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PRESENTATION TO MACV COMMANDERS CONFERENCE

BY MAJOR GENERAL W. R. PEERS

3 December 1967

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By ms, NARS, Date 5-11-84

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BATTLE FOR DAK TO

We, along with General Rosson's headquarters were concerned with what had happened to the 1st NVA Division and its regiments. About the latter part of October we detected the 1st NVA Division just opposite what is called the tri-border area (Chart 1). The 173d Airborne had been working in this area from June through September and had contacts in June and July but none subsequent to that time so most of the 173d was redeployed to Phu Yen Province. They left behind one battalion; this battalion, the 2/503d Infantry was subsequently replaced by our mechanized battalion, the 2/8 Infantry. Then when we saw elements of the 1st NVA Division here, we replaced the mechanized battalion with the 3/12 Infantry. We had the 3/12 Infantry reconnoiter the general area. Long Range patrols began to pick up enemy movement toward Dak To from the southwest. Also, agent reports supported our LRRP reports and we knew the NVA were moving toward Dak To. We reacted immediately and moved our 1st Bde headquarters to Dak To on the 29th of October and followed it with the 3/8 Infantry on the 30th. Colonel Johnson, Commanding Officer of the 1st Brigade employed all of the intelligence means he had at his disposal. We had an airborne personnel detector - most people call it "Snoopy" and it can detect the human scent. And so we detected strong concentrations along in here, along in here, and along in here (Chart 1)(Valleys leading toward Dak To and Ben Het from the southwest). So we knew the NVA were moving in and in large numbers. Our long Range Reconnaissance Patrols continued to pick up movement and I thought Colonel Johnson employed them and all of his intelligence means most skillfully. He located several ammunition storage areas and other base camps throughout this area. There again, another clue. We also used our visual reconnaissance aircraft or head-hunters, and Red-Haze, which is an infra-red device, to detect fires at night.

So we knew these people were moving in. Then on the second of November, one of the members of a 50 man recon party from the 66th Regiment turned himself in at the village of Dak Ri (YB969217). He had quite a fantastic tale to tell. As a matter of fact, there were a lot of people who disbelieved him because he knew too much. But he said that the 66th Regiment was moving from the southwest generally towards Ben Het; the 32d was moving from the southwest generally towards Dak To; the 32d was to cover the attack made by the 66th. The 174th, which had been north in the

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PAGE 2 OF 11 PAGES

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Dak Seang area had moved down along the border area to act as reinforcement in the event the other units got in trouble - sort of a contingency force. He also said that the 24th Regiment, which had been well to the north and northeast of Dak To, was going to move down to hit the Dak To area. He stated that the 40th Artillery Regiment was split to support both the two regiments coming in from the southwest and the 24th Regiment coming from the north. All forces were under the 1st NVA Division located just inside the border. All of our intelligence indicated that what he said was correct. And to be very honest with you, we followed this thing through and it is exactly the way it worked out in this entire operation, with one minor exception.

To encounter the immediate threat, Colonel Johnson deployed the 3/12 Infantry to the ridge line immediately south of Dak To and the 3/8 Infantry was placed to the southwest of Dak To also on the high ground. General Rosson made available at that time one battalion of the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 4/503d Infantry which we attached to our 1st Brigade and it was put at Ben Het. Ben Het is to be the new location of the CIDG Camp now located at Dak To. The camp is being placed in a position to maintain better surveillance of the border. At this time, there is quite a concentration of engineers and road clearing equipment at Ben Het. The 4/503d Infantry was directed to move south from Ben Het.

The first contact in the "Battle for Dak To" took place on the high ridge due south of here. It is only about two to three hundred meters from one of the largest engagements which the 173d Airborne Brigade had in the Dak To area in the month of June. Two companies from the 3/12 started pushing up the ridge and they encountered a very strong NVA position (YB9916). They tested it and found they couldn't take it without excessive casualties, so they backed off and started pounding it with artillery and tac air. They tried it again and were still met by strong opposition. And so we used as much artillery as we could put on it; also 40 air strikes, which included 24 sorties of thousand pound bombs with delayed action fuses. With this support the companies were able to move in, but I'm sure they killed many more than we were able to count. Many of the NVA were covered by the bomb damage. Also, it was evident that the NVA had dragged away quite a few in that engagement. We lost four and killed 13 NVA. The 3/8 established a fire base on this hill (YB933188) and air assaulted into the ridge line to the south (YB8914) to work west along the ridge. They had one contact as they moved in this general area in which they killed 11 and lost 4.

