852 killed against 50 [illegible] Vietnamese dead, [illegible] Vietnamese.

Meanwhile, a few miles south of Loc Ninh, where the Iron Triangle and War Zone C virtually merged, another brigade of the 1st Infantry Division encountered one of the most costly enemy ambushes of the war. As an American infantry battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Terry de la Mesa Allen, Jr., whose father had led the Big Red One during World War II in North Africa and Sicily, searched the jungle for an elusive VC regiment, enemy fire suddenly erupted from all sides. Colonel Allen was among those cut down in the first burst. When the battalion's operations officer, Major Donald W. Holleder, who had been an All-America end at West Point in 1954, tried to reach the battalion to take command, VC fire killed him too. Although the VC lost 103 men killed, they took a heavy toll of the American battalion: 55 killed, 66 wounded.

#10 OPS

SHENANDOAH II

On 29 September the 1st Infantry Division launched Operation SHENANDOAH II, a two-pronged operation by the Division's 1st and 3d Brigades combining search and destroy missions with road clearing and improvement. SHENANDOAH II initially covered an area from slightly south of Lai Khe, north approximately 18 miles and west to the edge of the Michelin Rubber Plantation, with the 3d Brigade's operational area being in the lower half of this area and the 1st Brigade operating in the upper half. The area of operation was expanded later to include the Loc Ninh area. The operation began with the 1st Brigade's 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry (M) conducting search and destroy missions approximately 12 miles north of Lai Khe. The 3d Brigade entered the operation with the mission of securing, clearing and pushing back the jungle for 100 yeards along Highway 240, which runs from the village of Ben Cat, just south of Lai Khe, to the edge of the Michelin Rubber Plantation. Rome Plows from the 27th Land Clearing Platoon of the 168th Engineer Battalion began the jungle clearing task. The road was to be cleared and improved for use by US traffic and the jungle pushed back to reduce the hazard of snipers and provide an area for helicopters to land an assault force anywhere along the highway. Initially, enemy forces in the area avoided a major engagement. Then, at 0735 hours on 4 October the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry (M) was attacked by an unknown size enemy force approximately 10 kilometers southwest of Chon Thanh. Friendly forces were supported by air strikes and artillery until contact was broken at 1100 hours. During the 3½ hour battle the enemy lost 12 killed. Friendly losses were 4 killed and 27 wounded. In reaction to the attack the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry moved to Chon Thanh and then conducted an air assault approximately 11 kilometers southwest of Chon Thanh. West of the landing zone, the battalion found a base camp which contained a large number of bunkers. Air strikes were placed on the area resulting in 19 enemy killed in action. In the same general area a Light Fire Team engaged and killed 12 enemy. By the end of the day's operations, the enemy had lost 43 killed in action.

Battle of Chon Thanh October 1967

At 1435 hours on 6 October, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry while operating in the vicinity of the 4 October contact began receiving mortar fire. Sporadic mortar fire, small arms fire and automatic weapons fire continued until 1954 hours. At 2317 hours the battalion received mortar fire followed by a ground attack from an unknown size enemy force. The attack was repulsed at 2334 hours. The enemy left 1 of his dead on the battlefield; however, a search of the area the following day revealed an additional 24 enemy dead. On 27 October a rallier received by the battalion stated that he was with the unit that made the attack and that 59 members of his unit were killed. Friendly losses were 2 killed and 8 wounded.

The next major engagement occurred at 1008 hours 11 October when Company B, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry engaged an estimated 100-150 enemy approximately 31 kilometers west of Highway 13. The enemy fired from both ground and tree positions. When the enemy broke contact at 1045 hours, he left behind 21 of his dead. Friendly losses were 1 killed and 4 wounded.

At 0952 hours on 17 October A Company, 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, while conducting search and destroy operations 14 kilometers southwest of Chon Thanh received a heavy volume of small arms and automatic weapons fire from an estimated enemy regiment. Friendly forces were supported by artillery, mortars and air strikes. Sporadic enemy fire continued throughout the afternoon. Final results of the contact were 106 enemy killed. Friendly losses were 57 killed and 75 wounded.

We lost bodies out all day back to Lai Khe

Operation SHENANDOAH II was highlighted by battles that occurred in and around the Loc Ninh area during the period 29 - 31 Oct. Prior to the attack on 29 October 1967, the defenders at the District town of Loc Ninh (XU732108) consisted of elements of 2 South Vietnamese RF companies and 1 RF platoon and two American NCO advisors; additionally, one kilometer south was a South Vietnamese Special Forces camp (XU731081) with three companies (350 men) and six US Special Forces advisors. At 0115 hours the 273d Main Force Regiment (estimated strength of 1500) commenced a mortar and RPG-? rocket attack on the district headquarters compound (XU733088) along with heavy ground fire into the defenders position. Some 100 rounds of mortar fire and intense ground fires were also directed into the Special Forces camp as two battalions of the main force regiment made a ground attack at both locations. At 0220 hours this numerically superior force penetrated the northern half of the district compound perimeter and engaged the Regional Force positions in bunker to bunker fighting.

