

A former Army platoon leader in Vietnam remembers a young hero.

The Real-Life Platoon

By John C. Shoemaker

THE HEAT was incredible. I could hardly breathe. My muscles ached. As an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam, I had it a little easier than some of the others. My rucksack weighed only 75 pounds or so. But when you added grenades, four or five bandoliers of M-16 and machine gun ammo, it was quite a burden. But I could not think about that now.

I had other things to worry about; my mind was racing. "Anticipate. You must anticipate," I kept telling myself. Where would the next ambush come from and how should I react? My eyes were wide open in search of the unknown.

As I moved my platoon of 20-odd teenagers through the jungle, I chose to walk third in the line of march. I had no seasoned veterans with me—no sergeants who had been through it before. Some of my "men" couldn't even read a map. If I got hit, I reminded myself, they would have trouble finding their way back to the firebase.

My point man was some well-mean-

ing, poor soul who was on his first patrol. He had a well-trained scout dog, which looked like Rin Tin Tin. Right behind him was Pvt Larry Gatliff. A tall, gawky guy, Larry was special. Simply put, he was one nice kid. Innocent, polite, cooperative. He wanted everyone to "get along." To defuse arguments and keep harmony among his comrades, he would dig their foxholes in searing heat after a long day's march through the rice paddies. He was the kind of boy who would make any father proud.

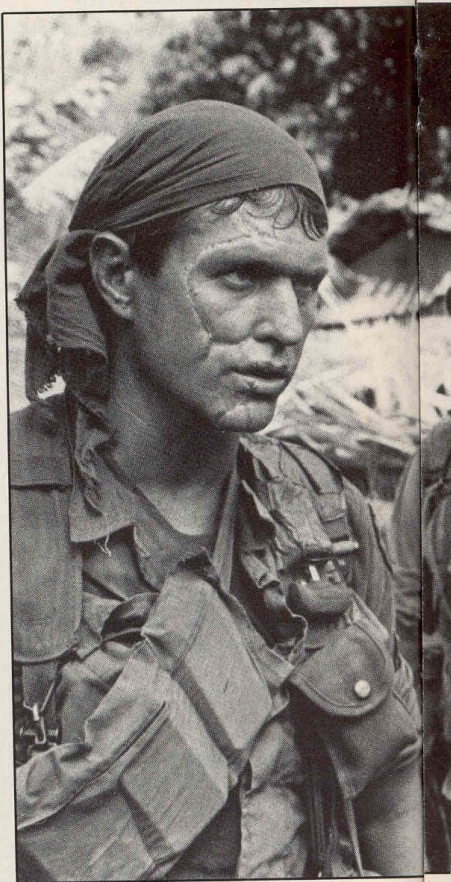
On this day, I followed behind Larry as we walked slowly and carefully forward. Having experienced the same scene during training in Panama, I had brought one squad up on my right flank for extra protection. I was "anticipating." As we proceeded up a hill, it happened.

Machine-gun fire. Screaming. Rustling. Groaning. More firing. Blood. Silence.

The scout dog ran off howling through the jungle, never to be seen again. The dog handler was shot through both legs but was still alive. I yelled at him to fire his M-16 at the enemy.

Larry fell backward next to me. A bullet had passed through his helmet and taken off most of his head.

"Fire!" I screamed to the others.



"Fire! Don't stop! Get those bastards." Bullets vibrated over my head. I could actually feel them. I was angry. It seems crazy, but I wasn't scared. I was too busy.

The enemy tried to run around to our right. They always seemed to be in control. This time, however, they were too eager. Too cocky. They nearly tripped over my other squad, which was ready for them.

Minutes later, I placed Larry onto a chair that was dropped down from a medical evacuation helicopter hovering above. Up he went, as I stared at him. Tears filled my eyes. I had done everything "by the book": I had anticipated; I had used my intuition. But I had still lost him. Although my voice was drowned out by the noise of the

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Orion Pictures photo

Though no "real life" unit in Vietnam ever experienced all the external and internal battles of Orion Pictures' "Platoon," the powerful imagery of that film reflected the intense action of the war. The Academy Award-winning movie stars, (left to right) Tom Berenger, Mark Moses and William Dafoe.

Huey, I yelled to him, "I'll never forget!"

Weeks and months passed. There were more ambushes. I lost several other soldiers every week. Such was the hazard of working in I Corps in 1970 in South Vietnam in the Americal Division. I made it a habit not to get close to them. I didn't want to be their friend. I was their lieutenant.

I knew about My Lai, Tet and Son Tay, but I was able to forget or at least accept it. Later, I learned about Agent Orange and felt betrayed. But for some reason Larry's memory kept coming back to me.

Years passed. I considered contacting Larry's parents. I knew that they had been notified by a form letter and that it had been a closed casket. From

my friends, I got divided opinions. Some said, "Don't contact them now—it's over, forget it; don't dredge up old pain and agony." Others would tell me, "If I were Larry's parents, I'd want to know how he died."

More time passed. I did nothing.

Finally, on the eve of Veterans Day last year, I visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. As I rubbed my fingers over Larry's name, I looked to my left and was surprised to see Chuck Norris standing next to me. I said I didn't know he had been in Vietnam. He whispered that his brother had been there. His name was inscribed very near Larry's.

While at the memorial, I learned that Larry came from Lebanon, Ore., and wondered again if I should contact his

family. I decided to call. It was nearly 16 years later, but somehow I thought it must be done.

From that call, I realized the full extent of one man's tragic death.

Because it had been a closed casket, doubt had gnawed at the family for all these years: It's not really Larry, right? There was a mistake, wasn't there? Other questions preyed on them: Did Larry die dishonorably? Was he killed by one of his own men? Was he into drugs? Did he run away? Maybe he fled to another country, ashamed to come home because of a crippling injury. Was it an accident?

I spoke with Larry's mother and revealed the true nature of Larry Gatliff's honor. He was, indeed, one of the best: a hero who died at a young age in an ugly war.

Later, I found out that after our discussion, Larry's mother was able for the first time in 16 years to talk about her son without crying.

In some way, she had found peace. So had I.



John C. Shoemaker, a sales manager in Southborough, Mass., served in Vietnam in 1970. Read Magazine, a publication for junior high school students, will also reprint this story of young heroism in an issue coinciding with the anniversary celebration of the opening of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., on Veterans Day. This is the author's first article for The Retired Officer.