

Firebase Illingworth Illuminated in a Titanic Horror

This is an excerpt from Brutal Battles of Vietnam: America's Deadliest Days 1965-1972, VFW's official account of the most lethal battles of the eight-year war

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April was the deadliest month of 1970 for U.S. troops in Vietnam with 730 deaths. On the first day alone, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units shelled some 115 targets throughout the country and launched 13 ground assaults. April 1 turned out to be the single deadliest day of the year when 70 GIs perished.

At the center of that day's carnage stood Fire Support Base (FSB) Illingworth, where 36 percent of the Americans killed died in a matter of two hours.

FSB Illingworth was a hastily constructed firebase built in a dry pond bed only five miles from the Cambodian border in Tay Ninh province. Its 219-yardwide perimeter was protected by Claymore mines dug into a low earthen berm surrounding the base and a few bunkers. No concertina or barbed wire was in place.

One GI described it as a "hot, miserable little place." Another said it was "trouble waiting to happen." It was named for Cpl. John James Illingworth of A Co., 2nd Bn., 8th Cav, 1st Cav Div., who was killed March 14, 1970, near Tay Ninh City.

Defending the base were 215 men from the 1st Cavalry Division and attached units. They included C and E companies of the 2nd Bn., 8th Cav; elements of four field artillery batteries (I of the 29th, A-1- 30th, A-2-32nd and B-1-77th) and two Air Defense Artillery batteries (B-5-2nd and D of the 71st). The 2nd Artillery provided dual 40mm anti-aircraft guns ("Dusters") augmented by D Battery's .50-caliber quad machine guns.

FSB Illingworth sat astride heavily trafficked NVA infiltration routes in the middle of an

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area GIs called the Dog's Head. Patrols disrupted Communist movement, and U.S. commanders were certain the NVA would attack. This would reveal their positions, allowing them to be bombed. Several veterans of the battle have used the word "bait" to describe the reason for the location.

"In the afternoon before the attack, we could hear the enemy about a half-mile away in the tree line getting worked up for a fight," said Spec. 4 Ron Curry of A Btry., 1st Bn., 30th FA. "I wondered why we didn't shoot and wipe them out then. We were in enemy territory after all."

Anticipating an assault, Illingworth was reinforced on March 21 with two selfpropelled 8-inch howitzers from A Btry., 2nd Bn., 32nd FA, and tons of ammunition for the big guns.

"From the first day on, we wanted to dig our ammo pits using our 8-inch howitzers as spades," said Ralph Jones of A Battery. "We were ordered not to, thereby allowing the enemy to view our ammo from the jungle line."

The decision to leave the ammo stacked above ground would have devastating consequences for the men at the base in Illingworth.

'Almost Imaginary, Like a Movie'

At 2:18 a.m. on April 1, the first of 300 NVA mortar, rocket and recoilless rifle rounds began exploding in a 20-minute barrage inside Illingworth's perimeter. The 32nd's Fire Direction Center (FDC) took a direct hit, killing three offshift radiomen sleeping nearby. Likewise, the 77th's FDC was hit several times; that unit lost seven KIA.

"I directed over 1,000 rounds of artillery fire plus several air strikes and dozens of gunships," recalled then-Capt. John Ahearn, artillery liaison officer of the 1st Bn., 77th Arty, and fire coordinator for the 2nd Bn., 8th Cav. "Two things in particular stand out in my mind: that everyone was on 100 percent alert thus preventing us from being overrun, and the courage of Cobra helicopter pilot Capt. Joe Hogg, who made possible communication from Illingworth during the desperate times of the battle."

Immediately thereafter, some 400 soldiers from the 272nd Main Force Regiment of the 9th VC/NVA Division charged the wire in a full frontal assault. They emerged like "ghosts through a mist," as a GI who was among only 77 infantrymen on the perimeter recalled.

"The dust was so dense you couldn't see 55 yards in front of you," said Sgt. Keith McKissick of Gun Sec. 241, 3rd Plt., I Btry., 29th FA, who earned a Silver Star. Still, combat was so close that the enemy was clearly visible. "Very rarely do you see the man who is trying to kill you," McKissick explained.

As the first wave of communists rushed the earthen wall, Spec. 4 Peter Lemon of Recon Plt., E Co., 2nd Bn., 8th Cav, moved to assist M-60 machine gunner Lou Vaca at the berm. The thick dust, Lemon says, caused Vaca's gun to jam and also obscured the onrushing NVA troops until they were only 50 feet from the Americans.

"They were 40 or 50 across, wave after wave of them," said Lemon. "It was almost imaginary, like a movie, with all the dust and the flares."

Lemon was able to kill five NVA with his M-16 until it, too, malfunctioned. He then began throwing grenades at the attackers. Meanwhile, he says Vaca, who was trying to repair the machine gun, was shot three times in the stomach. Lemon describes the 18-20 men of Recon Platoon as "professional soldiers" who kept their nerve during the chaos.

"We knew we were going to get hit, and as they were coming at us, we were blowing off a lot of the Claymores," said the Medal of Honor recipient. "We were pretty calm. But I equate it to a prizefight. By the time the 10th round comes around and your opponent is still swinging, you say to yourself, 'This guy is pretty tough.'"

Lemon killed four more NVA advancing on the machine-gun position and then carried Vaca to the battalion aid station. Lemon was wounded a second time returning to Vaca's machine gun, where he found a group of NVA attempting to turn the gun on the Americans.

He drove them off with more grenades and killed an NVA soldier at the gun. Lemon repaired it and "placed effective fire upon the enemy," according to his Medal of Honor citation. Wounded a third time, he eventually collapsed from his wounds and exhaustion.

Two of Lemon's fellow E Company soldiers earned posthumous Distinguished Service Crosses during the firefight. Spec. 4 Casey O. Waller and Spec. 4 Brent Anthony Street tossed hand grenades at the enemy after their weapons jammed because of the overwhelming dust.

Both Street and Waller refused to withdraw when their grenade supply ran out and they resorted to hand-to-hand combat. Waller was killed by exploding ammunition and Street was eventually killed by a mortar round.

George Hobson, CO of Charlie Company, recalled the role of Silver Star recipient 1st Lt. Gregory Peters. "We were quite alone behind one of the 8-inch howitzers while directing our combined efforts," he said. "When he lost his rifle, I gave him mine, and started throwing grenades while he used the rifle."

'The Earth Seemed to Fail Us'

The 8-inch howitzer crewmen, armed with M-16s, joined the infantrymen at the perimeter to fend off the waves of attackers. As Col. Morris J. Brady said, artillerymen “ignored the full fury of the NVA’s fire to answer it with their own.” Behind them, the stacks of howitzer ammo loomed ominously.

“I had never seen so many enemy in the open,” said Spec. 4 Richard Whittier, a platoon radioman.

*This article is featured in the April 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), publisher and editor-in-chief, VFW magazine. To order your copy of *Brutal Battles of Vietnam*, visit the [VFW Store](#).*