

AFTER ACTION REPORT

As transcribed by then MSG David Butters, Battalion Operations Sergeant
from the official document submitted to the Commanding Officer, 3d Bde TF, 25th Inf
Div

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY HEADQUARTERS 2D BATTALION 35TH INFANTRY (Cacti Blue) 3D BDE 25TH INF DIV APO 96355

AVDC-C-CTB

21 April, 1967

SUBJECT: Combat Operations After Action Report for 21 - 22 March 1967
The Battle of "One-Niner"

TO: Commanding Officer
3d Bde TF, 25th Inf Div
APO 96355

1. NAME OF OPERATION: SAM HOUSTON
2. DATE OF OPERATION: 21 March 67 - 22 March 67
3. LOCATION:
 - a. A Company.....vic YA 665576
 - b. B Company.....vic YA 675536
 - c. C Company.....vic YA 680568
 - d. Battery C, 2d Bn 9th Arty, vic YA 675536
4. COMMAND AND CONTROL HEADQUARTERS:
 - a. HQ, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
 - b. Company A, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
 - c. Company B, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
 - d. Company C, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
 - e. Battery C, 2d Bn 9th Arty
5. REPORTING OFFICERS:
 - a. LTC Clinton E. Granger, CO 2nd Bn, 35th Inf

- b. CPT S.L.C. Barcena, CO, A Company, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- c. CPT Ralph E. Walker, CO, B Company, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- d. CPT Ronald B. Rykowski, CO, C Company, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- e. CPT James E. Lanning, CO, C Company, 2d Bn 35th Inf
- f. CPT Richard E. Dwinell, CO, Battery C, 2d Bn 9th Arty

6. TASK ORGANIZATION:

- a. Company A, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- b. Company B, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- c. Company C, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf
- d. Battery C, 2d Bn 9th Arty

7. SUPPORTING FORCES:

- a. Battery D, Composite, 5th Bn 16th Arty
- b. 7th US Air Force
- c. Engineer Sqd, D Company, 4th Engineer Bn
- d. 170th Avn Bn

8. INTELLIGENCE: Current IntSum

9. MISSIONS:

- a. Company A: To conduct search and destroy operations from north to south between the 66 and 67 north/south grid lines and west of Company C.
- b. Company B: Initially to provide FSB security; subsequently the company was directed to conduct a combat assault in relief of Company C.
- c. Company C: To conduct search and destroy operations from north to south, to the east of, and parallel to Company A.

10. EXECUTION:

- a. At 0952 hours 21 March 1967, Company A departed its night location and continued on existing operation to sweep to the south on three axis. Shortly after 1000 hours, Company C, after reconnaissance by fire along the intended route, left same night location on two axis. Company A traveled with 1st Platoon and 2d Platoon to the east and Company C (-) to the southeast.
- b. At (unreadable) hours 21 March 1967, Company C (-) located a well traveled, high speed trail, vic YA679567. The trail had been used recently and CPT Rykowski, C Company Commander, directed a search of the trail in both directions. All three platoons searched with Company C (-) completing its search first. While 1st and 2nd Platoons completed their search, Company C(-) continued on the original route.
- c. After completion of the search of the trail to the northeast, 1st and 2nd Platoons reformed and moved again to the southeast. At 1525 hours, as the lead elements of the patrol moved up the ridge line to their south, the rear security element observed

two unarmed NVA traveling south on the trail that had just been searched. The security element fired on the two NVA, who fled back to the north. At 1550 hours, 1st and 2nd Platoons discovered a bunker complex vic YA680569. While searching the area, the 1st Platoon discovered a grave containing nine NVA KIA. The search was intensified with both platoons probing all bunkers for graves. At 1552 hours, the two platoons began receiving AW fire from two NVA armed with AK 47's. The platoons immediately returned fire and the NVA fled to the southeast. One friendly WIA was suffered. After the NVA withdrew to the southeast, CPT Rykowski radioed that he would take Company C(-) to the northeast to block the retreating NVA. 1st and 2nd Platoons then radioed for a medevac helicopter. A few minutes afterward, 1st and 2nd Platoon received fire from an estimated five different AW positions to their southeast and southwest. Company C(-) turned in the direction of the fire to envelop the enemy forces.