PAGE 3 OF 11 PAGES

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The 4/503 Infantry was deployed with three companies moving south from Ben Het and on the morning of 6 November all three companies had simultaneous contact. Concurrent with that, Colonel Johnson had air assaulted the remaining company on top of this hill (YB853187). They had plastered the hill well and we found out later they had actually driven the enemy off the hilltop. So the company landed without opposition. But not more than 30 minutes after they landed they had NVA all around them. The NVA had all-around defenses here and a large base camp. This battle went on most of the night and part of the following morning. And by the time it finished the 4/503 Infantry had lost 16 people and they killed a total of 104. That brings us up to the end of what we might call the first phase in which we had just the 1st Brigade employed. The next phase takes place from 7 through 12 November. (Chart 2). On the 5th of November, General Rosson had made the remainder of the 173d Airborne Brigade available to us, and the Brigade closed into Dak To on 7 November. We drew a boundary and placed the 173d on the west and the 1st Brigade on the west. Also at that time from our 2d Brigade that is operating in Darlac Province we alerted our 1/8th Infantry which was to move into this area to join the 1st Bde, 4th Infantry Division. Rt 512 through this area and the Dak To complex itself presented a security problem. The ARVN assisted us tremendously by providing the 1/42 ARVN Bn for local defense of this area, the defense of the city of Tanh Canh and their headquarters, and also to secure the bridge west of Dak To. Thus, there has been one ARVN battalion located with our 1st Bde throughout this operation. In addition to securing the Dak To area we also had to secure the road from Dak To to Pleiku. One armored cavalry troop and one tank company was used for this mission. During this period one ARVN Airborne Battalion, the 9th, was flown in from the Saigon and the Joint General Reserve and it was agreed the ARVN would orient themselves to the northeast to go to work against the 24th NVA Regiment.

The 3/12th continued working down the ridge line south of Dak To and found that the enemy had defenses about every 1500 to 2000 meters; they had to do the same thing that I described before-blast them out. We'd get a couple killed and kill 10 to 15 NVA each time. This happened on several occasions right down this ridge line. (YB9715)

The 3/8 Infantry continued this maneuver through this general area (YB9318) on 7-9 November. On 9 November it had, I would think, one of the largest contacts of the entire war. This battalion had three of its companies in here. They were in their night position and were hit by something in excess of an NVA battalion. This went on well into the night and it finally began to break about noon the next day. Finally at the end the 3/8th

PAGE 4 OF 11 PAGES

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Infantry counted 232 NVA killed, and they lost a total of 21. They had some companies that were badly hurt. The enemy employed mortars and B-40 rockets. Shrapnel from these weapons produced many wounds, however many of these are minor. 80 percent of our people wounded in these operations will return to us in anywhere from two weeks to a month.

In any event, we replaced one company and then moved the 3/8 Infantry on to the west. After they had punished a hill here (YB9048), very heavily with air and artillery, two companies moved up without opposition into their night location. A third company was in the process of moving in when they got hit by another attack and had to fight from on top of the ground. This battle went on again for the greater part of that day and part of the next morning before it was broken off. In this one we killed 94 of the enemy; we lost a total of 18, but again, we had many wounded. It was at this time this one company was down to 44 men. We had another company down to 59, and I believe the largest had only 78. We did have some difficulty getting our wounded evacuated. One of the helicopters went in with supplies and ammunition; also to take out dead and wounded. It was hit by a B-40 rocket and it burned all day, so we couldn't get people in and out at all. It took us until the next morning before we got the LZ cleared and our dead and wounded evacuated.

In the area south of Ben Het the 4/503 Infantry had suffered a number of wounded, so it was replaced by the 1/503 Infantry. The 1/503 Infantry pushed out to the west, and not very far from its fire base it too ran into a very heavy engagement lasting most of the day and part of the night. In this one they killed 161 and lost 21.

We knew we were going to have to block off this area since there was evidence that the enemy was moving back through it. The 173d knew the area and assaulted the 2/503 Infantry into an old fire base area. The 2/503 established a new fire base, started moving to the west and ran into sporadic engagements where they lost 19 of their people and killed 25 of the enemy. About this time General Rosson made other forces available to us - 1/12 Cav from the 1st Cav Division. Initially we employed it in the area around Dak To and later deployed two of its companies to assist the 3/8 Infantry unit, and later the 2/503.

It was on the night of 12 November that we received our first mortar attack against Dak To. They put in about 44 rounds, and fortunately it did practically no damage. There were two people wounded and three vehicles that had minor damage. (Chart 3) That brings us down to the close of business on the 12th of November. You remember previously we had the

PAGE 5 OF 11 PAGES

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9th ARVN Airborne Battalion in this area. When the Dak To contact started building up the ARVN Joint General Staff started reinforcing the area with ARVN Airborne troops. The 9th ARVN Airborne Bn was pulled out and replaced by the 3d ARVN Airborne Battalion. Also the 3/42 ARVN which had been southeast of Dak To along highway 14N was employed in this area. This placed two ARVN Battalions against the 24th Regiment to the northeast of Tanh Canh.

