

No One But Us

[00:00:00] This is dedicated to the Fifty-Four H Troopers who gave their lives in Vietnam, to their loved ones, and to the brothers who carry them still...

No One But Us.

For many it began back then, in the final teenage year, A boy still learning who he was, with manhood drawing near.

They boarded planes from towns back home and crossed an endless sea, Then stepped into a foreign land unlike what home could be.

The aircraft door swung open wide... the heat struck like a wall, Each breath was thick with diesel smoke and odors over all.

The burning waste, the heavy air, the engines' constant cry...

A young man caught his breath and thought... how will I survive?

A few short days to learn the rules, to hear what lay ahead, Then jungle greens, worn combat boots, and steel upon the head.

They came from farms and city streets, from mountains, plains and shore, From places most would never see, to fight another's war.

Their hometowns gave them nicknames first, their hair might earn one too, And names their mothers called them by were known by very few.

Some answered to Wild man, some to Hardass, to Echo and R A,

Their given names grew faint with time...those nicknames here to stay.

They looked so young, yet seemed so old, those men already there, With tired eyes in youthful faces and silence in their stare.

The new men watched and learned from them how little words could say, How men could age beyond their years before the break of day.

Their home was LZ Bayonet, in EYE corps near Chu Lai,

Across highway number one, beneath a burning sky.

West of the busy airbase there, where aircraft came and went,

The 198th built what home they could from timber, earth and tent.

But shelter seldom held them long, for daylight called them out,

Into the bush and down the roads where danger moved about.

H Troop was four platoons in all, Headquarters and the three,

First, Second, Third, the fighting lines of armored cavalry.

Ten tracks made up each line platoon, four troopers to a crew,

And sometimes five rode shoulder close, they did what they had to do.

Above them all stood simply Top, the name all troopers knew, A first sergeant whose steady hand helped hold the whole troop true.

Then Sergeant Vega led the Second, respected, firm and plain, A leader young men learned to trust through dust and fire and rain.

The M113s bore them on, their ACAVs made not of steel,

With engines loud and armor thin, their danger always real.

The tracks themselves were given names, as soldiers always do, Hippies Five and Hard On rolled out, with many others too.

A painted name upon the side made one machine their own, A moving room, a fighting place... as close to home as home.

Some rode inside when orders came, some rode the decks instead, With ammo beneath their dusty boots and open sky overhead.

The sun would bake the armored hull, the dust clung to the skin, The engine's roar became a sound that settled deep within.

Before first light the motors turned, and diesel filled the air, Each man checked gear and weaponry with quiet, practiced care.

A villager came with cold Cokes, smokes, and things to trade,

Brief reminders life went on... beyond the jungle shade.

Then someone gave the word to move, the column formed in line, And tracks rolled west from Bayonet through mud and rain and time.

They crossed Highway Number One, past Chu Lai to the west and south,

Toward Bantangan's tangled trails, and through Dragon Valley's mouth.

They watched the shoulders for a wire, the roadway for a sign, A patch of earth too freshly turned, a break beside the line.

For mines lay hidden under roads where ordinary men

Might drive the selfsame road at dawn... and never drive again.

Its dirt concealed what waited there, the earth gave little sign, And unsuspecting troopers paid the price of hidden mines.

Tra Bong Road awaited the Cav,

each blast, each broken crew,

And each time they traveled it, the danger traveled too.

November sixty-nine brought Sheridan tanks to the line,

with heavier guns and added steel against the road and mine.

The armor offered better odds, and none would call that small,

Yet steel could never guard the mind from fears that gripped them all.

The road still hid its deadly mines, the tree line still could fire,

And every mission still demanded the courage duty required.

They watched the distant tree lines hard for movement, smoke or flash,
A sniper's shot, a hidden mine, an RPG's quick crash.
Long hours passed with nothing seen, no movement in the green,
Then everything could change at once, though moments before seemed serene.
The stillness shattered into fire, the jungle burst awake,
Commands rang out from every side, each choice a life might take.
Then friends were down and calling out, yet fighting where they fell,
While every man beside them worked inside that sudden hell.
The Doc knelt down beside the hurt, while others held the line,
One fought to save a brother's life... the rest protected mine.
Then just as quickly... silence came. The jungle breathed once more,
As though the earth remembered not what happened moments before.
The birds returned, the leaves stood still, the sky remained the same,
While those who lived checked every man... and softly spoke a name.
They ran the missions handed down, "Search and destroy," was the phrase,
Words written neatly back at desks for dirty, endless days.
They searched through hamlet, field and trail, through brush and flooded ground,
Never knowing what might wait beyond the next small mound.
They guarded roads and river crossings, the places maps marked so,
Yet every mile they held secure kept life and traffic flowing so.

