

Robert David Law: Medal of Honor Recipient, Final Mission

[Written by Danny Wiggins; submitted by Dave Hill]

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

[John, 15-13]

Co I/75th Infantry (Ranger), 1st Infantry Division, had such a man, Sp4 **Robert David Law**, who on 22 February 1969, unhesitatingly laid down his life in order that his teammates would survive. Ranger Law was awarded our nation’s highest military honor, the Medal of Honor, for his actions that day. The following is an account of and background to that mission, as related by Ranger Law’s Team Leader on that mission, Sgt. Danny Wiggins.

It was the period of “TET 1969”. Heavy movement had been recorded by monitoring devices and other intelligence sources and part of I Company had been tasked to the area near Song Be to perform reconnaissance and intelligence gathering operations. On 19 February my team had just completed a successful five-day mission, without enemy contact, as part of that effort. We returned to base, looking forward to our scheduled two-day “stand-down” to rest and prepare our equipment for another mission.

During such stand-downs, team leaders were required to pull “FOB” (radio duty) shifts in the company Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to ensure that combat-experienced Rangers leaders would be the ones responsible for communicating and supporting Ranger teams out in the field. During my two hours of “FOB” duty that first night, things were quiet in the field and my mind began to drift. Having only 74 days remaining of my tour of duty in Vietnam, I had started counting down my days on my “short timer’s” calendar. My thoughts of going home, as well as my fears of not making it there, were now much more active in my mind. Many things go through your mind when you’re alone and this was especially true for me that night.

I had a very good relationship with Captain Patrick (Co I commanding officer at that time) and had been instrumental in his application for and acceptance of his assignment to our company. During the past couple of weeks, I had been joking (really hinting) with him about making me a permanent “FOB” (forward observation base). While I was on “FOB” duty one night, Captain Patrick came into the bunker and stated, “Wiggins, I’m going to make you a permanent FOB”. In my surprise, I replied “Sir, you are shitting me”! Jokingly, he grinned and replied, “Yes, you will be a permanent fired-on bastard”.

That was, of course, not what I had had in mind and the joke was on me. [Ironically, I never again went to the field on any mission that my team didn’t make some type of contact with the enemy. Truly, I was to be a “fired-on bastard” for the remainder of my tour.]

On February 20th, one of our Ranger teams came under enemy fire and two members of the team, Donald Hildebrandt and Gene Lowery, were seriously wounded and had to be

medivacced. An important element of the planned multi-team mission had thereby been temporarily eliminated. However, due to the importance of these missions (and maybe also the need to seek vengeance on “Charlie” (Viet Cong) for what he had done to part of our LRRP family), volunteers were requested to replace the LRRP team that had to be extracted along with the wounded Hildebrandt and Lowery. I was asked to lead the volunteer Ranger team, comprised of Mike Cannon, Bob Law, Bill Powell, Bob Roossiene and Ray Cervantes.

Never as a full team unit, but as individuals, I had worked with each member of this team and had full confidence and respect for each and every member. I agreed to lead the team if others were in agreement. Each volunteer team member agreed and positions for this mission were assigned. Law would take point, Cannon would walk his “slack” (2nd position in order of march) Powell would be the RTO, Roossiene would carry the M-79 and Cervantes would take the position of rear security. This was a great LRRP/Ranger team and we were prepared to be immediately deployed to continue the mission of the team we were to replace.

We quickly conducted an over flight of the mission Area of Operation (AO) and selected a primary and secondary Landing Zone (LZ) for insertion into the area. The area near the primary LZ was not especially dense and appeared to be ideal for insertion of the team. We returned to base camp and completed our preparations, including inspections, for this mission.

Late in the afternoon of 20 February our team was inserted into the LZ and quickly entered the nearby wood line, circled-up, accessed the area, and made contact for a “situation report (“sitrep”). After completing the sitrep and releasing the chopper, the team formed up and proceeded to put some distance between the LZ and us. Soon it would be necessary to locate a point for our “Remain Overnight” position (RON). After having traveled approximately 1000 meters, Law, the point man, came face to face with VC to his front and immediately opened fire. The entire team supported and conducted an “immediate action” (IA) maneuver, operating like a unit that had worked together numerous times. We received only a few rounds from AK-47s and no one was hit as we broke contact and began evading from the scene. After having moved for approximately 100 meters without receiving any additional fire or hearing anything, the team gathered in a defensive “wheel” (each Ranger with his feet to the middle, facing outward to cover their own individual area of responsibility) to access the situation and establish radio contact with the home base and apprise them of our new situation.

