War for a number of weeks. The Company Commander, Captain Henry E. Hutcheson, explained that the S-2 (Intelligence) estimated half an enemy squad was occupying the objective as an outpost. So his platoon should have no problem overwhelming the Chinese. A tank section on the MLR would provide support by fire. After assembling in darkness near the steep slopes of Hill 250, along the Outpost Line of Resistance, the Company moved out 18 July 1952 and crossed the Line of Departure (LD) at 24:00, so contact with the enemy would occur on 19 July. The company became lost in the dark. Noise discipline was very poor, undoubtedly alerting the enemy very early. It was not until the sun began to rise that they found the objective, negating the "stealth" part of the mission. The 2nd Platoon began the assault moving to the objective from the north.

The Chinese allowed the 2nd Platoon scouts to move within a few feet before opening up with a murderous fire of four Soviet Maxim Heavy Machine Guns, small arms, and grenades. The infantrymen instinctively threw themselves down to hug the earth and take cover. A Chinese soldier on top of the hill signaled with a large red flag. Lt. Clark and the 2nd Platoon

quickly found out what that signal meant. The Chinese, with complete disregard for their own soldiers, fired mortar and artillery shells into their battle position as 2nd Platoon advanced. Clark immediately charged into the enemy position leading his platoon of infantry with fixed bayonets shouting "Arriba Muchachos!" Platoon Sergeant, Master Sgt. Santos Candelario, helped to rally the rest of the platoon following their Lieutenant.



Col. Walter B. Clark (Ret.)

The Lieutenant fearlessly led his men into the position which consisted of three concentric trench lines on the hill. Lt. Clark was wounded by an enemy grenade but continued his charge. He hurled grenades and shot several enemy soldiers while charging the hill. As he entered a trench and turned a corner he came face to face with a Chinese soldier. Several things happened instantaneously within split seconds. They both raised their weapons and fired at each other. Clark's M2 Carbine jammed but the enemy fired a burst from his Soviet Model PPSH41 "Burp Gun" hitting Clark in the thigh. Clark threw his carbine away and instinctively jumped on the soldier. At the same time he took his steel pot off and began beating him senseless. When the soldier moved Clark remembered he still had his Smith & Wesson 45 revolver and shot him. The remaining Chinese nearby hurled several grenades at Lt. Clark wounding him in the legs, knee, and face.

Cpl. Jose Otero-Gonzalez ran thru the hail of fire, following his Lieutenant, firing his rifle, and throwing hand grenades at the Chinese. Near one of the enemy trenches, he found his platoon leader injured and stretched out on the ground. Otero told his Lieutenant, "I'll save you". Private First Class (PFC) Maximino Paoli had also run up with Otero when suddenly Paoli was knocked down wounded in the head. Clark thought Paoli was dead. Paoli jumped back up furious and bayoneted the two Chinese who were throwing grenades directly at Lt. Clark. Later Paoli discovered a bullet wedged in his helmet between the liner and the steel pot. Cpl. Otero spotted another Non-Commissioned Officer and rescued him also, risking his own life thru the rain of enemy bullets, grenades, mortars and artillery.

The intensity of the enemy fire was so severe, it did not allow the other two rifle platoons of "C" Company to the east to provide any support. The entire 2nd Platoon, following the example of their leaders, fought in the trenches hand to hand. Small Chinese bunkers were blown up by a 57mm recoilless rifle team accompanying the platoon or were directly assaulted by the infantryman. As the brutal fight progressed for several hours, it turned out the enemy "half squad" of 3-4 riflemen was a lot more, instead possibly an enemy Company of a hundred. Perhaps the bravest man Lt. Clark witnessed that day was the Medic, PFC Demetrio Villalobos-Melendez. With all the death and maiming going on in the bloody brawl, he calmly went about the business of saving lives, moving thru the fire and attending to the wounded. For this he would eventually receive the Bronze Star.

The 2nd Platoon was already intermingled with the Chinese on the hill and our tanks could not risk firing and killing their own troops. On its own and outnumbered at least two to one, 2nd Platoon still managed to chase the enemy from the position, then machine gun the Chinese who were running away back to their lines. The 2nd Platoon succeeded in capturing two Chinese Prisoners in the gruesome melee.

Clark and his Platoon of Puerto Rican infantry owned Hill 167 until they received orders to withdraw from the position. The Lieutenant refused medical aid and with complete disregard for his own personal safety, he moved through the heavy hostile fire assisting in the

evacuation of the wounded. By this time, the two enemy prisoners they had captured had already been killed by the intense Chinese fire.

Lt. Clark was the last member of 2nd Platoon to leave the enemy position. The platoon took all their wounded and dead back with them, including the upper half of one of its soldiers. No one was left behind. During the retreat to the MLR the Chinese fired an estimated 3,000 rounds of mortar and artillery at the retreating platoon. Clark was unable to keep up with his men. During his lonely walk back, he was lifted off the ground three times by the 122mm mortar shelling along the withdrawal route. Miraculously, he eventually reached the Battalion Aid Station at approximately 11:00 hours.

Nine Bronze Stars and two Silver Stars were awarded to "C" Company for their heroism that day, mostly to the soldiers of 2nd Platoon. Cpl. Otero received the Bronze Star and Captain Enrique A. Vicens, a Medical Officer of the 65th Infantry, received the Bronze Star for risking his life to aid the wounded as they reached the MLR. C Company First Sergeant, Master Sgt. Rafael E. Balzac, also assisted in evacuating a wounded comrade. Upon reaching friendly positions, he refused medical aid for his wounds, and after calling for volunteers to accompany him, left his position of relative safety to further assist in evacuating the wounded. As he was carrying a fallen comrade to safety on his shoulders, the entire area was brought under a devastating barrage of enemy mortar fire, which killed him. 1st Sgt. Balzac was awarded the Silver Star, posthumously. His body was not recovered until a couple of days after the battle. The casualties that day were 7 killed and 24 wounded... or over 50% of the Platoon.

Lieutenant Clark was awarded the Silver Star and two Purple Hearts for six separate grenade wounds and the bullet wound he received. During his long recovery from his wounds at the hospital, Clark learned that his troops had named that vicious fight as the "Mambo of Hill 167" (when the men of the 65th were going to "rumble" in combat, they would refer to it as "going to the Mambo").

Today Hill 167 is deep inside the Demilitarized Zone near North Korea.

Writer Bart Soto and Walt Clark are interested in finding any of the individuals who participated in the above mentioned battle. Please contact us if you have any information. April, 2004