

# DELTA RAIDERS' COSTLY

It took 17 years and a series of remarkable coincidences before Jim Zwit could thank the family whose son had carried him to safety.

By Michael P. Kelley

**F**or what seemed an eternity, Jim Zwit had been searching for the surviving family members of a friend who was killed only minutes after carrying the badly wounded Zwit away from the bullet-swept killing zone of an NVA ambush in 1971. His search had consisted of one frustration after another until a fortuitous phone call in November 1988.

Seventeen years earlier, on the afternoon of April 15, 1971, Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment—part of the famed 101st Airborne Division—was searching a ridgeline northeast of FSB Bastogne, some 30 kilometers west of Hue, Vietnam's ancient imperial capital. The ridge had been battered by dozens of heavy airstrikes following the disastrous results of a combat assault conducted by Alpha Company of the same battalion two days earlier. The Alpha insertion had drawn such intense groundfire when the choppers touched down that the mission was aborted and the body of one American casualty left behind at the landing zone.

During subsequent reconnaissance overflights of the site, NVA troops had animated the body, waving its arm in efforts to draw the circling helicopters into a fatal rescue effort, but the ruse was obvious and only served to enrage the American pilots and crews. As U.S. commanders reviewed the disturbing recon reports, a recovery opera-



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

# RECOVERY MISSION



*Boeing-Vertol CH-47 Chinook helicopters deliver supplies to Fire Support Base Bastogne. In April 1971, the FSB Bastogne-based Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, a part of the 101st Airborne Division, was given the task of recovering the body of an Alpha Company trooper who had been killed in action.*





JIM ZWIT



DON AND TONI DOUGET, VIA JIM ZWIT

**Top:** Sergeant Bob Hein, seated on sandbags second from right, on R&R at Eagle Beach with other members of the 2nd Platoon.

**Above:** Hein at home in California in July 1970, shortly before shipping out to Vietnam. He was killed during the April 1971 ambush.

tion was hastily conceived. Delta Company was given the unenviable task of recovering the missing trooper's body.

The war was winding down for the United States, and Delta was typical of U.S. Army rifle companies at the time. Its enlisted ranks were almost empty of Regular Army volunteers; virtually every rifleman was a draftee. To make matters worse, the unit was operating at a scant 50 percent of its normal strength, a result of the ever increasing cutbacks in personnel under President Richard Nixon's withdrawal strategy. Perhaps only 75 of the company's authorized 150 men formed the three platoons that struggled up the heavily cratered and tangled ridgeline toward their rendezvous.

Near 5 o'clock that evening, everyone sensed that the objective and the enemy were close at hand. The air was filled with the smell of death and the tension of an

impending collision, and the troops were exhausted from the physical and mental strain of their two-day approach to the area. The wary men of Delta Company—nicknamed the "Delta Raiders"—paused to evaluate the situation as the light began to fail. The company commander weighed the unit's options with his three platoon leaders at a quickly organized powwow. They decided that only two alternatives were open to them: dig in for the night or continue up the ridge despite the very strong likelihood that enemy troops were waiting in ambush. The Americans' practice of recovering their dead at any cost was a tactical weakness that the enemy was more than willing to exploit.

Directly in their path, a multicompany NVA force patiently waited. The enemy had taken advantage of their two-day respite to liberally sow the ambush site with expertly camouflaged spider holes and fully reinforced bunkers. The NVA had decided to do more than bloody a few noses. In a departure from their customary hit-and-run tactics, they were determined to hold fast and face the Americans' overwhelming firepower. Their plan was simple—to annihilate an entire American rifle company.

The nervous prey hesitated and rethought the wisdom of going farther in the growing darkness. Every aspect of the situation begged caution. The NVA knew the terrain and might be fixed in prepared positions, while the Americans were strangers to the site and exhausted from the difficult march up the ridge. But most important, it was getting dark rapidly, and as Delta's troopers well knew, the night belonged to Charlie. If the enemy was waiting, Delta's advance under those conditions would invite catastrophe, for America's technological advantage faded dramatically with the setting of the sun.

Some of the more experienced veterans in the column argued that it was best to de-

lay the maneuver until morning, but for reasons known only to the captain, he ordered his men to push on. The Delta Raiders cautiously advanced in the swiftly descending dusk, with the 2nd Platoon on point.

