

FORK IN THE ROAD

Memoirs of Major Donald Babb

(17 September 1968 to 5 October 1968)

Some days are never forgotten; they are indelible.

As I regained consciousness, my vision was blurry. I could not focus but I could hear sounds of some kind. The sounds became voices and I began to see some light, fuzzy at first, then I was able to focus on the source of the light – a single light bulb hanging down from overhead. The source of the voices took on shape and I felt someone grip my right hand and say, “Skipper, you lost your legs.” It was First Sergeant Barfield. I had to be in Tay Ninh. What happened? How did I get here? I seemed to fade in and out of consciousness.

On the evening of September 17 there had been an all out attack on Fire Base Saint Barbara by elements of the North Vietnamese Army and the local Vietcong. I was seriously wounded and was evacuated by helicopter to the 45th Surgical Hospital in Tay Ninh. Major Meyers, Battalion Executive Officer, came by helicopter to Fire Base Saint Barbara to take temporary command was also wounded and evacuated. There were many more casualties and evacuations. PFC Kevin Dugan, Battery Supply Clerk was killed during the attack. Two of the gun section chiefs were among the wounded and evacuated as were several soldiers from the attached Infantry platoon.

On September 18 Battalion assigned Captain Neil Springborn, Commander, Battery B, 2nd/32nd Artillery, to take temporary command at Fire Base Saint Barbara. He stayed for a week until Captain Wardell Hollis was assigned to command A Battery. That night the entire 105mm crew was evacuated after sustaining multiple wounds.

On September 18 a teletype was sent from Headquarters, US Army Vietnam, to the Casualty Division, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC. The message stated,

“Captain Donald N. Babb, O95774, SERIOUSLY WOUNDED, 17 Sep 68 at 1830 hrs. Traumatic amputation left leg above knee, right leg below knee. Individ in base camp vic coord: XT 275 679 Tay Ninh (22) III CTZ RVN when came under hostile mortar attack. Individ adm to 45th Surg Hosp 17 Sep 68 at 1935 hrs, and placed on the SI list 17 Sep 68 at 1940 hrs. Condition guarded.”

This teletype became the basis for a telegram sent by the Adjutant General, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, to Mom and Dad stating,

“The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your son Captain Donald N Babb was placed on the seriously ill list in Vietnam on 17 September 1968 as the result of traumatic amputation of left leg above the knee and right leg below the knee. He was in base camp when area came under hostile mortar attack.

In the judgment of the attending physician his condition is of such severity that there is cause for concern but no imminent danger to life. Please be

assured that the best medical facilities and doctors have been made available and every measure is being taken to aid him. You will be kept informed of any significant changes in his condition.”

The telegram was delivered to Mom and Dad at 3:30pm on September 18, 1968. Dad immediately contacted the office of Congressman William J. Randall to verify the information. A call back from Congressman Randall stated the information had been verified and was correct. Another telegram dated September 19 stated, “Your son Captain Donald N. Babb has been removed from the seriously ill list. Period of further hospitalization is undetermined.” And on September 23 a follow up telegram stated, “Your son Captain Donald N. Babb is making normal improvement. Period of further hospitalization is unknown. Evacuation is not contemplated at this time.” Then on September 30 a final telegram stated, “Your son Captain Donald N. Babb has been evacuated from Vietnam to Japan. His present health and prognosis are good. Evacuation to the United States is contemplated in approximately four days. The destination hospital is undetermined at this time. You will be notified of his arrival by the commanding officer of that hospital to which he is assigned. I share your hope that he will have a rapid recovery.” A Hospital Arrival Notice Form dated October 5, 1968, was sent to Dad from Fitzsimons General Hospital, Denver, Colorado, stating, “Your son, Captain Donald N. Babb, was admitted to this hospital as a patient on October 5, 1968. His present condition is satisfactory.”

On September 18, 1968, I was moved from the 45th Surgical Hospital in Tay Ninh to the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi. I was awake and alert enough to ask for some paper and a pen to write letters to Mom and Dad in Missouri, and to Judy Clark in Hawaii. On Red Cross stationery I wrote, “Sit down – I have to be blunt! I got hit yesterday – real bad in the legs. So bad in fact that the doctor had to amputate both legs from the knees down. I’m fine and resting comfortably now at Cu Chi in the 12th Evac Hospital. I’m told I’ll be here for a few days at least and will then be going to Japan I think it is.”