The District Chief stayed at his command post along with one of his US NCO advisors and one squad. The Regional Force units were forced to make a fighting withdrawal to firing positions in the southern half of the compound area, leaving the District Command bunker exposed. The District Chief continued to direct artillery fire and air strikes on the attackers and called for artillery fire on his own position. With such tactics, the enemy was held at bay until daylight when reinforcements arrived.

The 5th ARVN Division responded to the enemy attack immediately. Within a few minutes the 5th Division Reconnaissance Company and the 5th Division G2 Recondo Company from Phu Loi had been alerted to deploy to the battle area at first light. Arriving by 0900 hours, these two units along with two CIDG companies from the Special Forces camp who had been in contact since 0700 hours quickly organized and excuted a counterattack to regain the northern part of the subsector compound.

Directing this successful counterattack was the Province Chief who had arrived from Hon Quan, the province capital. He was accompanied by the Province Senior Military Advisor and by the 5th Division G3 Advisor. The battle in the compound raged until 1100 hours before the enemy was finally beaten. The compound was totally cleared of enemy elements by 1305 hours.

During the clearing of the subsector compound, it was found that the Viet Cong had barricaded themselve in the bunkers on the north end and it was necessary to blast them out. Not knowing which of these might contain friendly holdouts or wounded and to insure the safety of his own men, the Commanding General, 5th ARVN Division, who had arrived at the compound shortly after daylight, ordered three men teams to cover each other and check each bunker, placing a makeshift white flag in the ports of those which were empty or contained friendly troops. Utilizing 90mm recoilless rifle teams borrowed from a US 1st Infantry Division Company, other teams destroyed four to five bunkers in which VC were firmly entrenched. This feat was accomplished without loss of a man and attests to the resourcefulness of the division commander. It is noteworthy that the GVN flag, atop a tower in the south end of the compound, was never struck during the battle of Loc Ninh, contrary to some reports that the VC had replaced it with one of their own. After the district compound was cleared, the clearing of close in surrounding areas was initiated by predominantly ARVN forces. By 1515 hours ARVN forces were in control of the surrounding area; there was no further contact in the village. Other action occurred outside of Loc Ninh. At 0855 hours, a CIDG Company, which had been conducting operations northwest of Loc Ninh since 27 October had a 10 minute contact with enemy forces retreating westward from Loc Ninh. This contact forced an estimated enemy company into blocking positions maintained by the US 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry. At 1208 hours, this battalion engaged the enemy force for approximately one hour. Meanwhile other reinforcements had continued to arrive throughout the day until there were 2 US Infantry Companies and 2 US Artillery Batteries in a fire support patrol base at Loc Ninh airstrip in addition to 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry in blocking positions 4 kilometers to the west of the village. The ARVN 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry closed at 1835 hours and deployed in and around the subsector compound. During the day, 7 tactical air strikes (16 sorties) (center of area XU7115)

killed and 52 wounded. Known enemy casualties were 160 killed.

The 30th of October was a comparatively quiet day. There was no reported enemy activity in the village. At 0437 hours, the US 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry made sporadic contact 4 kilometers west of the village. The ARVN, CIDG and RF units continued repairing their damaged fortifications and resumed normal patrol activity. At 1230 hours, Company C, US 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry commenced a 3½ hour contact with an estimated enemy company 4 kilometers west of Loc Ninh. Company A, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry (US) and one CIDG Company reinforced. At 1815 hours, a reconnaissance patrol, 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry, (ARVN) contacted an unknown number of enemy 300 meters west of the air strip. After a brief fire fight, artillery and air strikes were called in. Contact was broken and the patrol returned to the subsector compound without casualties. At the same time Loc Ninh compound received 6-8 rounds of 82mm mortar fire. There were no further incidents. Throughout the day there were 12 air strikes (26 sorties) (center of area XU6909), 1 B52 strike (center of target box XU06236) (6 aircraft) and 2326 rounds of artillery were expended. There were 4 friendly KIA, 5 WIA and 85 enemy KIA.