Back to the 1st Brigade, 4th Division. The 3/12 Infantry continued on down this ridge line south of Dak To, and cleaned it out; then it started back along this high hill line, and it had another very heavy engagement on this peak, Hill 1338. We had to use the same tactic we used before; feel them out, pin them down, hit them with air and artillery. In that particular battle we lost 8 people and killed a total of 49. Also, the 1/8th which had come in from Darlac and secured the area east of Tanh Canh, was air assaulted into this general area (YB910122) primarily to establish a 155 artillery base. Moving from the fire base two of its units air assaulted into this location (YB957115) to sweep this area. They moved through the area but did not establish contact. Subsequently, they deployed two companies to this area (870100) and the 3/12 Infantry established a mortar base here (YB875072). The 1/8 Infantry had a rather medium sized contact near the mortar base in which we lost four and killed 10. On 18 November the 1/503 Infantry, as it continued down through this area, had another contact here (YB803161) in which they killed 51 and lost 6. Then the 2/503 Infantry began pushing south with three of their companies. They loggered in one evening on the north side, about a kilometer away from Hill 875 (YB797135). The following morning, 19 November, two of the companies moved out toward the hill and they ran into a strong resistance at this location (YB798138). They pulled back toward their night location and called in air and artillery. The other company from the north started to move toward them and came under a violent attack. It had to fight its way out of this engagement to marry up with the other two companies. Between the three companies, they had somewhere between 30 and 40 killed; they had about a hundred wounded and several people missing. About that time we had a very unfortunate thing happen. One of the aircraft bombing the hill put a bomb in the middle of the dead and wounded and it was estimated that an additional 20 were killed and 20 to 30 were wounded. General Schweiter with these units in contact, took the 4/503 Infantry and air assaulted it into the 2/503 fire base and married the 4/503d up with the 2/503 Infantry. It was then necessary to move against Hill 875 in order to neutralize fire on the LZ so the wounded and dead could be evacuated. The 4/503 Infantry started to assault Hill 875 and found it was very

PAGE 6 OF 11 PAGES

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strongly held. We then threw everything we could put on it the following day; light, medium, heavy artillery at maximum rate. For five hours air strikes were coming in at the rate of one every 15 to 30 minutes. The 4/503 Infantry still encountered stiff resistance as they moved out. On 20 November we had moved the 1/12 Infantry from Darlac Province. This move was possible since General Rosson had secured the 4/39 Infantry from HFFV to replace it. Two companies of the 1/12 Infantry were made available to General Schweiter. These companies were moved into an LZ adjacent to the 2/503 Infantry (YB7912). The following day the 4/503 Infantry and the two companies of the 1/12 Infantry tested Hill 875 and found it was still strongly held. They could have driven in but would have taken some additional casualties. Again we pounded it and the following day the 4/503 Infantry on the north and the 1/12 Infantry on the south, drove in against light opposition and occupied Hill 875. The 2/503 Infantry in this entire operation had 95 people killed; they killed 279 NVA. The 4/503 Infantry had 18 killed and they killed 43 NVA. It was during this period that we brought in the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division which General Rosson had made available. The 2/8th moved into the area east of Dak To and replaced its sister battalion, the 1/12th Cav. The 1/12th Cav was air assaulted into the Dak Hodrai Valley to establish a base camp to cut off the enemy's escape routes and to search out the area. It was a classic operation, however, there were no enemy there. The 2/8th Cav moved into the hills to the east of Tanh Canh and encountered strong enemy defenses. They worked about six days, again, blasting them out. In those six days they lost two and killed 22. One very important thing is that the 2/8th Cav captured, and blew up about 25 rounds of 57 and 75 millimeter recoilless ammunition which could have been used in direct fire against Dak To and Tanh Canh.

The ARVN meanwhile had moved northeast of Tanh Canh. The 3/42d ARVN established contact on top of a high peak and saw that it was strongly fortified, so the 3d Airborne Bn was employed on their left flank and they too met heavy resistance. The peak was worked over with air and artillery while the ARVN units were reinforced with another battalion, the 2d ARVN Airborne Battalion which had arrived from Saigon. The 3/42d ARVN was put in a blocking position and the 2d and 3d Airborne went to work on the hill. One attacked from the south and the other slipped around the west side and came in from the north, all the while employing air and artillery very skillfully. We supported this operation with a battery of 155mm which reinforced two ARVN 105 batteries. At the end of two days when contact broke, the ARVN had 49 of their own people killed and on the hill counted 247 NVA dead. This was a real fine operation on the part of the ARVN. On the morning of the 15th of November we received eight mortar rounds into the Dak To

PAGE 7 OF 11 PAGES

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complex. There were three C-130s on the parking ramp. They were taking out part of the 9th ARVN Airborne Battalion when one of the rounds hit next to one C-130 and wounded the 9th Airborne Battalion Commander and two other of his people and set the C-130 on fire. One other C-130 was hit also. It too exploded and began burning. The third one was hit, but did not burn. I happened to be flying overhead at the time and directed a VTR to pull the C-130 away from ones that were burning. But as the VTR approached I could see the right engine turning and then the left engine. The pilot put the props in reverse and backed the plane away. It was an outstanding act of gallantry and I sent a note to General Momeyer about his pilot and crew chief. The two other aircraft were destroyed.

