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PLEI JIRANG

(18 October - 6 December 1966)

N. KHA

The western High Plateaux (Tay Nguyen) is a region of great strategic importance. Stretching along the Vietnam-Lao and Vietnam-Kampuchea frontiers over nearly 600 km, it links the northern part of South Vietnam to its southern half.

There, after their ill-fated strategic counter-offensive in the 1965-1966 dry season, the US troops endeavoured to maintain their positions and preserve their combat potential while waiting for reinforcements for a new adventure. Their tactics consisted in using small formations while making ever greater use of air and artillery fire. In this way they attacked L.A.F. concentration points in order to forestall preparations that the local revolutionary forces were making for the forthcoming big assaults. The GIs hoped these tactics would allow them some rest; that they could reorganize their formations and go and fight by turns. However, as the liberated area was expanding and entangling with the occupied zone, they found the target-to-be-attacked list stretching on and on indefinitely. Moreover, the US Air Force, hampered by severe rain, could

not bring its striking potential into full play. The US *First Cavalry* was spread so thin that its brigades found themselves engaged in fighting over 300 km apart from each other. Battalion after battalion had shaken up the adversary's position—according to official communiqués. But the LAF had become stronger and had pinned down the maximum number of flying horsemen's on the Western Plateaux. The Americans however sought to lay their hands on this region of vital importance. Their strategic aims were, firstly, to search and destroy the LAF and deprive them of bases to stage attacks on different areas of South Vietnam; secondly to set up a security corridor for the defence of the coastal regions of Central Vietnam and communications between the northernmost provinces and the southern zone.

With this objective in mind, they launched in mid-October 1966: Operation *PAUL REVERE IV* in an attempt to relieve Plei Jirang—then besieged—and afterwards to thrust at LAF formations and at last to raid the liberated area, herd its population into concentration camps and block the "North—South corridor."

Land of Ordeal for 3 Yankee Divisions

Plei Jirang, a stronghold on the interprovincial Road No.5, is located about 40 km west of the northwestern part of Pleiku. The Po Co River winds

its way around it and from the river to the Kampuchean frontier extended the liberated area, a hinge between the Kontum Highlands and the Pleiku high plateaux. There stand here high mountains and along the rivers are cleared spaces with cultivated fields belonging to the population and the LAF. Some of those fields stretch over 700 m wide and 3 km long. Between the Po Co River and the Kampuchean border flows the Sa Thay River which may be forded during the dry season.

The terrain, especially in the west, was quite favourable for the landing of heliborne troops thrusting into the liberated area but it provided, at the same time, excellent hiding places for the LAF and facilities for moving about.

Plei Jirang, with two other strongholds located at Plei Mo Rong and Duc Co, respectively 25 km northwest and 45 km southwest of Pleiku, constituted a defence line west of the city where the US 4th Infantry Division, under the command of Gen. Charles P. Stone, had set up its headquarters.

According to American newspapers, this division was not fully ready for combat by the middle of 1966, having yet to achieve the training of its men, including many new recruits who had still to finish their 8-week programme of basic drilling. Until then prepared and organized for actions in European operational theatres, it had hastily re-equipped and retrained for anti-guerilla warfare prior to its arrival in South Vietnam. On 6 August 1966, 2nd Brigade of over 3,000 men including the 8th, 12th and 22nd infantry battalions and the 42nd

artillery platoon as well as other supplementary platoons, landed at Quy Nhon Port. It then proceeded to the Western High Plateaux; on 6 October, its 1st Brigade arrived at Nha Trang and on the 12th, its 3rd Brigade at Vung Tau.

Upon its arrival, the 4th Infantry Division was rushed to the High Plateaux for permanent combat mission whereas the *First Cavalry* was given the strategic role of a stand by force, readily available to give assistance in every major engagement, on every front. The *First Cavalry* had its headquarters at An Khe, located on a wide and high plateau adjoining plains and mountain forests, which was to be seen as the centre of the whole South Vietnam theatre of operations.

Also on the Western High Plateaux was the US 25th Infantry Division, known as *Tropic Lightning*, commanded by Gen. Fred Weyand. Set up in October 1941, this division had, since 1960, trained in Hawaii, where the terrain and climate are quite similar to Vietnam, in anti-guerrilla warfare (climbing over peaks, jungle patrol, ambush, counter-ambush, march and encampment in mountain forests, fighting wild animals in the savanna, etc.). Its commander was provided with up-to-date electronic computers (the UNIVAC 1005 and NCR 500) which assisted him in "making decisions" and for routine artillery fire. That, however, did not prevent its 3rd Brigade—sent in summer 1966 as reinforcements to the Western High Plateaux—from having one battalion put out of action and another badly

mauled by the LAF in the neighbourhood of Chu Pa, 18 km southwest of Plei-Jirang.