At 0050 hours, on 31 October elements of the 272d and 273d VC Regiments began attacking the subsector and SF Compounds with a heavy volume of mortar and small arms fire. By 0057 hours an armed C47 aircraft and a light fire team (LFT) were enroute to support the defenders. Mortar and small arms fire continued to increase in intensity. The C47 arrived on station just as the Special Forces Compound and US 1st Infantry Division fire support base at the south end of the air strip came under attack. At 0220 hours after receiving heavy small arms fire, the artillery employed direct-fire high explosive ammunition down the runway into the advancing enemy. Meanwhile, tactical aircraft arrived on station and engaged the attacking enemy forces. At 0407 hours District Headquarters reported that enemy forces were still attacking across the airfield and that artillery was continuing to fire (direct fire) high explosive ammunition at the enemy. At 0450 hours heavy contact was reported at the district command post at the north end of the air strip. Enemy forces were firing 75mm recoilless rifles and .50 cal machine guns at the defenders. At 0505 hours the enemy forces launched their heaviest ground assault of the day against the District Headquarters from the west, north and south. The main attack came from the north. The subsector compound defenders repulsed the enemy who employed human wave attacks. Withering fire by the defenders either killed or forced the enemy from the compound by 0530 hours after five separate ground attacks. However, the fire fight continued and by 0630 hours the defenders inside the compound were running low on ammunition. A resupply helicopter arrived as the enemy started to break contact and retreat. By 0700 hours the enemy had been cleared from the area around district headquarters and the Special Forces camp. At 1245 hours the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry (US) conducted an air assault vic XU761070 (4 kilometers SE of Loc Ninh). At 1600 hours the Commanding General ARVN 5th Division moved his forward command post to An Loc (XT7688) and placed his Deputy Division Commander in command of all South Vietnamese forces in the area. In support of this day's operations there were 24 air strikes (53 sorties) (center of area XU7606), 7 combat sky spots (radar controlled bomb strikes) and 1 B52 strike (9 aircraft) (center of target box XT572996). 2220 rounds of artillery ammunition were expended. 9 friendly forces were killed and 56 were wounded. Known enemy casualties were 126 killed. During the first three days of fighting for the town of Loc Ninh (29-31 October) the enemy lost 371 killed. Friendly losses were 21 killed in action and 113 wounded in action. Friendly forces were supported by 3 B52 strikes, 43 air strikes, 7 combat sky spots and 5157 rounds of artillery were expended.

SOURCE: ORLL, II Field Force, October 1967

THE BATTLE OF ONG THANH


U.S. ARMY

In battle everything depends on the commanders, from the generals to the colonels to the captains and lieutenants on the line.

By Brigadier General James E. Shelton, U.S. Army (Ret.)

In his classic treatise first published in 1832, the great Prussian philosopher of war, Karl von Clausewitz, emphasized the importance of the character of the leader. "It is the impact of the ebbing of moral and physical strength," he said, "of the heart-rending spectacle of the dead and wounded, that the commander has to withstand—first in himself, and then in all those who, directly or indirectly, have entrusted him with their thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears. As each man's strength gives out...the inertia of the whole gradually comes to rest on the commander's will alone. The ardor of his spirit must rekindle the flame of purpose in all others; his inward fire must revive their hope."


PAUL STEPHANUS

Major General John H. Hay, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, visits troops near Saigon.

Some 135 years later, on October 17, 1967, the truth of those observations was reconfirmed during the Battle of Ong Thanh, when the U.S. 1st Infantry Division's 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry (2/28), engaged elements of the 9th Viet Cong (VC) Division's 271st Regiment. Named after a small tributary stream, the battle was part of Operation Shenandoah II. It took place 40 miles north of Saigon in War Zone C in the Long Nguyen "secret zone," east of the Michelin rubber plantation and west of Highway 13.

That fall, the 1st Infantry Division had initiated large-scale offensive actions into major jungle areas to the west and north of Highway 13, the major north-south highway that ran from Saigon to Loc Ninh and on into Cambodia. These areas harbored Main Force VC units such as the 9th VC Division, which moved into and out of the jungle areas from sanctuaries located throughout Cambodia.

In a battle on October 6, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry (1/18), commanded by Lt. Col. Richard E. Cavazos, killed an estimated 60 VC when a battalion-size enemy force attacked its night defensive position. Subsequently, on October 11, the same battalion engaged a large enemy force during a daytime search-and-destroy action (the Battle of Dai Yeu).

On October 8, the 2/28 was airmobiled into positions northwest of 1/18 in an attempt to block the movement of what was thought to be an enemy regiment. The 2/28, commanded by Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr. (son of Maj. Gen. Terry de la Mesa Allen, a famous World War II commander of the 1st Infantry Division), then began probing actions, first to the east and later—after moving north on October 14—south into known

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A lieutenant of the 1st Infantry Division reports his assessment of the situation ahead before advancing on suspected Viet Cong (VC) sniper positions in the Bien Hoa area.

enemy base camp areas. On October 16, a short, violent firefight erupted. U.S. troops killed 17 VC.

