

# VFW Post 12074

## A Brief History of WO1 Ken Chapman

Kenneth Robert Chapman was born on 17 August 1939. After graduation from high school, he served for eight years as an enlisted soldier, serving overseas in France and Germany. Chapman volunteered for helicopter training, and upon graduation from flight school, was appointed as a Warrant Officer. He served 15 months flying helicopters in Vietnam in the First Cavalry Division.

WO1 Ken Chapman was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions on 12 October 1965 during Operation SHINY BAYONET (10-14 October 1965). The First Cavalry Division official history of the Vietnam War described the operation as follows:

“On 10 October 1965, in Operation SHINY BAYONET, the First Team initiated their first brigade-size airmobile action against elements of the NVA 325th Infantry (Song Lo) Division located in the Soui Ca River Valley about 275 miles northeast of Saigon, near An Khe in Binh Dinh Province. Special agents and ARVN sources had located the base camp of two battalions of the Viet Cong 2nd Main Force Regiment. Operation SHINY BAYONET called for the ARVN 22nd Division to make initial contact and drive the VC toward the elements of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division who were deployed as a blocking force.”<sup>1</sup>



WO1 Chapman in the field with Bell H-13 helicopter

Later that day, a CBS news crew flew into the battle zone on a medical evacuation helicopter, which was shot down on approach. A young reporter named Morley Safer filed the video report called *Baptism of Fire*,<sup>2</sup> which shows the challenges of evacuating the first casualties that 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment took on the opening day of Operation SHINY BAYONET. The troopers of the 1st CAV dubbed the Vinh Thanh Valley “Happy Valley.” Both Hal Moore and Robert Mason talk about actions in Happy Valley in their respective books.

<sup>1</sup> 1st Cavalry Division History, Vietnam War, 1965-1972, [http://www.firstteam.us/tableaux/chapt\\_08/](http://www.firstteam.us/tableaux/chapt_08/), on 14 December 2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/baptism-of-fire>

## VFW Post 12074 Official History Series

The following excerpt is from the official History of the First Battalion (Airborne), Twelfth Cavalry (1 July 1965 - 31 December 1965, pages 5 and 6), which provides background information about the battle of 12 October 1965 in which WO1 Ken Chapman earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.

“Upon being relieved from the picket line, the battalion was attached to the 3rd Brigade for an air assault search and destroy operation in Binh Dinh Province, 25 miles northeast of An Khe. This was the battalion’s first combat operation and was given the code name ‘Shiny Bayonet.’

On 10 October, the battalion was air lifted from An Khe Airfield to a landing zone in the Suoi La Tinh river valley using 54 UH-1D helicopters. Company A was the first company to land and secured the landing zone for the remainder of the battalion which closed at 1230. Sporadic sniper fire was received during and following the landing. At 1300 hours Company D sustained the first casualty of the battalion when PFC Terry T. Wright was shot in the chest by a sniper. The young trooper later died of his wounds after being evacuated by helicopter to Qui Nhon.

The battalion continued to receive sniper fire from the hills surrounding the landing zone for the remainder of the day. At 1300 S/Sgt Harold M. Hambric a veteran of 24 years of service was killed by an enemy bullet. This was the battalion’s first KIA (killed in action) in ground combat since the Korean War. The day ended with the battalion in a perimeter surrounding the landing zone.

On 11 October 1965, Company B was given the mission to search and clear a valley which ran north for two thousand meters and then turned west for [Transcript ends, missing some text, then picks up on the following page with] Hours to set up blocking positions while the latter completed its consolidation. Darkness and foggy weather caused the two companies to pull back to 1000 meters and form a perimeter for the night. At 2330 hours Companies A and B received fifteen 81 mm mortar rounds. Companies C and D conducted local patrols in the vicinity of the battalion command post and received sniper fire throughout the area. Nightfall found Company B with one KIA and two WIA’s (wounded in action) while Company C received one WIA.

The hardest and heaviest engagement that the battalion encountered was fought on 12 October with Companies A and B fighting as two company covering force against a VC battalion. It was this critical setting that two men personified the spirit of the “Chargers” and kept morale high. The Chaplain Captain Lord, heedless of his own safety ministered to the wounded, took charge of the evacuation of the wounded and carried many of the wounded to safety personally. At this point Major Bellocchi, Battalion Executive Officer, seeing that Medical Evacuation Helicopters were having difficulty evacuating casualties, repeatedly flew his helicopter through intensive small arms and automatic weapons fire to augment the Medical Evacuation Helicopters. In all he made five trips to bring out eight WIA in an H-13, a one passenger helicopter. The Major and the Chaplain were subsequently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star respectively for their heroic exploits. The battle lasted until darkness, and the following day the valley was taken and the two companies were finally ordered back to the battalion command post after a search of the battalion area. The remainder of the operation was spent destroying enemy huts and numerous rice stores.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> History of the First Battalion (Airborne), Twelfth Cavalry 1 July 1965 - 31 December 1965, pp. 5-6.

