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VIETNAM



OPERATION ATTLEBORO **The Wolfhounds' Brave Stand**

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Above: James Dietz's *Hot LZ* illustrates the kind of reception that met members of the Army's 196th Light Infantry Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, in November 1966 during Phase II of Operation Attleboro (story, P. 38).

Cover: U.S. troops move out from a landing zone in 1966 after being inserted by a Bell UH-1B Huey of the 118th Assault Helicopter Company "Thunderbirds."

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Operation Attleboro began innocently enough on September 14, 1966, as a training exercise for the newly arrived 196th Light Infantry Brigade. After landing in Vietnam the month before, the brigade had established a base camp in Tay Ninh in western War Zone C. To give the green troops some combat experience, the brigade conducted a series of search-and-destroy operations eastward some 20 kilometers from its base camp to the edge of the Michelin rubber plantation and the town of Dau Tieng, where a forward brigade command post and an artillery fire-support base were established.

Composed of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry (2/1), the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry (3/21), the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry (4/31),

and the 3rd Battalion, 82nd Artillery (equipped with 105mm guns), the brigade was under the command of Brig. Gen. Edward H. DeSaussure, a former assistant division commander of the 25th Infantry Division at nearby Cu Chi and an artilleryman whose experience had been primarily in nuclear weapons delivery systems.

During what would later be called Phase I, the American soldiers made a series of light contacts with local Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas and uncovered a number of enemy caches of rice, arms and equipment. In late October, intelligence was received that the 9th VC Division was moving into the area. A Main Force unit, the 9th VC Division consisted of the 271st, 272nd and 273rd VC regiments and the attached 101st North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment.

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An infantryman directs a Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopter onto a landing zone during the opening stages of Operation Attleboro. What began as a training operation soon turned into a desperate battle to survive for troops of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, who were surrounded by a Main Force Viet Cong division. **Inset:** A Wolfhound officer explains his position to headquarters via radio outside the Michelin rubber plantation near Dau Tieng.

PHOTOS: NATIONAL ARCHIVES



Operation Attleboro **THE WOLFHOOUNDS' BRAVE STAND**

The Dau Tieng relief mission had the makings of a tactical disaster, but leadership, initiative and courage snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

*As told by Maj. Gen. Guy S. Meloy,
U.S. Army (ret.)*

To reinforce the 196th Brigade to meet that threat, the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry (1/27)—nicknamed "Wolfhounds" because of the wolf's head on its regimental crest denoting its service with the 1918-19 Siberian Expeditionary Force—was ordered to Dau Tieng. Under the command of Major Guy S. Meloy, who was on the promotion list to lieutenant colonel and had already served six months in Vietnam as an adviser to the Vietnamese Airborne Division, the 1/27 was airlifted into Dau Tieng on November 1, 1966. Phase II of Attleboro was about to begin.

Twenty-six years later, Maj. Gen. Meloy, now retired, presented a two-hour lecture on the battle near Dau Tieng to the officers of the Wolfhounds, now stationed at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.

The following interview was extracted from those December 1992 remarks, as well as his later remarks during an October 1996 interview conducted by retired U.S. Army Colonel John F. Votaw at the 1st Infantry Division Museum.

