



BEYOND

A TRIBUTE TO CLERMONT COUNTY, OHIO

THE NAMES

VIETNAM WAR DEAD

FRANK L ADAMSON
BRUCE F GRIFFIN
LARRY J CALLOWAY
JAMES C LAMBERT
SAMUEL Q ASHER
JOHN W MCCOY
ROGER V INSCORE
CHARLES H CRAWFORD
GARY L TAYLOR
KENNETH R HUGHES
ROBERT D WADDELL
VIRGIL L HITER
RODNEY L HUDDLESTON
ROGER M LAY
CLYDE B BRAUGHTON
ROGER G LYONS
GREGORY T IDING
DARRELL W SIBERT
RICHARD E WAGNER
ARKIE J WRIGHT
EARNEST WILSON
JERYL L WATKINS
BARRY W LEWIS
RICHARD W SANDERS
ANDREW M HAGLAGE
DARIS W NICKLES
DENNIS G JOHNSON
CHARLES R CUNNINGHAM
DANIEL E FECK
CLIFFORD J T LEFFLER
FREDERICK WILHELM
JERRY A EATON
ROBERT W GUMBERT
GERALD W HILL
ALLEN T BOEHM
RANDALL C SHORT
LOUIS J SPEIDEL
JOHN G STROBL

GARY L KNEPP

Preface

During the summer of 2003, the traveling Vietnam War Memorial came to Clermont County. I was asked to speak at the ceremony marking its arrival about the war from a historical perspective. Although I did not serve in the war, its effects left an indelible mark on my generation. I wanted to say something significant.

My first thought was to challenge the traditional view that at best the war was a disastrous mistake—the wrong war in the wrong place, poorly conceived and even more poorly fought—or at worst an “imperialist adventure” with an evil design which left us with fifty-eight thousand dead, three hundred thousand wounded, billions of dollars squandered, and a country teetering on a Civil War. In recent years, a new “revisionist” school of thought has emerged. Michael Lind has argued that Vietnam was a war that had to be fought in our decades long struggle against Communism. Mark Moyer has echoed similar thoughts: Vietnam was “a noble but improperly executed enterprise.” Lewis Sorley has written that the war could have been won if the United States had adopted General Creighton Abram’s “One War” approach—combat operations, pacification, and improvement of South Vietnam’s forces—rather than General Westmoreland’s “Search and Destroy” strategy.¹ Though this would have made for an interesting discussion, it wasn’t an appropriate topic for the occasion.

Opponents of the war, in their zeal to condemn it, have also condemned the warriors. This has left an enduring impression that we lost the war because of our fighting men. They were, according to this view, drug-crazed, whacked out losers. This view was simply untrue. Americans won every battle fought in Vietnam. Most Vietnam veterans are proud of their service. They came home and, despite the hostility of their fellow countrymen, carried on their lives just

as generations of veterans did before them. This topic just didn't have the right feel.

I cast about for several weeks trying to find the right topic with no success. I now realize that any uneasiness over the direction of my speech was driven by a sincere desire to "do right" by the occasion. It was then that my wife, Hilda, came to my rescue by suggesting I speak about three of the men from Clermont County whose names appear on the Wall.

It was a perfect suggestion. The Wall was not about the politics, nor the ugliness of the war, but of the men and women who died fighting it. Each of the fifty-eight thousand names chiseled into the black granite of the Wall represents a life. "Beyond the Names" were people—sons and daughters, fathers, mothers, husbands, fiancés, friends, and comrades. Despite the shadow this still casts over us, weren't these lives worthy of our remembrance?

Of the thirty-nine men from Clermont County who died in Vietnam, I chose to speak about three—Andrew Haglage, Kenneth Hughes, and Dennis Johnson. Their lives were so inspiring I found myself unable to allow the others to fade into obscurity. And thus the concept for this book emerged.

It had been nearly thirty years since we left Vietnam. I thought that maybe enough time had passed that we could talk about the lives lost without becoming enmeshed in the politics of the war. For a while it seemed as though it might be possible. And then came the 2004 presidential campaign.

