

## The Quest - Lunar Year

The story of the Purple Hearts earned during February 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 1968

By

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A young LT, whose name was Richard Pershing, came to my Platoon 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon A Co 1/502nd 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Div. as Platoon Leader. I was acting like one when he arrived on Feb. 10, 1968 right after the Tet Offensive had begun (between January 30 - 31, 1968). Our Company Commander at Joseph Holland had been killed next day (Feb. 1, 1968). I was with him - (My Old Man).

We had been fighting intensively. All towns and fire bases were under siege. The U.S. Embassy was attacked, and almost taken. We had the Trojan Horse inside. I was with my Platoon inside the enemy lines - another Trojan Horse?, after Cpt. Holland got killed I was kept in the field, until LT. Richard Pershing arrived.

My Platoon was under strength. I just had thirty (30) warriors left from the original Platoon. Yes, just thirty warriors including myself and my RTO, Pvt. Nicholson, a real young warrior. We were prepared, ready and willing to go and go for broke. LT. Richard Pershing became the 31<sup>st</sup> warrior of 1<sup>st</sup> Plt. A 1/502 101<sup>st</sup> ABN.

Six (6) days after LT Richard Pershing arrived in my Platoon, Feb. 16, 1968, I was leading the point element, during an operation outside a fire-base (Jane) YD 339429, when the point I was leading made contact with enemy forces, that were well concealed, inside a village with heavy hedge rows around; while my point was exposed in the rice paddies. The enemy had all the odds in their favor. LT. Pershing was with the Platoon main body about seventy (70) meters behind. The point element I was leading received rocket propelled fire (RPG) and heavy automatic fire from the village. I was wounded by a fragment on the right leg. LT. Pershing ordered me to make a hasty withdrawal (pull back).

After the point had joined the main body at the CP LT. Pershing and I, ordered the squad leaders to send security out with respective OP's, before calling the evacuation chopper to extract me. We were expecting an enemy attack from the village to our position. We didn't know the enemy strength, but they had a good fire power.

Half hour after the medical evacuation chopper (dust off) was approaching our location for the extraction, when it received heavy automatic fire from the village (ground fire). The helicopter couldn't make the landing, increased the revolutions, and got lost in the sky. Thus despite my wound, I was forced to remain with my Platoon over night. God knows best.

In the meanwhile, the enemy inside the village, received heavy American artillery fire such as: 155,105,175 and 4.2 mortars. At the same time illumination fire was called and the enemy had no choice, but to stay inside the village over night.

\* The ordeal continued. Next day 17<sup>th</sup> February 1968, once again, I was sent back to the point. At mid morning we went to try to reach the village and I was the point leader element. LT. Pershing was with the Platoon main body waiting for the action. The enemy was patient and waited, waited, waited. I moved, moved and all of a sudden the enemy opened up with everything in the house. During the first fire burst I got the machine gunner wounded and his assistant killed. During the fire fight, just the point made contact because LT. Pershing remained with the Platoon way back.

I had ordered the men from the point to pull back and I remained with the man that was killed. The man who was wounded had pulled back to the Platoon. With no assistance, as the machine gunner had been wounded and his assistant killed, I took over the machine gun, and remained exposed to the intense enemy fire, while the rest of the point began to withdraw. Because of the heavy volume of fire I was placing on them, the enemy ceased firing on the rest of the point and concentrated on me.

Although, I was wounded by a RPG fragment, I remained exposed to the heavy fire until the rest of my point element had moved to a safe position. After the point had reached a defiladed position, I hold the enemy down for about an hour, with machine gun fire. Having expended all the ammunition from the M60, I began to fire my M-16 riffle and crawled back to rejoin the rest of the Platoon with LT. Pershing at the CP. I thought this was the end of this nightmare for the day. However a new mission laid ahead, as follows. So far, only one man and one M60 machine gun were missing besides the three (3) men wounded, who had been extracted to the rear hospital.

## **A new mission:**

After I returned to LT. Pershing at the Platoon CP we regrouped, when somebody from higher command ordered the LT. to recover the dead body and the M60 machine gun. The LT. passed the order to me. He told me "the medic is going to dress your wound (second) please have some food and prepare to take the point out". I told him "LT. Pershing, this time we have to accomplish this mission together". He agreed.

In my mind, I questioned the urgency for this mission-just in my mind. I knew the man was dead and the machine gun had been destroyed by me, as I was the last man from 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon A Co 1/502nd Inf. 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, who was engaged by the enemy until I was forced to withdraw.

However order are order, and we, both, obeyed, and moved in a Platoon column formation:

Two (2) squads abreast; LT. Pershing on the left, PSG Otero Barreto on the right. I was adjusting artillery fire to our front and inside the village. Despite my two (2) previous wound 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> February 1968, the last one few hours before. We were willing to give our life for our country. Warriors do not ask questions. They just are to accomplish the missions and obey orders. They cannot hesitate. My opinion.

Making the story short: LT. Pershing had been around a week in our Platoon, when we moved to recover the dead body and the M60 machine gun; and we encountered very heavy enemy fire and LT. Pershing was hit by RPG fire and was killed. This happened when we were half way toward the man KIA and the M60 machine gun; hell came wide opened to us. I recovered LT. Pershing but the man KIA and the damaged M60 machine gun were left behind.

As far as I know, that village was never taken. The enemy withdrew and got lost. I still remember a Phantom Jet shot down before our last mission to recover the man KIA and the M60 machine gun. A big fire in the village and the sound of a giant drum. During that action, when we lost LT. Richard Pershing.