The "government" forces on the Western High Plateaux included *Ranger* elements from the puppet 2nd Tactical Zone mobile troops and units of the 22nd and 23rd Infantry Divisions. Rarely sent to the battlefield, they were given the main mission of securing bases, towns, cities and the road system in the US forces' rear.

But the US *First Cavalry* remained the main mobile force to fight on the Western High Plateaux. It should be stressed that this is an area of heavily forested plateaux with very steep slopes and trees up to 30 m high. Lianas cover the tree trunks and the thick foliage in places forms a roof which obstructs any view from the sky. After the forests, come plateaux with savannas, which are difficult to move across. Interspersed with thickets of trees, bamboo clusters and thorn bushes is the "elephant grass" up to 3 m high, very sharp and sometimes as thick as a thumb, entangled with innumerable creepers. In this terrain, watered by countless springs, one moment heated by burning sunshine, the next drenched by a torrential downpour; the helicopter had a threefold mission: movement, information and strike-force. Its scouting work was carried out by still and television cameras. It took part in the attack, encirclement and pursuit of the adversary whom he could cannonade, rocket or machinegun. In spite of numerous natural obstacles, it helped the commander to directly follow up the ground operations executed by his men as well as by the neigh-

bouring ones, to in time turn to account the vantage-points or parry the effects of the reverses.

The US Command thought it had major assets in the war on the Western High Plateaux: a much larger number of troops than its adversary, an overwhelming strike-force and exceptional mobility, thanks to its helicopters. These means should have made it possible to wage a quick war and win a lightning victory, by firstly concentrating a war machine to deal crushing blows to the L.A.F. But battles in the past year had shown that it was not the *First Cavalry* which had battlefields and fighting grounds of its choosing. The L.A.F. had managed to lure the enemy to places of their choice and forced them to engage on L.A.F. terms. In those conditions, the infernal strike-force of U.S. helicopters lost much of its effectiveness, their fire being designed for battles opposing modern armies fighting on clear-cut frontlines, with easily detected objectives. On the Western High Plateaux, the most sophisticated means of detection became inoperative against a highly mobile adversary, dispersed in numerous small units which might disappear and reappear at any moment, which was everywhere and yet nowhere. As Gen. John H. Hay, Jr. admitted "Vietnam was a different war. It was a conflict where the front line was not a trace on a map but was rather whenever the opposing combat forces met and fought."¹ And, according to Hugh A. Mulligan from *A.P.* "fighting an enemy who seems to

1. Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., *Tactical and Material Innovations*, Washington, 1974.

be everywhere can be pretty frustrating to troops trained in the methods of a conventional warfare."

"Innovation Was the Key to Success

(Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr.)

The U.S. Command, after more than a year's fighting in the Western High Plateaux, tried to draw lessons from experience, to improve combat tactics and techniques. Gen. John H. Hay, Jr. wrote: "Vietnam was a war of innovations. The contestants, the equipment, the arena, and the rules of engagement were different from previous wars. In the beginning, there was a great variety of recently developed hardware but a general lack of doctrine concerning insurgency-type operations. Improved equipment was rushed through the development phase, and successful ideas originated in the field."² For the *First Cavalry* which had been in action in Vietnam for more than a year, "many airmobile techniques had been refined and polished in the crucible of combat."¹ The Americans admitted that one of the "real mistakes" made in South Vietnam had been the use of helicopters and planes as "substitutes for night patrols, ambushes, and the long-range patrols of guerilla warfare than as complements, supplements, and aids to these essential activities."²

1. Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., op. cit.

2. Herman Kahr *Can We Win in Vietnam?*, New York, 1968.

Rectify the error, the U.S. Command fielded on the Western High Plateaux more infantrymen, with new fighting methods such as long-range patrols which constituted, as Gen. John H. Hay, Jr. put it, "a particularly significant aspect of U.S. operations in Vietnam." Such patrols were not new to the U.S. Army but they were used in increasing density and were now operating at division level long-range patrols "were needed" in Vietnam because of the "difficult terrain" and the "elusiveness" of the adversary. The numerous helicopters and military vehicles enabled these patrols to be "more densely dispersed." Tactics put down and pick up the long-range patrols also came into being. New devices, the "penetrators," replaced the nylon ladders in the helicopters. The "penetrators" was a kind of helicopter hoist which pulled up or set down the G.I., seated or standing on it. The helicopter did not need to fly down close to the ground to deposit or pick up patrols but hovered about ten metres above it as "the penetrator was lowered through the jungle canopy."