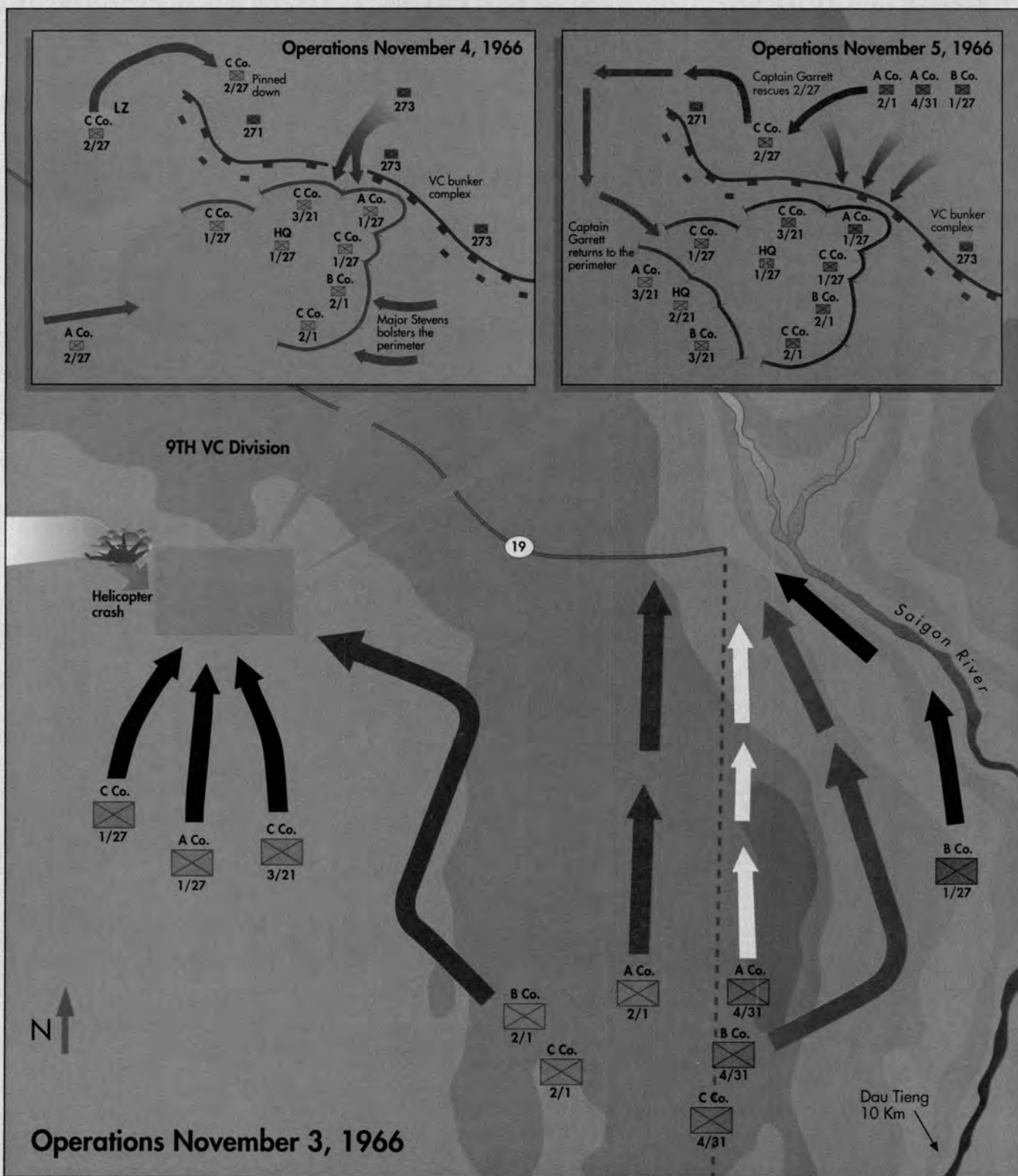
General Meloy, who received the Distinguished Service Cross for bravery and a Purple Heart for wounds suffered in action during the Attleboro fight, later returned to Vietnam to command the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, in 1970-71. He then served as commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division from 1978 to 1981, prior to his retirement in 1982. General Meloy now lives in Austin, Texas. The general's remarks were transcribed under his guidance into a question-and-answer format by Colonel Harry

G. Summers, Jr., editor of *Vietnam Magazine*—who also was wounded during Operation Attleboro while serving as the operations officer of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry, 1st Infantry Division.

Vietnam: Was the brigade tactical plan for Phase II sound?

Meloy: Unfortunately not. It was flawed from the start. The initial plan on November 2, 1966, directed me to send one rifle company some 10 kilometers to the northwest of Dau Tieng and another rifle company some 10 kilometers to the northeast, splitting my battal-

ion in the face of a superior enemy force. That's a terrible violation of basic Army tactical doctrine. The overgrown triple-canopy jungle in the area was so dense that it often took more than an hour to move 500 meters, and even that pace could not be sustained for long. That meant it was impossible for the rifle companies to be mutually supporting, another violation of basic tactical doctrine. To make matters worse, two other battalion task forces from 2/1 and 4/31 were to attack on four parallel axes—designated Red, White, Blue and



On November 3, 1966, Captain Frederick Henderson's C Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Brigade (1/27), 25th Infantry Division, was inserted in dense jungle northwest of two other battalion task forces that were to attack the 9th Viet Cong Division on four parallel axes—designated Red, White, Blue and Purple—near Dau Tieng. Command and control of the separate attacks proved impossible, and in the protracted firefight that followed during the next two days, Major Guy S. Meloy's 1/27 was reinforced piecemeal with 11 rifle companies.