The Battle of Ong Thanh took place on October 17. As the two-company force moved back into the area where the firefight had taken place the previous day, the enemy force attacked—initially with a barrage of Claymore and automatic weapons fire. The VC maneuvered down both flanks of the U.S. column, inflicting massive casualties. In the approximately two-hour battle that ensued, the U.S. battalion was completely overrun except for one small perimeter. Colonel Allen, the battalion commander, was killed, along with the 1st Brigade S-3 (operations officer), Major Don Holleder, a former All-American football player at West Point (the sports complex there is now named for Holleder). Also killed in the action were 52 other U.S. soldiers, and most of the surviving troops were wounded.

While subsequent reports referred to the battle only as one insignificant skirmish that was part of a successful offensive campaign, within the 1st Division the battle was seen as a devastating defeat and a major setback and embarrassment to the division. As some of the survivors saw it, the episode had been whitewashed by the Army and by the top brass of the 1st Infantry Division, who were anxious to protect the reputation of the "Big Red One" and preserve the morale of the surviving division troops.

Only recently have the records of the Battle of Ong Thanh—including transcripts of interviews with many of

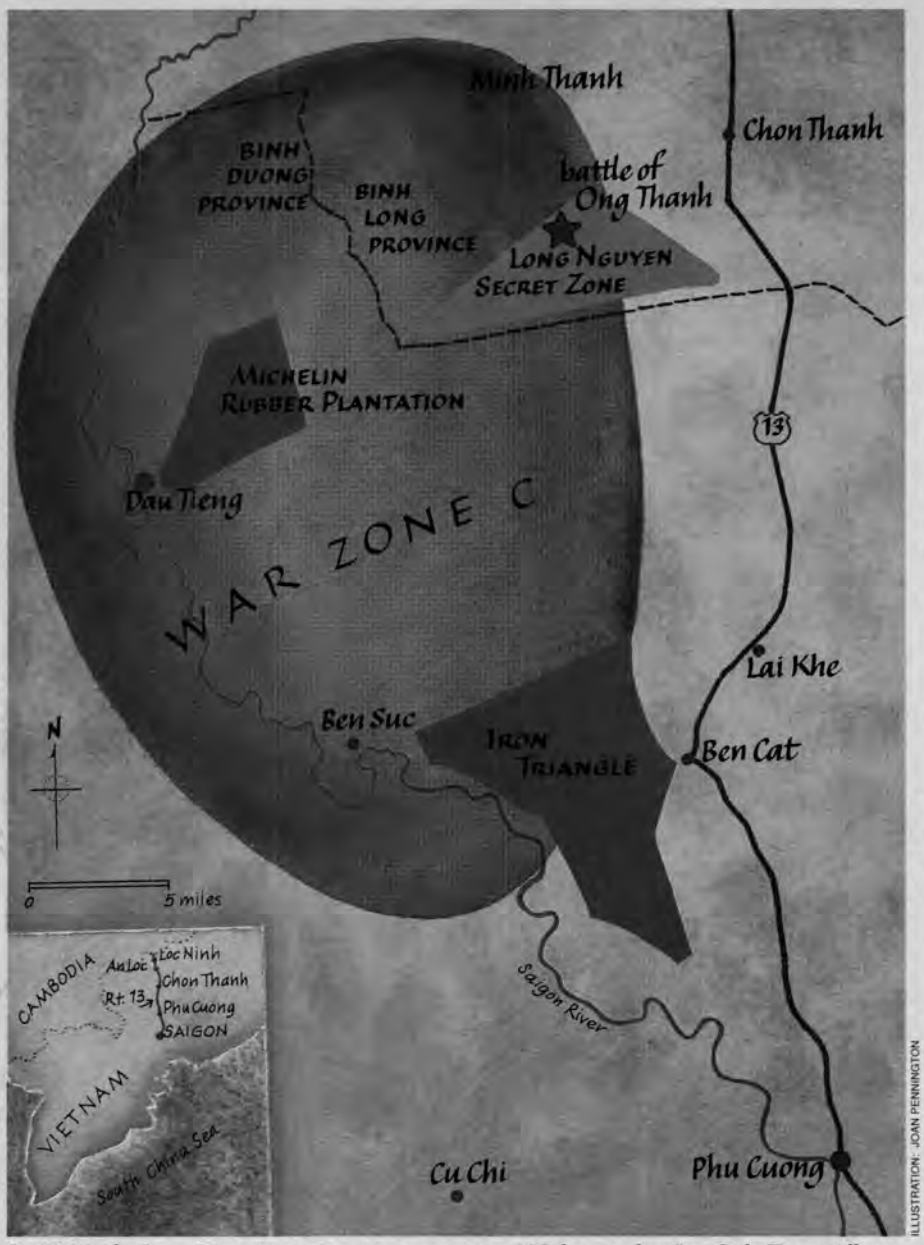

ILLUSTRATION: JOAN PENNINGTON

In 1967, the Long Nguyen region was a notorious VC haven, but Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr., laid his plans without considering the possibility of the enemy's getting the upper hand.

the survivors—been declassified. For many years after the battle, very little information on what actually happened and who may have been responsible for the tragic losses of October 17, 1967, was available to the public and to those close to the action—either as participants in the action themselves or as observers.

