



PHASE I ONLY

The area of Operation Junction City — At the heart of it was FSB Gold. Junction City was the first of the big US sweep operations designed to clear the area close to the Cambodian border known as War Zone C. Beginning in February 1967 and lasting just under a month, it involved 22 US and 4 ARVN battalions and resulted in nearly 2,300 enemy killed or captured.

firing drill. He'd call out fire instructions and observe the men's actions. He secretly delighted to see the young men's reactions as they realized the old general knew their business as well as they did. Half way through the mission he ordered the men to fall out. Then he examined the levelling bubbles to see if they were properly set and verified that the gun was pointed at the aiming stake. If a battery came up short in any area he reported this fact to the divisional commander. Seldom did he have to make such a report twice.

Sometimes infantry generals relieved officers on the spot during a field inspection. This occurred when a general felt that the officers were not equal to the rigorous test of combat. These artillery officers served in a less pressured situation. Thus, their mistakes were not so severely penalized. Crittenberger never found the need to relieve an officer based on one of his inspections.

After a day in the field the general returned to headquarters. Perhaps that night he would stay up to chat with his staff, to talk shop, to try again to figure out how best to use his powerful artillery against the elusive enemy.

In the early spring of 1967, hours of meetings, careful planning, and preparation came to a climax out in a jungle clearing 55 miles northwest of Saigon.

American helicopters descended toward a blighted, tear-shaped opening in the forest. Chemical defoliants had partially created this clearing and planners intended to use it for a new fire support base, to be known as Fire Support Base Gold. This base would support a major operation called Junction City that was designed to clear the notorious War Zone C. The fire base would be smack in the middle of this war zone. However, heavy enemy contact was not expected.

Just as the first helicopters landed five tremendous explosions rocked the small clearing. Like crippled insects three choppers plummeted to the ground while six others limped away badly damaged. Anticipating an American landing, the Viet Cong had rigged heavy explosive charges and triggered them when the helicopters were at their most vulnerable.

When the smoke cleared 15 American soldiers

were dead and 28 more wounded. It was an evil beginning.

Nonetheless, helicopters continued to ferry the men of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry into the landing zone. Soon the men and equipment of the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery joined them. The work of building a position for the guns began. For the entire next day the soldiers prepared their defensive positions. Worries about the terrible landing faded. Perhaps there would be no more heavy contact.

Shortly before dawn on the second morning, 20 March 1967, a patrol operating outside the defensive perimeter reported movement. Everyone tensed in anticipation of some kind of combat. Minutes ticked by slowly and nothing happened. Apparently it was a false alarm caused by some tired, jumpy infantry.

Two hours later a heavy mortar barrage crashed into the American position. Simultaneously the patrol outside the perimeter reported they were under attack. A massed enemy assault overwhelmed the patrol killing or wounding most of its men. The men inside the perimeter could not worry about the patrol's fate; they were fighting for their own lives.

Hard on the heels of the mortar bombardment, the enemy opened fire with machine guns and recoilless rifles. Their bullets and shells ranged back and forth across the perimeter.

Any damage caused by this bombardment was a bonus for the VC. Its main purpose was to force the Americans to shelter; a defender hunkered down in his foxhole could not see or use his weapon effectively. Just as American artillery tried to suppress the enemy's fire during an ambush, so the VC/NVA used their heaviest weapons—mortars, rockets, and recoilless rifles—to suppress the American fire. Once the intense bombardment had served its purpose the enemy would send in waves of attacking soldiers.

From inside the perimeter, the artillery battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel John Vessey, Jr., organized his defense. In spite of the stunning bombardment his artillerymen worked fast to return the enemy fire. Initially the enemy shelling seemed the biggest threat, so the artillery fired back at the sites where the mortars might be located. Priorities changed when the defending American infantry of



Lt. Col. John Vessey, Jr., —led the defense of FSB Gold. He later became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



Digging in
—Grunts of the
4th Infantry
Division filling
sandbags near
Ban Me Thout.
Building
extensive bases
has long been
an American
specialty, but
when you can
expect to be
under fire in the
bunker you are
digging, the
quality of work
goes up.

B Company radioed to Vessey's headquarters near the middle of the perimeter that Viet Cong soldiers had penetrated their lines and that they needed help fast.