## VFW Post 12074 Official History Series

The official 1-12 Cavalry Battalion history correlates with a newspaper story published after WO1 Kenneth Chapman received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in the battle on 12 October. The following is an excerpt from that article quoting a letter Chapman wrote home on 17 October 1965:

“On the 12th one of our battalions was moving into an area northeast of here and I was assigned to the bosses’ [sic] ship. Shortly after we arrived the troops on the ground came in contact with a battalion of Viet Cong, dug into the side of a hill. You’ll probably read about it because it was a good-sized operation and we took a beating. Anyway, Mr. Merkle (The pilot I was flying with) and I flew a lot of missions during the day – Adjusted artillery, gun rockets ships and an Air Force strike into the area. Even flew a couple times at low level to actual battle line and managed to take a .50 caliber round in my door. It’s a hell of a big slug and it blew out my window...and tore the door and door frame all up. Scared me too – can’t forget that!

Toward the end of the day our infantry had gotten some pretty heavy fire and had a lot of serious casualties. They called for the med/evac helicopters to come pick them up and got three to come in. As they made their approach, they were greeted with a hail of fire and one of their pilots was fatally wounded. They cleared out without touching down. It was past daylight and most of the wounded were in bad shape and wouldn’t last the night, so Merkle and I went in with the Control Ship.

I wish I could explain it – a helicopter always draws a lot of fire and we picked guys up right where they were fighting. The ones that could handle weapons were fighting next to our ship – the stuff was so thick that Merkle remarked that the tracers looks like hundreds of fireflies going by. The thing that tore me up most, were the guys we were loading – most of them were just kids trying to hold their faces together and their guts in with their bare hands. There were gut wounds, sucking chest wounds, guys with their jaws half shot off and all of them scared silly yet happy just because we were there to take them out. Somehow we got loaded and got out of there and to the aid station.

Then here we went again for a second load. Same as the first except that we stayed longer and loaded the ship past its capacity. I almost forgot the shells flying around except when I heard one hit the ship or saw someone jerk and fall when one hit him in the face or body. We managed to get off the ground again. This time with 11 wounded and got them to the aid station too.

We were all set to go back for a third trip when the poor old Huey finally quit. It was minus four windows and all full of holes and she finally just gave out. A couple of H-13s made a trip in after our second load and got out the remaining few we couldn’t carry.

Lots of people are real happy about us going in and say we’ll be recommended for some award for it. Hell, just getting those guys out was enough for me. Just the way some of them looked at us when we took them out and knowing we saved some lives give me more satisfaction then I thought possible. Sure was quite a day. We had to spend the night in the evacuation area...the following morning they took us out.”<sup>4</sup>

In the same article Charlie Black, a military reporter for the Columbus, Georgia newspaper *The Enquirer* stationed with the 1st Cavalry, wrote:

---

<sup>4</sup> Newspaper Article, *Former Mystic Man Wins the DFC, Copter Pilot Brings Out Wounded*, Circa 1966

## VFW Post 12074 Official History Series

"...I walked over to the tent area and saw 17 men on litters there. Major Bellocchi turned from watching the doctor and medics working and shook his head. 'Charlie, B Company went into that rice paddy and got into a whale of a fight...Mr. Merkle and Mr. Chapman got these wounded out of there in the Tactical Operation Command [TOC] Huey. They made a fantastic run in there. The weather was awful and the fire is heavy. They got them on board with all that heavy radio gear already on it....twice the load the thing ought to carry.

The Medical evacuation choppers already had been hard hit in the initial landing having lost a pilot and a ship and the weather and violence of fire at the landing zone apparently kept them from coming in after the wounded. The TOC pilots familiar with the terrain (and probably more important, deeply attached to the men involved, know them and being close to them) had performed their impossible flights under the kind of conditions which simply aren't to be asked of pilots. The kind of effort which finally took all of the wounded and the two men killed from that fight back to friends and assistance has to be volunteered by brave men. I walked over to the helicopter and climbed in...there was a big hole smashed into the floor frame where I climbed up – it went out the top of the ship...We were almost there when the chopper began shaking heavily... it flew to a rice paddy in front of the CP, however, and settled down in a jerky bouncing fashion."<sup>5</sup>