As an operations officer at the 1st Infantry Division headquarters, I "observed" the battle from a distance—I followed the battle by radio and read all the reports on the action as they came in. The action held more than academic interest for me; I knew many of the men involved in the battle very well because I had been the S-3 for the 2/28 until two weeks before the battle took place. I have subsequently talked with many of the surviving participants, recording their recollections.

What follows—rather than a blow-by-blow account of the action—is a profile of some of the individuals who were involved in that devastating action: Maj. Gen. John H. Hay, commander of the 1st Infantry Division; his assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Bill Coleman; Colonel George Newman, 1st Brigade commander; Lt. Col. Terry Allen, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry; Captain Jim George, commander of the battalion's A Company; and First Lieutenant Alfred Welch, commander of D Company.

Major General John Hay, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, was an impressive-looking man. He certainly looked like a general. He was friendly, always a gentleman, and serious about his responsibilities. He was greatly concerned for the welfare of every one of his soldiers and strived to be the most responsible and caring commander he could be.

His most outstanding characteristic, however, was his stubbornness. He was willing to talk and discuss almost anything, but he was not likely to have his mind changed easily. The substance or rationale of his arguments in briefings was not impressive, and his stubborn streak was doubly difficult to deal with because he was the senior officer of the division.

General Hay lived in the shadow of his predecessors, Maj. Gen. William Depuy and Brig. Gen. James Hollingsworth, men who had fostered a cult of forceful personality and dynamism in the division. Some of the "old-timers" who had served under Depuy resented Hay's presence, but bridging this gap was the division G-3 (operations officer), Lt. Col. Elmer Pendleton, who had served as a battalion commander under Hay in Berlin and under Depuy in Vietnam.

In fact, Hay never tried to change anything in the division that Depuy had started. Hay wanted only to codify the Depuy systems, and he incorporated most of Depuy's practices into his own rules. But Hay lacked Depuy's flexibility. Hay was pedantic and prevailing while Depuy was polemic and dialectic. Depuy searched for those who could prevail by intellect and personal ingenuity, while what mattered most to Hay was how well his subordinate commanders followed the rules.

Hay took his position as commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division, the oldest division in the Army, very seriously. He wanted to carry on the proud tradition of the Big Red One himself, and he also wanted to ensure that there would be no blot of shame on its escutcheon during his watch. As I look back on my own experience, it seems to me that protective attitude was more prevalent in the 1st Infantry Division than in any other unit I heard about. There was a power in the Big Red One—at least to the professional soldier—and it was something special those in command wanted to preserve.

This parochialism was a double-edged sword. Esprit de corps is admirable, but in modern warfare—particularly at battalion level and above—it can be an invitation to disaster. And it would have an impact on the Battle of Ong Thanh. The unit had to prevail; defeat could not be considered a possibility.

Hay was a very cautious commander. He did not like to take calculated risks, although operations in Vietnam were full of them. He always wanted the upper hand before the fight started. What happened to the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, at Ong Thanh was an absolute aberration, to his way of thinking.

Brigadier General Bill Coleman was a graduate of Clemson University in South Carolina. He spoke with a pronounced South Carolina accent, but he spoke quickly, and his mind was sharp. Coleman led the 1st Infantry Division at the Battle of Ong

JAMES E. SHELTON

The 2/28 staff in September 1967. Rear (from left): Op. officers Majors Jack Sloan (incoming) and James Shelton (outgoing); the artillery officer; Captain Jerry Edwards, supply; Captain James Blackwell, intelligence; front: Captain William Whitehead, adjutant; Major Bob Gilliard, exec. officer; Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr., commander; Captain Ed Crum, surgeon; Lieutenant Levinson, communications.

Thanh because General Hay was away at a meeting in Saigon on October 17. Hay's absence during the battle should not be regarded as an overly significant factor in the episode. After all, most head football coaches need not be present at a football game. What they are really responsible for is the preparation for the game. Trying to sort things out on the battlefield is another matter, and on October 17, 1967, at least in the early critical stages, General Coleman was calling the shots at the 1st Infantry Division. He had been in on the evening meetings of October 16 at the 2/28 night defensive position, but neither he nor Colonel George Newman, the 1st Brigade commander, was fully aware of how numerous and how well-equipped the enemy was in that sector.