John Kerry, in an attempt to bolster his commander in chief qualifications, motored into his party's nominating convention aboard a "swift boat." Surrounded by some of his former comrades, the Vietnam veteran snapped a salute and "reported for duty." Incredibly, the Vietnam War was again at the center of public debate, ripping open thirty-year-old wounds.

During the course of the research for this book I have had the great honor of talking with family members of our Vietnam dead. I have come to realize that they still grieve, mourning their loss every day. They think about their loved ones all the time and wonder about the lives that might have been. Some are haunted by still unanswered questions. Others are resentful that we had for so long failed to honor their loved one. This book is also about those left behind.

From July 24, 1965, through October 3, 1972, thirty-nine men from Clermont County died in the Vietnam Theater of Operations from fragmentation shells, booby traps, bullets, accidents, and one by murder. Twenty-three were members of the U.S. Army, ten were U.S. Marines, five were U.S. airmen, and one was a U.S. Navy Corpsman attached to a marine unit. There were three offi-

officers. Eleven men, more than 25 percent, died in 1968—the year with the highest U.S. casualties. February 1968 was the deadliest month for Clermonters, when five were killed, three on February 9 alone.²

This is also a story about Clermont County. Founded in 1800, Clermont has a rich military tradition of responding to the nation's call by sending tens of thousands of sons and daughters to serve. At the outset of the war, Clermont was still largely rural. It was growing, however. Its population soared from 80,000 in 1960 to 98,654 in just five years. Milford, with a population of 4,849, was the largest village.

The physical landscape of the county was completely transformed during the war. Interstate 275, spurring ferocious growth in the northwestern areas of the county, and the Appalachian Highway (State Route 32) were constructed. Clermont College, Clermont Mercy Hospital, and the Clermont County Airport were built. The Eastgate Mall arose from long-tended cornfields. The East Fork of the Little Miami River was dammed, forming Harsha Lake.

This project has been an incredible journey starting with a ten minute talk and ending with a 307-page book. I have interviewed dozens of people, traveled to Washington, D.C., twice to research the National Archives, and once to Vietnam. Despite these efforts, there were several men who simply eluded me. I apologize to those families and want to let you know that I meant them no disrespect. I still want to talk with you and will be happy to add to the story in subsequent printings.

During the last five years, I have learned a lot about the Vietnam War and the men who served. They deserve our respect for their guts, grit, professionalism, and devotion. Welcome Home.

Gary Knepp
Milford, Ohio

CHARLES ROBERT CUNNINGHAM

February 20, 1946 – March 31, 1969

Company C, 19th Engineering Battalion, 18th Engineering Brigade



Charles Robert Cunningham was born to Dorothy and Charles W. Cunningham on February 20, 1946. He grew up on Clough Pike in Amelia. Bob was never really interested in school, but was a “good boy” who didn’t get into trouble. He was six foot tall, weighed 185 pounds, with a light colored complexion, wavy blond hair, and brown eyes. After graduating from Amelia High School he went to work for the LeBlond Machine Tool Company in Norwood.⁸⁴

He married Marcia at the Clough Baptist Church in 1964. The couple had twin boys, one of whom died shortly after birth. Their relationship was strained. Marcia divorced Bob while he was in Vietnam. There was very little contact between the two after the divorce.⁸⁵

Bob joined the U.S. Army in February of 1968. He arrived in Vietnam on September 16, 1968, and became a member of 2nd platoon, C Company of the 19th Engineering Battalion.⁸⁶

The 19th Battalion was activated in 1921 and saw extensive action in World War II. The unit was reactivated on July 16, 1965, arriving in Vietnam in December of 1966. Its mission was to provide engineering support services such as road, bridge, and air strip construction in I and II Corps. It was headquartered at Dong Ba Thin, located three miles northwest of Cam Ranh Bay.⁸⁷

Michael DeSantis of 3rd platoon knew Bob, whom he called Charlie, for

about two months. They became good friends. He said Bob was well liked and known as a stand up guy who handled himself well.⁸⁸

