

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a letter to a fallen soldier that Rodger McConnell, a Great Falls veteran, posted on the Vietnam casualty page of the Web site for the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment.

The Boots

They must have belonged to you, Billy Gene Rodgers, the patent leather jungle boots that have haunted my life for 40 years. I've forgotten the names of most of those who died that day, but you were the only white enlisted kid from K Troop who was killed. They had to belong to you.

Everything about those boots fit your personality and your quirky sense of humor. The rest of us wore the standard issue jungle boots and after a very brief period of time humping the boonies, they'd all look the same, like size 10-D Hershey Bars! Not so with yours. I don't remember where you said you'd gotten them, but for you, looking "strike" was easy. You'd simply wash away the mud with a little water and your boots would glisten like diamonds!

I saw you right before we went in to rescue the men of L Troop. They were getting mauled in a VC ambush a klick or two ahead of us on the morning's road march, and were fighting for their lives. We of K Troop were parked in the hot sun, listening to battle reports on the radios, and nervously awaiting orders from the colonel flying overhead. You dismounted your Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle (ACAV) to deliver a message to us from the K Troop captain, and to help cut the tension, you busted us up with one of your famous off-the-wall one-liners. Then, boots agleam, you flashed that crooked little smile and trotted back to your track to man your M-60 machine gun. Moments later, we got the word from above and mounted up for our rendezvous with destiny. I still remember the smile on your face as your track pulled away to lead us into the attack.

Rumbling down the dusty road at top speed, my FO (forward observer) track was 50 yards or so behind you when your personnel carrier rolled into the kill zone of the ambush. As I watched over the front of my ACAV, your track began taking heavy automatic weapon and deadly rocket propelled grenade fire from the trees along the right side of the road. Every-thing suddenly in slow motion, my track seemingly crawled into the kill zone and was swallowed up by the same river of green tracers. The volume of fire was so intense that I would later see that enemy bullets had grazed or shot away each of our three roof-mounted radio antennas in at least two places.

The fight lasted nearly four hours and miraculously, we on the FO track took only two light casualties. The men in the ACAV behind us, the third track in the column, were not as fortunate. They were hit by at least one RPG round and had several seriously wounded troopers who had to be dusted off. Billie Gene, your track was the hardest hit, and suffered at least four fatalities out of the five men on board. The captain was medevacked after being hit and blinded by shrapnel from an RPG strike. We never heard if he made it through.

I didn't see you again until after the battle, and then all I saw were your boots. But, at first I didn't see them, either. After the long fight, we survivors were in a state of shock and my walk over the ambush area was eerily like that of a dream.

Though I had no idea who, or how many of us had died, I remember feeling so intensely sad, and at the same time so joyously happy about the fact that on this day in the crapshoot of war, some young men got to live while other young men had to die.

Someone snapped me out of my trance by hollering for me to help him carry our dead to a helicopter waiting in a hastily prepared landing zone. Before I arrived on the scene, each of the anonymous bodies had been totally encased in an army blanket and placed on a canvas stretcher. Billie Gene, your body was in the last covered stretcher that I helped carry. I grabbed the handles at the foot-end, and while hurrying to the chopper across the uneven terrain, I stumbled and fell under your weight, dropping your feet onto my right knee. The blanket fell away, and when I looked down between my hands I was in no way prepared for the stark image of your two blood-splattered, patent leather jungle boots gleaming brightly in the hot Vietnamese sun.

In the years since 7/21/67, I've seen those boots countless numbers of times in my thoughts and dreams. You were way too young and too nice a kid to die on that dusty little road so far from home. But each of us died at least a little that day and a large part of me died with the patent leather jungle boots that would sparkle in the sun no more.

Rest in peace, my brother,
Rodger McConnell