

The Trentonian

Mine Search Turns Deadly

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TRENTON — Two days after Cecil Dixon arrived at Duc Pho, he was out on his first mission in Vietnam. He got killed a little over an hour into that mission.

Dixon suffered from a bad case of homesickness two months into his tour in Vietnam. The 28-year old career U.S. Army soldier missed his wife and two sons who were sitting back in their Passaic Street home in Trenton. But now he was in hostile territory, after spending his initial two months in relatively safe and secure Qui Nhon.

To help divert his attention from his family, Dixon decided that tagging along on a mine-sweeping mission would get his mind off it all.

“We all thought he was crazy for volunteering to do that, not because we thought it was dangerous — but why go walk four miles up a dirt road when you don’t have to,” said Victor DiMartini, one of seven men in a detail that included Dixon from 137th Engineering Company (Light Equipment) that was sent to set up a rockcrushing machine in Duc Pho in late June 1967.

Dixon and seven other guys in the detail had only been in the Duc Pho base camp about two days.

The night before Dixon stepped off on that first and final mission, he told the other guys in the detail that he was bored and needed to do something to pass the time. “Cecil was bored, so he volunteered to go out on the mine sweep,” DeMartini said. “He decided to go after talking to the guys in D Company, who said, ‘yeah you can come along with us, if you want.’” That morning Dixon woke up and left around 4:30 a.m.

“He was turning the lights on — we weren’t getting up yet, so we were yelling at him to shut the lights out while he was getting his gear together,” DiMartini recalled. “We were all just teasing back and forth before he left.”

Dixon headed across the compound to a briefing about the mission. There he was met by 1st Lt. Jim Shamblen, platoon leader for Co. D, 39th Engineers, and the other men who would head out on the routine mine-sweeping mission that morning.

“Every morning, the first thing we did we would take about 25 guys out — 3 guys with mine detectors and three guys behind doing the probing — and then we would have our security out to the flank and to the front. We were always heavy with security.” Shamblen explained. “When the mine detectors would locate something we would then probe the area to find out what it was, and if it was a

mine we would do something about it, if it wasn’t we would just find what was causing the reading and then move on.”

The detail of over 25 men slowly made their way north along Highway One just outside of Duc Pho on the morning of July 4, 1967. Dixon was walking along the east side of the road as part of the security detail. Just beside of him was Spec 4 Richard Robey, who was sweeping the road with a mine detector, and the officer in charge of the detail, 1st Lt. Shamblen, who wasn’t far behind.

Left to right, right to left, and back again, Robey swept the road in search of any landmines that may have been hidden overnight by the Vietcong or the North Vietnamese Army.



Photo courtesy of LTC Jim Shamblen (ret)

The men of D. Co., 39th Engineers Company are seen on their daily mission searching for landmines using a mine-detector along a road in Vietnam.

“That road was not secure during the night,” Shamblen explained. “The area was unsecure -- we found a lot of mines.” Dixon was working as the flank security. He was getting a look at the area, but he was there to keep a sharp eye out for the bad guys — just in case. About 18 other men had the same job on that day. Nobody really saw what happened next.

Robey was having problems with his mine detector — it just wasn’t working right that morning. After a while, Robey stopped and tried to figure out what was wrong with the contraption. He tried to recalibrate the detector with the help of 1st Lt. Shamblen. The two knelt on the ground in the middle of the road as they worked on the detector for a few minutes. Eventually they got it working again.

Shamblen turned back to the south. Robey started his way to the north. But 21-year Richard Robey didn’t take three steps away from Shamblen when an explosion rocked the area. Robey fell to the ground — something had exploded on his right hip. He was

down and badly wounded. Shamblen rushed to his aide and found he was still alive. Then company medic Bob Daniels landed on the scene.

“I treated his wounds and hung at least one IV,” Daniels recalls.

Shamblen turned his attention to Dixon. His right hand had been cleanly severed, Shamblen recalls. So cleanly that it wasn’t even bleeding.

“Dixon was hit and in shock,” Shamblen believes. “He shook a few times and then died.

Minutes later, a medivac helicopter was on the scene. “I helped put Robey on the medivac,” Shamblen recalls with a great amount of sadness in his voice. “The last thing he said to me was: ‘Tell my mother I love her.’”

Dixon’s body was loaded on the same helicopter. Robey died on the helicopter trip to the hospital.

Those were the only two deaths to occur under Shamblen’s watch during his entire tour in Vietnam. “Dixon was a good soldier, he was a good guy,” Shamblen said in recalling his first impressions of Dixon. “We didn’t just let anybody go along with his. He was a squared away soldier.”

Back at the base camp, the other men in Dixon’s detachment were sitting around passing time.

“We were sitting around the tent because we didn’t have anything to do,” recalled DeMartini. “Some sergeant walks in and tells us that Cecil got killed. Then he told us to go over to the morgue and identify the body.”

DeMartini and two other men hopped in a Jeep and drove across the compound to get a look at Dixon’s body.

“The irony of it all is that Cecil didn’t have to do that — he just volunteered,” DeMartini said. “Everybody liked Cecil, he was a nice guy.”

“Our company took it very hard,” said Manuel Realme, who served alongside Dixon in Vietnam. “Cecil Dixon was our first member killed in the line of duty.”

Four days later, an Army officer came knocking on Emily Dixon’s Passaic Street door to tell her her husband had been killed.

In his most recent letters home, Dixon had written to tell his wife that he missed her and their children.

“He didn’t write much about the war,” she told reporters the following day about Dixon’s letters home. “He just said how much he missed us.”

Emily Dixon said she was “shocked” by the news of her husband’s death, but was more concerned for the two boys — Lamont and Frank — that he left behind. “My sons are too little to understand,” she said. Attempts to locate Dixon’s family were unsuccessful.

The circumstances are still unclear as to how Dixon and Robey died on that road that day. But DeMartini recalls that one of the doctors in the morgue pointed out that Dixon died from a shrapnel wound that pierced his heart. “It was a tiny hole in his chest,” DeMartini recalled.

And there still remains the question of how the two men were killed. “I believe a Vietcong sniper ambushed them,” Realme, a crane operator who served alongside Dixon before and during their time in Vietnam, speculated recently. “The 137th had its 40th reunion at Junction City, Kansas on July 4, 2005, and Cecil Dixon along with our other brothers who paid the ultimate price were honored.”

Several months after Dixon and Robey were killed, investigators talked with Shamblen about the incident. Intelligence was pointing toward a Russian sawhorse gun that was being tested by the Communists at that time. Speculation was that a sniper using the weapon probably hit one of the four grenades Robey was carrying that day. Something did explode on his right hip, and no one believes it was a land-mine.

“Rich had a few hand grenades on his web belt, as we all did,” Daniels said. “We all were a bit puzzled as to what exactly happened to Rich. Something set off one of his grenades.”

For Shamblen, Robey’s death still haunts him, but he did eventually find the man’s family to explain what happened to the Spencerville, Ohio-native on July 4, 1967.