Another technique that was rather "new in some respects" was the "stay-behind patrol." U.S. forces had already used it during World Wars I and II and also during the Korean War but only with very small units to facilitate their withdrawal through the adversary's lines and to aid concealment. "The fluidity of the battlefield in Vietnam and the availability of helicopters to reinforce or extract the stay-behind force led to frequent use or

stay-behind patrols of various sizes among U.S. forces..." (Lt -Gen. John H. Hay, Jr.).

Thrusting deep into the liberated Western High Plateaux, this time the U.S. troops acted more cautiously with, while stationed, better-organized defence dispositions leading to a "flexible defence" including rapid retaliation, as directed by Gen. Westmoreland. They mustered their strength into reinforced battalion blocs with, besides air-covered long-range patrols, combat-ready companies pinned along the defence perimeter, mostly at would-be points of contact with the L.A.F. the concentrated firepower of the battalion and the interlocking fire from the companies support positions considerably increased the combat potential of the defenders, whose Command operated from well-sheltered case-mates. Guns of various calibres, recoilless and radar-guided, together with heavy machine-guns and sophisticated mines dashed against the assailants a murderous wall of firepower.

The American method of fighting also proved more diversified than before. Following reconnaissance planes, bombers came to pave the way for the G.I.s who going on patrol, fine-combed the terrain which was to be the landing zone for the flying horsemen. Combining cunning and brute force, the enemy increased the number of faked landings which served as baits to induce the revolutionary armed forces to come into the open, to be vulnerable to airstrikes. Once on the ground, the G.I.s organized, in their temporary defence disposition, support positions which they turned into bases of

attack before progressing again, either on foot or by helicopter. US infantry had the mission of finding the adversary by means of patrols and reconnaissance operations, guided by a whole world of information services, intelligence-gathering sensors and air cavalry. Having found the adversary at less than 100 yards range, the infantry commander called for overwhelming reinforcement and fire power. The main attack was wherever and whenever the enemy could be found." ¹

The 4th Infantry Division which played the role of the main infantry on the Western High Plateaux outran the *First Cavalry* in its march forward and stationed its brigades at Pleiku. Its brigades went west of Route No. 14, and occupied the main positions in order to set up a front of contact with the L.A.F. in the north and centre of the Western High Plateaux. Each brigade had its own direction of manoeuvre. Relying on the mobility and firepower of their helicopters, the attacking horsemen "leap-frogged" into their adversary's territory. There, if one of their positions or formations was assailed, their commander would send rescue forces and land troops into the rear of the assailants to intercept the latter's supply and egress route, then cut them off so as to wipe them out or drive them out of the battlefield.

Preparing to cope with the imminent Operation *AUL REVERE IV*, the L.A.F. Command decided to set up an in-depth combat disposition with regular troops positioned in echelons with varying-scale sectors of concentrated attack. When everything

was ready, a small LAF unit started the battle by mounting an assault on Plei-Jirang along the Po Co River. In the L.A.F. Command's view, once Plei-Jirang was assailed, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division would occupy positions east of the Po Co River—to be used as bases for counter-attacks—and land its men west of that river, with a view to encircling and parcelling out the adversary's formations. Therefore before attacking Plei-Jirang, the Vietnamese Command had its regular forces posted west of the Po Co. However, this did not yet constitute the main sector of concentrated attack of the L.A.F. but was merely the first echelon, the first step of their in-depth combat disposition. Their sector of decisive attack was at the second echelon, the second line, further back, i.e. west of the Sa Thay. There, the bulk of the L.A.F. waited for the enemy, anticipating that this would be the very place where the G.I.s would have to land. If they wished to corner the revolutionary forces stationed between the western bank of the Po Co and the eastern bank of the Sa Thay.

Camouflaging carefully, the L.A.F. made efforts to take the fullest advantage of the terrain. They believed that a single buttress stuck high up on a steep mountain slope, but well used, could render enemy fire ineffective—whether it came from up-to-date howitzers or from B.52 "flying fortresses"—and a platoon lying in wait on a peak could manage to intercept many manoeuvring battalions. In facing the U.S. helicopter tactics in counter-guerilla warfare, which closely combined fire and move-

¹ Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., op. cit.