Purple—between my two rifle companies.

VN: That sounds like a recipe for disaster.

Meloy: The plan was ludicrous. Command and control of the separate attacks was impossible. There was no linkup plan whatsoever. There was no appreciation of either the terrain or the enemy. I had a rather heated discussion with DeSaussure before the operation began. But since I was a major at the time and he was a brigadier general, obviously I lost.

VN: How did the fight begin?

Meloy: On November 3 my C Company, under the command of Captain Frederick H. Henderson, landed in a landing zone (LZ) to the northwest and soon thereafter made contact with what we later learned was the Reconnaissance Company of the 9th VC Division, which was guarding a large enemy base camp. A major fire-fight broke out, six C Company soldiers were killed and six wounded, including the company commander. The "dustoffs" (medical evacuation helicopters) were driven off by the intensity of the enemy fire. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and I had to get on the ground.

VN: How did you manage that?

Meloy: In what I call "dumb decision No. 1," I asked my command-and-control helicopter pilot to fly low over the LZ at about 10 knots, and the battalion command sergeant major, my artillery fire-support coordinator, our three radio operators and I jumped out. The command sergeant major was hit instantly, and the helicopter took several rounds but was able to keep flying.

VN: What did you do then?

Meloy: That's when I made "dumb decision No. 2." Captain Henderson and 1st Sgt. Sam Solomon from C Company, 1/27, had made their way out to the LZ. I crawled out to see how badly they were wounded and found out they were both still alive but sinking fast. I think I let my emotions overrule my common sense. I called "Hornet," the 116th Assault Aviation Company that supported us, for a helicopter to evacuate them, and almost immediately two gutsy warrant officers volunteered and came in through a hail of automatic-weapons fire at about 150 knots. But when the chopper flared to land, there was a huge explosion and it fell like a rock. Henderson saw it happen, then looked at me as if to say "Thanks for trying" and died. Solomon raised up on one elbow, shook his head as if to comment on the sacrifice the helicopter crew had made, then also died. The helicopter crew chief on the right was killed, and the other crew chief broke his leg, but somehow those two wonderful pilots survived without injury.

VN: How did you deal with the deteriorating situation on the ground at that time?

Meloy: The first thing was to order my A Company, commanded by Captain Richard D. Cole, which was then securing the airstrip at Dau Tieng, to immediately move by helicopter to reinforce C Company. I also ordered B Company, commanded by Captain Robert B. Garrett, which had earlier been helilifted to the northeast, to move overland to the fight. But the B Company order was countermanded by brigade headquarters.

VN: Why did DeSaussure override that order?

Meloy: I really don't know. I can only assume he wanted to adhere to his original plan. But he did order C Company, 3/21, under the command of Captain Richard deVries, to move from Tay Ninh to reinforce me. Not only that, but unbeknownst to me he also ordered B and C companies, 2/1, under the command of the battalion S3 (operations officer), Major Ed Stevens, to be helilifted from the Red axis to reinforce my position.

VN: You didn't have any advance warning that the 2/1 companies had been put under your command?

Meloy: I didn't know it until they were on the ground and contacted me by radio. It was a pattern that would be repeated again and again during the fight.

VN: So by the end of the first day you had five rifle companies under your command—two from 1/27, one from 3/21 and two from 2/1. How did you employ them?

Meloy: I used A Company, 1/27, and C Company, 3/21, to envelop and capture the enemy base camp, keeping C Company, 1/27, in



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Equipped with a pistol and a probing stick, a member of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade searches for arms caches near the Saigon River.

reserve, and integrated B and C companies, 2/1, into our night defensive position.

VN: What kind of fire support did you have?