General Coleman was a good assistant division commander. He was field wise; he asked good questions and could get to the root of a problem quickly. Very early in the battle that day I could hear the concern in his voice over the radio—not fear, but a gut seriousness that foretold the grievous situation. During the battle he helped with the artillery and airstrikes; he voiced encouragement to the commanders on the ground and assisted Colonel Newman in the seemingly futile command-and-control activities from the air. Refueling the helicopters was a problem, and Newman and Coleman tried to ensure that one of them was orbiting the contact area at all times.

Coleman was a good soldier and a good leader. He understood the problems of the men and their leaders. He was there on October 17 to do everything he could to make the best of a tragic situation, and some of his efforts were not in vain, since the evacuation of wounded was greatly assisted by his efforts. However, although he was a general, and although he was on the spot, his impact on the outcome was not decisive because he did not have enough information on the area as he needed.

Colonel George M. "Buck" Newman was commander of the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, during the battle. He was a 1943 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and an infantry combat veteran of World War II and Korea. Newman did not merely mouth West Point's motto, he lived it. A

REAL WAR PHOTOS

Troops of the 1st Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade swarm aboard waiting Bell UH-1D Huey "Slicks" at the start of an operation in the Saigon area in 1966.

REAL WAR PHOTOS

Specialist 4 Jack Brinson of the 28th Infantry lays down covering fire with his M-60 machine gun as his squad comes under heavy fire from concealed Viet Cong troops.

man of high intellect, he was somewhat overweight, puffy and pompous. But underneath that less than impressive appearance was a man of great moral strength and courage, compassionate, strong-willed in the best sense, physically courageous with great stamina, and a truly professional soldier. Newman was comfortable as an infantryman, but he also understood Army politics. He was also a truthful man. He might bend the rules when they needed to be bent, but he was a man of honor—selfless even when surrounded by the selfish. For those reasons, he had the absolute respect of the soldiers he commanded. Those who knew him respected and loved him.

Newman had commanded the 1st Infantry Division Support Command while waiting for a tactical brigade. He took command of the brigade around October 1, 1967, and had been in command less than one month when the Battle of Ong Thanh took place. While he allowed 2/28 to proceed on its maneuver on October 17, 1967, no man could have done more to try to get the battalion out of the mess it was in once the situation turned nasty.

Lieutenant Colonel Terry Allen, Jr., was the commander of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry "Black Lions," on that fateful day in October. His paternal grandfather had been a graduate of West Point. His famous father, Maj. Gen. Terry de la Mesa Allen, had attended but not graduated from West Point. The younger Allen had graduated from West Point in 1952, but only by the skin of his teeth. Like many young men with famous fathers, Allen lived in his father's shadow, but he showed little of that pressure on the surface. He knew that he had his father's reputation as a soldier to uphold,

JAMES E. SHELTON

Imbued with the spirit of the Big Red One, Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr., seriously underestimated the VC's 271st Regiment.

but he certainly was not a martinet. He was quiet and usually a good listener.

Several of Allen's West Point classmates have described him as a loner, not because he did not enjoy people, but because he was more of an introvert. He normally had a smile on his face. He enjoyed a good time but not necessarily as the center of attention. As his battalion S-3, I never thought he lacked aggressiveness. He never made a lot of noise or commotion and rarely raised his voice, but he had a commanding presence when he was among his subordinates. We were all well aware that he was in command and that he took his responsibilities seriously.

I first met Terry Allen in a jungle NDP, where he was the battalion S-3 and I had been sent to replace him. He impressed me with his helpfulness and forthrightness, as well as the way he treated the soldiers around him with dignity and respect. He was not party to the posturing and puffery that are exhibited by some officers, men who are so carried away with having been designated "officers and gentlemen" that they feel they must impress everyone around them. He enjoyed talking about a wide variety of subjects, and both of us expressed our opinions that, although we had spent some good years in the military, we could also have done well in another profession. Allen told me one day that he might consider leaving the Army after the war, maybe after serving his time; he wanted to try something else completely different than soldiering. He certainly did not have his eyes on being a general.

After the battle and Allen's death there was some talk that Allen had not been competent to be in command of an infantry battalion—that he was not well prepared and had only been given the battalion through favoritism. My observation was that he was highly qualified, both in technical and tactical competence and in leadership ability. During my three-month association with him, I never knew him to take an irrational, stupid or unthinking action, nor did I have reason to question his judgment. He knew his stuff much better than his predecessor had and he genuinely cared about his men, although he was not reluctant to make corrections. Neither of us really agreed with the "ass-chewing" mode of correction prevalent in the Big Red One, but he was better than I was at taking it without passing it along.