ment ability with ingenious detection and communication means — including an advanced and widely-used radophone system camouflage was of prime importance for our men. They disguised themselves from head to foot, from their jungle helmets to their rubber sandals, under a cloak of leaves. Assisted by the guerillas, our regulars lay in wait and made use of the smallest hollow to set up ambushes. To be successful an ambush needed careful preparation. Troops were positioned in three echelons: the first to watch the enemy column, the second to attack it and the third to support up both the others and secure the withdrawal of the whole at the end of the operation. Orders were issued to our men to lie in the dark at selected sites in wait for their victims. As soon as mines exploded (mostly at enemy weak points), they had to rush forward for a hand-to-hand assault on the G.I.s, before the latter, carrying heavy burdens, had time to fight back, run away, call for air relief or make full use of their strike-force and modern equipment. After the attack, they had to disappear at top speed again into the jungle to avoid the air strikes which would follow, particularly from B.52s. They were advised to avoid the enemy's strong points but to exploit thoroughly the weak ones. As a rule, troop landings were made under combined aircover and artillery support fire. Therefore, the attack could not be launched at that time but at night, when the enemy, exhausted by fruitless patrols, camped for the night inside the defence position. Attacks were made at the least expected moment and aimed firstly at the enemy's vital points; command posts, artillery men, pilots

and signal corps. Emphasis had been put on deep and lightning thrusts in order to split apart the enemy formations, prevent them from regrouping, wipe out the maximum of their strength, shake up their combat disposition and then fall back in the utmost secrecy.

Before D-Day

In October 1966, with 1,700 helicopters in South Vietnam, i.e. more than those in the whole of Europe at the time, the US Expeditionary Corps indisputably had air supremacy, especially on the Western High Plateaux which were the stationing field and main operational scene of the US *First Cavalry*. Within four hours of the alarm's sounding, one of its battalions with full strength and equipment, could be borne by helicopter up to mountain peaks, into the heart of the jungle, to the battle ground itself.

As George-Chaffard put it, "how can one conceive that a country such as the USA — which has given the fullest significance to the key-words of modern power, "technology," "logistics," "electronics," "nuclear propulsion," "management," — could not overcome a few thousand lousy pyjama-clad guerillas, who had never seen a computer, went on foot and lived only on rice?"¹

With this in mind, the flying cavalry, most of whom had come from the US only two months

1. Georges Chaffard, *Les deux guerres du Vietnam*, Paris, 1969.

before as reinforcements (9,000 men of the Division had rotated from South Vietnam after one year of service), rushed towards the liberated areas on the Western High Plateaux.

The French daily *Le Figaro*, on 2 November 1966, gave a detailed account of one of such encounter which took place before D-Day, when the 2nd Brigade of the flying cavalry wanted to land one battalion in the nearby Pleiku liberated area and then, according to how the situation developed, commit its reserves as reinforcements to pin down and then outflank its adversary.

"Helicopters swarmed like bees just over the branches. Successive of phases *First Cavalry* would succeed each other like clockwork. First came the rounds of ground artillery, followed by an air strike, then the landings covered by 'gunships' i.e. by heliborne division artillery."

Into the silent forest arrived *Chinook* helicopters one by one to drop guns, 105mm mortars, then came the CH-54 flying cranes which disembarked 155mm howitzers and huge bulldozers... The battle was launched half an hour later. The company landed safely and "proceeded ahead, one platoon after another, along the narrow path that led to the river. Despite the utmost caution of the scouts who often came to a halt to listen carefully, they did not succeed in spotting the enemy until hit by his fire"

The LAF entrenchments were dug quite near the path and covered by branches and a layer of

earth. The LAF formation waited until the leading elements had advanced before firing with rifles and machine-guns along the whole path. In a few minutes, the US company lost 70 men — 26 killed and about 50 wounded. The commander was among the wounded and his second killed (by a stray bullet which blasted a grenade on his belt). According to the paper, the company "was virtually put out of action." This encounter between the GIs and the LAF "may seem accidental at first sight. It is not so. In fact, most of the engagements between Americans and Viet Cong begin in the same way... 90% of the fights begin like this with the Viet Cong taking the initiative, under circumstances that offer a good chance of success."

Execution of the Operation

The operation took place in two phases.

First phase: from 18 October to 11 November 1966.

During the night of 18 October, the LAF launched a mortar attack on Plei-Jirang, a key outpost west of Pleiku, which was defended by 3 companies puppet. The attack was made despite the reinforcement of the enemy defense position by fortifications surrounded by barbed wire with mines and flares. In panic, the puppet troops called the GIs to their rescue. The US 4th Infantry Division, stationed at Pleiku, faced a dilemma at this time in that it had just landed (in August 1966) and was still busy reconnoitring the terrain. Had it not gone to relieve Plei-Jirang, its western gate would have been stormed, its west flank exposed and its rear base under

heavy pressure. So it had to come in to fight, although knowing that, once out of its entrenchments, it would be quite vulnerable. Thus started Operation *PAUL REVERE IV*.

