

Leon D. Bieri '57

No 21245 ■ 19 Aug 1935 – 18 Jun 2000 ■ Died in Baltimore, MD
Interred at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA



Leon Delbert Bieri was born 19 Aug 1935 in Cody, WY. The son of a career Army officer, Leon grew up on Army posts in CONUS and abroad. His high school days were spent in Chicago, IL; Berkeley, CA; and Tokyo, Japan; where he learned of his appointment to West Point from Senator Edwin C. Johnson of Colorado.

Leon came to West Point a natural, rapidly adjusting to life in A-1. Since math and engineering posed few problems, he was able to tutor classmates in these subjects. Roommates remember he “could not sing, although he never gave up trying.” Active in church activities, the Dialectic Society and the Chess Club, Leon believed in rules, was apolitical, reluctant to deviate from what he thought was right, generous of spirit, and positive in nature. Winter weekends often found him heading to the snowy ski slopes of Vermont.

At graduation he was 6'2" tall and weighed 164 pounds. Choosing Infantry, he went to Ft. Benning, GA, for the basic course, followed by Ranger and Airborne schools. Leon was first assigned to 3-187th Airborne Battle Group at Ft. Campbell, KY. Initially a company officer, he was selected in 1959 as aide to BG Timmes, ADC (Support). This meant additional time at Ft. Campbell, where he had met Lorie (Lolly) Safford, the daughter of the division chief of staff. The timing seemed perfect. They were married at West Point in 1961.

Leon was one of the first in the class to attend the Advanced Course and next was sent to Korea, spending a year commanding the Eighth Army Honor Guard Company. Ordered back to Ft. Benning, he was assigned to the 1-187th Airborne Infantry *Rakassans*, as they developed and codified air assault tactics and doctrine for the 11th Air Assault Division. Selected early for Command &

General Staff College, he and Lolly moved to Ft. Leavenworth, where he earned a master's degree in Military Arts and Science.

While Leon was at CGSC, the 11th deployed to Vietnam and became the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Assault). One of the first replacements to arrive at the division in the summer of 1966 was Leon Bieri. Returning to his old unit, re-flagged the 1-12th Cavalry, and by this time an early-promote to major, Leon became the battalion S-3. He was remembered as “a super individual ... very positive and competent, who knew inside and out the capabilities and limitation of an airborne battalion.”

Late in 1966, the 1-12th was involved in numerous operations in Binh Dinh Province, against the 22nd North Vietnamese Army Regiment, an area “crawling with NVA troops.” On 17 Dec 1966, while coordinating operations from the air, he learned that two company commanders had been wounded badly. Landing, he took charge, brought in aerial rocket artillery, and then organized an assault of the enemy's key position, during which he was severely wounded. He completed the link-up of friendly units and drove off two attacking Viet Cong battalions, inflicting heavy casualties. With the successful link-up of his battalion, “MAJ Bieri permitted himself to be evacuated.” He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for “exceptionally valorous actions.”

Leon returned to CONUS, where, after additional hospitalization, he was assigned to Infantry Branch, then to the Office of the Secretary of Defense as the Vietnam Desk Officer. In 1968, he was selected by GEN Maxwell D. Taylor, special assistant to the President, as his executive officer. He left the White House in the fall of 1969 for the MBA Program at Harvard University.

After Harvard, he returned to Vietnam to command the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. His new unit was one of four infantry battalions remaining in Vietnam after the 1st Cavalry departed. On 23 Jul 1971, Leon flew to Fire Base Evelyn, where he and classmate Len Wishart, the outgoing battalion commander, spent the day discussing the battalion and operating in the area. Len recalls “I felt much better knowing I was

turning my unit over to a classmate I knew and respected.” The next day, Leon assumed command of 2-5th Cavalry. A contemporary recalls: “Leon Bieri was known for eschewing any acknowledgement of personal valor while recognizing members of the battalion for their meritorious and valorous actions ... he frequently was on the ground with the soldiers adding confidence and reassurance during particularly stressful encounters with the enemy.” Another adds: “Leon Bieri's earnest concern for the welfare of each soldier coupled with his enthusiasm and expectation of the highest level of performance gained him respect from every member of the battalion. He made a point to personally know the soldiers, and they in turn felt that they personally knew him. Because of his unique and selfless leadership, every man was willing to follow him anywhere and under any circumstances. His presence was such that he made each soldier feel unique and that their mission was integral to the success of the battalion.”

In the summer of 1972, Leon returned the 2-5th Cavalry's colors to Ft. Hood, TX, and returned to the Pentagon in the office of the Chief of Staff, until starting National War College in the summer of 1973. He stayed at Ft. McNair on the NWC faculty, moving in 1975 to the Army staff as deputy to the ADCSOPS-Requirements. From this position he retired in June 1978, after 21 years service.

Leon then became a financial officer with several firms before starting his own company, manufacturing field target systems for tactical weapons training that provided automated feedback to the shooter and/or an evaluation system.

Leon and Lolly had two sons, Robert and Thomas, born in 1964 and 1966 respectively. Robert has a Ph.D. from MIT and works for SAIC, a defense contractor. Thomas is the executive director for an organization serving at-risk youths in California. There are five grandchildren (four boys and one girl) ages nine to 21. In retirement, Leon enjoyed rowing and sailing. He died of cancer on 18 Jun 2000 and is buried at Arlington. Lolly resides in their home in Arnold, MD.

—Classmates, members of 1/12th and 2/5th Cavalry, friends, and family