At Tam Key they protected spans that had to stay in hand,
Watching roads and riverbanks across that troubled land.
At Binh Son Bridge they stood their watch, through daytime and through night,
A ribbon stretched from bank to bank, held fast beneath their sight.
Food and fuel crossed over it, along with mail and men,
And every convoy heading north depended on it then.
To some it was just steel and stone, another bridge to span,
To H Troop it was something more... a promise kept for man.
At night the moon rose over it, the river drifting on,
A quiet silver witness there, the moon above Binh Son.
Two friends might share a cigarette, and speak of home awhile,
Or trade the kind of insults that could make a soldier smile.
No speeches echoed through the night, no grand words filled the air,
A joke, a curse, a nickname tossed was all that mattered there.
Then one December night '67, while H Troop still was new,
The bridge at Binh Son forged a name the years would carry through.

The village lamps burned dim and low,
with fewer men in sight,
A strange calm settled near the span
before the guns that night.

An RPG struck one track's side,
and metal filled the air, Young Chico Garcia cried, "I'm hit!"
as the battle began out there.

Then Bandy climbed into the smoke,
looked hard and made it plain:
"You're fine now, Chico... back on your gun."
And courage rose again.

No speech to stir a thousand men,
no grand heroic claim,
Just calm enough to quiet fear
and call him back by name.

Garcia climbed back to his post
while battle raged around,
And every man who witnessed it
saw courage newly found.

At the far end, Cecil Smith
saw his commander fall,
He carried him inside the track,
then answered duty's call.

He closed the ramp, climbed to the gun,
and took command that night,
Then checked the net with Hellcat 23
and joined the bitter fight.

Two armored tracks at either end,
two crews beneath the fire,
Held fast against the force that came
with charges and desire.

For five long hours the battle rose,
then weakened toward the dawn,
Yet neither crew released its hold,
and still the bridge held on.

Their commander saw how they had fought
and named the truth outright:

“They fought like Hellcats on that bridge...”
and that name outlived the fight.

They called themselves the Bandy Bunch
and held that bridge through fire,
They were troopers, and they gave
all that the night required.

The bridge still stood when morning came,
the charges never won,
And Bandy’s Silver Star recalled
what he and they had done.

Yet medals never quite explain
what those who served all knew:
The calmest man beneath the fire
gives courage back to you.

It was the calm voice on the net, the hand that stopped the bleed, The friend
who moved toward danger first because a friend had need.

When at last the column rolled through Bayonet once more, The men would
count the battered tracks before they counted more.

Then came the roll of every man, the answer, voice and name, Each one who
stood and answered back meant one more safely came.

No sweeter sound was heard at night than every voice say, "Here," For every
answer in the dark meant one more brother near.

And when the whole troop gathered there, with every man accounted,
Tomorrow's weight seemed lighter then, though only for a moment.

For everybody was a brother, whatever state or town, And for one night the war
itself could not quite wear them down.

They laughed at things no one back home would ever understand, For humor
kept a soldier whole when reason never can.

The roll call was no ceremony, no grand review or show, It simply meant the
men they loved had all come safely home.

But sometimes one voice did not come. One place stood still and bare. One helmet, bunk, or silent track... and everyone knew where.

The engines still were started up, the orders still came on, For war does not suspend itself because a friend is gone.

Replacements came throughout the years, new faces, fresh and young,

To take the place beside a gun where someone else had hung.

They looked upon the older men, though none were very old, And saw the stare that youth can wear when youth has grown too old.

The veterans guessed their ages then, as veterans always do, And wondered what the coming weeks would ask those boys to do.

A replacement filled an empty seat, but it took time to fill the space

within the men who still recalled a missing brother's face.

Some men rotated back toward home, their duty finally through, While others climbed aboard the tracks and learned what they must do.

Friendships formed through shared ordeal that words could never bind, a family born from danger faced and no one left behind.

They knew each other in a way no later life could prove, A closeness forged where boyhood ended and men were forced to move.

A boy among such seasoned men did what a man must do, And learned how much the heart could bear from watching others too.