At about 6:45 the company halted and began dropping rucksacks and setting up a night defensive position. Specialist Fourth Class James Zwit's 3rd Platoon was at the rear. The 2nd Platoon's dwindling energy had been further depleted by tedious machete work during the advance. The 1st Platoon was at the center of the column. As the men tried to catch their breath, a small group led by 1st Lt. Paul McKenzie left their packs with the 2nd Platoon and initiated a reconnaissance forward of the line of movement. They disappeared into the deepening shadows and tangled vegetation.

As the recon element reached a point about 100 meters forward of the 2nd Platoon's perimeter and well within the enemy's prepared kill zone, the NVA sprung their deadly trap. It was 6:52 p.m. when the first sounds of contact crackled over the battalion's radios. Jim Zwit was carrying his squad's M-60 machine gun when the world around him exploded into deafening and continuous thunder and lightning.

McKenzie's men were decimated by the initial volley, and the ferocious incoming fire continued unabated for several minutes. Enemy positions were mixed in and around the Americans' line of march, and the Delta Raiders reacted by firing blindly through their own ranks at virtually every point on the compass.

The chaos prompted screams for a ceasefire from Delta's platoon leaders and NCOs. The battlefield fell suddenly silent. The eerie lull was punctuated only by the groaning and screaming of the wounded and the unnerving, ghostlike voices of NVA ambushers as they maneuvered to profit from the advantage of their stunning attack.

Zwit reacted to the screams for help. Acting entirely on his own initiative, he grabbed as many belts of M-60 ammo as he could and then bolted through the company position alone, at a dead run, passing through both the 1st and 2nd platoons' positions. Just beyond the lead element's forward edge, Zwit came to a large log blocking the trail and paused to survey the killing ground ahead of that protective obstacle. The wounded men beyond were still screaming for help, and Zwit recognized the voice of Lieutenant McKenzie, a man he deeply respected and admired. There was no turning back.

With complete disregard for his own safety, Zwit seized the opportunity offered by the lull in the shooting and rushed forward to aid the savaged recon force. The forward elements of the 2nd Platoon unleashed a storm of covering fire to protect him. Fifty meters farther down the trail he



stumbled upon two bodies and fell to his knees at the feet of the first. The man was groaning loudly and begging for help. It was Lieutenant McKenzie.

Zwit glanced at the other body. It lay perfectly still, and he knew instinctively that the man was beyond help. Squeezing the trigger of his M-60, Zwit swept the area around him with a stream of fire. When the gun finally exhausted its last cartridge, Zwit was puzzled that there was no enemy fire—he was completely exposed in the kill zone. He heard enemy voices to his rear, however, and realized he was likely well within the enemy's perimeter and in deep trouble. The NVA's desire to kill him was probably only tempered by the fear of hitting their own men.

He discarded the emptied M-60, lifted the 2nd Platoon's leader to his right shoulder and turned back toward the relative safety of his comrades. At that instant, a brutal blast hurled Zwit and his load some five meters from the point of impact.

Zwit found himself in a tangled heap with McKenzie still on his back, and he opened his eyes in time to witness the lieutenant's last breath, their faces only inches apart. McKenzie's body had apparently taken the full force of a satchel charge thrown at the pair.

In shock, badly wounded and stunned by the explosion, Zwit lay in the dark trying to gather his wits. He was lying perhaps 25 meters from the fallen log from which he had launched his rescue effort. Bullets buzzed through the air above his head, but he was fairly certain the fire was not being directed at him. Perhaps the enemy thought he was no longer a threat.

The Americans beyond the fallen log saw Zwit's predicament and laid down a base of protective fire. Two of them would make desperate attempts to retrieve their fallen comrade.

Sergeant Kron was the first, crawling forward to Zwit's side and armed only with bandages. As Kron applied a pressure dressing to a jagged hole in Zwit's right side, a round of automatic-rifle fire slapped heavily into his stomach. "Oh, I'm hit," Kron gasped, and then told Zwit, "I gotta go. I'll send someone back." Then the badly injured sergeant dragged himself back to Delta's perimeter.