Within two weeks of arriving in Vietnam Bob obtained two Panasonic reel to reel tape recorders. He kept one and sent the other to his parents. His plan was to send tapes or "living letters" home because he was a poor letter writer. He also thought that this would be a better connection with his parents. Each sixteen minute tape cost seventy-two cents and took about a week transit time each way.⁸⁹

Bob recorded his first tape in the "EM" or enlisted men's club. With tunes from the juke box in the background, he told his parents he was at a replacement center awaiting transportation to the Company C's base at LZ Lowboy. He gave instructions to his mother on what bills to pay from the money he was going to send home. He asked her to pay one hundred dollars towards his watch and, thereafter, one hundred dollars per month on the six hundred dollars he owed on his stereo. He asked his mother not to worry about him since "no man is big enough to hurt me."⁹⁰

Initially he didn't think much of Vietnam: "The land of little people." The "gooks" villages were run down. The people were dirty. "The children break my heart," he said. "Imagine getting washed out of a canteen cup."⁹¹

In time his opinion softened. He admired the grit of the old peasant women who carried huge loads of sticks on their heads. He liked the "cute coke girls" who sold the GIs soda and beer for fifty cents a can. He got to know some of the ARVN "Black Panthers" attached to his camp saying, "They seem to be good people." He even learned a little of the Vietnamese language which helped him get more acquainted.⁹² He was very impressed with the locals' artistic ability: "The oil paintings over here are really pretty." He asked his mother to send him a photo of his parents to give to one of the artists so that she could paint them and Bob in a family setting.

He was truly amazed by a large waterwheel he saw on one of his trips into the countryside. The wheel used the current of the river to turn a wheel to lift water twenty feet to irrigate rice paddies.⁹³

Like many young Americans in Vietnam, Bob struggled to make sense of an alien world. The weather could be confounding. He complained about the scorching temperatures and strength-sapping humidity, the constant rain during the monsoons, and the bone shivering cold of winter.⁹⁴

The beauty of the land was spellbinding. He flew in a chopper and was mesmerized by the brilliant green rice paddies. The sunrises were "beautiful." From his hootch, high on a hill overlooking the South China Sea, he watched the nightly parade of fishing boats going out to sea, their lanterns twinkling in the night.⁹⁵

Cunningham was based at LZ Lowboy which sat astride Highway 1 on the border of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces, about sixty miles north of Qui Nhon. Camp sounds such as the thumping of outgoing mortar shots, the pop, pop, pop of machine gun fire, and bull dozers working are sometimes heard in

the background. He personalized his hootch by placing photographs of his parents and his son Timmy on the wall. He was particularly fond of the photo of his son in a suit which he said made him “look like a little man.” A mosquito net was hung over his bed and strings of beads, purchased from the locals, were hung from the door frame.⁹⁶

Despite the demands of the war, he found time to relax. One evening he came back to his hootch after taking a shower. He sat down in a lounge chair, turned on the box fan his parents sent to him and sipped on a mixed drink made from the Kessler’s his mother sent him.

He had a couple of pets. One was a black and white dog named Brenda. He fed her C-rations or mess hall chow, but on Thanksgiving the dog feasted on turkey.⁹⁷ Dogs were a common sight around American camps. Many were adopted as mascots by the GIs. After the dogs fattened up from the American larder, they often disappeared—probably into the family cook pot. A yellow cat that Bob said was “something else” adopted him. The cat earned his keep by “taking care of the rats.”⁹⁸ While taping one night, the cat curled up in his lap and then jumped down to get a drink of ice water from his cooler.⁹⁹

He “grewed himself a mustache” which he thought was “pretty comical” and “scratchy.”¹⁰⁰ Bob suffered from recurring sores on his legs, probably cellulitis or jungle rot, that gave him fits. He loved getting care packages from home especially those stuffed with pepperoni sticks, sausage, and cheese, but “couldn’t hack the sardines.”¹⁰¹