That evening, starting about five o'clock, Dak To received a heavier attack. There were about 78 rounds that fell generally in the same area as the morning attack but some of the rounds hit the ammunition supply point and fire spread from one bunker to another and eventually we lost about 1100 tons of ammunition. It was pretty warm around there with steel flying through the air practically all night. However, out of all this action, only three ARVN and three US were wounded. One of our Sergeant Majors from DIVARTY was there and he almost had the fire out when one of the pallets of ammunition exploded and a fragment hit him and broke his leg. At the same time, the hose on the water truck was cut which was extremely unfortunate since the fire had almost been extinguished. (Chart 4)

This brings us down to our present phase. We refer to it as the Exploitation Phase, and represents our current dispositions. Before going into the current dispositions, there was one other action that we took. We had an adversary move into the Plei Mrong - Kontum area. The 4th Bn, 95B Regiment and its my firm conviction that this battalion had the rockets and rocket launchers that hit Pleiku about a month and a half ago. The battalion was moving into an ideal place to hit Kontum. We had many assets in Kontum; many helicopters were there and we could not afford to lose them. We took the 1/12th Cav and air assaulted right on top of where intelligence indicated the 4/95B was located. I think the assault was so accurate that within an hour after the battalion landed it received a mortar attack. This area is low jungle but extremely thick and the battalion was never able to establish contact with the 95B Battalion.

The ARVN made the last big contacts in the Dak To area. The 2d and 3d ARVN Airborne Battalions started to move north and northwest to Dak To and were joined by the 7th Battalion. A battalion of Rangers was also deployed from Pleiku to work to the northwest. The 22d Ranger Battalion had contact here (ZB0314). They lost four people and killed 31. This

PAGE 8 OF 11 PAGES

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was a fine operation on their part.

We were going to put the 1st Cavalry Brigade in the area northeast of Tanh Canh to work adjacent to the ARVN, however, General Rosson had to use the Brigade Headquarters and the 2/8th Cav, so we deployed these units back to Bong Son. The remaining battalion, the 1/12th Cav two days ago air assaulted into the area east of Tanh Canh where they are working at the present time. There was good information that the headquarters of the 24th Regiment was in this area (ZB1425). The ARVN Airborne Battalion moved against the suspected location of the 24th Regiment. The 3d ARVN Airborne Battalion came down 14N, the 2d Airborne Battalion began sweeping southeast and they had almost simultaneous contact. The 2d Airborne established contact with what they considered to be the headquarters of the group which had ambushed a convoy of the 3d Battalion. It was a strong contact but they went to work and in this instance killed 72 and lost 5. The 3d Battalion killed 37 and they lost five.

As far as the present phase of the operation is concerned, it has been one primarily of adjustment. As I indicated, the 1/12th Inf was in the area of Hill 875 working with the 4/503d. The 2/503d Inf had been moved back to the Ben Het area to reorganize and refit. The 4/503d Inf was then moved back to the general area of Dak To. The 1/503d moved its fire base west of the river between Ben Het and Dak To and is now working to the northwest of the fire base location.

The 3/12th Inf which had been on the hill (YB8215) is working this area where there was a NVA rocket launcher site. We put an arc light on top of this position. Before this, rockets were launched from the position toward our 1/8 Inf Fire Base. The Airborne Artillery of the 1st Cav reacted immediately and there were rockets both going into and coming out of the position. The 3/12 Inf fire base (YB8107) is one of the most rugged fire bases I have ever seen. There are ironwood trees there from 5 to 6 feet in diameter. Bamboo is 5 to 8 inches thick. It's a rough place to put a fire base, but these soldiers established it. While moving out from the fire base to the northwest, the 3/12 Infantry had a little contact there shortly afterward. The 1/8th Inf air assaulted on Hill 835 and established another fire base and is working south of the fire base. The 3/8th Inf on 20 Nov reacted to an indicated threat of an NVA battalion east of Hwy 14. We could not lose this road under any circumstances because it is our supply lifeline. The battalion searched the area and, frankly, there was nothing there. So subsequently the 3/8 Inf took

PAGE 9 OF 11 PAGES

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over the mission of the 3/12 Inf and is continuing to search the ridge south of Dak To. They have uncovered a huge complex built deep in a canyon. The tunnels, according to Colonel Johnson, who has been there, are huge caverns. There were hospital areas there along with eating and sleeping facilities. Everything to accommodate more than a battalion, and it appeared that they intended to stay. At the present time the 3/8th Inf is in the process of destroying the complex.

