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# HERITAGE

As MP In Vietnam, Chavis Took The Fight To The Enemy



PHOTO: BOB CHAVIS

**Bob Chavis, center, is shown with two members of his team while working with the military police (MP) in South Vietnam in the late 1960s during the Vietnam War. The team's duties included far more than internal security, as they also went on patrols and were involved in firefights with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.**

**Edit: Left- 1st Lt. Edward R. Mendez B Company Executive Officer. Right- SFC Roy L. Hall B Company Platoon Sergeant, taken in 1968**

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This profile of Vietnam War veteran Bob Chavis, a longtime Yankton lawyer and state's attorney, was written by Dave Hosmer. To see more articles by Hosmer regarding World War II, see today's HERITAGE edition.*

**BY DAVE HOSMER**

For the Press & Dakotan

**B**ob Chavis should be dead. Probably many times over. Perhaps he was over eager once or twice, but that's the life of a professional soldier. His survival may be just plain luck. If the truth be told, it is we who are the lucky ones because we have gotten to know this man. This warrior. He was and is passionate about his military life and we can learn a lot from him.

Bob joined the Army on May 5, 1958 — with a ninth grade education. His sister forged his mother's name on his enlistment papers so he could join at age 17. Living in Peoria, Illinois, he was raised by a single mother. His two older brothers were both in the military, the older in the airborne during World War II. Both brotherly love and pride shine as Bob presents their pictures.

After basic training, he sought out airborne infantry. Due to his vision, he moved to airborne MP. His first duty in the MP was assignment to the 101st Airborne where he earned his wings. He was honorably discharged in 1962 at Specialist 4th rank. Sixty days later, he re-enlisted and was assigned to Headquarters 5th Army and then to the 8th Airborne MP which was stationed in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. He truly loved that assignment.

Thereafter, he took an assignment with the 82nd Airborne. He was with the 82nd when it was deployed in the Dominican Republic in 1965. He was thereafter promoted to staff sergeant. The Airborne units have proud histories going back to Sicily, Salerno, Normandy, Market Garden and Bastogne in World War II.

The 82nd was not his favorite. As a result, he applied for both Officer's Candidate School and the Rangers, an elite group of Army light infantry designed to be the "tip of the spear" on offensive missions. He passed the prior and completed the latter. Modern Rangers proudly trace their lineage to those men on Omaha Beach, Point du Hoc and in Merrill's Marauders.

These are amazing accomplishments, but Bob is most proud of being in the MPs. The Army MP has a long history, as well. Movies portray MPs with shiny hats and armbands with "MP" emblazoned on them, which was often true. However, the true symbol was the crossed pistols, and Chavis wore them his entire military career.

Bob completed his time in Vietnam in the 5th Special Forces Group. Otherwise known as the Green Berets, their primary mission was to train and then lead unconventional warfare or guerrilla forces. He was sent to the Central Highlands along the Cambodian border with Vietnam for the explicit purpose of training and organizing Montagnards, indigenous mountain people, to fight against the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). This was jungle warfare and very dangerous. He was later promoted to captain and was the CO of a Recon Company Mobile Strike Force.

Describing all of Bob's feats would make for a much longer article. Because Bob is so proud of his MP service, the greatest way to honor him is to tell of his time as an MP in Company B, 720th MP Battalion, 89th MP Brigade.\*Not many people know of B Company, but they should.

\* Should be 89th MP Group, 18th MP Brigade

## **THE TET OFFENSIVE**

The Tet Celebration is the Vietnamese New Year, an important holiday that recognizes the arrival of spring. There are many ceremonies and the holiday is usually work-free. The North Vietnamese publicly announced that they would observe a peace treaty from Jan. 27-Feb. 3 in 1968 to celebrate Tet. However, in the early morning hours of Jan. 31, 1968, the VC and NVA coordinated an attack throughout South Vietnam in the hopes of sparking a revolution against the Americans. The revolution failed, but more than 1,000 American personnel died during the Offensive.

During Tet, there was chaos in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. The American Embassy was attacked. MPs of the 716th MP Battalion bravely defended the Embassy, which was never overrun. The unit received a Presidential Unit Citation, but, more importantly, there was agreement that MPs could do more than simply keep order within the military.