What I didn’t say in that and future letters was anything about the pain – the constant pain. Whatever the normal dosage schedule was for the pain medication, I was told later they cut it in half and gave me shots every two to four hours. And sleep always came after each shot. Regaining consciousness I looked around and soon realized the hospital ward I was on was really a Quonset hut. A door was located at each end and an aisle ran the length of the hut from door to door. On either side of the aisle were hospital beds and the nurses station was near the center. Each time I was awake I was aware of many people moving around the Quonset hut, usually nurses going from bed to bed checking the patients. Doctors would come and go too. Back to sleep and then awake again, I didn’t seem to really be aware of the actual passage of time.

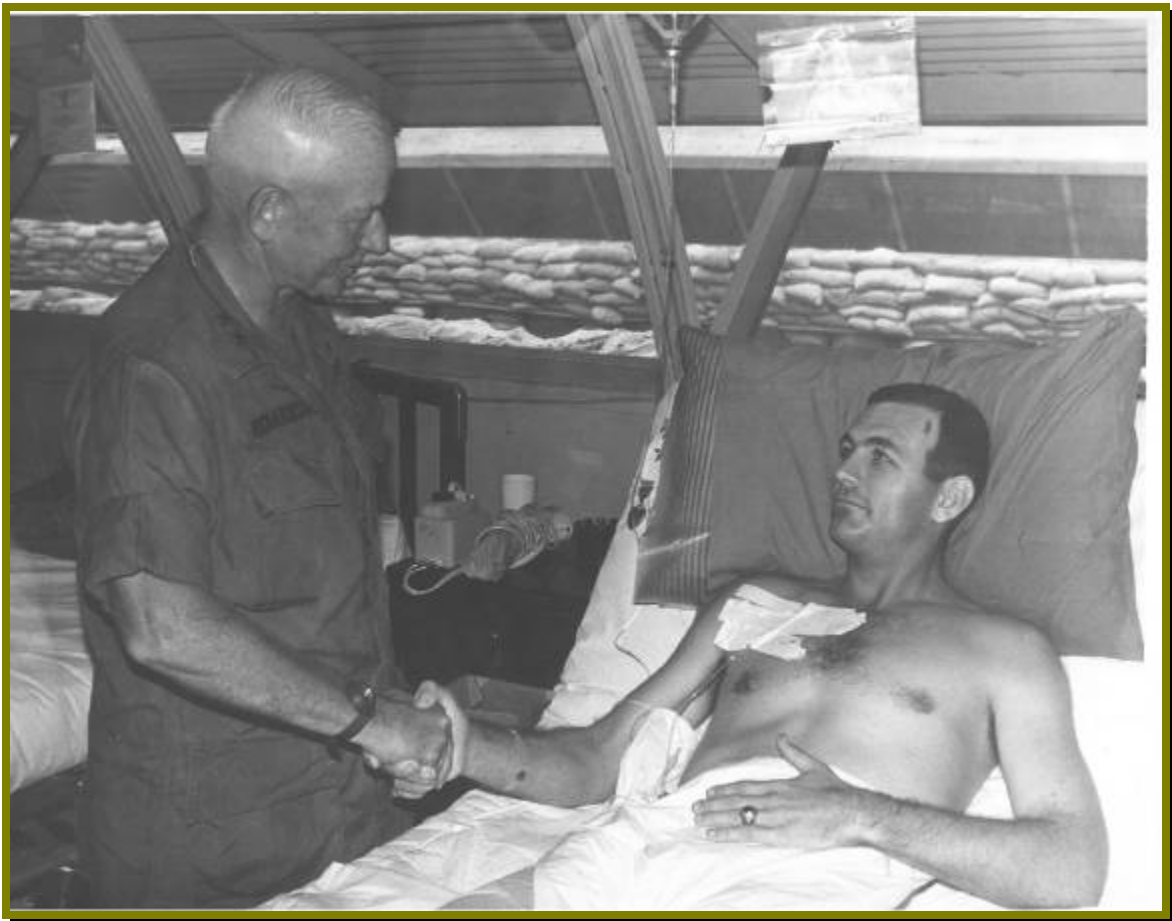
Suddenly I was aware my legs were being moved and they really hurt. A doctor was removing the bandages and looking at the wounds. I recall the doctor said something to the effect, “He’s ready, let’s go.” And then I was on a gurney and moving. First we go outside the Quonset hut then across an open area and into another Quonset hut. And then it hit me. This new Quonset hut felt cool, very cool. It was air conditioned. This was one of the operating rooms at the 12th Evac Hospital and I was going to have more surgery.