On 1 December Ben Het--where the 2/503 Inf and the 173d Abn Bn Fwd CP, along with engineers and some artillery are located--was hit by 122 mm rockets from the area west of Ben Het. Mortars also were fired from the south of Ben Het. I was airborne and could see them fired in ripples. The units at Ben Het had 22 rockets land inside of the fire base but did not report any 82mm mortars; however, I am sure they were at least firing in that direction. We had one man killed and nine men wounded. We also lost one 155mm howitzer and had two others damaged. We firmly expect they will try it again and we have to be ready for it.

This brings us to the present, in the operation at Dak To. The charts will summarize for you the casualties on both sides (Chart 5). This first one shows the enemy losses. A total of 1644 NVA KIA by the FWMF. This is by body count not by estimate. These were the dead ones positively seen. We have captured 19 POWs and the ARVN has captured three. Here is the weapons count; 314 small arms - and most of these are AK47's, which is part of a new family of weapons. 109 crew-served weapons have been captured for a total of 423. Of course this has not been done without casualties to our own side as you see here (Chart 5). The 1st Brigade had 82 killed, the 173d Airborne KIA including those that were killed by the bomb total 194. There are a few other supporting units making a total of 290 US KIA. The ARVN had 73 killed for a total of 363 friendly KIA.

One thing that I wanted to bring out is the fact that I have presented the Battle of Dak To, but personally, from the Division point of view, and General Rosson from his point of view as commander of I Force Vietnam, looked upon this as being the Battle of the Highlands. Many other things have been going on to detract us and cause us to employ our forces elsewhere (Chart 6). One of the things they tried to do was to sever our lifeline between Pleiku and Dak To. We had one ambush of an engineer work party on Hwy 14N just north of Kontum. Fortunately we had armor with them. We had six killed and we counted 13 enemy

PAGE 10 OF 11 PAGES

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dead at the ambush site. Later in searching the area where we and the ARVN had reacted we counted a total of another 16. We had another small ambush in this area in which we lost one tank and had one man wounded. We killed just two of the NVA. Then another convoy moving from Qui Nhon to Pleiku was ambushed about three miles east of Le Trung, about six miles east of Pleiku. There were six vehicles destroyed. The 2/1 Cav reacted very quickly on this one and got into the ambush while it was still going on. The convoy itself reacted very well in the sense that they drove many of their trucks off the road and down into rice paddies saving several vehicles. The 2/1st Cav flanked the enemy and we had a headhunter, a spotter aircraft, up quickly and the gunships arrived shortly thereafter. An air strike was employed and our exploitation platoon was on the ground within 30 minutes. In the process of that operation they killed 44 of the enemy and captured five. We had four killed in the operation. While this was going one battalion of the 101 C Regiment moved into the area west of Hwy 14E and tried to ambush one of our armored cav platoons. The platoon reacted very quickly and slid around in back of them. We had two men killed, two wounded. We killed ten of them, and captured more than ten weapons and 26 packs.

Down south in the Darlac area we have our 2d Brigade operating, with two battalions. There has been one major contact in which the NVA tried to attack a fire base. The 1/22 Inf killed 25 of them, and had two men wounded. (Chart 7). Since that time there have been small contacts in the area. In the month of November the 2d Bde killed 78 and captured 11. In Pleiku we have killed a total of 68 and captured 6. The overall casualties resulting from only actions in the Highlands are as shown on this last chart - 1374 enemy killed while we lost 310. That generally speaking, gentlemen, has been the battle for the Highlands.

