

Eyewitness statement of William M. Perkins
of events of 3 April 1969

NOTE: An eyewitness statement was previously made in May 1969 while I was a patient at the US Army Hospital, Camp Zama, Japan. I sent the statement to the S1, 3d Bn. 60th Infantry at the Vietnam APO.

On the night of 3 April 1969 I led a night raid of my company, Co B, 3d Bn. 60th Inf of 9th Inf Div. There were 11 men in the raid, including myself. We departed the airfield at Dong Tam in 2 lift helicopters (UHIH), a command and control helicopter and 2 Cobra gunships for a target in Vinh Binh province. The target was a radio transmitter of a suspected Viet Cong or North Vietnamese battalion. Sergeant Edgar W. Eaton was my second in command. I flew in one lift helicopter and he flew in the other.

We landed about 2200 hours in a muddy rice paddy near a small hamlet. We cleared the hamlet, finding only old men and women, young women and small children, but no military age men. After about 20 minutes of searching, one of my men found a sophisticated, reinforced concrete bunker system. About the same time several members of the party fired upon some men at the north end of the hamlet. After a few minutes of searching the bunker I realized it was too extensive and complicated for our small force. In any case, we'd been on the ground too long and I called the helicopters to extract us.

They responded that they had departed to refuel. I assembled my force 200 meters west of the original landing zone, in the large rice paddy and divided it into 2 chalks about 50 feet apart--ready to board the lift helicopters when they returned. During the operation, an ARVN artillery unit had provided illumination on call and continued to provide sporadic illumination while we waited. We began to detect movement around the rice paddy and then we could hear men speaking and giving commands. My men asked for permission to fire but I told them to wait until the helicopters were on station because we had limited ammunition. When the helicopters finally returned I asked Sgt Eaton to come to my chalk for a few minutes. He was the company sniper and his sniper rifle was equipped with a night vision device (Starlite scope). Through it I could see about 30 men in one group north of the hamlet. They were moving toward us. At about that time, the helicopter pilots told me to turn on the strobe light so they could spot us. I did so but they had difficulty finding us but finally did so and began their approach.

I told them of the enemy force to their right (east and north) and told them to fire on them with the gunships and door gunners as they landed. I told my men that when the helicopters landed to get on board--without delay. Because of the mud, Sgt Eaton was unable to get back to his group before the aircraft landed so he stayed with my group..

As the helicopters landed they received withering automatic weapons fire. The night turned green because of the enemy tracer fire. The gunships and door gunners fired at the enemy. Despite being hit repeatedly, our helicopter took off and we reached about 500 feet altitude. I called for a headcount from the other aircraft and was told that a man was missing.

The ARVN artillery still illuminated the area and I and my pilot, CWO Hunt, soon spotted the man, lying in a ditch to the south of the pickup zone. I told the other lift

Eyewitness statement of William M. Perkins
of events of 3 April 1969

aircraft to go in and get him and that our helicopter would follow behind in support.

Our approach was from a different direction than the original approach and the enemy appeared to be surprised as they did not fire at the first aircraft. It landed and the missing man jumped in the right door, but someone jumped from the left door and the helicopter took off--leaving a man still on the ground.

I was leaning out the right side of the aircraft and when I saw what had happened I pointed at the man as I looked at the pilot. He nodded and we began our approach.

We were at about 30 feet altitude when I saw a burst of automatic weapons fire hit the cockpit and wound CWO Hunt. I saw him in the hospital later and he had 3 gunshot wounds. This fire disabled the aircraft and it pitched up and to the right. I jumped and landed in the deep mud and then the aircraft hit and land landed fully upon me on its right side.

I could hear men yelling and felt the impact of rounds on the fuselage. I kicked someone with my right foot and then I heard Eaton giving commands as the men rocked the aircraft and hands began pulling my feet and legs, freeing me. Except for my left arm I was clear of the wreckage. I eventually freed that arm.