His mother Dorothy was a frequent correspondent. She filled him in on all of the news from home, especially about Mrs. Burton—a favorite neighbor. She ended every tape with “Be a good boy, Bob.” On one tape she told him, “We love you a bushel and a peck.” On another she admonished him to be careful or she “would box his ears off.”¹⁰²

Bob asked his mother to tape some music from his stereo for him to listen to. After recording three Christmas songs, she broke in and said, “Bob, I know this isn’t a Christmas song, but it is kind of pretty.” We don’t know whether he agreed with his mother that Don Ho’s “Tiny Bubbles” was “kind of pretty.” We can just imagine the twenty-three-year-old listening to the song, saying “Mom!”¹⁰³

Bob’s dad appeared on the tapes only once and then for just a moment. He said that he never got much of a chance to say anything because his wife never gave him the chance to. (You can hear Dorothy in the background yelling back at him for the zinger.) His father advised Bob to “practice up on your pool a little bit.”¹⁰⁴

Shooting pool must have been a favorite hobby of Bob and his father. It became a common theme in Bob’s tapes. He told his father “to get ready for a game of pool when I got home.”¹⁰⁵ “I’ll try to beat you in a couple of games of pool (ha ha).”¹⁰⁶ “Can’t let you slide—may beat you in a game of pool if I slip a couple of balls in the pocket.” To these comments his mother said, “Dad gets tickled when you talk about pool.”¹⁰⁷ Playing pool with his father became a

kind of lucky charm, seeming as if he talked enough about it, it would come true. He would come through the war, return safe and resume his life, and beat his dad at a game of pool.

Bob's first duty was to stand guard. He worried about falling into a hole as he was walking around the post in the dark, but overall it was "not bad."¹⁰⁸ He rode shot gun, armed with an M-14, for convoys. He decided early on that convoy duty and guarding the engineers was not what he wanted to do. He wanted to drive a five-ton dump truck, but there weren't enough trucks at Lowboy and he didn't have a license.¹⁰⁹ By November of 1968 he got his truck, C-22, and his license. He began hauling rock up and down Highway 1 to various construction sites.¹¹⁰



The airstrip at LZ English today—one of the construction sites Cunningham worked at.

He really liked the work, telling his folks, "I really enjoy driving the truck—daggone thing grows on you. It is a really good running truck."¹¹¹ He was given a safe driving award and won a three-day in-country R&R for hauling the greatest load for the week. Soon after winning the contest he was promoted to assistant squad leader. He told his parents, "I'm pretty happy about it."¹¹²

Even so, he was looking beyond the five ton dump truck to drive a ten ton semi because he wouldn't have to go on mine sweeps.¹¹³ The VC nightly mined the country's major highways to disrupt the U.S. supply line. Many of the mines were detonated by pressure, but many others were set off by command of the enemy using electrical triggers. American countermeasures at this time were primitive. The army used a magnetic vacuum shaped device to detect the mines. The detectors were largely ineffective, however. As a backup the army loaded down a five-ton dump truck with sandbags and drove it down the road after the detector had "swept" the highway. It was a very nerve wracking and dangerous assignment.¹¹⁴

The enemy was always present. Sometimes he shelled the base. Mines

exploded in the road. At times "Charlie" waited in "the grass" to ambush an American vehicle. During one ambush a baby was killed in the crossfire.¹¹⁵ Bob once went on a convoy without taking his weapon. As luck would have it, it was attacked. He never forgot to take his rifle with him again.