Rumors circulated that Allen may have had a "death wish," caused by marital difficulties. While I was aware that his marriage was breaking up at that time, in my opinion his marital problems had no effect on his mental state or on his feelings and responsibility for the battalion. He felt sad, of course, but it certainly did not preoccupy him or interfere with his ability to command. He was mature and level-headed about the situation. Speculation that Allen was somehow mentally impaired should be put to rest. It simply was not so.

Captain Jim George was the lead company commander (A Company) in the

movement of 2/28 into the site of the Ong Thanh battle. He had commanded A Company since late July 1967—less than three months, but a relatively long time for a rifle company commander. George was a native of Spartanburg, S.C., and graduated from Wofford College in Spartanburg. He had majored in theology, hoping to eventually become a minister. Since he went through the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program at Wofford, he had an obligated tour of duty to serve in the Army. He went in as an infantry officer, graduated from parachute school and the Ranger training course at Fort Benning, and decided that he liked the Army.

Jim George reminded me of Herman Melville's sailor Billy Budd—a handsome lad with blonde curly hair, chiseled features, cleft chin, blue-gray eyes and long eyelashes. His warm, bright smile was his trademark, and he had a cheery disposition to go with it. His religious training helped him greatly in his dealings with people—and of course dealing with people is the main job of a commander. Because Jim George was the way he was, his men respected and trusted him. He was not afraid to get down in the dirt with the men, and he lived in the mud with them while he encouraged them. He had a temper, but it did not show unless it was on behalf of his men.

George was a first-rate rifle company commander. Unfortunately, on October 17, 1967, the first man knocked down by the blast of an enemy Claymore mine was Jim George. He really played no part in the battle. He was blinded and deafened by the Claymore, and would most likely have been killed with his men had not his first sergeant taken him by the arm and led him back to safety. His company had led the battalion into its predicament, and the enemy force immediately gained fire superiority over A Company.

Part of the reason for the enemy's advantage early on was due to training, since even relatively seasoned U.S. soldiers would not fire their weapons without command. The Viet Cong knew more about A Company's location than A Company knew about the VC location. The blanket of fire delivered by the VC force had the same impact that volley fire had in the Napoleonic era—a shock effect that was difficult to recover from. However, since the battalion had moved less than 1,000 meters in two hours, it would be difficult to say that A Company was not cautious. Unfortunately, the well-trained VC regulars "got the drop on them," and a leaderless and immobile A Company was chopped to ribbons in the first 10 minutes of battle.

Perhaps the most elusive and enigmatic of all the personalities involved in the Battle of Ong Thanh was 1st Lt. Alfred Clark Welch. Welch had entered the U.S. Army at 17, right out of high school. He rose rapidly through the enlisted grades thanks to native intelligence, high motivation and New Hampshire Yankee doggedness. He was a sergeant first class (E-7) by age 24, with most of his experience in the newly formed U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets). He was highly trained in the techniques of warfare; however, he had little or no experience in dealing with line soldiers. Most of his experience had been with hand-picked volunteers, as all the early Special Forces soldiers had been.

In 1966 he applied for and received a direct commission in the Army for two years under a special direct commissioning program. He had no college education, but he was a highly trained soldier. He had served as the 2/28 reconnaissance platoon leader and he had more combat experience than any officer in the battalion, including Terry Allen. Welch was selected to command D Company (added as a fourth rifle company) when the original captain who had come into the 1st Division to command the company ran afoul Major Bob Gilliard, the battalion executive officer, during the company's initial training in Lai Khe. The captain had failed to follow Gilliard's orders, and Welch found himself a company commander.

Welch was considered the best company commander in the battalion. He was the most fieldwise, and he was tuned in the best to the way the enemy operated. He was something of a

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

On October 11, 1967, during the Battle of Dai Yeu, and three to four kilometers through the jungle from the site where the Ong Thanh battle would take place 6 days later, the 1st Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry (1/18), had done well. Some would say the reason was its commander, Lt. Col. Richard E. Cavazos.

A combat infantry veteran of the Korean War, where he won the Distinguished Service Cross for bravery (he would win another in Vietnam), Cavazos was a very special person. He had a great deal of self-assurance and was supremely confident of his own ability to control events.

Cavazos was not the type of man to trust others to assist him in carrying out his missions. He was a good team player except when it came to his command responsibilities. There Cavazos knew he had to control things, not leave them to chance or to others.

If he really was not sure he had a very good handle on the control of an operation, he would not get involved. Instead, he would influence those in control either to do it another way or to give him control. Cavazos was a man close to the earth, and it showed in his intellect, his will, and his sensitivity to the environment.

Not an inveterate planner, Cavazos knew that too much study of the supposed circumstances might cloud his mind to the real situation when it occurred. When it came to tactics, you could almost see him looking, listening, smelling, tasting and feeling. He commanded by intuition.