PAGE 11 OF 11 PAGES

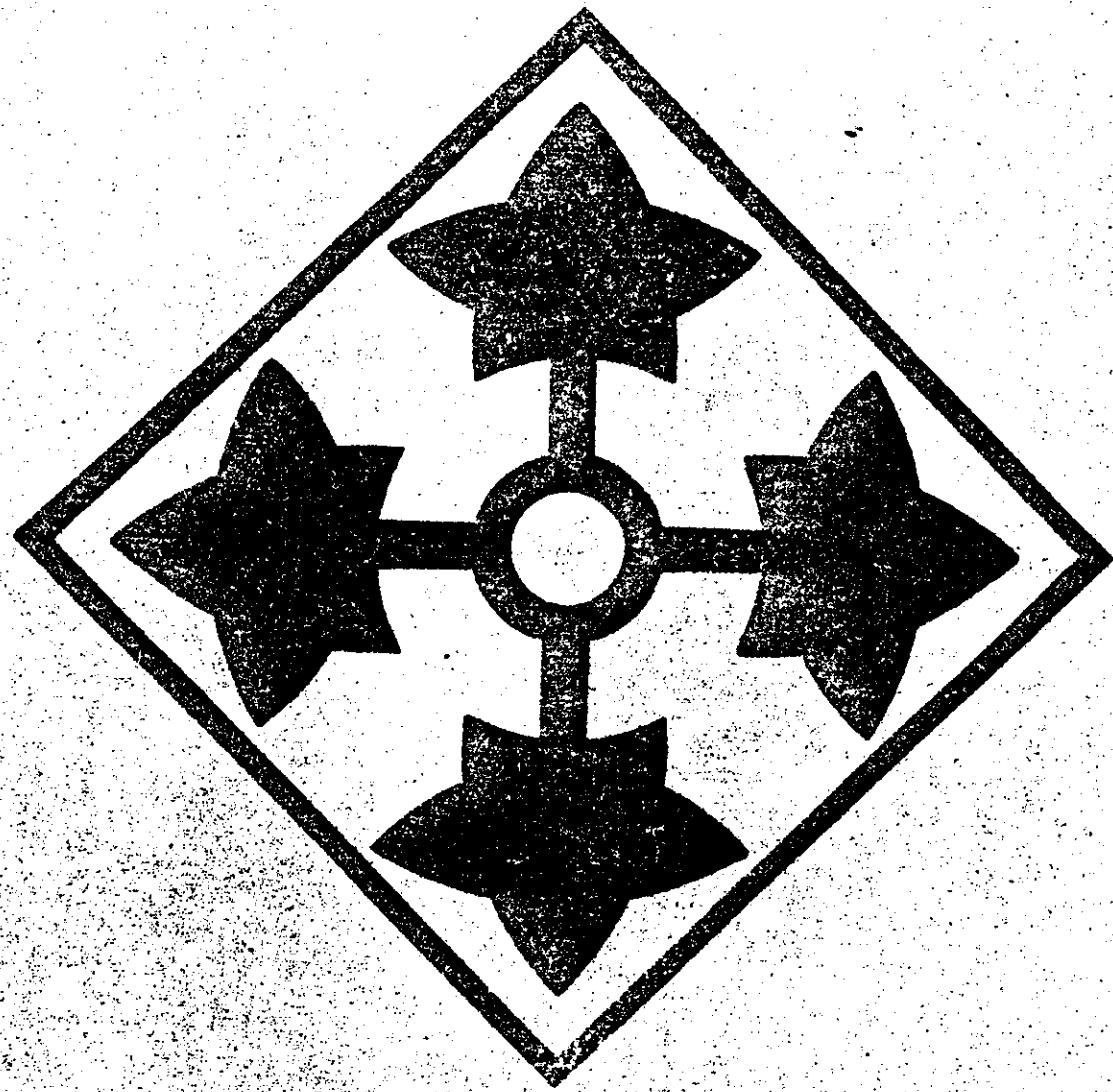
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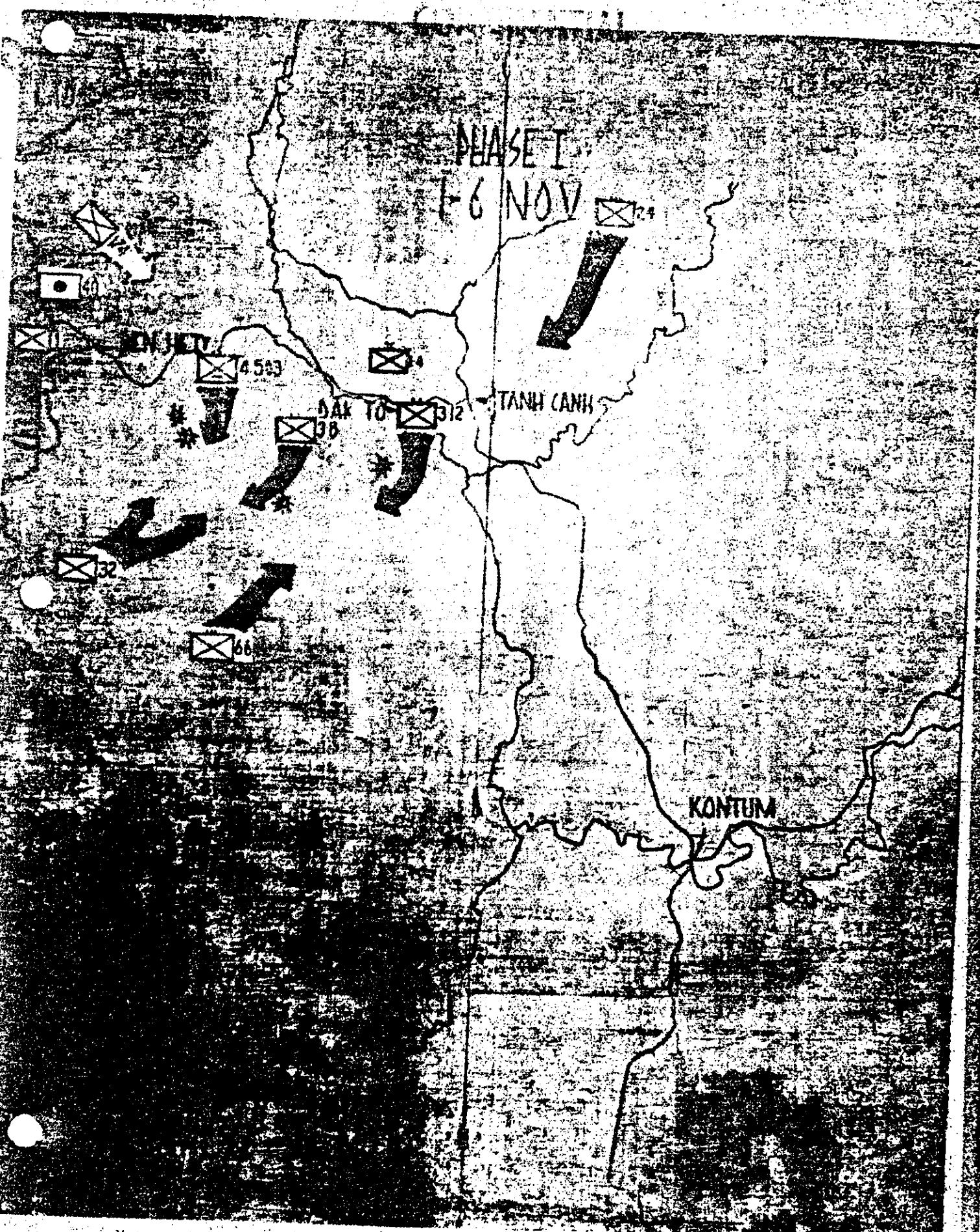