The artillery illumination in the distance helped in seeing. Sgt Eaton had gotten the raiding party out of the aircraft and led them, under fire, in freeing me from the wreckage by rocking the aircraft. All of the survivors were wounded, some seriously and some less so. After getting most of the survivors moved near the tail into a perimeter, he began to fire on the enemy with his sniper rifle. I heard the impact of enemy rounds on the aircraft a few feet above me as I lay directly below the fuselage in a large puddle of fuel that was leaking from the bottom of the helicopter. I was unable to move much but remained conscious as I tried to prop myself up with my right arm. I continued to hear Eaton's slow and methodical return fire. I then felt hot casings on me and I looked up and saw a man stretched across the left skid above me. I asked who it was and someone nearby said it was Eaton. An RPG impacted near the nose and I yelled for everyone to take cover. A useless order as all were doing their best to be in covered positions, except Eaton. The whole time I saw tracers pass near his exposed position. I feared that a tracer would ignite the fuel in which I lay. I knew it would incinerate me and Ed. A fire did break out in the cockpit but a crew member crawled forward and put it out.

Most of our weapons were either damaged or lost in the mud and wreckage, but I saw a crew member hand up an M16 rifle to Ed. He laid down a heavy volume of fire in one direction and then handed it back down to be reloaded. He then resumed his deliberate fire on the enemy with his sniper rifle. The loaded M16 was then handed back up to him and he then fired it on automatic and handed it back down and resumed his sniper firing. This cycle continued for some time. I could see enemy soldiers moving 50-75 meters from us near the grave mound and the tree line. I saw many go down but not sure whether because they were hit or whether they were seeking cover from Eaton's firing. But I know that he was keeping them away from us. The fire was coming mainly from the east but

Eyewitness statement of William M. Perkins
of events of 3 April 1969

groups could not approach directly across the paddy because of the deep mud, so they moved along the north and south dikes, firing as they moved towards our position.

The Cobra gunships made gun runs sometime after we crashed. They fired close-in, not more than 50 meters away and sometimes closer. They made at least 2 live runs and then several dummy runs. It was obvious they were out of ammunition.

They then landed, with their tails towards most of the enemy. I saw many green tracers pass near them. The gunners motioned to come and several of the survivors ran and clambered aboard the struts and opened ammunition doors. Someone tried to pick me up to carry me to the first gunship but I was too badly injured and told him to leave me. He did and put a grenade in my right hand before he ran for the gunship. With at least 4 men aboard (could have been 5), it turned and, with green tracers following it, departed.

I noticed that Eaton was no longer on the skid above me. I saw several board the other gunship and it too turned to the left to depart but as it did so I saw someone jump off the skid. The pilot or gunner said something and he replied, "I won't leave the old man to die alone!". He ran back and lay down at my side. It was Ed Eaton. The gunship took off.

Eaton was with me but a few minutes when one enemy stepped around the nose of the aircraft. Ed shot him and a short time later he shot a second near the same spot.

In a few minutes I heard another helicopter land and heard sustained automatic firing and was roughly dragged to the helicopter and thrown in. The aircraft took off. It was the command and control aircraft with LTC Petersen aboard. We flew for some time and landed at the MASH hospital at Dong Tam. A few seconds after our landing the engine quit and the pilot said the aircraft was out of fuel.

Years later I learned that Eaton and the colonel's Tiger Scout had left the crash site aboard the second gunship. It had returned because the command and control aircraft was overloaded. They rode the skids & ammo doors of the gunship to a paddy near an ARVN outpost and were later picked up by a UH1H and flown to the hospital in which I was being treated. At the hospital that evening Eaton told me that he had but 5 rounds of ammunition left when we were rescued.

26 years later I asked him what awards he received for the action. He told me he had received another Purple Heart and the Army Commendation Medal with "V" device. Later I learned all the members of the raiding party had received that Army Commendation Medal, except Bernie Bienwald, who received the Bronze Star.

Edgar W. Eaton displayed the highest order of gallantry and intrepidity that night. He ensured all survivors were removed from the wreckage and that most were moved to a less exposed position. Alone and exposed he then defended the hapless and virtually defenseless survivors from an aggressive, superior force..

Despite the constant threat of being shot or incinerated, he maintained accurate fire upon

Eyewitness statement of William M. Perkins
of events of 3 April 1969

a platoon or larger force, preventing them from killing or taking prisoner the twelve American survivors.

Then when gunships began to evacuate survivors, he left the sure safety of evacuation to return to defend me, thinking I was the sole survivor. There was no guaranty that he would be saved and he knew that when he chose to return to my side. In short, he made the choice to die with me, knowing he likely could not save me.

But he did save me, and all the other survivors as well.

His actions merit the highest award for gallantry that this nation can bestow.