In 1966, Gen. William Westmoreland had approved Operation Moose (Move Out Of Saigon Expeditiously), which was designed to transfer American military operations from Saigon to nearby Long Binh. By the time of Tet, many troops had been moved to that post, which was the largest Army base in Vietnam, housing nearly 60,000 personnel.

Tet certainly accelerated Operation Moose. Security at Long Binh was crucial; it was assigned to the 89th MP Brigade, composed of five battalions. The exposed southern border of the Post was a particular concern. The job of pacification of VC insurgents (later encapsulated within Operation Stabilize) and suppression of the enemy within the 22-square-mile area to the south of the base (the "TAOR") fell to the 720th MP Battalion. This was a unique choice because combat missions of this nature were usually reserved for the infantry.

Why entrust these duties to the 720th? Official explanations suggested that MP bravery during Tet – which was no doubt true – was the significant factor. However, such an explanation seems strained. If you listen closely to the MP population, the "unofficial" story is that generals, after a couple of cocktails, shook hands as part of a bet to see if the MPs could do a better job than the infantry. Never bet against the MPs, especially the 720th.

Effective June 1968, all of the operations within TAOR were assigned to B Company. TAOR was bordered by highways to the north and east, the Dong Nai River on the west, and the Buong River in the south. Across the Buong River was the Royal Thai Army zone. These rivers and their tributaries would be crucial areas of operation for B Company.

We have all seen the movie where a group — whether it be the military, police or even a football team — are plodding along and then someone joins their ranks who thinks unconventionally. There is some turmoil; some toes get stepped on. But there are also results. Bob Chavis, who wanted to see combat, was the man who brought unconventional tactics to B Company in September 1968. Thomas Watson, a decorated veteran who authored the history of the 720th MP Battalion, said Chavis brought a "new, aggressive, 'gung-ho' style and innovative Special Forces approach." It was "successful" but "very controversial."

B Company was "leaderless" at that time. The men lacked focus. The troops conducted both night ambushes and daylight patrols (search and destroy missions). On his first time out as the ambush leader of a squad, Chavis went to a little village close to the Base. He quickly realized that he was the only man awake! He either fired off a magazine of ammunition or threw a grenade as far as he could, but, in any event, "I don't think my combat MPs ever fell asleep on ambush with me again," he said.

Another early assessment was that there was a frequent lack of surprise during ambushes. The VC would silently move along the coast to the south, move upriver and then maneuver along a tributary. B Company primarily used PBRs (Patrol Boat, River) and Boston Whalers to maneuver along rivers. Those boats were noisy. Many hours were wasted because of the process. Chavis knew this was a problem and immediately went to a Navy Seal base to get a seven-man rubber raft. They wanted a case of steaks for the raft. "The deal was done the next day," he said.

The rafts were helpful. They trained in the water between Long Hung and An Hoa Hung villages so that the villagers were certain to see them. So would VC sympathizers. Manning the raft took skill and stamina. The plan was to use the tide, which came in at night, to float silently down river. He peered into darkness with the help of a Starling Scope. Chavis described it as "a little fun with

a lot of excitement." He named the raft "The Good Ship Lollypop." Each man aboard the raft was a volunteer, which gave Chavis a wonderful opportunity to attract a loyal, aggressive crew, including Sgt. Hall, Sgt. Xichs, Corp. Watson, Lt. Mendez and others. Not one man was lost during any missions aboard the raft, a testament to Bob's training.

Chavis also conducted reconnaissance. He used a small observation helicopter every other day, looked for new trails or signs of activity, and then devised a mission. Of course, he had to fight to get a dedicated helicopter; too many officers were using them for non-tactical purposes. Bob recognized that the primary local VC base camps were located just outside the TAOR in the Thai zone. They were staging areas to infiltrate within the TAOR. Logic would suggest that arbitrary lines don't matter and that those camps should be destroyed.

But it wasn't that easy.

#### ON THE ATTACK

To attack those base camps may get Chavis in trouble, but "it seems like I have always been in trouble." B Company went on combat missions every few days, or even every night. One night B Company used the tides to float the raft into the lagoons near a hill outside the TAOR. The six-man team arrived and waited. It was common for VC to return home at night to get supplies. Several VC in a canoe showed up and they were eliminated. Rather than be extracted in the middle of the night, Chavis's team waited for morning. In the early morning, an NVA soldier arrived. NVA wore a green uniform, while VC typically wore "black pajamas." Chavis shot him, too. Several minutes later the men looked for his body, but he was gone. Chavis then called in gunships to work over the hill.