According to *AP*, from 18 October onwards, the artillery at Plei-Jirang pounded without let-up west and north of the Po Co River, between 6 and 8 km away from its position, and enemy planes—including B.52s—ceaselessly pound thousands of tons of bombs on the peaks north and northwest of Plei-Jirang with a view to setting up safe zones for troop landings.

To parry adverse eventual ambushes, a company of Rangers, on 20 October, landed 4 km north of Plei-Jirang for a sweep of the area. On 23 October, a reinforced battalion of the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, disembarked there to set up a relief operation base about 6 to 8 km north and northwest of Plei-Jirang. Thus, as the LAF had foreseen, as soon as Plei-Jirang was assailed, US troops made landings west of the Po Co River: a reinforced battalion on 23 October; another on 26. These two units made up support positions, at company level, located from 15 to 17 km west and southwest of Plei-Jirang.

After days of action, the GIs had a respite from hard work. Turning to account the fact that they had not enough time for a steady retrenching, the LAF, during the night of 28 October, simultaneously stormed four of their positions. The assaulting forces, by their concentrated firepower, decimated two companies and hit hard at two others. On the

night of 29 October, they mortar-pounded and machine-gunned an artillery park of the 2nd Brigade, destroyed two 105 mm guns and wiped out both platoons of gunners. The reverse-suffered troops asked for reinforcements. The latter joined the already landed GIs to array a defence disposition east of the Sa Thay River. The "phantomatic" LAF hanged upon the enemy and went on with their assaults; on 5 November, an ambush completely wiped out one of its infantry companies; on the night of 10 November, a lightning attack annihilated an artillery company and damaged six 105mm howitzers. The enemy, many a time, had to use concerted air and artillery strikes, B.52s included, to surround their defence positions with a pulverizing wall of shelling power whereas guns, howitzers, mortars covered the area with a continuous criss-crossing fire.

The newly-arrived men of the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, had neither a good knowledge of the battle ground nor much experience in jungle fighting. Manœuvring on a piece of terrain full of snares, mines and booby-traps, hampered by their cumbersome outfit, having troubles with the heat, mosquitos and leeches, entangled in a heavily-forested area and deprived of guiding-marks, they were easy targets for their well-ambushed adversary who was mingling in the landscape.

An American general wrote about their difficulties this way: "The leeches were in their boots and inside the waists of their fatigues. They had dropped from the trees, not from the water, on their way down. It was now too late to bother about removing

them. The cold sweat was body reaction to the drainage of blood. The leeches could drink their fill, turn into a ball and drop off. ¹ Hugh A. Mulligan gave a more exhaustive picture: "The GI must endure the merciless, the stifling humidity, the awful flying weather in the monsoon season: The dust. The mud. The endless slogging through rice paddies or hacking his way through 100-foot high rain forests. The constant threat of disease: malaria... dysentery... typhoid fever, plague... He must contend with leeches and lizards... Snakes everywhere. Bugs of every kind and size..." ² Let us mention that the Vietnamese fought under worse conditions.

On 26 October, manoeuvring in conjunction with their attack west of Plei-Jirang, the LAF stormed US positions in the southeast (3 km north of Plei-Me), wiped out an artillery platoon, destroyed two 105mm guns and annihilated 50 defenders of the artillery position. In mine warfare along Routes No. 21B (from Phu My to Plei-Me), No. 19 and No. 15 (from Plei-Jirang to Dae Co), they damaged 21 military vehicles including 9 M.113. Their actions pinned down at Duc Co a whole US battalion, 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, which—to parry eventual adverse attacks—had to send several patrols to the Chu Pong—Plei-Me front area.

These attacks, simultaneously launched at several points, wore down and strained the enemy forces. The 2nd Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division,

¹ S.L.A. Marshall, *Battles in the Monsoon*, New York, 1967.

² Hugh A. Mulligan, op. cit.:

entangled on an intricate battlefield, ceaselessly assailed and forced to scatter its troops, had uncovered its weakness and shortcomings from which its adversary did not fail to benefit. The US Command then had to throw the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division into the fight and use the puppet units as reserve forces.

Heavily reinforced, the US formations made so-called "deep thrusts" into the LAF's rear for an attack from behind with a view to disorganizing the Western High Plateaux resistance bases.