Later in the same article, the author quotes from a letter that Chapman wrote home:



*Commanding General, Maj. Gen. Harry O. Kinnard  
Presenting the DFC to WO1 Chapman*

"Well I got it – the DFC. It may not be the prettiest medal going but it sure does look good to me. It was presented last night by none other than our commanding general, Maj. Gen. Harry O. Kinnard. I felt like President Johnson I shook so many hands. The officers all stood at attention while the citation was read and then General Kinnard shook my hand and said, 'That is one hell of a fine citation. I couldn't be any prouder of you. Congratulations.' Then naturally I felt about 10 feet tall and thought some of my buttons were about to bounce off his chin."<sup>6</sup>

Most people understand the extreme danger infantrymen face in combat. They are the men that do the fighting. Most people don't think about how dangerous it was for the helicopter pilots flying directly into or nearby the firefights. Some of the landing zones were so close to the fighting that a month after Chapman earned the DFC, Hal Moore wrote about his battle at LZ (Landing Zone) X-Ray: "Hauling out the wounded was not the slick crews' job. Crandall's people were assault helicopter crews, trained to carry infantrymen into battle. Hauling the wounded off the battlefield was a medical-evacuation helicopter mission. But this was early in the war, and the medevac commanders had decreed that their birds would not land in hot landing zones-or, in other words, that they would not go where they were needed when they were

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

## VFW Post 12074 Official History Series

needed most.”<sup>7</sup> Major Bruce Crandall received the Medal of Honor for his actions Moore described at LZ X-Ray.

One final point about the Huey pilots' extreme dangers in October and November of 1965 comes from *CHICKEN HAWK*; this was so early in the war that chest protectors or body armor the pilots were supposed to be wearing had not arrived in Vietnam yet. Mason wrote the following passages:

“For the occasion of my first mission, I had on my cleanest fatigues, a flak vest, my new .38 in its hip holster, and a pair of real flying gloves. We didn't have chest protectors because they hadn't arrived yet.”<sup>8</sup>

Later, he described what he felt when flying into a hot landing zone:

“It suddenly became obvious to me that I was completely exposed to any fire that came from the front. Chest protectors would be nice.”

WO1 Kenneth Chapman received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroic actions in October 1965 at the beginning of the Vietnam War. We are proud to honor one of our own.

---

<sup>7</sup> Moore, Galloway P. 125

<sup>8</sup> Mason, P. 59

Photographic and other information for Kenneth Robert Chapman



WO1 Chapman and friend in Vietnam

**'Copter Pilot Brings Out Wounded**

*Former Mystic Man Wins the DFC*

MYSTIC — A Southeastern Connecticut man, who flew a helicopter into the jaws of hell and back to evacuate wounded soldiers at Viet Nam, has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Dut. wrote Warrant Officer Kenneth R. Chapman in a letter to home Oct. 17 when he learned he would be recommended for an award, "just getting those guys out was enough for me."

Chapman, son of Mrs. Betty Myers Krawczyk, formerly of Mystic and now of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and Oscar B. Chapman, Jr., of Westerly, said "The thing that tore me up the most were the guys we were loading — most of them were just kids. . ."

The Army flyer attended Poquonnock Bridge Elementary School and Norwich Regional Technical School before enlisting in the Army in 1957.

Volunteers for Viet Duty

He was graduated from helicopter school at Fort Rucker, Ala., and received his wings in July, 1965. After volunteering for duty at Viet Nam, he was assigned to the 1st Cavalry at Fort Benning, Ga.

He left for Viet Nam in August.

Last Oct. 17 he had written home.

"Then for the worst day I've had yet, and in a way the best. I finally got a taste of real combat.

"On the 12th one of our battalions was moving into an area northeast of here and I was assigned to the boss' ship. Shortly after we arrived, the troops on the ground came in contact with a battalion of Viet Cong, dug into the side of a hill.

"You'll probably read about gun rocket ships and an Air Force strike into the area. Even though we took a beating, we flew a couple of times at low level to actual battle line and I managed to take a 50 calibre pilot I was flying with and I flew a lot of missions during the day — adjusted artillery, a big slug and it blew out my window. . . and tore the door and door frame all up. Scared me too — can't forget that!"

"Toward the end of the day, our infantry had gotten some pretty heavy fire and had a lot of serious casualties. They called for the med/evac helicopters to come pick them up and got three to come in. As they made their approach, they were greeted with a hail of fire and one of their pilots was fatally wounded. They cleared out without touching down. It was past daylight and most of the wounded were in bad shape and wouldn't last the night, so Merkle and I went in with the Control Ship.