Now a retired four-star general, Cavazos believes that if he had not been using his intuition and five senses at Dai Yeu in 1967, he would have found himself in the same boat as Terry Allen at Ong Thanh. He also believes that in addition to the many attributes he was blessed with, he has been extremely lucky.

When Cavazos began probing around his night defensive position on October 11 at Dai Yeu, a scout dog kept barking, warning the Americans that the enemy was nearby. No enemy could be seen, however. Instead of ignoring the "false" signal, Cavazos ordered a reconnaissance by fire, which was immediately answered by a huge volume of enemy fire that would have annihilated Cavazos' battalion if the attack had proceeded as planned. Cavazos' sixth sense had—with the help of the scout dog—allowed 1/18 to escape the fate that befell 2/28.

By the time Terry Allen really understood his situation at Ong Thanh, his unit was decisively engaged. His only hope then was that someone would bail him out. But Cavazos was a master in not getting into such predicaments in the first place. He never counted on anyone except himself to get him out of trouble.

Cavazos never lost a battle on the battlefield because he never lost a battle anywhere. If he didn't like the "smell" of it, he didn't do it. He had the power and presence to alter the circumstances and did not allow fools and hangers-on to sway him from his course. His strength of character was so great that men would willingly follow him to their deaths, and that's a rare breed indeed. **J.E.S.**

JAMES E. SHELTON

Major Shelton, Colonel Allen and Command Sgt. Maj. Francis Dowling at Long Binh in September 1967. Allen and Dowling would both be killed on October 17.

loner, but was highly respected by everyone. Welch did not lack self-confidence, but he did feel he was not of the same cut as the "college educated" guys. The men of D Company very quickly realized that Welch had it all together, however, and they were proud to have him as their commander. Welch was short-tempered; he did not tolerate fools. If he thought something was wrong, he spoke his piece. He was neither diplomatic nor particularly persuasive, but he was forceful.

On October 16, 1967, Welch warned Allen that the proposed movement into the Ong Thanh area would be very risky. Given what he knew about the engagements that had taken place in the previous two weeks, Welch believed that extreme caution was warranted. For some reason, Allen refused to listen, accusing Welch of being "gun shy."

The five wounds Welch subsequently received during the fighting attest to his steadfastness in a battle he had tried to prevent—at least prevent on the terms in which it took place. Welch still resents the loss of lives that day, which he feels could have been avoided. His bitterness has softened some with time, but he has never forgotten the experience. Few could match his strength of character and self-possession. He gave his very best. On that day, it was not good enough.

One can only conclude that there were no "villains" in the battle, no obvious flaws in the leadership. So what went wrong? Ironically, the same thing went wrong at the tactical level on the battlefield that had gone wrong at the strategic level in Washington. In his masterful book, *The Twenty Five Year War,* General Bruce Palmer says, "The only explanation of [the failure of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] is that the chiefs were imbued with the 'can do' spirit" and could not admit the possibility of failure.

That same spirit permeated the Big Red One. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., editor of *Vietnam* Magazine and himself the battalion S-3 of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry in the 1st Infantry Division, recalls General Hollingsworth's putting his arm around a machine-gunner and telling him, "Son, I want you to find them Cong! You find them Cong, and I'll put this whole damn division in there to get you out!"

That was an article of faith in the Big Red One. But for Terry Allen it was a faith that ended in tragedy. Allen was a first-class soldier and officer. Unfortunately, on October 16, 1967, when Welch voiced his concern about the battalion's proceeding into what was a known VC haven, Allen was not in a listening mood. He may have been tired and looking forward to the opportunity of finally getting into some decisive action. He may never have considered the possibility that the VC might get the upper hand. He knew the battalion had to proceed with caution, and he tried to make sure that it did. He knew airstrikes should be placed to the enemy's rear to discourage their escape, and he ordered them. He knew artillery marching fire was important, and to all accounts it was used that day.

But Allen apparently did not take into account that his lead company commander might be knocked out immediately—that he might essentially lose control over the entire company. He did not realize that air and artillery fire would be useless to him (except to block enemy reinforcement) as the enemy closed in on his unit. He did not visualize the Big Red One, the great division of his father and his source of strength and confidence, as being incapable of helping, in spite of the concern expressed by both Colonel Newman and General Coleman, who were orbiting helplessly overhead in the command aircraft. He did not visualize that his enemy force might be, pound for pound, better trained, better conditioned, better armed for jungle battle, and at least the size of his own.

Allen did not grasp how serious the situation was. He never gave up hope for his battalion, and right to the end he was hopeful that someone would salvage the situation. Allen was a good man. He would have given anything not to have placed his battalion in such a predicament, but by then it was too late. Combat is a very unforgiving environment, and there was no chance for the Black Lions that day. □

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