At that point, Zwit decided it would be prudent to risk calling for help, but he noticed that the flow of blood from the hole in his side surged every time he yelled. He knew that he would bleed to death if he stayed put, so rather than continuing to call for help and waiting to be rescued, Zwit gathered all his remaining strength and squirmed forward slowly, inch by inch. He prayed the enemy was too preoccupied to notice his progress. Reaching the fallen log was his only hope.

Moments later, another rescue attempt was made by Phil Brummitt. He followed the path Kron had taken to Zwit, grabbed him by the collar and started dragging him down the trail. Something then crashed through the brush at the trail's edge to their right. That ominous sound was followed a second later by a dazzling flash—then shrapnel tore into Zwit's right leg and foot and slapped Brummitt to the ground.

Brummitt groaned, "Oh God, I'm hit!" At that moment both men realized that the rest of their lives would be measured in seconds if they did not find cover. As if on cue, and despite serious wounds, both managed to get to their feet and stagger the last 20 meters to the fallen log as fast as they could. As they reached the log in a hail of renewed gunfire, eight strong arms reached out from the darkness and yanked the two injured men to relative safety on the other side.

Zwit's shattered but still living body was carried toward the center of the American perimeter by Sergeant Bob Hein, Randy Kuziak and two other men. After gently placing Zwit behind a large boulder, Hein helped stem the flow of blood from his many wounds. Then he left the injured man in the hands of the medics and returned to the desperate melee surrounding them.

During a subsequent lull in the fighting, Hein crawled back again to keep up the spirits of his critically injured friend. He helped Zwit satisfy a searing thirst with sips from his canteen, then slapped a fresh magazine into an unattended M-16 lying nearby, cradled it in Zwit's arms and with a wink and grin told him to take a few of the enemy with him if the company was overrun. Hein smiled a last reassuring goodbye, then disappeared back into the thick of the fighting. It was their last meeting.



CORBIS BETTMANN/UP

Artillerymen elevate a 155mm howitzer toward the hills surrounding FSB Bastogne. A skull recovered nearby serves as a macabre sentinel, perched atop a rack holding shells.





"Log Day" for Delta Company: The Delta Rangers get resupplied and update their inventory at FSB Bastogne in March 1971. A water trailer on the right has brought in fresh water for the troops.

Later that evening, under relentless enemy fire, three of the most critically wounded Americans were hoisted from the killing ground and rushed to the 85th Evacuation Hospital in Phu Bai. The intensity of enemy fire forced a halt to any additional dustoff flights. Jim Zwit was the last of the three wounded men to be evacuated.

The isolated and surrounded company would fight for survival throughout the remainder of that terrible, interminable night. When Delta's bedraggled remnants were finally extracted the following morning, they were carrying their 14 wounded

and six of their eight dead. Among the dead was Sergeant Robert Charles Hein, a native of Sacramento, Calif.

Just weeks before the Delta Raiders' tragic test unfolded, a premonition of his impending fate had apparently spooked Hein into seeking Zwit's counsel. In an uncharacteristically serious meeting, both had sworn that should one of them die in battle, the other would provide surviving family members with a detailed account of the event.

Soon after completing the two-year hospital stay dictated by his wounds, Zwit began an impassioned and tireless quest to find

Hein's family. He was eager to keep his promise, but started his search at a great disadvantage because he had lost the Hein family's address along with many other personal belongings that had failed to follow him home from Vietnam.

His initial calls to Hein listings in Sacramento's phone directory uncovered no encouraging leads. From time to time over the next 17 years, Zwit repeated that effort—to no avail. Discouraged but not defeated, he felt a resurgence of hope in the fall of 1988 after reading an article in *Military* magazine that highlighted a Sacramento TV personality named Stan Atkinson, then heavily involved in the campaign to build California's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Zwit wrote Atkinson in care of Sacramento's NBC affiliate, and Atkinson in turn passed the letter along to the memorial commission.

As an associate member of the commission, I had developed a reputation for successful detective work in reuniting Vietnam War comrades, and it was Atkinson's intent that I be given the responsibility of researching Zwit's request. After exhausting every immediate avenue for locating the Heins—including the property tax records easily accessible to me as a property appraiser—I decided to plumb the depths of Zwit's memory in hopes of giving the search a new direction. I picked up the telephone one November afternoon and dialed Zwit's Chicago number.