Leaving their guns, the men of the 77th Artillery grabbed rifles and grenades and counterattacked the enemy breakthrough. They fought their way to the frontline defensive positions where they joined the infantry who were facing repeated VC assaults. Within half an hour of the first shelling, a forward air controller arrived overhead to coordinate air strikes against the Viet Cong. Simultaneously two batteries of 105mm howitzers positioned at nearby bases began shelling the enemy. The careful planning that positioned fire support bases in locations where they could help one another was paying off. Soon the frontline defenders called for the howitzer shells to fall just 100 meters in front of their positions. Such perilously close support was necessary because the brave enemy infantry were pressing their attacks right into point-blank range of the defenders. The artillerymen bore-sighted their pieces by squinting along the depressed gun tubes or actually looking through the open breech and out the muzzle. No fancy fire direction calculations were needed. The enemy was that close. Like waves eating away at a sand beach, successive VC assaults lapped closer and closer to the American position.

Infantry platoons from several places around the perimeter reported they were being overrun by human wave attacks. Air strikes came in terribly close to the American lines but even these failed to stem the flow. The forward air controller's plane crashed after being hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire.

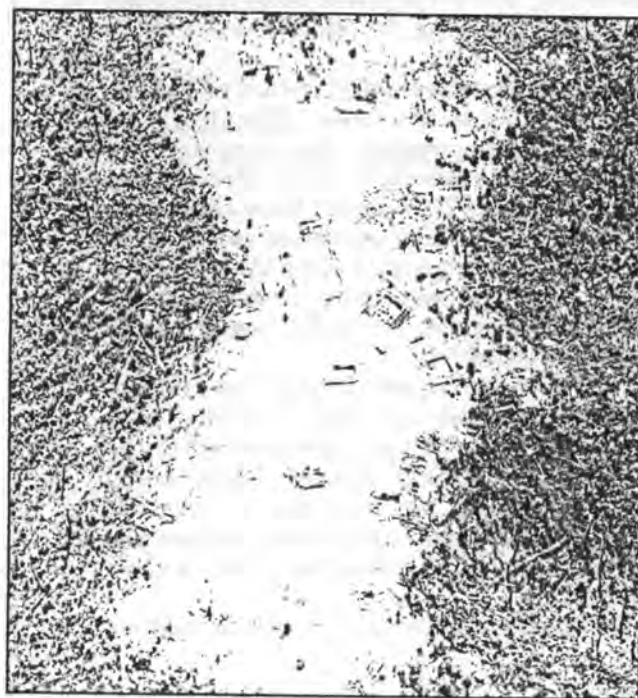
At this desperate juncture an infantry leader called to the artillery to ask for "beehive" rounds—containers filled with hundreds of metal darts—directly into his position. The gunners responded by sending these massive shotgun-like rounds screaming through the American position. They hoped the friendlies would be protected by their dug-in positions while the exposed enemy would be hit.

Six minutes later the same American commander reported that a new enemy attack had broken through and that his men were running out of ammunition. The dwindling American infantry reserve, just 20 men, attacked toward them in order

to deliver more ammunition. A quarter of an hour of hellish combat ensued and then the artillery received a report that another section of the perimeter had been overrun.