- d. At 1620 hours, Company C(-), while maneuvering against the enemy force firing at 1st and 2nd Platoon, made contact with an unknown size enemy force which was dug in to their northeast. CPT Rykowski deployed Company C(-) on line with the 3rd Platoon leader, 2LT Alvarado, on the west flank and the weapons platoon leader, 1LT Sudborough, on the east flank. The attack was slowed by the dense vegetation and the heavy enemy fire. At 1623 hours, the company began receiving heavy 60mm and 82mm mortar fire while continuing to attack the enemy force. At the same time, the enemy attacked Company C(-)'s east flank, in mass, with an estimated battalion size force. Meanwhile, Company A was directed to link with Company C, while Company C was directed to break contact to allow full use of air and artillery support against the large enemy force. CPT Rykowski informed the battalion commander that he was heavily engaged on two flanks and that he was unable to disengage the enemy. At 1640 hours, CPT Rykowski was severely wounded by enemy fire. Lt Emory, the company artillery FO and LT Sudborough, the weapons platoon leader, were mortally wounded by enemy fire. The 3rd platoon leader, LT Alvarado, was lightly wounded. CPT Rykowski directed Company C(-) to try to disengage; however, the enemy initiated human wave assaults on the besieged platoon and the disengagement was halted. During the fight that ensued, Company C(-) inflicted heavy losses on the enemy; but also suffered heavy casualties. In spite of the seemingly overwhelming odds against Company C(-), the men were still able to return fire and repeatedly repelled the enemy assaults and, successfully defended their positions. The 1st and 2nd platoon of Company C were unable to break contact with the enemy to provide the necessary reinforcement to destroy the enemy force. At 1701 hours, LT Rutledge, the 2nd Platoon leader was directed by the battalion commander to assume temporary command of Company C.
- e. At 1715 hours, gunships from the 170th Aviation Company were able to identify all friendly units in the area of contact and engaged the enemy with excellent results. As the gunships started to make their initial pass in support of the 1st and 2nd platoons of Company C, the NVA force initiated an assault on both platoons. The effective fire of the gunships broke the pending attack and was instrumental in destroying a large number of enemy troops. At 1740 hours, heavy contact was broken by the enemy and efforts were made by other elements of the force to link with Company C(-) who, at the time, were still surrounded and receiving heavy sniper and AW fire. There were

no further efforts made by the NVA to overrun Company C(-). However, under the cover of the heavy fire, the NVA were effective in policing the battle area despite the heavy concentrations of artillery fire delivered to block this action. Efforts by CPT Rykowski, even while severely wounded, to bring the airstrikes and artillery fire closer to the area being policed, were hampered by the ineffectiveness of signaling devices, smoke and flares, in the thick jungle canopy.

- f. At 1825 hours, Company A linked with the 1st and 2nd platoons of Company C and CPT Barcena assumed command of the force. He immediately had Company A assume responsibility for the perimeter while the two platoons from Company C reorganized and reconsolidated in the center. Enemy sniper and mortar fire was received intermittently throughout the time of link-up to consolidation
- g. At 1845 hours, the battalion commander, LTC Granger, led a seven man command and control party on a combat assault into an LZ 300 meters south of Company C(-) in order to provide control of the battalion (-) on the ground.
- h. At 1900 hours, Company A and the 1st and 2nd platoons of Company C linked with Company C(-) and cleared an area which would allow medical evacuation helicopters to hover and evacuate the more seriously wounded by hoist. Blood plasma, stretchers, and morphine were requested, as well as the battalion surgeon to provide emergency medical treatment for the more seriously wounded prior to medical evacuation. The medical evacuation helicopter arrived at 2000 hours and, while hovering to hoist the wounded, was shot down by an enemy B-40 rocket. Two of the four helicopter crewmen were KIA, and the remaining two were WIA. The enemy rocket launcher team was killed by SSG Wehner of Company A when he assaulted the hidden position. The explosion of the medical evacuation helicopter ended any further attempt of medical evacuation at that location. LTC Granger, aware of the downed "DUSTOFF" was able, with his patrol, to secure a more desirable LZ and directed Company A and Company C to link with him for the evacuation of the wounded.
- i. At 2210 hours, the first elements of Company A and C linked with the battalion control group and medical evacuation helicopters were again called. At this time CPT James Lanning assumed command of Company C on order of the battalion commander. The first helicopter arrived ten minutes later with the 2nd Battalion 35th Infantry Battalion Surgeon CPT Stilp, as well as an attached engineer team aboard. The addition of the battalion surgeon and the control group was instrumental in saving several lives and in improving evacuation of the seriously wounded, as compared to the slightly wounded who were not evacuated until first light. The engineer squad had immediately started the LZ clearing operation. At 2235 hours, the remainder of Company A and Company C entered the LZ and assumed responsibility for the security of the LZ while the battalion commander organized the force into task organizations: Litter parties, medical teams, and an LZ control team. These task organizations proved to be the best solution and resulted in a minimum of confusion. By 0130 hours 22 March 1967, all seriously wounded were extracted and the battalion control group was airlifted back to the FSB to provide coordination for subsequent operations. Fifteen sorties were required to medevac the wounded from Company C.