At the outset of the call, neither Zwit nor I had an inkling of the impending conse-

## JIM ZWIT'S WILD RESCUE

When Specialist Fourth Class Jim Zwit was evacuated from the brutal fight near FSB Bastogne on April 15, 1971, his troubles were only beginning. His nighttime extraction from his company's ambushed position, which included a near-collision and a wild ride through the jungle canopy, was anything but routine.

The medevac helicopter that would take him to safety hovered in position and lowered a jungle penetrator while Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships circled the area, firing at expected NVA positions. The enemy immediately began firing at the nearly stationary bird with their AK-47s and grenade launchers. "I could swear things were floating through the cockpit," remembered 1st Lt. Stanley C. Marcieski, who, as co-pilot, was in the cockpit of the helicopter assisting the pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Fred Behrens, in holding the chopper steady about 100 feet above the perimeter.

On the ground, Spc. 4th Class Bob Gervasi strapped Zwit onto the jungle penetrator. As Zwit slowly ascended toward the Huey, Gervasi saw a cone of green tracers envelop the chopper.

Suddenly, something exploded beneath the tail of the Huey, throwing the helicopter almost onto its nose. Inside, Behrens wrestled with the controls, trying to bring the dustoff chopper to a level position. With the copter at an odd angle, Marcieski looked up through the greenhouse window and saw a Cobra careening dangerously close to the Huey. "It flashed in my brain that there was no way we were going to avoid tangling our blades with his skids," Marcieski would later say. He braced for an impact, but nothing happened.

Amazingly, the two birds did not collide. Dangling beneath them, Zwit felt the bouncing and jerking of the helicopter but thought it was normal, having never before been retrieved by jungle penetrator.

Behrens' crew seemed to have two options with Zwit: either pull him on board, or cut the cable and get out of there. They chose neither. With Zwit dangling 20 feet below, Behrens steered toward the 85th Evacuation Hospital at Phu Bai while the crew reeled Zwit in. When they finally got him aboard they noticed tree branches in his shirt. Zwit had whacked a number of trees in the four minutes it had taken them to retrieve him.



quences of our casual conversation—it was the first time we had talked. Zwit said he could remember no details of Hein's background and that all his written information about his late friend had disappeared with his personal belongings soon after he was wounded. Since that avenue was apparently a dead end, the conversation then focused on our personal recollections.

I mentioned that my own 1969-70 Vietnam tour had been with Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry, a sister element of the same 101st Airborne Division brigade to which Zwit's Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry, had belonged. As it became apparent that our tours in Vietnam had much in common, our conversation was punctuated with laughter and reminiscences.

Zwit's unit and my own unit had been headquartered at Camp Hockmuth, near Phu Bai, and we both had been at many of the same firebases and walked the same jungle-covered trails southwest of Hue. We were soon quite at ease with one another and enthralled by the parallels in our combat experience.

Zwit went on to describe in detail the horrific action of April 15, 1971, noting that his medevac rescue had terminated at the 85th Evacuation Hospital in Phu Bai. At first he had been given almost no chance of surviving the day. It was, he said, the supreme effort of one surgeon at the 85th that saved his life. "That's interesting," I said. "I was medevaced to the 85th when I got hit in September '70, and a doc there saved my butt, too."

"Well, I'll be damned," responded the surprised Zwit. "You're not going to believe this, Kelley, but an hour and a half from now I'm going to have dinner with the same surgeon who worked on me the night I got hit."

Unaware of what the helicopter crew had just gone through, the battered Zwit began yelling at his rescuers, berating them for dragging him along the jungle canopy. The crew was shocked that a soldier with a wound as big as a grapefruit in his side, as well as wounds in his leg, foot and back, could have the energy to tear into them so vividly.