On 8 November, 3 companies of puppet Rangers landed west of the Sa Thay River to sweep the area, backing the GIs' search for the LAF. In a matter of about ten minutes' time they landed from helicopters on improvised pathways in the very heart of the jungle but were immediately spotted. One company was completely wiped out on 9 November and another on the following day. The survivors set up a combat disposition with defence positions made up of lath upholding and soded shelters, interconnected by hurriedly-dug-in trenches. Despite that, US heliborne troops went on landing as foreseen, on 10 November, a reinforced infantry battalion and an artillery-battalion, both of the 3rd Brigade, 25th D.I. disembarked west of the Sa Thay River, about 25 km west of Plei-Jirang.

Early on 11 November, the LAF synchronized attacks in the rear and on the flanks took unawares the surviving company of puppet *Rangers* who, overstrained and overwrought, were at their breaking point. The US troops thus lost all their "feelers." At noon, a US infantry battalion and another

puppet company of *Rangers*, with a 105 mm howitzer company and a 106.7mm mortar one, landed at Bai Linh, about 3km northeast of the retrenchments where, some hours earlier, the last third puppet *Rangers* company had been decimated.

Second phase: from 12 November to 6 December 1966.

Thrusting deep into the liberated zone, the enemy showed more cautiousness and, after ten days of fighting, he had gained in experience. Organizational changes took place. According to Gen. John H. Hay Jr., "the US soldier in Vietnam soon learned that change was the order of the day and that innovation was the key to success."

The GIs set up a front line along the western bank of the Sa Thay by occupying the tactically important peaks which might help controlling the battleground. They positioned into several reinforced-battalion-echelon defence dispositions with a round-the-clock air cover and arrayed companies for an outer cover as well as long-range patrols operating almost without let-up. Their support bases were echeloned into a circular defence system with barbed-wire-surrounded field fortifications which were mutually supporting thanks to their interlocking fire and to the ready-for-action weapons of the reinforced battalion.

The enemy's drive forward aimed at encircling and parcelling out the LAF's troops disposition, slashing their rear, striking at their reserve forces, command posts, depots, to finally destroy the combat potential of the Western High Plateaux liberated

zone. The US Command apparently supposed it would succeed without much ado, as its troops benefited vantage-points from their Air Force, artillery, armour, up-to-date helicopters and a sophisticated signal system.. facing moreover a "lousy" adversary who had nothing. But the prime difficulty for the Americans was that they could not spot the accurate locations of the LAF units whose presence had been confirmed by numerous intelligence agencies, the Vietnamese guerilla having "an amazing ability to turn up in the most unlikely places" (Hugh A. Mulligan). Thus, according to *Le Figaro*, "the occurrence that the Viet Cong might have the upper hand at the first clash did not dissuade them. They were convinced to prevail over the adversary during the engagement. The problem was to make him out of his cache... For the US Command, the height of the battle was not when the GIs ran into enemy fire. That was only the prelude which had to be followed speedily by the coming into play of the US overwhelming air and artillery, thus depriving the Viet Cong of his initial advantage, the latter having only individual weapons."

On 12 November, at 07.00 hours, the LAF launched a fierce attack on the field encampments of the 4th Infantry Division which had been reinforced by elements from the 25th. Their intense and well-directed fire, taking the enemy by surprise, hit at his command post and telecommunication sector. The LAF then, in several prongs, assaulted, encircled, clipped the US formations whose muzzled 105mm guns had not even the time to react. In the

following morning, helicopters landed to evacuate dead and wounded. Several of them were downed by the guerillas' heavy fire.

On early 13 November, a company of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Brigade, conducted a mop-up operation 23 km north of Plei Jirang. It was quickly hemmed in and decimated. At noon, the US troops hurriedly pulled out to leave behind only one battalion, the 1st of the 3rd Brigade, which retrenched southeast of Bai Linh, 6 km far away from the place where the 2nd battalion of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, had recently suffered heavy losses.

After these reverses, the 4th Infantry Division resorted to CS1 and CS2 toxic chemicals, drums of which "were dropped from CH-47 helicopters..." to "restrict the enemy's use of terrain".¹ The 1st battalion of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, again sent its companies to patrol around, trying to spot the LAF formations in order to parry in time their blows. On 13 November afternoon, one of these companies ran head-on into an ambush over 20 km north of Plei-Jirang and lost almost its troopers without being able to call for air and artillery rescue.

These patrols operated, covered and supported by air and artillery. The latter included a whole series of howitzers from the 105 mm caliber (11 km range) to the 155 mm ones (15 km range), good for vertical as well as plunging fire, spitting out explosive rounds as well as perforating ones. Besides, the GIs tried many tricks, coming now by land, now by

helicopter or landing now straight on the objective' now much far away, on unexpected sites, but everywhere, they were spotted and intercepted. Their new combat methods failed to prove effective.