In late February "Charlie began cracking down." Lowboy was shelled for about an hour.¹¹⁶ A couple of days later a mine sweep team was hit hard on three sides. One truck took twenty rounds, four in the gas tank alone. Fortunately, no one was hurt.¹¹⁷ First platoon was shot up pretty bad on another sweep, resulting in seven wounded in action.¹¹⁸

By the first of March, he was making plans to go on his three-day R&R to either Bangkok or Hong Kong. He asked his mother to withdraw fifty dollars from his account and send him a money order from King Quik. He sent her a photograph of him sitting in his truck. On the return tape Dorothy commented about the photograph: "You are so small. How on earth can you drive that truck? You look like a peanut sitting on an elephant."¹¹⁹

His mother told him about a documentary entitled "A Face of War" that she had seen on television. The film followed Mike Company of the 7th Marines for seventy-seven days. Nothing about the film was scripted. She was uneasy about watching the film. It was just so close to home. She skipped the first fifteen minutes of the film, debating whether to watch it. During that fifteen minutes she said, "I thought I would scream." But she was immediately glad she decided to watch it. "I saw a lot of the things you described—the huts, the little women with loads of sticks on their heads, and water buffalo. . . . I was so glad to see it because your descriptions were so vivid." She laughed when a marine fell off a buffalo and yelled "Sh—t!" She must have shuddered a bit when she saw a truck blown up by a mine.¹²⁰

In what was probably the last tape she sent to her son, Dorothy put \$225 in the mail for Bob's R&R. She told him to "look your eyeballs out. If you have a nickel, send me something, maybe a scarf." She told him to make sure he took the trip because he may never have the chance to get overseas again. Ever the mother, she told him to be careful or "I'll beat your ears off." Dorothy noticed that the tape was about to run out and she had to "Di Di (Go Go) or whatever they say."¹²¹

On the morning of March 28, 1969, Company C was ordered to haul course rock over Highway 1 to dump in a culvert. A sweep for mines was conducted at 6:30 a.m. A second sweep, with Bob driving the "detonation vehicle," was undertaken later in the day.

A mine detonated as Bob's truck drove over it, igniting the gas tank. Bob was severely burned over 85 percent of his body. He was pulled from the truck and was dust-offed to the 67th Evac Hospital in Qui Nhon where he died three days later of a cerebral edema and a massive pulmonary edema.¹²²

Full military services were held at the Smith Funeral Home in Blanchester, Ohio. He was buried in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery at Westboro, Ohio. SP4 Cunningham was posthumously awarded a second Purple Heart and a Bronze Star



The charred remains of the truck he was driving when the mine exploded.

for heroism. He had previously been awarded Expert Badge with Automatic Rifle Bar, Marksman Badge with Rifle Bar and the Driver Mechanic Badge with Driver V Bar, among others.¹²³

For a long time afterward Dorothy Cunningham had nightmares of Bob calling out "Mom! Mom!" through the flames of the mine explosion.¹²⁴

82. *Clermont Sun*, April 3, 1968.

83. *Ibid.*

Charles Cunningham

84. Shirley Lewis, interview, May 18, 2008; *Clermont Courier*, April 17, 1969; Robert Cunningham, Military Identification, DD Form 2A, IDPF.

85. Shirley Lewis, interview, May 18, 2008.

86. Report of Casualty, Charles R. Cunningham, April 3, 1968, IDPF; *Clermont Courier*, April 17, 1969.

87. www.18engineers.army.mil, 06/18/08; Kelley, *Where We Were in Vietnam*, 5–143.

88. Michael DeSantis, interview, September 2, 2003.

89. In April 2008, I placed a letter in the *Community Journal* newspaper asking for information about Charles Cunningham. Bob's sister-in-law responded to the inquiry, telling me that she had 30 tapes and the original tape recorder which had been stored in steel container for nearly 40 years. This was an incredible stroke of good fortune. There is nothing that stirs the heart of a historian more than to find an untapped first person source. But to actually hear a subject's voice is really something else again.

I had some real concerns about the condition of both the tapes and the recorder. I called my tech guru Jim Cliff to see if he could digitize the tapes. He played the tapes on the recorder and into his computer. The sound quality was surprisingly good. After a few recorder stops, and repairs, the entire collection was captured on a DVD.

The tapes had been numbered in a rough chronological order. Some were dated. On some the stamp cancellation could be read. In others Bob mentioned the date, but most are undated.

90. Tape 1, September 30, 1968.

91. *Ibid.*; Tape 2, undated.