Meloy: When I reported in to the brigade I brought with me my artillery fire-support coordinator, Captain Bart A. McIlroy, and my direct-support artillery battery—A Battery, 1st Battalion, 8th Artillery. Their 105mm M2 howitzers had a maximum effective range of 11 kilometers, and we were operating near that maximum range. We requested reinforcing fire from the 196th Brigade artillery but were initially turned down. In any event, during the entire operation some 14,000 rounds of artillery were fired in our support, coming in as close as 25 meters to our front. In addition to Army helicopter gunships, I also had a great Air Force forward air controller (FAC) overhead for most of the battle, and he brought in some 40 airstrikes of iron bombs and napalm, most within 50 to 100 meters. He also served initially as my radio relay back to Dau Tieng.

VN: Were the brigade orders for the next day, November 4, any improvement on the initial order?

Meloy: Not hardly. The next morning the assistant brigade S3 appeared at my command post with a map. The 2/1 companies were supposed to move overland some three kilometers and resume their original attack on the Red axis. I was to attack northeast to an arbitrary location along Route 9, the so-called Ghost Trail, and link up with my B Company, which would attack to the west from its present position.

VN: How did that play out?



WOLFHOUND MUSEUM, SCHOFIELD BARRACKS, HAWAII

Major Meloy was wounded on November 4 but refused evacuation until the firefight ended. In this photo, taken on November 5, Meloy (left) is assisted by Captain Lowell J. Mayone, the assistant battalion operations officer (holding the radio), and Major Hal Myrah, Meloy's executive officer.

Meloy: To avoid any friendly-fire problems I gave Major Stevens and his 2/1 companies a two-hour head start before I moved out to the northeast. We ran into a VC concrete bunker complex, the only time I saw such fortifications in Vietnam. It was manned by the 273rd VC Regiment, and they immediately tried to outflank us. The fire was so heavy that everyone in the battalion command group except one radio operator was wounded. I went into a horseshoe-shaped defensive position with my A Company on the right from 12 o'clock to 3. A platoon from C Company stretched from 3 to 4. On the left, C Company, 3/21, was deployed from 12 to 9, and two platoons from C Company were positioned from 9 to 7.

VN: Did you ask for reinforcements?

Meloy: Initially I could not reach the brigade tactical operations center at Dau Tieng because my only communications were by PRC-25 radios, which had short antennas. Later, my assistant S3 at the rear command post managed to commandeer a helicopter and provide an aerial relay, as did the Air Force FAC. And my operations sergeant, Roy Burdette—under heavy machine-gun fire—assembled and raised a 292 antenna that enabled me to talk directly to Dau Tieng. Meanwhile, I got in contact with Major Stevens, told him I needed help and asked him to return. He took some casualties getting back to me, and when he closed on my position I deployed his two companies on my right flank.

VN: Were those your only reinforcements?

Meloy: The 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry (2/27), my sister battalion from the 25th Infantry Division, commanded by Lt. Col. William C. Barrott, had been ordered to Dau Tieng to replace my A Company, and their C Company was already on the ground. General DeSaussure, with no coordination with me, sent that company to reinforce me. Bill Barrott decided to accompany them. I first found out about that when Barrott called me on my battalion command net from his helicopter and told me he was 10 minutes out. That was my first warning that I was getting another unit.

VN: What were your orders for the 2/27 element?

Meloy: I gave Bill an LZ located about two kilometers west of my perimeter. I told him to move due east until he crossed an open field and then turn due north into my position. That was a major mistake on my part, for it violated Murphy's law—anything that can be misinterpreted will be.

VN: What went wrong?

Meloy: My directions were evidently not clear. I should have said move on an azimuth of zero-niner-zero, then three-six-zero. Instead of going east and then north, the 2/27 element went north and then east and ended up about 100 meters north of the fight with the enemy force between us. The next thing I heard was from a Pfc Wallace, the radio-telephone operator for the C Company, 2/27, commander, who told me they had gotten into a fight trying to get to me and that both the company commander and the battalion commander had been killed. Although I found out later that a surviving lieutenant had taken command of the company and did a great job in holding them together, the only contact I had with C Company, 2/27, for the rest of the battle was with Pfc Wallace.

VN: Why didn't they just break contact and withdraw?

Meloy: They couldn't. They were so shot up that they didn't have enough men to carry out their own wounded.