"I wish I could explain it — a helicopter always draws a lot of fire and we picked guys up right where they were fighting. The ones that could handle weapons were fighting next to our ship — the stuff was so thick that Merkle remarked that the tracers looked like hundreds of fireflies going by.

"The thing that tore me up most were the guys we were loading — most of them were just kids trying to hold their faces together and their guts in with their bare hands. There were gut wounds, sucking chest wounds, guys with their jaws half shot off and all of them scared silly yet happy just because we were there to take them out. Somehow we got loaded and got out of there and to the aid station.

"Then here we went again.

Please Turn to Page 4

**Warrant Officer Chapman and General Kinnard**

## 'Copter Pilot

Continued from Page 1

for a second load. Same as the first except that we stayed longer and loaded the ship past its capacity. I almost forgot the shells flying around except when I heard one hit the ship or saw someone jerk and fall when one hit him in the face or body. We managed to get off the ground again, this time with 11 wounded and got them to the aid station too.

We were all set to go back for a third trip when the poor old Huey finally quit. It was minus four windows and all full of holes and she finally just gave out. A couple of H-13's made a trip in after our second load and got the remaining few we couldn't carry.

"Lots of people are real happy about us going in and say we'll be recommended for some award for it. Hell, just getting those guys out was enough for me. Just the way some of them looked at us when we took them out and knowing we saved some lives gives me more satisfaction than I thought possible. Sure was quite a day. We had to spend the night in the evacuation area . . . the following morning they took us out."

Charlie Black - military reporter for the Columbus, Ga. Enquirer - stationed with the 1st Cavalry, wrote:

" . . . I walked over to the tent area and saw 17 men on litters there. Major Billochi turned from watching the doctor and medics working and shook his head. 'Charlie, B Company went into that rice paddy and got into a whale of a fight . . . Mr. Merkle and Mr. Chapman got these wounded out of there in the Tactical Operations Command Huey. They made a fantastic run in there. The weather is awful and the fire is heavy. They got them on board with all that heavy radio gear already on it . . . twice the load the thing ought to carry.'

"The medical evacuation choppers already had been hard

hit in the initial landing having lost a pilot and a ship and the weather and violence of fire at the landing zone apparently kept them from coming in after the wounded. The TOC pilots familiar with the terrain (and probably more important, deeply attached to the men involved, knowing them and being close to them) had performed their impossible flights under the kind of conditions which simply aren't to be asked of pilots. The kind of effort which finally took all of the wounded and the two men killed from that fight back to friends and assistance has to be volunteered by brave men . . . I asked if I could ride back in there with them. 'If this ship will get there we're going there' was the reply . . . I walked over to the helicopter and climbed in . . . there was a big hole smashed into the floor frame where I climbed up - it went out the top of the ship . . . We were almost there when the chopper began shaking heavily . . . it flew to a rice paddy in front of the CP, however, and settled down in a jerky, bouncing fashion . . . I sat on my bedroll inside the CP tent . . . people were ducking in and out of the rain, talking and then leaving. We moved around in the little tent so the pilots could stretch out on the two air mattresses . . . conscious of the luxury of not being rained on."

On March 1st Chapman wrote home: "Well I got it - the DFC. It may not be the prettiest medal going, but it sure does look good to me . . . It was presented last night by none other than our commanding general, Maj. Gen. Harry O. Kinnard . . . I felt like President Johnson I shook so many hands. The officers all stood at attention while the citation was read and then General Kinnard shook my hand and said, 'That is one hell of a fine citation. I couldn't be any prouder of you. Congratulations.' Then, naturally I felt about ten feet tall and thought some of my buttons were about to bounce off his chin."

## GLOSSARY

**A/C** - Aircraft Commander or Pilot-in-Command

**AHB** - Assault Helicopter Battalion

**CP** – Command Post

**Dustoff** - Radio Call Sign of 57<sup>th</sup> Medical Co. in Vietnam, Slang for a medevac mission

**OH-23** - OH-23 “Raven” observation helicopter

**Slick** - Slang for UH-1 Huey helicopters used for transporting ground troops

**TOC** - Tactical Operations Center

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Roll, William C., Smith, Jimmie R., Estey jr., Melvy A. Interim Report of Operations, First Cavalry Division, July 1965 to December 1966, First Cavalry Division Association, Albuquerque.

History of the First Battalion (Airborne) Twelfth Cavalry, 1 July 1965 to 1 December 1965

Mason, Robert. Chickenhawk, Viking-Penguin. New York. 1983

Moore, Harold, Galloway Joe. *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*. New York. 1992