The seasons turned though few could tell, one patrol much like the last,

until the calendar, not the war, revealed how time had passed.

As tours grew short, thoughts turned toward home, to those across the sea,

To wives and girls and mothers' rooms they longed again to see.

They griped about the food and heat, the stench, the mud, the rain,

and dreamed about a real hot meal they'd someday have again.

They carried letters near their hearts, and pictures worn and creased,

holding tightly to tomorrow while serving in the Asian east.

As tours drew nearer to their end, the longing pulled two ways, One heart reached home across the sea, one stayed in jungle days.

So going home brought questions too that followed through the [00:13:00] years,

Had all the men they left behind come safely through their fears?

They were not statues cast in bronze, nor legends without flaw, They were young men doing what the frightened young men saw.

They fought because the man nearby was counting on their hand, And sometimes that was all the truth a person needs to stand.

Then orders came, and tours ran short, and one by one they flew, Leaving behind familiar roads and brothers they once knew.

A uniform was folded up, the jungle boots set down, A soldier found his old job back in some familiar town.

A wife and child might wait at home, an apartment, house or street, Yet everything looked much the same, except the man they'd meet.

Some carried steel beneath the skin, a pin to hold a bone, Some walked away without a scar yet never came back whole.

One grew a beard to hide the scars that strangers need not see, yet nothing ever quite [00:14:00] concealed what memory chose to keep.

"All things considered, I am well," was often how they spoke, With pain made small by humor dry and grief disguised as joke.

They seldom spoke of what they'd seen, nor asked for sympathy,

They simply tried to build a life and raise a family.

But somewhere underneath it all, where daily life had grown, There lived the young H Trooper still... who'd never quite come home.

Yet sometimes faces once well known

grew strangely dim and far,

While faces lost beside the tracks

remained just as they are.

The mind held fast the men who fell,

their laughter, walk and tone,

While faces from another life seemed barely once his own.

For ordinary life returned with bills and daily strain, Yet no one there could truly see what lingered in the brain.

Some things were better left unsaid, for language seemed too small, And [00:15:00] silence often carried more than words could tell at all.

A birthday came with candles lit, with family gathered near, While deep inside an old clock stopped at one set time each year.

To others it was celebration, a cake, a song, a smile, To him one afternoon remained as vivid all the while.

At fifteen forty-five that day, one life had reached its end, Though breath remained and someone else came home to wife and friend.

The years moved on for everyone, the calendar turned new, Yet every birthday carried back the things that soldier knew.

Some wounds are hidden from the eye, no scar their pain can prove, Yet they can shape a lifetime's course... long after battles move.

The body lived, the years went on, but something had been changed, The man his loved ones thought they knew felt distant and estranged.

A wife might mourn the husband lost though he was standing there, Still
working, laughing, raising [00:16:00] kids... still trying hard to care.

She learned which dreams would wake him fast, which silence meant "not yet".

She asked for little, gave him much, and loved him without regret.

He smiled through weddings, holidays, to spare the ones he loved, While
somewhere deep one afternoon remained untouched, unmoved.

It did not simply fade with time, as some believed it should, He only learned to
hide it well... as countless veterans would.

There were no bandages to change, no scars for eyes to see, Yet every day he
carried things no one else could perceive.

He sought a quiet place instead, with one who made him safe,

No crowd, no party, no old songs... no need to wear a face.

Those wounds were carried silently beneath life's steady tone, A veteran could
fill a room... and still remain alone.

Yet through the Family of H Troop, the burden found some rest,

Among the friends who needed no explanation or [00:17:00] request.

They knew the sudden anger's source, the sleepless night and fear, The way an
old remembered sound could make the past appear.

They knew why helicopters stirred a feeling deep within, Why diesel smoke or
summer rain could start the war again.

They knew why someone left a room, or flinched at certain sound, Or scanned
the doors and windows first wherever he was found.

Some still recalled the barbed wire at Lei Tan in the sun,

A picture seared into the brain... though half a lifetime run.

They knew that guard had never ceased, though decades passed away, Some old soldiers still stood watch at ending of each day.

More than fifty years have passed, new chapters filled their lives, With children, grandchildren, quiet homes, devoted husbands, wives.

Their backs grew bent, their hair turned white, their footsteps not as fast, Yet somewhere lived the teenage boy who stepped down from that [00:18:00] craft.