The doctor who had earlier looked at my wounds had determined they were ready for final closure. I was told about the surgery, but what I really wanted to do was to stay in this air conditioned place for a while. The next thing I remember is being told to count backward from 100. I came awake back in the hospital ward Quonset hut in a bed next to the nurse's station. My legs felt different somehow, but they still hurt like blazes. It was time for another pain shot and some more sleep.

When I woke up I discovered I was shirtless and I had an IV in each arm and an IV in my chest. A nurse stopped by and propped me up a bit saying, "You've got visitors."

In the picture below Major General Walter Richardson, Deputy Commanding General, II Field Force Vietnam, is talking to me about the actions that took place on 17 September at Fire Base Saint Barbara. Colonel DeArment, 23rd Artillery Group Commander, and Lieutenant Colonel Billy McDonald, my Battalion Commander, were also present standing at the foot of my bed.

General Richardson, Colonel DeArment and Lieutenant Colonel McDonald took a few moments to talk about the actions and situation that occurred at Fire Base Saint Barbara on September 17, and plans for the future of the fire base. We shook hands and he departed.



My condition stabilized and I was ready to be transferred to Japan and then on to the United States. On September 25 I was moved to the hospital at Bien Hoa, the air base near Saigon. I was taken by gurney to a ward and transferred to a bed about half way down the aisle. I looked around and all I could see were empty beds. I was the only patient. Another doctor came to see me and to evaluate my wounds. He said I was doing well and would be going to Japan on the next available flight. Then he looked at me and said, "Want a beer?" "Sure" I replied as the doctor and orderly walked away. Ten or 15 minutes later I began to hear footsteps then running. The next thing I knew the orderly had placed a can of Budweiser on the nightstand near my bed and he left. I was alone, just me and a cold can of Budweiser. I reached out to pick up the can of beer and discovered I could not do it. It was too far away. The can was right in the center on top of the nightstand; it might have well been on a nightstand at the far end of the ward. Then for the first time since being wounded I tried to use my feet to move closer to the nightstand. No feet and my stumps were hurting again. What to do. I began to move myself little by little from the center of the bed towards the side of the bed away from the nightstand. This seemed to take forever. When I felt my shoulder reach the edge of the bed I stopped. Then I extended my arm out away from my body and in a sudden movement I threw my arm across my body and the bed and succeeded in turning myself over from my back to my stomach. Now I was able to reach the beer. I opened it and drank that beer while on my belly.

On September 27 I was air-evacuated to Japan to the 106th General Hospital located near Yokohama. Another doctor, another evaluation and assessment of my wounds, and a decision that there was nothing they could do for me. It was time to get me on to the United States as soon as space on a flight became available.

Most of the soldiers on the ward with me in the 106th General Hospital were Warrant Officers and all were pilots who had been wounded while flying helicopters in Vietnam. Leg wounds mostly with some pretty severe fractures that required some weird looking traction devices holding their legs in position during the healing process. With some assistance I could get out of bed and into a wheelchair and I was mobile. On one occasion I recall one of the nurses stopping me while I was maneuvering a wheelchair around the ward all the while trying my best to keep from hitting anything, especially my stumps. The nurse asked me if I had any money with me. I didn't know for sure so I checked the canvas wallet I still had on me. "Nope", I said. "No money, I just have my military ID card." She directed me to the agent cashier office in the hospital and I was able to obtain a cash advance payment of \$100.00. When I returned to the ward, the nurse was talking with two young men dressed in casual civilian clothes, short sleeve shirts and trousers. She told one of them to let me borrow one of his shirts and we should then go to the Officers Club. I changed into the shirt but kept the hospital pajama pants on. And off we went to the club, walking wounded types so to speak. They were both pilots and recovering reasonably well from leg wounds. Once we got to the club and the bar area we ordered drinks. I wanted a scotch and water while they each ordered beer. I probably should have ordered a beer and even though I did order a "weak" drink, it was too much for me and before long I fell asleep. When I woke up I was in my bed back in the hospital.