On nothing more than a hunch, the rafters went to another area a few nights later. They arrived in a lagoon and saw a VC camp. There were clothes drying, food was being cooked and there were several shelters. A firefight ensued, and the group spotted several blood trails. Chavis called for infantry reinforcements and tracking dogs. The trails led back to the very same hill area. Helicopters worked over the hill again. Infantry returned several days later and found bunkers and tunnels. As one reads of these stories, the physicality is amazing. The men waded in water and through dense foliage, the heat was intense, the leeches were ever present, the mosquitos always swarmed and the fire ants could divert an entire squad.

Unfortunately, battalion command judged success by body counts and weapon seizures. Men and weapons were easily replaced, however. More important was altering the enemy's tactics, exposing them to mistakes and embarrassment, and getting into their heads. The VC must have sensed the operational changes of the MPs so they changed tactics, too.

Roadside bombs have been used for decades. Such a bomb killed PFC Robert Alicea, a member of B Company, on Oct. 2, 1968. His passenger in the jeep, PFC Jim Brunotte, a triple amputee, survived. Chavis clearly thought the bomb was payback. The bomb was constructed of a 105-mm artillery round, a blasting cap, a battery and a detonator. The trigger was two pieces of wood placed on the top of a tin can and the other with a nail through it. When the wood was pushed together, the nail and cup touched, thereby setting off the charge. It would have been impossible for Alicea to spot

the bomb as he was driving the vehicle, especially at night.

The men were "mad as hell and they wanted retribution." Their manhunt was entitled Operation Revenge.

The first patrol to travel that area after Alicea's death was by foot, and Bob was there. The point man held up his hand to stop them. He had seen something metallic. The patrol saturated the area with small-arms fire and shot flares to light up the area. Chavis found the wires to a booby trap, just like the one that killed Alicea. Bob was curious and began to tinker with the trap. He removed the blasting cap as they waited for the engineers. Then he stopped, which was fortunate because there was a second 105-mm round under the other: Had he probed a little farther, he would have caused an explosion! Very lucky. Bob also recalled another report of a booby trap near An Hoa Village. Upon arrival, they discovered a U.S. 8-inch howitzer round hung in a tree. It was well hidden. It was near the river and designed to blow up watercraft. Its blast pattern would have been at least 500 yards.

One thing MPs excel at is investigations. They "beat the bushes" looking for Alicea's killer. It was intense. The confrontations were heating up. The bridge across the Buong River spanning between areas guarded by the South Vietnamese and Thai came under attack. No Americans went, however. The next morning, Chavis took two PBRs down river and stopped in the lagoon mentioned earlier. He walked toward the bridge and discovered a booby trap attached to an 8-inch artillery shell. (As before, Chavis detonated the shell with C-4.) Had the Americans responded in the middle of the night to the NVA attack, it is likely they would have tripped that wire. The bridge had also been wired by enemy sappers, but not detonated. The bridge attack was clearly a diversion to draw in the Americans and then ambush them.

Chavis's tactics were having an impact upon the battalion, as well. Someone – possibly a civilian with ties to the VC – complained about these operations. They also objected to the dusk-to-dawn free-fire zone curfew, which Chavis used as a tactical tool. Down the command chain it went until Chavis was called in by the battalion executive officer. He chewed on Chavis to stay out of the Thai area. His reply? That's where the bad guys were! Chavis stayed and the curfew remained.

Chavis was advised in late October by his interpreter, Sgt. Bao, that the VC were stopping sampans on a back channel river and collecting taxes. A trap was planned. They would conceal troops in a sampan and float down river. In order to obtain a sampan, they bartered. Not only did they give beer and C-rations, but B Company men personally contributed cash! A couple of days later, a VC canoe approached the sampan. Sgt. Bao hit the deck and the hidden MPs fired. Unfortunately, the small-arms fire rocked the boat and good shots were hard to come by. That bobbing motion later gave another ambush crew the advantage in a firefight. They escaped, but Chavis set up another ambush. The VC never arrived, but "tax collections" ended.