As for the revolutionary forces, the close conjugation of their three categories of troops (regular, regional and guerilla) afforded them to successfully face up the enemy who, being all-round assailed, was forced to disperse and got bogged down into passiveness. The "regulars" in particular had accurately foreseen the enemy's reactions and knew how to steal away unseen, unheard and unhurt to reappear and deal death-blows through an engagement on utmost favourable terms. They held on the initiative in combat and attacked the enemy in concerted action with the regionals and guerillas, whose blitzing and endless drives made him exhausted, uncovered, with his weak points laid bare.

On 19 November, the 25th Infantry Division elements, who landed on the site of the 12 November battle, were immediately hemmed in, assaulted from three sides, and engaged in hand-to-hand fighting which decimated two companies, the 1st Battalion Command (3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division) as well as a puppet company of *Rangers*.

On 20 November, according to *AP*, another company of the 25th Infantry suffered "moderate losses" 1.5 km east of the ground over which the "slaughter" took place the day before.

After the setbacks of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, the US Command rushed to Pleiku the 2nd Brigade of the US *First Cavalry*, then in

1. Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay Jr., *op. cit.*

sweep action at Binh Dinh. One of the many weaknesses of this brigade was it included mostly newcomers and thus faced "another major challenge" notation. This change-over "not only included the loss of combat seasoned leaders, fighters, flyers, supporters, but also witnessed the departure of those personnel who had been a part of the birth of the mobile experience, had been with it through its early development and formative period, had tested it, and had applied the principles of airmobility to the nature of warfare in South Vietnam."¹

On 20 November, the 2nd Brigade, *First Cavalry*, dispatched one of its companies for "frogleaps" west of the Sa Thay. The US unit met with a fierce resistance. After the encounter, the US Command, having supposed a shift of the LAF manoeuvring direction, rushed reconnoitring patrols northwestwards. Late in the evening, a LAF unit slipped into the enemy rear and mortar pounded the field Command Post of the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry, near Plei Jirang.

On 21 November, the LAF managed to lure a company of the *First Cavalry* (commanded by Captain Harold Wunsch and coming to replace a unit of the 25th Infantry Division) into an ambush west of Plei Jirang, one kilometre east of the Cambodian border, decimated it after 45 minutes of deadly fire and downed two helicopters coming to relieve the battered flying horsemen. Another ambush located 27 km northwest of Plei Jirang

wiped out a platoon of GIs patrolling nearby. Believing that the adversary was rushing his concentrated forces southwestwards of Kontum, the US Command hastily sent reinforcements there. The puppet 42nd Regiment stepped up operations west of Kontum while American troops disembarked 36 km northwest of Plei Jirang where they met with well-ambushed LAF fighters. Upon landing, the US units—including an infantry battalion plus a company of 105 mm howitzers and a 106.7 mm mortar platoon—received a hail of bullets of all calibers. Teleguided mines exploded under their very feet while gunshells, mortar rounds as well as a heavy machine-gun fire mowed down their ranks. So blitzing was the encounter that air and artillery could not intervene in time. Before vanishing in the jungle, our fighters, by their at-top-speed drives and murderous assaults, wiped out an infantry company, a command one and one of 105 mm guns.

In the first days of their positioning into their new combat disposition and their manoeuvre on the west bank of the Sa Thay River, the US shock units had been hit hard. Two flying horsemen battalions, making "frogleaps" into the adversary's rear with a view to occupying the peaks so as to have the battleground under control, were intercepted and had one of them put out of action. Their torn up offensive disposition included now no more than some fortified positions and, though being on the mend, did not form a thorough front line. The LAF, after breaking down the enemy's offensive prongs and dismantling his combat dispositions, went on storming the remaining positions. Ten days

1. Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., op. cit.

after, by a cleverly-executed pincers' operation, they decimated another US battalion and drove the assailants away from the west bank of the Sa Thay as well as from the operational area which had been to them assigned. The balance-sheet for Operation *Paul Revere IV* in Plei Jirang area, which lasted from 28 October to 6 December 1966, was: 2,500 enemy casualties (including 2,100 GIs); 2 US infantry battalions and 8 infantry companies, 4 US artillery companies and 3 artillery platoons as well as 5 puppet Rangers companies put out of action; another battalion of GIs was badly hurt; 26 howitzers destroyed; 21 aircraft downed; 21 military vehicles burnt down.