My comrades in arms Larry Weisbarth and Bill Lux can bear witness to this story.

### **Note: For full details on the 17<sup>th</sup>**

February 1968 wound, ( please refer to the Silver Star Medal Citation, general order #4596, attached), General Olinto Barsanti went out to the field and pinned down on my chest the decoration as an impact award with the promise to be up graded in a near future.

In addition I earned the ( 4<sup>th</sup> OLC). Purple Heart at the same time of my Silver S which was presented to me, thirty two (32) years after the event at a special ceremony at Buchanan P.R. (Please see enclosed photo).

## Purple Heart Medals

Jorge Otero Barreto's first tour to Vietnam was a military advisor assigned to the 117<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company during the Advisory Campaign; detached from A company 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 27<sup>th</sup> Inf. (wolfhounds) 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Div., Hawaii.

During this tour he received three (3) Air Medals, the gunner's wings and the crewman badge, among others. He participated on the Vietnam Advisory Campaign. After this tour, he went back to Hawaii; and from there, in 1965, he was transferred to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. He was assigned then, to A Co. 1<sup>st</sup> Bn 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry (Gerónimo). From this outfit emerged the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, separate; and the rendezvous with destiny began.

On June 6, 1966, Otero Barreto returned to Vietnam, as member of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn 503<sup>rd</sup> Inf., 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade separate. He was highly decorated. He completed this tour on June 4, 1967. Returned home on a military leave for thirty (30) days, until July 15, 1967. Prior to completing this tour in Vietnam, Otero Barreto, would have participated in three (3) designated campaigns: Vietnam Counter Offensive, Vietnam Counter Offensive Phase II and Vietnam Counter Offensive Phase III.

His Unit 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, 4<sup>th</sup> Bn was also awarded a Meritorious Unit Commendation, the Republic of Vietnam Unit Citation with palm (3 awards) and a Navy Presidential Unit Citation, while he was a member of the organization. In addition, he was awarded three (3) Purple Hearts.

## **I- The first one was earned**

On 21<sup>st</sup> July 1966, but was given in the city of Washington on 8<sup>th</sup> day of Jan. 1992, for a puncture wound, on the right ankle. About this action, Otero Barreto tell`s, "During an operation in war zone C, when I was executing a Charlie Alpha (combat assault), the chopper was hovering in place, about ten (10) feet from the ground. I exited from the chopper and when I hit the ground, I was grapped by a bear trap, and was immobilized right there".

He added: "In the meanwhile, my outfit was receiving a heavy volume of fire from the enemy position and the Platoon had to maneuver to engage the enemy. Due to my handicap, I had to remain by myself in the LZ (Landing Zone).

He further explained: "After the fierce battle ended, some of the men from my Platoon returned to help me. The Doc (medic) applied first aid and called a medic EVAC (chopper)". "Four hours went by from the time I was injured, to the time I was evacuated. Then, I was taken to Bien Hoa Hospital, where the bear trap was cut off, and the medical personnel was able to take care of the wound; and I was returned to the company area to convalescence".

## **II- The Second Purple Heart was earned:**

On 17<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1966, Otero Barreto earned the 2<sup>nd</sup> Purple Heart (1<sup>st</sup> OLC) for a fragment wound, left leg.

With regard to this action, Otero Barreto explains: "While patrolling around the Michelling Rubber Plantation as a Platoon Leader, my Platoon made contact with a VC force and two of my men got killed. I was maneuring to the right flank, when the enemy tossed a frag. Grenade, which hit a tree and exploded. Some of those fragments wounded in the left leg. We regrouped and recovered the two (2) men KIA".

He continued "after the search throught the battle area, we found four (4) VC KIA, three (3) AK-47 and one (1) SKS (for sniper)". He added, "after the two Americans (KIA) were extracted (evacuated), the medic (Doc) took care of my wound and we returned to the base camp Bien Hoa Air Base.

### III- The third Purple Heart was earned:

On March 6, 1967, Otero Barreto earned the third Purple Heart (2<sup>nd</sup> OLC) for a serious bullet and frag wound, on the left buttocks. Notwithstanding, "Otero Barreto continued to expose himself to the hostile fire by moving from man to man to point out enemy targets, until fire supremacy was gained". Despite his serious wound, Otero Barreto "remained with this squad until the unit was out of the hostile area and only then did he accept medical aid and allowed himself to be evacuated". (See Bronze Star general order #942). Otero Barreto further said: "He was taken to Lhong Bing Field Hospital for surgery, and after fifteen (15) days the wound became infected and it had to be opened to be cleaned". As a result, he had "to undergo another painful surgery procedure had kept him hospitalized for about a month", he said.

In addition to receiving his third (2<sup>nd</sup> OLC) Purple Heart Medal for this action, Otero Barreto was honored with a Bronze Star with "V" device for heroism, by the Brigade Commander.

The citation reads: "Staff Sergeant Otero Barreto distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on March 6, 1967 in the Republic of Vietnam, while serving as a squad leader. On this day, Staff Sergeant Otero Barreto's squad moved forward to his lead element after they were caught in an enemy attack to direct their fire into enemy positions..." As previously explained, "Otero Barreto repeatedly exposing himself to the hostile fire received a serious wound..." "Otero Barreto's outstanding display of aggressiveness devotion to duty, and personal bravery were in keeping, with the highest traditions of the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army".