

His Best and Last

Robert David Walden of Charleston did well in school, but enjoyed the outdoors, a preference that led him to choose Clemson and its forestry program. Robert joined the Forestry Club and was a member of Alpha Zeta, the national agricultural honorary society. He served as a hall president and a member of the Wesley Foundation, but it was the military aspect of life on campus that most appealed to Robert. He enjoyed ROTC and became a member of Pershing Rifles, commanding the outfit his senior year. He was selected for membership in Scabbard and Blade, the military honor fraternity and participated with the Counter-guerilla Unit. He also competed as a member of the rifle team. Selected as a distinguished military student, Robert was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Regular Army upon his graduation on May 30, 1964.



Four days later, Second Lieutenant Walden reported for active duty at Fort Jackson. He attended Field Artillery Officer Basic Training, Airborne School, and the Army's rigorous Ranger course. He completed a tour of duty in West Germany and returned to the States in the summer of 1967. In late August, Walden reported to the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam. In February 1968, Captain Walden was appointed commander of Company D, 16th Infantry Regiment.

On March 12, Captain Walden led a ready reaction force to the assistance of a friendly patrol that had encountered a Viet Cong force of unknown size. According to the citation for his Bronze Star medal for valor:

Captain Walden directed the relief force of two tanks and an armored personnel carrier into position near the hard pressed patrol and then led a sweep of the area which routed the enemy. His swift action brought vital ammunition supplies to the friendly force, resulted in the capture of valuable intelligence material from a dead enemy soldier, and prevented the Viet Cong from mining the road. The courage and dynamic leadership of Captain Walden significantly contributed toward the successful outcome of the mission.

Walden was wounded in this action and evacuated to the United States where he spent four months in the Army hospital at Fort Benning, Georgia. Upon his return to duty in August, Walden was appointed training officer for the 2nd Student Battalion at Fort Benning.

Walden returned to Vietnam in November 1969, once again as a unit commander, this time leading Company A, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. Philip Topps, a green second lieutenant, remembered Walden as "a fine officer, and a finer man... He cared about his men, and demanded that we, as leaders do so as well." Dave Lewis, a lieutenant serving as the artillery forward observer in Walden's company, recalled that Walden "was a good officer and a great person who was doing his duty to the best of his ability." According to Lewis, the 1st Infantry Division was in the process of pulling back before being reassigned to the States as part of

President Nixon's Vietnamization strategy to scale down American involvement in the war. On the night of March 13, 1970, Company A had settled into a "wagon wheel" formation with its armored personnel carriers arranged in a defensive ring around the company command post. Lewis remembered "That night we were to inventory our ordnance for disposal."



While removing ammunition from one of the tracked vehicles, a soldier carrying a box of trip flares stumbled, spilling the contents onto the ground. One of the flares ignited as it bounced into a stack of armaments. Captain Walden was alerted and immediately rushed to the scene. Acting quickly, Walden cleared the area and ordered one of the armored personnel carriers repositioned to block potential explosions from the now burning munitions. Without concern for his own safety, Walden assisted another soldier in attempting to extinguish the fire. According to Lewis, "Bob was standing next to the platoon track when a fragment grenade exploded." Captain Walden was airlifted to the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh and was later transferred to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon. He died from his wounds on March 15. For his heroism and initiative in action not involving conflict with the enemy, Captain Walden was posthumously awarded the Soldier's Medal.

Robert David Walden was survived by his parents, his wife Patricia, and their infant daughter Elizabeth. In addition to the Bronze Star and Soldier's Medal, Walden was awarded the Air Medal, Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachutist Badge, Expert Sharpshooter Badge with Automatic Rifle Bar, and Ranger Tab. Captain Walden is buried in Charleston's Riverview Memorial Park.

Writing in 2010, Patricia described Robert as "an exceptional man. He was a committed Army Captain who gave his best and last for the men in his command."

