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Reluctant hero

By Lou Gonzalez - The Gazette

The letters that show up in Clark Welch's mailbox in Florissant these days are from ghosts, men he knew from another life another country.

They're men Welch, a 62-year-old retired Army colonel, thought died on a bright October day 35 years ago in Vietnam: Griego and Sena, Smith and Gilliam. And Scott , who saved Welch's life with a brown Army sock.

Other letters are from politicians. Or the Army.

Thirty-five years after watching his men get slaughtered in a jungle firefight with the Viet Cong, Welch is at the center of a debate about whether he should get the Medal of Honor.

Welch was recommended for the medal in January 2000, but got the Distinguished Service Cross instead.

That's not good enough for one retired Army general who last week submitted more documentation of Welch's heroism.

Many believe Welch deserves the nation's highest honor for his actions Oct. 17, 1967, in a battle north of what was then Saigon.

On that day, 142 men were sent on a search-and-destroy mission.

Surrounded by 1,400 Viet Cong, 58 men in two companies of the 1st Division died. Nearly all the rest were wounded in the two-hour firefight.

Casualties hit 92 percent. Military officials view 10 percent as unacceptable.

Secretary of the Army Thomas White rejected the Medal of Honor, said retired Brig. Gen. James Shelton who nominated Welch for the honor. The reason: He only found one eyewitness to Welch's bravery. "Everyone who should have put him in for it back then died in the battle," said Shelton, who lives in Englewood, Fla.

Shelton hasn't given up. He's found more survivors. He resubmitted the Medal of Honor recommendation Monday with four more witness statements. He's written a book, "The Beast Was Out There" to set the record straight.

Welch is a reluctant hero who, for more than 30 years, felt he didn't deserve any medals. He insists the battle was a terrible defeat instead of the victory the Army claims.

So the men Welch helped save, the men of Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division -- most of whom thought everyone else was dead -- are stepping forward to tell the story of Ong Thanh and Welch's bravery.

About a dozen survivors met in Las Vegas this weekend for a reunion.

"You should have seen them," Welch said, shaking his head at the memory of battle. "They did what they were trained to do. They held up. But they didn't have a chance. They were outnumbered 10-to-1."

Then, his chin began to tremble.

"We got our asses kicked. That's nothing to be proud of."

For more than three decades, Welch was afraid he may have been a coward.

Welch sees himself running from something in his dreams. He heard tales of a company commander who got spooked under fire and deserted his men in the jungle.

"I was filled with self-doubt and I was always afraid someone would walk up to me and say, 'Welch, you ran away,' " he said.

Welch was unconscious for almost a month after the battle. He worried he created his battle memories while in a morphine-induced stupor.

After his wounds healed, Welch took all the ribbons off his uniform -- the three Silver Stars, the five Purple Hearts.

He figured they meant nothing compared with what his men experienced. It was an act of defiance in a culture that counts success by the number of decorations on a warrior's chest.

Welch -- considered the hero of Ong Thanh -- wouldn't talk about the battle to anyone.

He returned to Vietnam to join a Special Forces unit, wearing only a Combat Infantry badge to prove he had been in battle. It was the only one he was proud of.

Back from the dead

Shelton thought he saw a ghost one day in 1969.

He looked up from his desk at Fort McNair in Washington D.C., when he heard Welch's unmistakable voice in the hallway.

"He was dead in my mind, I'm telling you," Shelton said. "And there he was, standing in front of me, and not a medal on his uniform. I knew he already had at least a couple of Silver Stars even before Ong Thanh."

Shelton had been a major with Welch's battalion -- called the Black Lions -- in 1967. He was transferred to battalion headquarters 10 days before the battle. He listened to radio transmissions as his buddies died -- and he thought Welch was among them.

Shelton and Welch hugged in the hallway at Fort McNair, weeping for a moment.

"Clark was always a mustang among a bunch of thoroughbred colts," Shelton said. "He was a combat-hardened soldier always sitting off to himself, and we were always horsing around, slapping each other on the back, congratulating ourselves, wanting to fight. We were just a bunch of fraternity boys, and he was the only one who knew what was going to happen."

Shelton helped Welch reconstruct his memories.

Leading up to the battle, the Black Lions chased the Viet Cong around Ong Thanh for nine days, taking more than a half-dozen casualties, including an officer.

Welch's commander was Lt. Col. Terry Allen Jr.

Although Welch warned him of increasing Viet Cong movement Allen sent the men out -- a decision Welch, many of the battle's survivors, and Shelton say led to the debacle.

"Lieutenant Welch carried the body of Captain (Bernard) Jones out of the jungle (on Oct. 16)," said Santiago Griego, then a private, now a retired post office clerk in Albuquerque, N.M. "He knew there were a lot of Cong out there. But Allen wouldn't listen to him."

When Welch advised caution, Allen implied he was "gunshy," and moved Delta Company to the rear of the column.

It was Allen's way of embarrassing Welch.

"That was fine with me," Griego said. "That meant we wouldn't take the first shots. Griego remained nervous. "I could tell from Lieutenant Welch's face it was going to be bad. Believe me, infantrymen don't carry any more than they have to. I grabbed extra rounds of ammunition anyway."

A leader and a rebel

Welch rose from the ranks and was commissioned before he went to Vietnam.

He was a born rebel too. "I think if I wouldn't have been a soldier, I would have been an old hippie," Welch said.

Although he graduated from high school in Durham, N.H., with a full scholarship to the University of New Hampshire and appointments to the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he joined the Army at 17.