"One of the Bloodiest Ambushes"

(Hugh A. Mulligan)

The ambush technique was not new to the US Army for, according to Gen John H. Hay, Jr., it had been used, as far back as April 1775, when "Colonel Smith's red-coat column was continuously ambushed as it withdrew from Concord, Massachusetts." However "the mechanical ambush" as it was used in Vietnam, "was new." This time, US troops "combined the ambush technique with the Claymore mine and a trip wire. Later it was refined by the addition of a remote control firing device... in conjunction with sensors. "This kind of ambush-termed "innovation"—was seen as "one of the

most important aspects of semi-guerilla warfare" in Vietnam.

For the LAF, the ambush technique remained the favourite combat method of the traditional tactics of a modest-sized and not much populated country having to continually face much more powerful invading armies, when "one has to fight even outnumbered, to oppose the weak to the strong." The matter which focussed their attention was to manoeuvre so that "the hunter had suddenly become the hunted." That was carried out in a typical encounter opposing a company of flying horsemen to a LAF unit in the neighbourhoods of Plei Jirang, not far from the place (see *Vietnamese Studies*, No.54) where, one year ago, a *First Cavalry* unit had "a similar fate."

According to Hugh A. Mulligan, during the night of 18 November 1966, Huey helicopters with the black and yellow horse-head insignia of the *First Cavalry* flew Charlie Company (5th Regiment), commanded by Captain Harold Wunsch, into Landing Zone *Hawk*, five miles north of the Ia Drang River and about a half mile east of the Kampuchean border.

The first day (19 November) went quietly and the flying horsemen, after some patrols, were back at Landing Zone *Hawk* by dark for the night rest "without having fired a shot or seen a Viet Cong."

On 20 November, a hot and clear day, with helmets garlanded with tree branches and reeds, the GIs ventured out across the open fields reconnoitring every trail, every water hole, almost to the

Kampuchean border. Again there was nothing to be signaled in their "search and clear" game.

21 November was even hotter. The "new plan" of the company called for the 2nd Platoon to sweep south, the 3rd north and the 1st to remain "in a blocking position" to cut short the eventual escape of adverse elements who were to come in the open.

At 09.00 hours, the 2nd and the 1st were about 1,000 metres apart. At 10.00 a.m., Wunsch and Richeson led the 2nd Platoon across a narrow river into a valley covered by tall elephant grass. To the left was a deep ravine and, to the right, a high ground with plenty of trees.

Suddenly "khaki-clad figures" appeared on the trail ahead of them. The 2nd Platoon gave chase trying to manoeuvre the "flying figures" in the open, when small arms fire crackled in front. Then from the river bank behind and in the tree line on the right, came a heavy fire of 30mm machine-guns. "In the first thirty minutes, the two medics were killed. The company commander's arm was shattered and Richeson was hit in the leg." At noon, Wunsch managed to call in an artillery support strike, but "the rounds fell wide of the mark."

By 14.00 hours, Letbetter and his 3rd Platoon went across a valley floor between two hills. They had just reached the base of the hill separating them from the 2nd Platoon when they became encircled. "Machine-guns moved them down from behind while small arms took up the chorus of death in front and on the right." Everything happened "shockingly quick." Letbetter was the first to fall.

Then the radioman and the corporal on the field telephone. "The others hit the ground, but there was no place to hide. The automatic rounds streamed in knee high or lower, chopping up the grass as if a mower had passed through. The two medics died, trying to get to one of the machine gunners. Then the platoon's other machine gunner fell silent at his gun."

The fighting kept on raging. Durham, the platoon's sergeant, "had no time to weep for his best buddy" - Smythe - who died almost in his arms for, at that very instant, a grenade burst and "a thousand needles ripped into his arm."

Durham buried his face in the elephant grass and waited. He learned afterwards he was "the only survivor" of his platoon.

Commenting on the flying horsemen's engagement at Plei-Jirang, Hugh A. Mulligan admitted that "in the new war, death can come shockingly quick, and, even with the superior American fire power, the enemy has his day, a day he has prepared for long and hard, choosing the moment and the place for the contact... The twelve fleeing figures had led Charlie Company to slaughter in one of the bloodiest ambushes of American troops of the war."

The GI's defeat at Plei-Jirang once more has showed that there was no hope for the Americans

to try for a momentous victory to reverse the military situation when the year 1966 came to a close. The failure of Operation *Paul Revere IV* did not fail to remind the US Command of US retired Gen. Ike's lamentations which, since the rainy season's end, had urged for a change in US strategy, as the Vietnam war casualty list extended longer and longer with every passing day.