92. Tape 2, undated; Tape 1, September 30, 1968; Tape 4, undated; Tape 8, October 1968.

93. Tape 19, undated; Cunningham was most likely referring to a 25-foot-diameter bamboo wheel in the Kim Song River located near LZ Bird south of Bong Son. Chopper pilot, Robert Mason, described the wheel in his book, *Chicken Hawk*. He watched several GI's playing with the wheel. One grabbed onto the wheel. It lifted him about ten feet into the air before he let go. Two men grabbed on, trying to stop the wheel. It lifted them to the top, although it struggled. Eventually, three men held on. The wheel shuddered before it stopped. Robert Mason, *Chicken Hawk* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 208.

94. Tape 4, undated; Tape 21, undated; Tape 2, undated.

95. Tape 8, October, 1968.

96. Kelley, *Where We Were in Vietnam*, 5–306; Tape 25, February 11, 1969; Tape 2, undated.

97. Tape 6, November, 1968.

98. Tape 30-2, March 10, 1969.

99. Tape 32-2, March 17, 1969.

100. Tape 4, undated; Tape 13, undated.

101. Tape 5, November, 1968.

102. Tape 26-1, February 2, 1969; Tape 7, December 2, 1968.

103. Tape 9, December, 1968.

104. Tape 18-2, undated.

105. Tape 4, undated.
106. Tape 8, October, 1968.
107. Tape 19, undated.
108. Tape 1, September 30, 1968; Tape 2, undated.
109. Tape 2, undated.
110. Tape 5, November, 1968.
111. Tape 25-2, February 11, 1969.
112. Tape 25, February 11, 1969.
113. Tape 28-1, February, 1969.
114. Summers, *Vietnam Almanac*, 100; Tape 3, undated; Carl Westenburg, C Company, 19th CEB, Remembrance, The Virtual Wall, May 4, 2004.
115. Tape 4, undated.
116. Tape 26-2, February 22, 1969.
117. Tape 28, undated.
118. Tape 30-2, March 10, 1969.
119. Tape 31-2, March 12, 1969.
120. Tape 31-1, March 12, 1969.
121. Tape is unnumbered and undated.
122. Michael DeSantis, interview, September 2, 2003; Carl Westenberg Remembrance, May 4, 2003; Command Chronology, Company C, 19th Engineering Battalion, March 31, 1969, RG338. NARA; Report of Casualty, Robert C. Cunningham, April 3, 1969, IDPF; Certificate of Death, C. R. Cunningham, April 5, 1969, IDPF.
123. C.A. Stanfiel to Timothy Cunningham, June 12, 1969.
124. Shirley Lewis, interview, May 18, 2008.

Daniel Feck

125. Eliene Feck Goodin, interview, July 2, 2007; Daniel E. Feck, Military Identification, DD Form 2A, IDPF.
126. Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 76–77; Report of Casualty, Daniel E. Feck, May 1, 1969, IDPF.
127. Kelley, *Where We Were in Vietnam*, 5–300.
128. Bowman, *The Vietnam Almanac*, 226.
129. Daily Journal 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry, April 28 & 29, 1968, RG338. NARA; Report of Casualty, Daniel E. Feck, May 3, 1968, IDPF.
130. Eilene F. Goodin, interview, July 2, 2007.
131. *Clermont Sun*, August 7, 1969.

Cliff Leffler

132. Rick Swett, E-mail to author, March 1, 2006; March 2, 2006.
133. Jeff Leffler to author, March 26, 2004.
134. Teresa Leffler Poe, interview, December 22, 2003; Gary Sheldon, interview, October 27, 2003.
135. Teresa L. Poe, interview, December 22, 2003; E. Tutt Lambert, interview, April 29, 2004.
136. Jeff Leffler to author, February 26, 2004.
137. Gary Sheldon, interview, October 27, 2003; *Ibid*.
138. Jeff Leffler to author, February 26, 2004; *Clermont Sun*, February 3, 1967.
139. Jeff Leffler to author, February 26, 2004.