VN: That must have really complicated the situation.

Meloy: It was the pivotal point of the entire battle. It hampered our ability to call in artillery fire to our front and restricted full use of firepower by the rifle company opposite them, since friendly fire was overshooting the enemy bunkers and landing in the C Company, 2/27, position. I had a gut feeling the enemy did not know the precise location of C Company, 2/27, and I imposed a strict ceasefire on them for fear they would reveal their exact position. Although their position was probed three times during the night, they maintained strict fire discipline and did not return enemy fire. Meanwhile the rest of the 2/27 landed, and I used them to clear the LZ so that our own wounded could be evacuated and resupply could be brought in. The priority was on ammunition, water and med-

ical supplies. To my knowledge there was no food resupply throughout the entire operation.

VN: By now you had eight rifle companies under your command. Did you try to break through to C Company, 2/27?

Meloy: Twice during the night of November 4-5 I tried to relieve them in place and bring them out. First I ordered C Company, 2/1, to make a night attack through what we thought was a gap in the right flank to penetrate the enemy lines and get C Company, 2/27, out. But they were repulsed with five dead and eight wounded. Then, at first light, I ordered A Company, 2/27, under the command of Captain Robert F. Foley, to attack through what appeared to be another gap to the front. But there was no gap, and a major firefight ensued. Captain Foley received the Medal of Honor for his actions there, as did Pfc John F. Baker, Jr., but that attack also was unable to break through to C Company, 2/27.

VN: What was the status of your B Company?

Meloy: Captain Garrett, the B Company, 1/27, commander, had initially attacked to the west to join me and in the process ambushed an NVA platoon that was moving to reinforce the enemy to my front. But he was ordered by General DeSaussure to return to the east, where he rendezvoused about five kilometers from the battle with A Company, 2/1, the 2/1 command group, A Company, 4/31, and the 4/31 command group. The next morning, November 5, Garrett told the two battalion commanders that he didn't know what they were going to do, but he was moving "to the sound of the guns" to reinforce his battalion. The commanders of 2/1 and 4/31 and their rifle companies initially accompanied him, but when they got almost to the fight the two battalion commanders—either on orders from DeSaussure or on their own initiative—decided to return to the east with their command groups. But oddly enough, they left their two rifle companies with Captain Garrett. I never did figure that one out. Garrett, who was north of the beleaguered C Company, 2/27, position, on his own initiative formed an ad hoc task group consisting of A Company, 2/1, A Company, 4/31, and B Company, 1/27. This now gave me command of 11 rifle companies. After coordinating artillery with him, I told Garrett to attack to the south to relieve C Company, 2/27.

VN: Was his attack successful?

Meloy: Remarkably so. By noon they had reached the C Company, 2/27, position, sustaining only one casualty en route. I directed them to recover the wounded and evacuate the remainder of the company around the right flank of the enemy position and then head south into my defensive position. That move was completed by 1600 hours on November 5.

VN: What happened next?

Meloy: Earlier that morning, Brig. Gen. John R. Deane, Jr., the assistant division commander of the 1st Infantry Division had appeared out of nowhere and asked for a briefing on my tactical situation. Later that day, Maj. Gen. William E. DePuy, the commander of the 1st Division, appeared and asked if I really had eight companies. I told him that since I had briefed General Deane I had been given three more and was now up to 11. He was rather astonished and told me he wanted to relieve us with a brigade from the 1st Division. That marked the end of Phase II of Attleboro and the beginning of Phase III. The relief involved breaking

contact with the enemy and withdrawing about a kilometer to the south through 1st Division units deployed to my rear.

VN: That sounds like a most difficult task.

Meloy: It was. Five of my 11 companies were still in direct contact—within 20 meters of the enemy—so it was impossible to withdraw without their knowing it. The first thing I did was send my six companies that were not in contact to the rear, where they were later evacuated by helicopter to their base camps. Then came the tricky part—breaking contact on the ground.

VN: How did you do it?