Knowing that our brief firefight could trigger other enemy soldiers to move in, we requested artillery support. Powell requested the Artillery Unit “fire P4”, one of the five pre-plotted artillery locations for this mission. I walked the artillery into the area of contact with the enemy and gave the command to “fire for effect”. After completion of the artillery fire mission, we made a request for extraction, since the mission and the teams safety had been compromised by the enemy contact.

However, since the team was not presently in direct contact with the enemy, and by the time a chopper could make it to the area the extraction would have to be made after dark, our request for extraction was denied. Instead the order from our base was to locate a RON for the night and continue the mission as planned. Not knowing the status or location of the enemy with which we had made the contact and having expended part of our ammunition we felt very ill at ease, at best, about the decision, but understood that it would indeed, under the circumstances, be much too dangerous to attempt a night extraction. I made a request to plot the last artillery round fired. The request was implemented and the location was plotted as "P6". Next we requested artillery to fire two of the pre-plotted artillery positions to re-confirm the team's exact location.

The team stayed very alert during the night, with 100% security until midnight and 50% alternating security until daylight. However, at any rate, nobody could sleep even after midnight, though things remained calm and no movement was detected. The appearance of daylight on our position was a welcome sight, but we were afraid Charlie was looking for us or waiting for us to give away our position. I had an eerie feeling about leaving our position. I discussed our situation with the team and we decided to remain in position for a brief time further to continue to observe and listen to try to ensure that nobody had approached us during the night and was laying in wait for us to move. We contacted the FOB and relayed our plan. The team didn't see or hear anything during this time and, after checking the surrounding area, agreed that our current location was not ideal for monitoring activities in the area.

Law again assumed the point position and we headed in the direction of our planned recon area. After having traveled approximately 2000 meters, we located a stream that was shown on our map. As we cautiously moved adjacent to a stream, we came upon a major trail that had signs of heavy recent activity. Additional checking revealed a log personnel bridge that crossed the stream. We scouted the immediate area for the best position for the team to remain hidden while monitoring the trail. We located a place that we considered ideal and started setting out our claymore mines adjacent to the trail in what we considered the 'kill zone'. In the center of the zone we set two claymores connected by det-cord. In the event Charlie came from an unexpected direction other claymores were set facing directions all around the team.

Two Rangers, Cervantes and Cannon, were well hidden up on the banks, with trees and thick brush as protection, while the other four were down in the thick cover alongside the stream bed. If any gooks passed along the trail, it seemed unlikely they would become aware of our position. Time passed without movement, except for a seven or eight foot king cobra, which crawled into our position while making his way to the stream. Thankfully the cobra was equally surprised and scared and had no trouble moving in the opposite direction when our presence was detected.

For quite a while, all was calm when, suddenly and quietly, Cannon snapped his finger to gain our attention, pointed to the trail in front of our position, and held up three fingers to indicate three gooks (enemy soldiers). In the stream bed, Law was closest to the bridge, Powell approximately 3 meters to his left, and I was 2 meters to the left of Powell.

Roossien was about 7 meters to my left. Everything went well until the point man neared the streambed, whereupon he turned about 3/4s to his right, bent forward and looked down the streambed. He was looking directly toward the Ranger team, and though they were well hidden, he must have in some way caught sight of one of us. He didn't have his AK-47 in the ready position and seemed to be in slow motion as he tried to ready his rifle. Law and Powell immediately emptied a magazine in the direction of the point man and he fell to the ground without having got off a shot. Cannon immediately detonated the claymore mines in the kill zone. Fortunately, the last gook, who carried a machine across his shoulder, was positioned directly in front of the double claymore mines and was killed instantly. Cervantes emptied a magazine in the direction of the center soldier while the team tossed grenades and Roossien popped M-79 rounds toward the wood line behind them.

Two of the three enemy soldiers refused to die and tossed grenades in the direction of the Ranger team. They must have been too weak, from injuries, to get the grenades into our position. As close as they were to our position all the grenades came up a little short of the streambed and exploded on the opposite bank. Cannon remained on the hill under cover of the trees. From his vantage point he could partially see one of the gooks and could direct our grenades to the target. One grenade landed just left of the downed enemy soldier and the second landed about 15 feet too far. This is well within the kill zone of the grenades. Law and Powell tossed grenades in the direction of the point man. "What does it take to kill these bastards?" we wondered.

