

The Convoy and Fight in the Graveyard
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On February 7th I was assigned to Bravo Battery 1st Battalion 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Bravo Battery was located at a remote firing position known as the “Rock Crusher”, approximately five and one half miles southwest of Hue City near the village of Nam Hoa, Thua Thien Province, Vietnam. The battery had been on location for a little over a week, frequently firing in support of the Marine units engaged in the Battle for Hue City and surrounding area. On the morning of the 7th an eighteen vehicle ammunition resupply convoy under the command of Captain Ronald Brown arrived at Bravo Battery’s location with a large amount of 105 mm ammunition. After unloading the convoy prepared to return to 1st Battalion 11th Marines’ position at Phu Bai Combat Base. I was attached to Capt Brown’s convoy for travel back to Phu Bai for administrative reasons.



On the return trip, B Company 9th Engineer Battalion attached four additional trucks to the convoy and the two M-50 Ontos from 1st Anti Tank Battalion that had been at the “Rock Crusher” position were to provide extra security, increasing the convoy to 24 vehicles. Captain Brown organized the convoy with one Ontos and the command jeep at the head with the engineer dump trucks attached at the rear followed by the other Ontos as rear security. I was traveling in the bed of the lead truck. We had traveled about three miles north on the road running along the river and just as the convoy turned east toward Phu Bai, the truck that I was riding in hit a landmine. The convoy commander, Capt Brown, was also riding in the cab of the truck. Although the truck was disabled, there were no serious casualties. Captain Brown dismounted the disabled truck and had the Marines from the disabled truck move back to the following truck. He then instructed the driver of the next vehicle to push the disabled truck from the roadway. After a short delay the convoy continued toward Phu Bai, Corporal Smith in the lead Ontos leading the convoy with Captain Brown following now riding in the command jeep.

We continued on traveling east when there was another landmine incident that occurred somewhere further back in the convoy. We had traveled about a mile and a half east thru a village and into a large graveyard where the road made a ninety degree turn, the turn was so sharp that it made it difficult for large military vehicles to pass.

After the lead vehicles passed the turn, I could see a North Vietnamese RPG come across the convoy and struck the front of the vehicle that I was riding. This was accompanied by heavy rifle, machinegun and other rocket fire.

Captain Brown ordered the lead vehicles to speed up and to move out of the ambush site. Corporal Smith followed Captain Brown’s orders to quickly move out. Corporal Smith quickly led the command jeep over the small bridge and onto the road across the narrow rice paddy that is where the command jeep was hit and the driver was killed. Captain Brown was afoot and making his way back to the stopped convoy.

The fight at the graveyard and around the battle damaged vehicles was intense and fierce. We were pinned down, many dead or wounded, badly outnumbered and actually fighting for our survival. It was clear to us that we probably would not last until help could get to us. That was when Corporal Smith returned to the fight with his Ontos, he had made it safely out of the ambush site and must have realized that the rest of the convoy was trapped, so he turned around, loaded his 106s and came back to help.



Captain Brown had climbed on the front of Corporal Smith's Ontos to direct his fire and was quickly killed. I saw Corporal Smith firing heavily with his 30 cal machine gun as PFC Powel drove the vehicle straight back into the ambush. They destroyed a major North Vietnamese position with a direct hit from a 106 recoilless rifle. The presence of the Ontos with intense 30 cal machine gun fire did much to suppress the enemy fire. This gave us just enough of a tactical edge and boosted our moral so that we were able to hang on.

After destroying the NVA position, Corporal Smith's Ontos was hit with a 57 recoilless rifle, Smith was badly injured and L/Cpl Powell was killed. Corporal Smith climbed out of the destroyed Ontos and fell into the ditch with other surviving Marines. I patched him up as well as I could as he was severely wounded. We were there for what seemed like hours when we were approached by two NVA soldiers with kaki pith helmets, kaki shirts and short combat boots. They were carrying AK-47s and I remember the patches, red quarter moon with the number 321 on them. I fired at them with an M-16 and fortunately that is when the reaction force from Phu Bai arrived, about fifty Marines on trucks with machine guns. Thank God - this was not a minute to soon, we were at our last and could not have survived much longer.

After the Phu Bai reaction force had gained control of the battlefield I attempted to aid Powell get out of the destroyed Ontos. I determined that Powell had been killed earlier and that I needed help to extract his body from the track.

There was much heroism that day, the convoy and reaction forces lost over twenty killed and forty wounded. It could have been much worse and none of us would have survived except for the heroic actions of Corporal Smith and PFC Powell.

Corporal Smith was ordered to speed up and move rapidly out of the ambush, following Captain Brown's orders his Ontos broke out and was clear of danger. Smith realized that the convoy did not break out but instead was trapped in the graveyard. He stopped his vehicle, turned around, loaded two of his 106s and returned to the fight very aggressively. Corporal Smith could have returned and remained safely at the edge of the ambush site, supporting by long range fire support but instead he ignored his own safety and pushed straight into the thick of the fight.

Semper Fi - Howard Melton Cpl "B" Btry 1/11th Marines