- j. The two companies organized the perimeter around the LZ and established security for the balance of the night. There was little enemy firing until 0627 hours 22 March 1967, when the two companies received approximately 25 - 30 rounds of enemy 82mm mortar fire. Counter mortar fire from the 60mm mortars in the companies, reinforced by artillery and mortar fire from the FSB effectively stopped the enemy fires. There were no friendly casualties in this mortar attack.
- k. Friendly artillery and mortars boxed the position throughout the night to contain the enemy and prevent a police of the battlefield, but the effort was not completely successful, and the enemy evacuated an estimated 85 dead, leaving behind 45 bodies which he could not evacuate. At 0907 hours, Company A, while making a sweep of the battle area, made contact with two NVA, both of which were KIA during the resultant fire fight. At 1045 hours, Company A suffered five WIA while recovering friendly KIA. A US body was booby-trapped. The area had been liberally sprinkled with booby traps made from US manufactured hand grenades taken from friendly KIA. One man later died of wounds.
- l. At 1030 hours 22 March 1967, Company B made a combat assault 300 meters south of Company C(-) point of contact in order to effect a relief of Company C. Company B secured an LZ and sent a contact team to Company C to lead them back to the LZ. Company C was then airlifted back to the FSB where they assumed FSB security and reorganized their forces.
- m. After Company B relieved Company C in place, Companies A and B conducted a thorough search of the battle area. In addition, a search was conducted in all four cardinal directions with negative enemy contact; however, extensive bunker, living, and hospital installations, totaling regimental size, were located in the immediate vicinity of the action.
- n. Total friendly casualties: 24 KIA, 55 WIA (Includes Dustoff & C/2-9 Arty)

11 LESSONS LEARNED:

- a. ITEM: Use of the emergency flasher strobe light proved highly successful during the evacuation of over 30 wounded on the night of 21 March. The LZ was surrounded by trees over 100 feet high and the approach into the LZ was extremely difficult. The LZ was capable of handling only one Huey at a time and at that, it was less than acceptable. The flash of the strobe light penetrated the foliage of this thick jungle and assisted the pilots in locating the small clearing.
- b. OBSERVATION: The emergency flasher strobe light would be successful in conducting night landings in difficult landing zones and in locating friendly forces during periods of restricted visibility. As it is extremely light and compact, little weight would be added to the squad load if it were added to the squad TO&E.
- c. Recommend that the emergency flasher strobe be issued to each rifle squad, and one to the platoon headquarters of each rifle platoon, and that replacement batteries be placed in the supply system.

12. USE OF THE BATTALION SURGEON:

- a. ITEM: Prior to the evacuation of casualties that night, the battalion commander decided to put the battalion surgeon into the LZ to treat casualties and establish priorities of evacuation. This employment of the battalion's own medical treatment capability as far forward as possible proved very successful. The doctor was able to save lives on the LZ, and through his professional knowledge and skill, determined the casualties that required first priority evacuation. A tribute to the success of this operation is the fact that not a single soldier evacuated that night died despite the seriousness of most of the wounds. The great majority of the WIA's suffered multiple wounds.
- b. OBSERVATION: The battalion's principle medical capability, should be held readily available until it is determined where it can best be committed. On this occasion, the Battalion Surgeon was properly employed as far forward as possible, resulting in lives saved.
- c. Recommend that battalion surgeons be kept either in the FSB or trains, where they can be helilifted directly to the scene of action to treat casualties and establish priorities for evacuation.

13. GROUND CONTROL OF HELICOPTERS:

- a. ITEM: The use of a ground controller to guide helicopters (to) the LZ and assist them in actual landing by voice commands was successful in that 15 medevac missions were conducted in total darkness, except for landing lights, without a single accident, where as on the following day two helicopters suffered damage trying to get into the same LZ, when they disregarded the instructions of ground controller.
- b. OBSERVATION: The battalion S-3 personally controlled the medical evacuation by directing the helicopters into and out of the difficult landing zone using an AN/PRC-25 on the battalion command net. The surgeon and engineer reinforcements were introduced in the same manner. During difficult times and difficult landing zones, it is worth the effort to either employ a pathfinder team or an experienced officer to control such operations.
- c. Recommend that pathfinder teams be attached to each maneuver battalion to assist in control of helicopters into and out of difficult landing zones.