Fearing that these three individuals could be the point for a larger unit Powell and I began requesting artillery support. I did not want to force any enemy into our location by walking the artillery in too slowly, so I quickly made a major adjustment. When it landed, I adjusted to drop 200, left 50 and gave instruction to fire for effect. Meanwhile, the two Rangers on the bank slipped down behind the streambed to take cover from the artillery, as it would be extremely close to our position. As the artillery rounds landed, small trees were being cut down above our heads. It was really scary how close this was to our position.

Suddenly, an enemy grenade landed on the bank of the stream and rolled into our position, stopping about a meter from Law. Powell and I were shocked when the grenade landed at Law's feet and we didn't make a move. The grenade was definitely within the possible kill radius for both Powell, myself, and possibly Roossien. Law had to spontaneously make a decision to jump toward the stream or try to toss the grenade out of our position. I cannot explain how I felt as Law's head and eyes slowly turned to look at us as he moved forward and placed his body over the grenade. All we could do was watch helplessly as Law made his life ending decision. The grenade then exploded beneath his body, shielding the rest of us from its deadly blast. Ranger Bob Law's body had absorbed the full force of the explosion. We dashed to Law's side and rolled him over, but we immediately discovered that it was too late.

I almost lost it within the next few moments, but somehow gathered my composure and continued to perform my duties as team leader of the Ranger unit. We secured the area,

awaiting further shots or grenades, but the grenade thrown among us was the final activity of the enemy force. I called the situation into our base, reported Law mortally wounded and requested a medivac. A Cobra gunship arrived just prior to the medivac chopper and, after marking our position with smoke, we directed the gunship where to lay down covering fire. We felt so helpless and it seemed to take forever for the medivac chopper to come in. Finally the medivac chopper sat down in a one-ship clearing on the opposite side of the stream from our position and not one person would get out of the chopper to assist in attending to Law. Two of the Rangers, I don't remember which ones, helped me carry Law's body across the stream while the others secured the area. As soon as we got Law on the chopper, an extraction chopper came in for the rest of the team and we took off for our Lai Khe base. [Time can really run in slow motion when what you really want is for things to speed up.] Upon arriving at Lai Khe, I sat down at the base of a nearby rubber tree and cried like a baby. Many tried to comfort me, but there was no comfort for me or the others on the team.

We went to the TOC for debriefing and discovered they were sending an ARVN unit to the contact location to do an assessment and look for documents. Their After Action report confirmed three dead enemy soldiers, including an officer. One had died, crawling away, about 25 meters from the scene with several bullet wounds, including two to the head, three to the chest, and shrapnel wounds from head to feet. This gook's AK-47 rifle was also battered by bullets and shrapnel to the point that it would not fire. It was really difficult at times to understand the motivation that kept these soldiers alive and fighting in the face of all the firepower our supporting arms and we could bring to bear upon them.

After we had been in Lai Khe for a while, we made another discovery--Powell and I had each received a small piece of shrapnel from the grenade. Powell's injury was a little worse than mine, so I told Powell to go have it removed and he would receive his purple heart. I thought he went for medical attention, but; I guess he felt the same way I did. Law had saved our lives and would only receive a purple heart for his actions and the sacrifice he made; no way did I have any intent of receiving the same award for a little piece of metal that I didn't even realize had hit me.

Every time I look at the scar on my right arm, I'm reminded of this time in Vietnam. I'm proud that the scar is there to continuously remind me. I think of Robert D. Law very often and I hope I continue to do so until my last breath of life. Robert D. Law is a very special individual to whom I will be indebted forever.

I could not understand Robert D. Law's actions but I will forever be indebted to a truly great ranger.

CITATION

MEDAL OF HONOR

LAW, ROBERT DAVID

Rank and organization: Specialist Fourth Class, U.S. Army, Company I (Ranger), 75th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division Place and date: Tinh Phuoc Thanh Province, Republic of Vietnam, 22 February 1969 Entered service at: Dallas, Texas Born: 15 September 1944, Fort Worth, Texas Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sp4c. Law distinguished himself while serving with Company I. While on a long-range reconnaissance patrol in Tinh Phuoc Thanh Province, Sp4c. Law and 5 comrades made contact with a small enemy patrol. As the opposing elements exchanged intense fire, he maneuvered to a perilously exposed position flanking his comrades and began placing suppressive fire on the hostile troops. Although his team was hindered by a low supply of ammunition and suffered from an unidentified irritating gas in the air, Sp4c. Law's spirited defense and challenging counter assault rallied his fellow soldiers against the well-equipped hostile troops. When an enemy grenade landed in his team's position, Sp4c. Law, instead of diving into the safety of a stream behind him, threw himself on the grenade to save the lives of his comrades. Sp4c. Law's extraordinary courage and profound concern for his fellow soldiers were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit on himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.