Zwit finally calmed down, and the crew delivered him to the hospital. For Behrens, Marcieski and the rest of the medevac crew, their successful rescue of Zwit and an earlier extraction of a 101st Airborne trooper earned them each a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Stanley Marcieski never forgot the rescue of Jim Zwit and the close call with the Cobra gunship. In 1995 he met artist Ronald Wong in Germany and asked him to paint the incident. Wong agreed, and Marcieski eventually gave him a detailed, half-inch-thick narrative of the event. Almost a year later Wong produced *Eagle Dustoff*, depicting the close call of the helicopters, the explosion under the Huey's tail and Zwit's rescue. The painting appeared in the October 1998 issue of *Vietnam Magazine* in an article saluting the bravery of dustoff pilots, titled "Medevac Choppers to the Rescue."



An aerial view of FSB Bastogne, located west of Hue in Thua Thien province. Delta Company's April 15, 1971, firefight occurred on a ridge northeast of the base.

I reeled with shock as Zwit continued to explain that he and the good doctor had developed a strong friendship—that this doctor had even continued taking care of Zwit long after both had left the service. "I remember my surgeon's name," I said. "Maybe yours knows how I can get in touch with mine, Jim. What's this guy's name?" "Charlie Carroll," responded Zwit, his voice tinged with obvious affection.

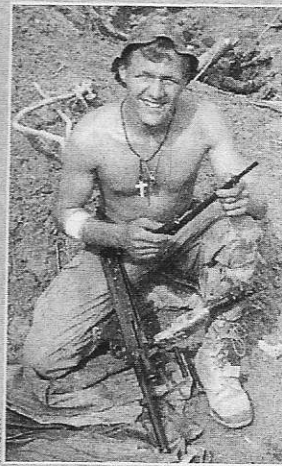
I gasped in astonishment, "That's the same doc who saved me when I got hit!" In the stunned silence that followed, I felt faint. Of the 250 million people in Ameri-

ca I could have called that fateful night, I somehow had managed to dial the one having dinner with the surgeon who had saved both our lives in Vietnam some 18 years earlier. And while Zwit and I sat there some thousand miles apart, joined together by providence and the shared memories of that long-ago war, little did we realize that the Hein search had yet another, equally startling surprise in store for us.

Two hours later, Dr. Carroll and I were reminiscing over the phone about a tumultuous day in September 1970. It had been 18 years since our last conversation—since

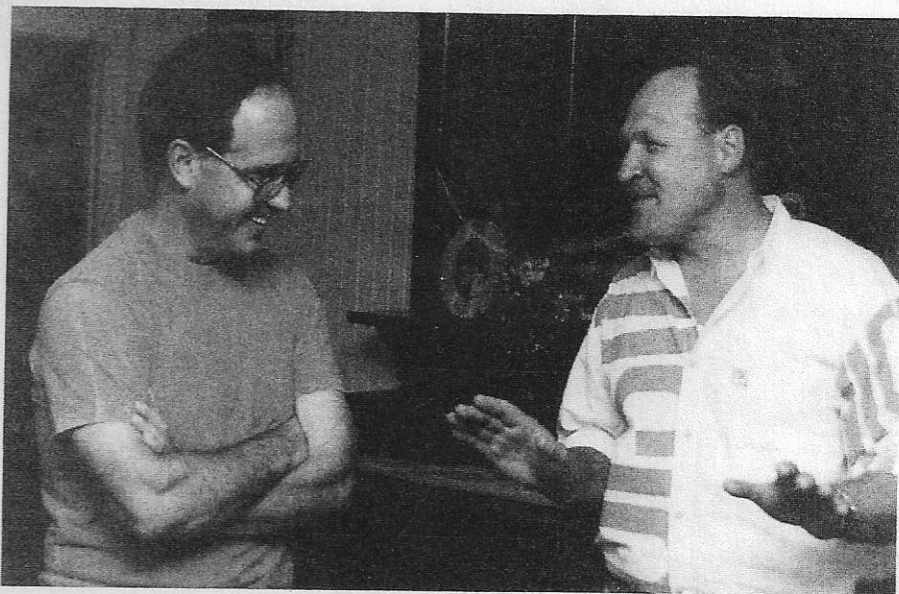
fate had first thrown us together. Although I remembered Carroll vividly, he could only vaguely recall me through my description of the surgical procedures employed that day. Under intense pressure, surgeons are understandably much too preoccupied with their patients' urgent medical needs to be able to put a name to the blur of faces passing through their care. Carroll was anxious that the gap in memory would disappoint a former patient, but he could not know the joy his familiar voice brought to me.