The battles still could rage at night, the bedsheets damp with fear,

The nightmare sharp as yesterday, the distant voices clear.

Replacements now were needed most... but no replacements came.

The lonely watch continued on, remembered name by name.

The guard remained though wars were done, the years could not relieve
the duty owed to absent friends whom every heart still grieved.

Then one man took another watch, with rosters, calls and names,

And searched across the passing years to gather them again.

At first a telephone might ring and neither man know how,

to cross the years between them there and meet each other now.

So reunions brought the Family back, though many years had flown, Old voices filled the room once more... and no one stood alone.

Time dissolved with handshakes shared, old laughter filled the air, The decades slipped quietly away as though they'd never been there.

A name once heard across the field, a grin from long ago, Could bridge the years in just a breath more deeply than most know.

They spoke of friends who never came, as though they'd stepped outside, for every empty seat that stood still kept them by their side.

A chair might stand, an empty seat, left without a man,
For every gathering still made room within H Troop's great span.
There came a time to raise a glass, then quietly bow each head,
One toast was always offered first... to brothers who were dead.
Fifty four young men of H Troop would never leave that land,
fifty four unfinished lives, each known by heart and hand.
Back home mothers kept a room, while fathers spoke their names,
and those who loved them carried on, though life was not the same.
They were not numbers on cold paper lists, nor just names carved in stone,
but sons and brothers, husbands, friends,
each dearly loved at home.
The laughter never hid the loss, nor sorrow dimmed the cheer, For joy and grief
walked side by side whenever they drew near.
No rank remained to separate, no youth to prove once more,
Just aging men whose bond endured as steadfast as before.
Together they remembered all, the living and the gone,
For H Troop was still Family...
and Family carried on.
The years had taken many things, yet one gift still remained, The story of those
younger days deserved to be retained.
For children knew them as a dad, or Grandpa, calm and kind, Not always seeing
what had shaped the memories in his mind.

They saw the gentle, patient man, whose hair had turned to gray, They could not know the frightened youth who once had gone away.

The photographs grew old with time, the letters slowly browned, Yet every faded face recalled a brother once well found.

They told the stories when they could, though never every part, Some memories belonged to words... and some stayed in the heart.

They hoped that those who followed them would understand someday, That freedom bears a hidden cost too many are asked to pay.

The battles ended long ago, but one thing still was true, The greatest gift they carried home... was each remaining few.

One by one the roll grew short, as Time called each away,

Until the few who still remained became the ones to say,

"Remember not how we grew old, nor every tear we knew, Remember those who gave their all... and those who brought them through."

The story was not theirs alone, but every life it touched, The families who stood waiting home, who sacrificed as much.

For wives and children bore the weight when silent burdens came, They carried love through darkest days and asked for little fame.

So every page that now is turned, each memory recalled anew, Becomes another watch relieved... by someone seeing through.

For history lives not just in stone, nor medals kept apart, It lives within remembered names... and every grateful heart.

The years will claim us, one by one, as years were meant to do,

Yet stories live beyond our days when others keep them true.

No monument of stone alone, no marble carved with names, Can ever hold the living hearts of those who fought those flames.

They live each time a child asks why, or someone stops to hear,

The voices of another age still quietly drawing near.

They live when old photographs are gently passed around, And someone says,
"That smiling face..." then speaks a name aloud.

The names were spoken carefully, so none would disappear, For memory lives
another day each time a name rings clear.

Some [00:23:00] stories fade with passing years, their pages lost to time, Yet
others live because they're told in memory and rhyme.

This is not just a tale of war, nor battles fought afar, It is the story of young men
who learned just who they are.

The years could never break the bond that hardship helped to weave, For some
friendships are forged so deep they never truly leave.

Though Time may thin the gathering now, and silence claim each voice, The
love they bore for one another remains a living choice.

As long as stories still are told, their watch is not yet through,

The story still is carried on...

by me,

by you.

And when the final roll is called, beyond this earthly plain,

May every brother find his place... together once again.

No tracks will bear the scars of war, no jungle hide the sky,

No young man wonder if this day might be the day to die.

The laughter of those long-lost friends will echo strong and clear,

Their brotherhood unbroken still...

beyond the passing years.

Though many voices now are silent, their stories shall remain,

They walk with us,

once again,

each time we speak their names.

While no one could fully know

the road our H Troopers passed through,

may all who read these humble words, walk a mile there 2.

No One But Us.