INFANTRY DIVISION

Cover Chart

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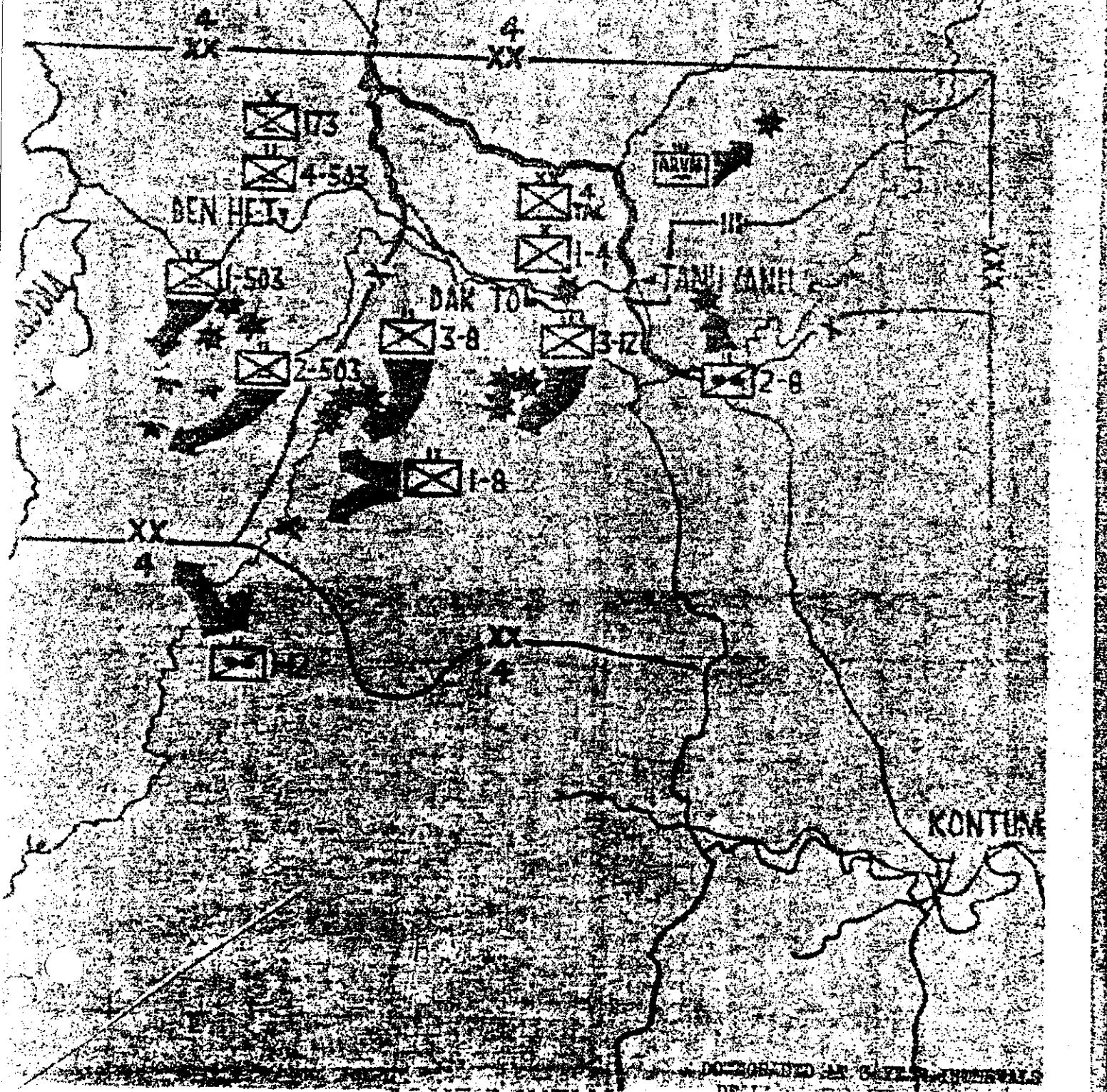
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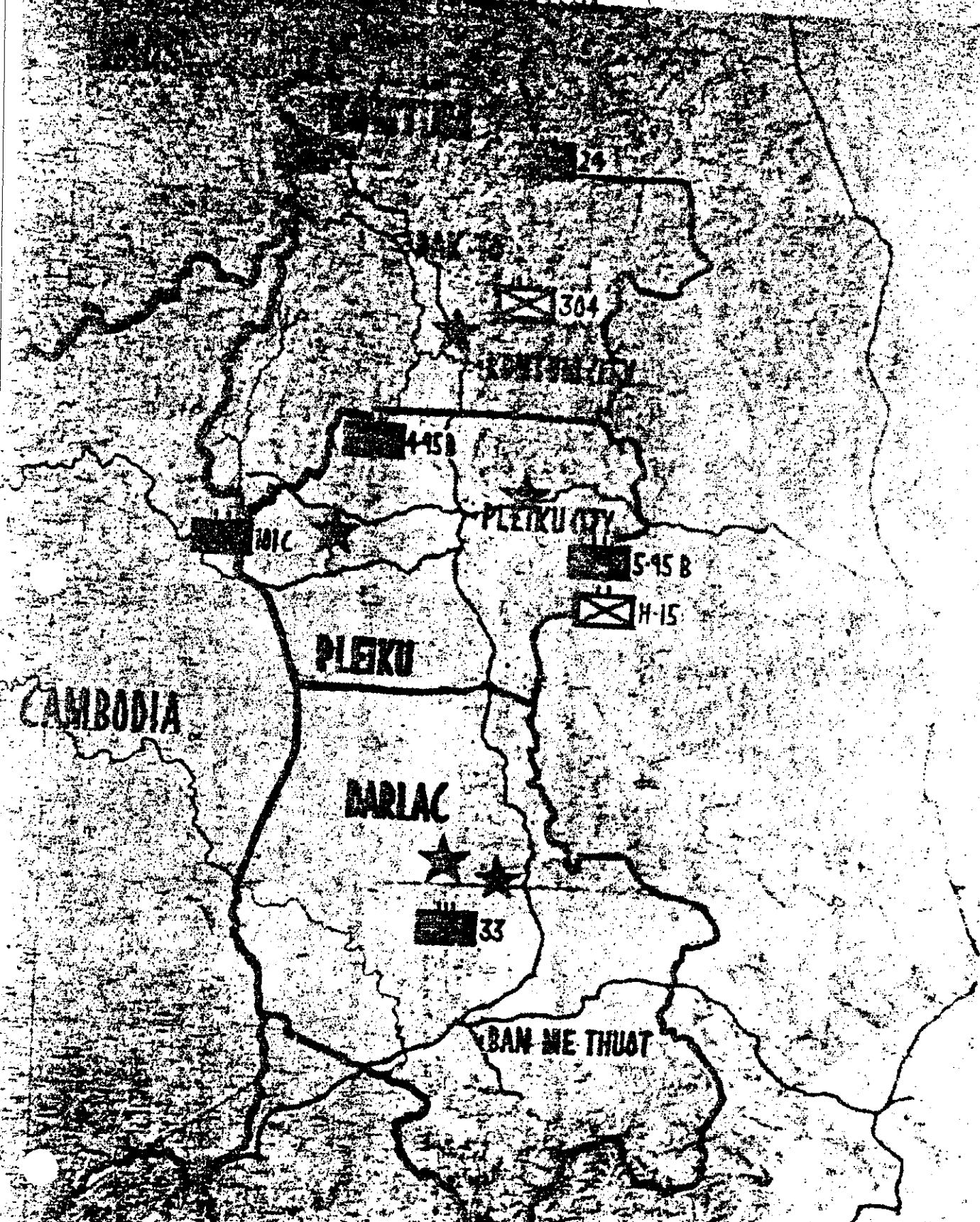
Chart 3
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RESULTS
DAK TO AREA

	ENEMY	FRIENDLY
KIA	CIA	WPNS
US	1227	16
ARVN	417	3
TOTAL	1644	19
	302	121
	290	73
		363
		KIA

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ENEMY		FRIENDLY	
KIA	CIA	WPN'S	KIA
1227	16	302	290
DAK TO			5
PLEIKU	68	6	
DARLAC	79	11	64
TOTAL	1374	33	403
			310

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Chart 7