In the weeks following my conversations with Carroll and Zwit, I spent much of my spare time frustrated by my unsuccessful effort to unearth the Hein family for Zwit. Having



Specialist Fourth Class Jim Zwit strips and cleans his M-60 machine gun.





JIM ZWIT



MICHAEL AND KATHY KELLEY, VIA JIM ZWIT

**Top:** Dr. Charlie Carroll, left, talks with Jim Zwit in 1988. In 1970-71, Carroll operated on both author Michael P. Kelley and Zwit at the 85th Evacuation Hospital in Phu Bai. **Above:** Bob Hein's mother, Catherine Hein-Markley, meets with Zwit at Sacramento Airport en route to the dedication of the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

exhausted every obvious resource, I told Stan Atkinson that from all indications, I believed only an appeal by him on the air at KCRA might offer hope. Without hesitation, he offered to work the request into an upcoming TV broadcast.

On the Sunday following our conversation, before Atkinson was able to prepare a public appeal, my phone rang. The caller was former Marine Doug Durham, a friend who chaired the memorial commission's dedication committee. Durham wanted to discuss details of the rapidly approaching dedication ceremony. At issue was the content of one of several letters home, written by one of California's fallen sons and selected for reading as part of that important event.

An excerpt from that particular letter, written just before the author's death, con-

tained a reference to his newfound outlook on college students back home who were protesting America's involvement in Vietnam. Several members of the commission felt the passage was inflammatory and wanted it omitted. Durham and I, however, were planning a vigorous defense to ensure that the wide spectrum of opinion held by Vietnam veterans was given fair balance. My copy of the letter lacked the author's name, and I was unaware that Durham had submitted the original text for consideration.

As we talked, Durham's thoughts turned to personal matters. "You know my brother-in-law is flying down from Alaska for this thing, don't you?" he asked me.

I acknowledged I had heard that and asked why his brother-in-law felt compelled to make such a lengthy journey. "Well,"

continued Durham, "it's very important to him. A friend of his named Bob Hein was killed in his platoon, and he's coming back to escort Hein's mother to the dedication. In fact, this letter we're talking about is from Hein to his...."

"What did you say his friend's name was?" I interrupted, not believing my ears.

"Bob Hein," repeated Durham. "That mean something to you?"

Jim Zwit's 17-year odyssey had finally come to an end. Durham immediately alerted his brother-in-law, Pat Condron, and Condron in turn made a late-night call to Zwit. Zwit was soon hastily scribbling down the phone number and address of Bob Hein's mother, Catherine Hein-Markley, then 78 years old and still living in Sacramento. Mrs. Hein had remarried not long after Bob's death, and her new married name had blocked the search all those frustrating years.

During their long, heart-rending conversation that night, Condron related the details of his own relationship with Hein. They had been close friends, and not long before the big battle at FSB Bastogne, both had volunteered to serve as helicopter door gunners as a remedy for the boredom of everyday infantry life. Just two days before Hein's death, their transfer orders had come down, but Hein had second thoughts and elected instead to remain with the platoon. Condron stuck with his decision and moved on to training for helicopter door gunners. Because of his choice, Condron was to inherit his share of guilt and remorse for not having been with his former company during its trial by fire.

Early on the morning after Zwit's conversation with Condron, Zwit finally fulfilled his promise to call Bob Hein's mother. As Zwit and Mrs. Hein shared their many memories of her son, she mentioned that Bob had been awarded a medal for valor because shortly before his death he had exposed himself to heavy fire in order to help carry a wounded comrade to safety.

"Mrs. Hein," Jim Zwit told her quietly, "I'm the guy he carried back."

The dedication ceremony for California's Vietnam Veterans Memorial took place on December 10, 1988. Attending were Jim Zwit, Catherine Hein-Markley, Pat Condron, Doug Durham and I. It seems fair to say that it proved to be one of the warmest reunions of that memorable day. ☆

*Michael Kelley is a Vietnam veteran who served with Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, in 1969-70. He is an associate member of the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial commission. Suggestions for further reading: The Rise and Fall of an American Army, by Shelby Stanton (Presidio); and After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam, by Ronald H. Spector (Viking).*