#### **TARGETING A LEADER**

Chavis received intelligence indicating that a particularly nasty VC leader had returned to the area. Some of the pieces were being assembled. That VC may have been involved in tax col-

lection and he had ties to the NVA. In one instance, Chavis brought most of his platoon on another mission. After they grounded the boats they split up. Shuffling feet were heard and a firefight ensued. They found another camp and, this time, they found the tools for making homemade grenades. On the way back, Chavis examined one to ascertain its power. He pulled the pin to drop it in the water, but then thought it may scare his men, so he returned the pin. Lucky again. The grenade striker did not have a delay fuse. When the pin is pulled and released, it automatically blows. They were booby-trap grenades.

The presence of the VC leader also impacted villages, which the MPs were protecting. The villagers didn't want to talk for fear of intimidation or worse. A village leader was nearly taken hostage. On Nov. 21, intelligence was received about Alicea's killer, who was arrested without incident. That capture relieved the villagers, and intelligence flowed to the MPs, including the whereabouts of the nasty VC leader.

On Nov. 22, Chavis formed a skirmish line along the area known as "the Finger." No VC were seen, but a large, recently constructed camp was found. They were going to blow it to make certain that any connecting tunnels were destroyed, as well. An entire case of C-4 was delivered. The men had previously used C-4, so they knew its power. They didn't want to have additional items to take back, so they used the entire case. BOOM! The concussion flowed like an underground freight train. The explosion was so large that "trees, tree stumps, branches, mud, dirt and everything else came raining out of the sky." Near that camp Cpl. Watson discovered a cache of weapons in a unique booby trap, a 55-gallon drum with sharpened crown points and positioned in the stream to only be seen at low tide.

The search continued for that VC leader. Lots of different methods were used. River patrols stopped sampans to check for national ID cards. Chavis devised a plan referred to as "black pajama raids." Chavis, Watson and Xichs dressed in black pajamas. Xichs would knock on the door of the home where the VC leader's family lived. They asked for him by name. Chavis and Watson covered the front and back, with the remaining squad out of sight. The leader was not captured, but the psychological pressure was mounting.

The presence of the VC leader was somewhat confusing because there did not appear to be any major VC offensive within TAOR. Everything in the past was just harassment and intimidation. What was this VC leader up to?



In December, the MPs received information that a platoon of VC with 122-mm rockets was in the area. Newly promoted 1st Lt. Chavis recognized the danger that these rockets posed to the Long Binh Post. Just as disturbing, Cpl. Watson discovered during a conversation with a Thai lieutenant who was in charge of security at the Buong River Bridge that the Thais had no intention of seeking out and destroying the VC in their area. They were for decoration only.

On Dec. 9, Squad-76 was on night ambush. They heard voices, identified by their translator as VC. The lack of noise discipline meant they were unconcerned with American patrols. The next day Chavis ordered a K-9 patrol to find a scent. They eventually found two camps. The items seized confirmed that there was a VC battalion actively operating in the area. One camp was south of the Buong River, which was out of the TAOR. Approval was needed to infiltrate that area, but they went anyway. Discovery of these camps justified more intensive operations. As a result, several companies of men from the 82nd Airborne, as part of Task Force Devil, conducted a two-week sweep in late December. Twenty-one VC were killed.

Chavis conducted an unapproved night ambush in the Thai sector on Jan. 10. That pressure from the south pushed the VC to other areas. Three VC were killed. Ambushes in the east of TAOR caused VC to move around again, which paid off. On Jan. 13, the nasty VC leader was killed near An Xuan Village.

And then Chavis was gone. He was told that his "talents would be better appreciated" elsewhere, but it was obvious that his tactics were ruffling feathers. The defense of the Long Binh Post was very important, and it was very difficult due to the topography. Sometimes the goal was more important than how it was achieved, especially when protecting the 50,000 troops at the post. Watson said that he "respected [Chavis] for his determination and loyalty to his men and mission." He was "fearless, focused ... blessed with an uncanny degree of logic and common sense."

On Feb. 23, the MPs finally went head-to-head with the VC and NVA to the south of the Long Binh Post; seven Americans were wounded and 131 of the enemy were killed. By then Chavis was with the Special Forces, but those exploits are for another day.