Meloy: I pulled the companies back one at a time. First I had the artillery ready to shoot on my command directly on top of their defensive positions. I called each company commander and asked if he was ready. When each commander said "Roger," I told my artillery fire-support coordinator to fire. As soon as he said "Shot" (i.e., rounds on the way), I told the company commander "Go!" The artillery rounds had about a 70-second time in flight. In that 70 seconds the rifle company pulled back about 50 meters, firing as they went. The rounds then landed on their previous position. I repeated that procedure until all of my companies were out of contact and had passed through the 1st Division's combat outpost line at the edge of the jungle. I don't think you'll find that tactic in any book, but it worked.

VN: Once the dust settled, what were the final casualty figures for Phase II of Operation Attleboro?



Armored personnel carriers struggle through the dense underbrush typical of the Attleboro terrain. The triple-canopy jungle was so thick that it often took more than an hour to move 500 meters.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Members of the 196th cross a stream on a log bridge that had been constructed by North Vietnamese units. As Meloy's forces struggled through the jungle to relieve C Company, 2/27, they ran into large numbers of enemy troops—as well as a VC concrete bunker complex.

Meloy: I'm not sure, but I've been told that the official enemy casualties were 700 wounded in action and 200 killed in action. Friendly casualties over the November 3–5 period for the entire 11 rifle companies in the 1/27 Task Force were 159 wounded and 60 killed, of which 54 wounded and 12 killed were from 1/27 itself.

VN: It is a matter of historical record that General DeSaussure, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade commander, was relieved as a result of his actions during the Attleboro operation. What are your thoughts on his relief?

Meloy: It was not until two or three days after DeSaussure was relieved that I became aware of it. I was not asked for any advice or comment beforehand, of course. But I was asked several direct questions by General DePuy on the afternoon of November 5 when he came up to coordinate my withdrawal and found that I was commanding 11 rifle companies. He asked when I had last talked with DeSaussure on the radio, and I told him it had been at least 48 hours. He then asked when was the last time I had actually had physical contact with DeSaussure, and I told him it had been on the evening of November 2 at Dau Tieng when I got in a heated discussion with him about the original tactical plan. He asked me when was the last time I had talked with anyone in the 196th Brigade Tactical Operations Center, and I told him that I had seen the brigade S3 on the morning of November 4 and that was the only contact throughout the engagement. DePuy also asked if I had asked for all those reinforcements that had appeared almost out of nowhere, and I told him that I had asked for some of them, but most just suddenly reported in piecemeal on my battalion command net. I was told by several others that it was DePuy, under the authority of the acting corps-level II Field Force commander, Maj. Gen. Fred Weyand (who also commanded the 25th Infantry Division), who actually relieved DeSaussure. The details were way above my pay grade, so I don't know whether that was true or not.

VN: What was the major lesson you drew from Attleboro?

Meloy: You must remember that when Attleboro started, except

for my own three rifle company commanders, I did not know any of the other eight company commanders who eventually served under me. To this day I have never met four of them. I've never even talked to them, I can still remember their radio call signs, but I don't know their names. But when they got on the ground, they were immediately responsive. When I gave an order to "Fighter Alpha Six," for example, all I got was a "Roger." I didn't know "Fighter Alpha Six" (i.e., the commander of A Company, 2/1) from a hole in the ground, and that goes for most of those guys. The fact that we were all speaking from the same sheet of music was the greatest tribute to the Army's schooling system that you could ask. We all spoke the same tactical language, we all communicated exactly the same, we were imbued with the same basic fundamental doctrine, we had the same basic tactics and techniques of the individual soldier, we were all using the same equipment. It was a real tribute to the discipline of the Army that I never got any "say again" or "say what" when I gave an order. All I got was a "Roger." And remember, they didn't know me either, except as a voice over the radio. But we had a common heritage and spoke a common language, and that's why we were able to whip the enemy's butt. □

Suggestions for further reading: Ambush: The Battle of Dau Tieng. Also Called the Battle of Dong Ming Chau, War Zone C, Operation Attleboro and Other Deadfalls in South Vietnam, by S.L.A. Marshall (Cowles); and The Rise and Fall of the American Army, by Shelby L. Stanton (Presidio).

ETI To read another perspective on Operation Attleboro, go to <http://www.thehistorynet.com> on the World Wide Web and see "Operation Attleboro: The 196th Light Infantry Brigade's Baptism of Fire," by Colonel Charles Nolsen, Jr. (3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry), which will be published beginning the week of September 8, 1997.