October 3, 1968, I was finally on an air-evacuation flight to the United States. Strapped onto a litter, we made the trip from the hospital to the airfield by bus and on arrival we were unloaded and carried onto the plane. It was an Air Force C-141 modified to carry both litter patients as well as those who could walk and would sit in regular type seats for the flight home. I was still up to my new routine, asking for a pain shot on a frequent basis. I don't know how long the flight took or even if there was a stop somewhere along the way. I do remember the lights being on and an announcement we were landing at Travis Air Force Base in California. The wheels touched down and we were home, back in the USA. Then it was time to be transferred to another bus and a short trip to the base hospital. As we came to a stop at the hospital, the interior lights were turned on. An officer boarded the bus and welcomed us home. He also told us we would be taken from the bus to the dining hall where steak dinners were being prepared for us. After eating we would be taken to our assigned rooms and then we would be allowed to make a phone call. The steak tasted okay but I only managed to eat a few bites before I was full and could eat no more. I looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was 2:00. It was 2:00am and here I was eating a steak, rather eating a few pieces of steak. Now, off to the room I had been assigned until arrangements could be made to get me on the air-evacuation flight from Travis AFB to Denver, Colorado. I was going to Fitzsimons General Hospital for my rehabilitation. I made my 5 minute phone call to Mom and Dad in Independence, Missouri, telling them I was at Travis AFB and would be going on to Denver and Fitzsimons as soon as a flight became available.

During early morning rounds a doctor looked at my stumps and said I was healing very well and the sutures were ready to be removed. Sometime closer to noon on October 3, a couple of orderlies came into my room saying they were there to take out the sutures. I had just had a pain shot so it was an easy procedure. Late in the afternoon I felt my bowels move and knew I needed to get to a toilet, soon. The room I was in had three beds, two of them near the window and the one I was in near the door to the hallway and across from the bathroom. I pulled the cord next to my bed to alert the staff at the nurse's station I needed assistance. Several minutes went by without any response. I tried again and again and did not get any response. I was the only patient in this room so there was no one there to provide me with help. I looked around and saw just what I needed, a wheelchair. But it was too far away from my bed for me to reach it. Sort of reminded me of the beer on the nightstand back at Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon; this must be some kind of test and I didn't like it one bit. I looked at the sheets on my bed and thought, why not give it a try. I undid the sheets, twisted and rolled them up lengthwise and made myself a sheet lasso. I twirled it around a couple of times and tossed it at the chair. Beginners luck; I got it and began to pull it toward my bed. I got out of the bed and onto the chair and wheeled into the bathroom. Then I realized it was not a regular wheelchair, but an over the toilet style chair. Even better I thought as I maneuvered myself over the commode. Ahhhhh...yes, how do you say relief? Success; now to get back to bed. Just as I left the bathroom one of the orderlies entered the room and helped me get back into the bed.

On October 5 I was on an air-evacuation flight from Travis AFB to Peterson AFB in Denver. And from there another bus ride to Fitzsimons General Hospital. I was taken to a room on the Orthopedic Ward and transferred into bed. A while later a doctor came

to see me and told me he would be my primary care doctor. He reviewed my medical chart, asked me several questions, and told me that it was time for me to get off the pain medication. I was taking too much and taking it too often. I needed to detoxify. Turned out October 5 was a Saturday and the doctor told me I should be able to reduce my cravings for the pain medication by the time Monday arrived. He would leave an authorization for another pain medication, one with a lower dosage, at the nurse's station and I was to use that when necessary. It was a long weekend for me as I sweated and cursed and hit the walls with my balled up fists. I was miserable but it worked and when Monday finally arrived I actually felt some better.

Grand rounds were conducted each week and on Wednesday I met the Chief of the Orthopedics Department when he came into my room. I was sitting up near the head of the bed, the Chief of Orthopedics stood at the foot of the bed looking into my eyes and my doctor standing near me at the head of the bed presenting me and my medical situation. When my doctor finished his presentation, the Chief of Orthopedics said to me, "Now that you are going to be confined to a bed for the rest of your life, what are you going to do?" Momentarily stunned by this crass statement, I looked at my bedside table and saw the "Duck"[a "duck" is the term used for a urinal kept for bedside use]. I picked up the urinal and threw it in his direction just as he left the room. "You miserable sonofabitch!" I said. "Did I mean him or me?" I thought to myself as the grand rounds group moved on to the patient in the next room.