He served in Nicaragua and Panama and he trained Cuban rebels. When he arrived in Vietnam in 1967, he had been in the Army 10 years.

His unit was made up of replacements.

Most were draftees.

None had seen battle.

Most were scared.

They were in awe of Welch, a former Special Forces Green Beret and their new company commander.

Most important, Welch was like them.

"That man is a soldier's soldier," said Faustin Sena, also from Albuquerque.

Sena was a 19-year-old private in 1967. "He was a sergeant before he was a lieutenant."

Welch, he said, didn't take any bull.

Sena said he would go anywhere for Welch, do anything. On Oct. 17, 1967, that promise was tested.

"All hell broke loose. It was chaos. The machine gun fire cut trees in half, stripped the leaves right off anything that didn't fall," Sena said. "This was thick jungle and just like that, it was mowed down by bullets."

Alpha Company, walking point, was mowed down as well.

Welch screamed for Sena to get his radio, their lifeline to the outside world.

"It was 40 yards away. So I slithered over there like a lizard" Sena said.

As he crawled bullets shattered his right wrist and sheared off most of the muscle in his arm. He was shot

in the leg and took shrapnel as well. The Veterans Administration says he's 100 percent disabled. "I couldn't see a damn thing. The sound was deafening. I couldn't hear my own gun firing, but I could hear Welch, screaming above the noise, putting his men in position, calling in orders. First he was here," Sena said pointing in one direction. "Then he was there. He was everywhere, making sure we held our ground, that we didn't panic."

At one point, Welch defied Allen's order to run.

"We couldn't retreat with so many wounded," Welch said. "I wouldn't leave without them."

Welch, on his feet, pulled the wounded out of the line of fire and scavenged ammo from the dead.

His buddy, 2nd Lt. Harold "Pinky" Durham, held the radio transmit button down with what was left of his arm and called artillery in within 10 yards of their position.

"All we could do was hope our artillery would kill more of them than us," Welch said. Durham died in the artillery barrage, Welch said.

Welch was shot in his chest while dragging two wounded men by their belts. Another bullet hit his right leg as he called out orders. Machine gun rounds hit his left arm so hard he was knocked backward.

"The automatic fire shot his bicep right off," Griego said. "It fell right there on the ground in front of him, a bluelooking thing. For a second, he thought it was his own heart."

It looked like a fish flopping in the dirt.

"I laughed at it. What else could I do," Welch said.

Paul Scott, Welch's radioman, took an Army sock and used it as a tourniquet for what was left of Welch's arm, battlefield triage that saved his commander's life.

"I bet he had worn that old sock for at least two or three days", Welch said, laughing despite the horror of the image. Welch and his first sergeant, Clarence "Bud" Barrow, held off the Viet Cong to give the injured a chance to crawl to cover.

Killed 10 times

The slaughter lasted two hours.

It wasn't until Welch returned to Vietnam in January 2000 that he learned the troops had wandered between entrenched Viet Cong positions.

Snipers tied to 100-foot-tall mahogany trees and hidden in bunkers and thick brush were armed with rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers.

There were three battalions.

With a signal from their Viet Cong commander -- he clicked sticks together three times -- all 1,400 Viet Cong opened fire at once on the thin column of 142 American soldiers.

"When a body fell, they didn't just kill it once, they killed it 10 times," Welch said. Allen and most of the officers died. Delta and Alpha Companies killed more than 160 of the enemy.

When it appeared both companies were wiped out, the Viet Cong moved on, leaving behind what they thought was nothing but bodies.

Mark Smith, a platoon sergeant, now a retired major living in Thailand, was sent to re-establish contact with the soldiers. He found Welch and Barrow propped against the trees facing each other. They were

surrounded by at least 60 dead enemy.

"It was apparent that Lt. Welch killed the vast majority," Smith wrote in his witness report.

Smith looked at Welch's bloodied body.

"He was just a couple of inches from my face and said he was sorry, that he had to help the ones that were still alive," Welch recalled. "He thought I was dead."

Welch was evacuated to a hospital in Japan. His arm was reconstructed with repositioned muscles and skin grafts.

Although in terrible pain and only partially conscious, he was awakened in his hospital bed and sat upright so Gen. William Westmoreland, the supreme commander, could give him a Purple Heart.

"I told him it was (expletive)-up and listed eight reasons why we failed. The Army never asked me about Ong Thanh again," Welch said.

Return to duty

After Welch was released, he tore up the medical profile restricting his work duties, stuck the sling for his nearly useless arm in his pocket and returned to Vietnam.

"That's the only time I ever got mad at him during his 31-year career," his wife, Lacy, said.

Welch stayed in the Army for 20 more years to train troops. He also went back to Vietnam to recover missing soldiers' bodies. He's been to Kuwait and most recently, Bosnia, as a civilian adviser.

Today, he's a volunteer Four Mile Creek firefighter. To keep in shape, he walks the 3-mile round trip to his mailbox lugging a 40-pound backpack.

The letter carrier brings Welch stories from the men he feared he'd let down. Other letters are from the mothers, sisters, brothers of men who were too young to have wives when they went to Vietnam. The families send poetry and prayers and heartfelt pleas for information about the battle. They encourage him to ride out the Medal of Honor process, to not let the politics of it get to him.

He writes back to thank them for not hating him because he couldn't keep his promise to bring all his men home.

"I know Lieutenant Welch is riddled with guilt," Faustin Sena said. "But he shouldn't be. He's the only one who did everything right. He deserves the medal."

"He said if we did what he told us to do, he'd get us out of Vietnam alive," said a grateful Griego. "And he did."

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