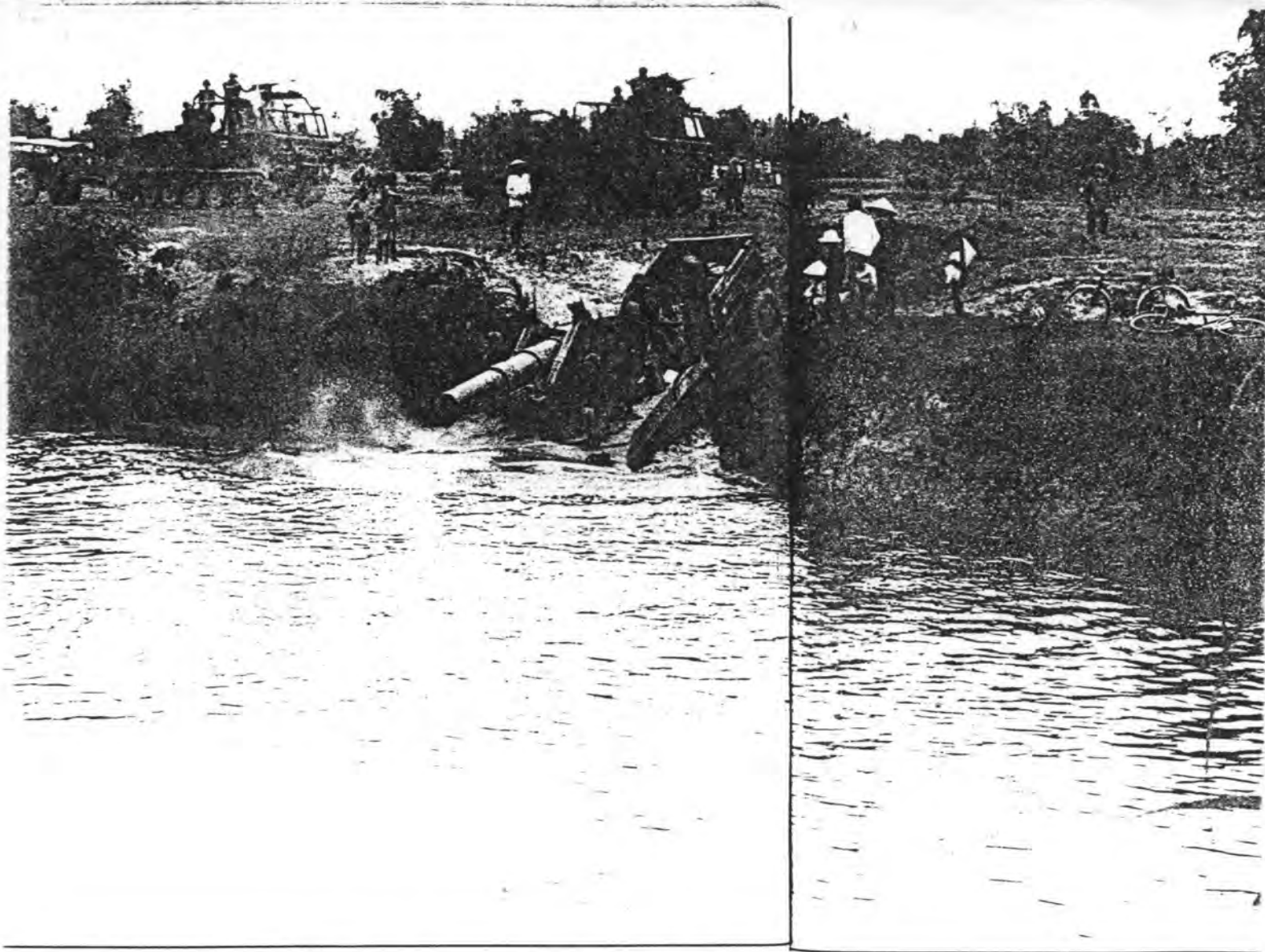
Enemy rockets had knocked out the crew of one of the quad .50 machine guns sited to defend FSB Gold. Without this weapon the Americans could not hold. As the infantry fell back the VC swarmed around the quad .50, turning it to face the remaining defenders. Seventy-five yards away an American 105mm howitzer crew calmly depressed the weapon's barrel. In the nick of time their first shot destroyed the overrun weapon.

A little over two hours into the fight half the American defenders had been pushed back from their initial positions into a final defensive perimeter. This allowed the Viet Cong to infiltrate right into the heart of FSB Gold. Soon enemy grenadiers were lobbing their deadly explosives into the command post and aid station from just five yards away. Throughout the perimeter furious hand-to-hand combat was going on as the defenders used whatever weapons they could lay their hands on



GHOST BASE:

Aerial view of an abandoned FSB in the A Shau valley. Formerly home to a battery of the 101st Airborne Division, it had been picked bare before being abandoned. US troops knew that whatever they left behind would be salvaged by an enemy much-practiced in living off the land. To the NVA everything had a use; even old C-ration cans were recycled to make casings for homemade mines and grenades.



including shovels, chain saws, and bowie knives. The American artillerymen fought for their lives.

Colonel Vessey and his staff helped man the howitzers, firing beehive rounds over open sights against the enemy who stood at the impossibly close ranges of 15 to 50 meters. In a combat that would have seemed more appropriate at the Battle of Waterloo than in a war fought in high-tech modern society, the gunners fired pointblank canister into the faces of an enemy who refused to yield. Each

beehive container sent 8,000 flechettes (missiles) tearing into the enemy ranks. The supply of beehive rounds was exhausted, still the Viet Cong attacked. The gunners switched to high explosive shells set with a minimum fuse. The shells exploded at almost the instant they left the howitzer barrel. From outside the supporting artillery and jet aircraft blasted enemy positions. Incredible precision under stress was required as the jets and artillery dropped their