Friendly casualties totaled 24 KIA and 55 WIA

Sic Clinton E. Granger, Jr.
 CLINTON E. GRANGER, JR.
 LTC, Infantry
 Commanding

My Epilogue

Again, John Mario Mucci and a host of other brave Cacti men have their individual stories of survival during this battle. Most don't talk about it. They would much rather forget it. But it's hard to forget those who didn't survive or the absolute heroics of those unnamed in official after action reports.

I was in the TOC when the contact was first made. Oh no, I thought. We haven't recovered yet from ten days ago. Please Lord, let this be a minor scrape. As you can see from the after action report and the KIA list on the Cacti web site, this turned out to be even more devastating.

As the battle progressed, CPT Rykowski was talking to me on the battalion net when he was hit. He continued directing the battle, constantly switching between his company net and the battalion net. To make things easier for CPT Rykowski, I put our second radio on Charlie Company's net. The 1st Platoon RTO, "One-niner Sierra" continually updated CPT Rykowski on the contact. Then the NVA human wave assault began. I could hear the enemy AK fire very clearly. One-niner Sierra calmly said "I've got to put the radio down now and shoot." With his mike still open, I heard the AK fire. One-niner Sierra was silent. I don't remember his name, only his call sign and the distinct way he pronounced the word "Sierra" with an exaggerated upward inflection on the "e". Somewhere on the list of KIA's of Charlie Company, March 20th, 1967 is this young man's name.

John Mario Mucci may not like me telling part of his story, but he will just have to get over it. As CPT Rykowski lay wounded with a crushed pelvic, John Mario took over the radio. It was very dark. Colonel Granger, flying in his Charlie-Charlie was trying to locate the company CP location. Small arms, automatic weapons and mortar fire were heavy. Enemy NVA soldiers were inside the perimeter. Yet, John stayed with his company commander, who was passed out by this time, guiding Colonel Granger's helicopter. As indicated in the after action report, the old man had to land several hundred yards away from the company. John, in between keeping the enemy at bay with his own rifle, guided the battalion commander and his small party directly to the CP. Now the battalion commander could bring to bear the gunships and heavy artillery (8 inch and 175mm from the FSB). John was the one who got the old man there as quickly as possible. Colonel Granger considered his action as one of the many significant factors that brought the battle to a close. For the remainder of the battle, John refused to leave his company commander. For his heroism in direct combat with the enemy, John was awarded the silver star. The battalion commander, thankful for John's action, transferred him to the TOC as an RTO. You guessed it, John was the most miserable s.o.b for the entire time he was with me. All he wanted was to get back to Charlie Company. By pure coincidence, John and I are from the same small town just outside of Boston.

From my journal

20 March: Intel reports NVA Regiment nearby-Will attempt to take FSB

21 March: Co C, while sweeping southeast from 664585 made contact with enemy battalion. 3rd Platoon stopped human wave attack. Most of the platoon are casualties. Co A moved northeast to assist. NVA broke contact before Co A could reach Co C. CPT Rykowski, although seriously wounded in stomach and both legs, stayed on radio for three hours directing the fight. Sounds horrible to hear a dying man talk on the radio. Battalion commander landed & got him out. One chopper took direct hit from rocket launcher while about 25 feet in the air. Pilot lost both eyes, co-pilot seriously wounded, both gunners dead. Initial reports 16 friendly KIA, 52 WIA, 11 MIA. Most casualties from 3rd platoon and Co C Hq. Choppers did tremendous job pulling wounded out during darkness in very bad LZ.

22 March: didn't get much sleep last night. Now pulling friendly KIA's and remainder of Co C back to FSB. Co B flew in to relieve Co C. Medic told me it looked like a graveyard out there. Battalion commander estimates 3rd Plt, Co C took at least 150 NVA with them.

23-25 March: Making close search of battle area. NVA body count now up to 52.

26 March: Easter Sunday. Battalion Chaplain conducted combined Easter Sunday and memorial service for Charlie company. Real nice. (*I have a picture of the service*) Found Regimental Hq of NVA. Also found GI equipment from 12 March action. Same bunch of NVA. Hospital area with 5 more NVA in graves & many bloody bandages.