

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 2ND BATTALION, 5TH CAVALRY, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMOBILE), IN THE ATTACK UPON A MAIN FORCE VIET CONG HEAVY WEAPONS BATTALION, IN THE VICINITY OF BONG SO, SOUTH VIETNAM, 16-17 FEBRUARY, 1966. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A COMPANY COMMANDER.)

INTRODUCTION

On 27 January 1966, six days after Tet (Vietnamese Lunar New Year Celebration), the First Air Cavalry Division (Airmobile), commanded by Major General Harry W.C. Kinnard, moved out of their base camp at An Khe and launched Operation "Masher", in the coastal lowlands around the town of Bon Song, in Hoai Nhon District, Binh Dinh Province, Republic of South Vietnam. (Approximately 450 kilometers north-east of Saigon. (see map A)

THE DIVISION PLAN

The plan of action of the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was to make contact with the numerous hard-core, main force Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army Units that had been controlling the area for over a year, defeat them by using the air cavalry's mobility and fire power capabilities, and as a result of the defeat of Viet Cong units, be able to open Route One, between Bong Son and Qui Nhon, to civilian and military travel.

THE INITIAL ENGAGEMENTS

Initially, the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) conducted offensive operations north of Bong Son against elements of the Quyet Tam Regiment, composed of approximately 70% North Vietnamese Army Regulars, and was 30% Main Force Viet Cong. (see map B"). The 1st Air Cav was highly successful against the Quyet Tan Regiment. It was a comparatively new unit, with little combat experience against American troops, and attempted to fight in relatively open, flat country where cover and concealment were sparse. The air mobility capability enabled the 1st Air Cav to defeat this unit and eventually cause them to break up into small groups and move into the mountains. The weather in January and February around Bong Son was highly inclement and not conducive to aerial flights. It was the rainy season for the area, and due to the constant showers and low clouds in the mountains northwest of Bong Son, the 1st Air Cav Div. was unable to follow up its successes for about three days.

Finally, the 2nd Brigade, with three infantry battalions, was able to move into the mountains to the west and conduct a search and clear operation in conjunction with the United States Marines into the An Lao Valley. (see map B) The operation was conducted using tear gas as part of the preparatory fires, and the various objectives were swept by U.S. troops wearing gas masks. The operation encountered no resistance and U.S. efforts consisted primarily of medical assistance and civic action projects for the rescued civilians.

Simultaneously with the 2nd Brigade operation, the 3rd Brigade executed the Division's Operations Order "White Wing", by Air Assaulting into the Kim Son Base Area, a Viet Cong training center located in numerous small valleys and surrounded by high mountains. (see map B) The Quyet Chien Regiment, a unit, opposed the 3rd Brigade with much experience in fighting American troops. The Quyet Chien Regiment, composed of approximately 30% North Vietnamese Army Regulars, and 70% Main

Force Viet Cong, fought hard and bitterly in an area conducive to defense. Finally, after taking especially heavy losses to one of their companies, the Quyet Chien Regiment withdrew. (1)

THE BRIGADE PLAN

Intelligence gathered in the next few days indicated that the Quyet Chien Regiment had moved into the rugged jungle covered mountains south-east of the Kim Son Base area, some 25 kilometers south of Bong Son. The 2nd Brigade, commanded by Colonel William R. Lynch, was ordered to move from pick-up zone Duck on 16 February 1966, with three infantry battalions and execute the Division's Operation Order "Eagle Claw" designed to surround and trap the Quyet Chien Regiment in the vicinity of the mountains surrounding the Song Bien Valley. (see map B) The terrain was some of the worst in the country. The ridges and valleys were covered with thick interwoven vines, rocks, and crevices, along with leeches and snakes. The only possible landing zones were as follows: one on top of the mountain ridges to the east and south of the objective area, which was covered by huge boulders nestled in waist-high elephant grass, and the other on a rice paddy in the objective area itself. The latter, seen from a high flying helicopter, looked like a trap. It was estimated that only about four UH-1D helicopters could land at once, and the thick foliage surrounding the clearing could possibly hide many soldiers waiting in ambush. It was decided however, that it could be after troops had first moved overland and it was secured. The 2nd Brigade Plan called for the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 5th Brigade to move by helicopter from pick-up zone Duck to the area of the proposed operation on 16 February. The 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, was to land on the mountains tops to the south of the objective and sweep north. The 2nd Battalion of the 12th Cavalry was in reserve.

THE BATTALION PLAN

The operations plan for the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Meyers, called for the unit to land on LZ Mike and push north. (see map B). Company A, commanded by Captain Thomas Fincher, would land first and secure the landing zone. Company D, commanded by Captain Thomas Carney would follow. The Headquarters Company and Company B would arrive next. Company C, commanded by 1st Lieutenant George Long, would complete the move. The battalion, minus Company B, would set up a defensive perimeter on the hill to north of LZ Mike. When Company B landed, it was to move northeast down the ridge to the Song Bien Valley and establish a clearing position around the clearing. This objective was designated LZ Pete. On 17 February, Companies A and C would conduct sweeping operations into the blocking position at LZ Pete.

COMPANY B

Company B, commanded by Captain Robert W. McMahon (myself), had a strength of six officers and one hundred and twenty enlisted men in the field on 16 February. In addition, they had attachments consisting of an Artillery Forward Observer Officer (2nd Lieutenant Mark Zeldes), an Artillery Forward Observer Sergeant, and their respective radio operators. They also had a 3 man Engineer Demolition Team and a Forward Observer and radio operator from the Company D mortar platoon. The company had not been engaged in a pitched battle since the fighting in the Ira Drang in November 1965, and about 50% of the men were recent arrivals in Vietnam and had no

previous combat experience. The company commander had taken command at Christmas, and had fifteen months of advisor and U.S. Forces staff assignments in Vietnam prior to taking command. On the 15th of February 1966, the 1st squad of the 1st platoon, and the 3rd platoon had engaged a small party of Viet Cong and killed one and wounded and captured two. Thus the morale of the unit was high, with 2nd Lieutenant Charles J. Clark commanding the 1st platoon: 1st Lieutenant Keith Sherman the 2nd platoon: and 2nd Lieutenant Donald A. O'Keefe the 3rd platoon. Master Sergeant Guss Harryman commanded the mortar platoon. The company Headquarters consisted of the commanding officer, 1st Lieutenant Rufus Stephans as Executive Officer, 1st Sergeant James A. Dedrich as company First Sergeant. It also had an additional officer (2nd Lieutenant Charles M. Johnson) who had just been released from the hospital after having malaria, and was to take over the 1st platoon in a few days.

NARRATION

After landing on LZ Mike and making a final coordination, Company B moved down the ridgeline in a company file with individual soldiers off to its sides as flanking security. When they reached the first point where the valley floor could be observed, the company commander called a halt. Accompanied by the artillery officer and forward observer from company D, the company commander went forward to point of the company and directed that their indirect fires be adjusted onto the valley floor. For over one hour, they company waiting while the 155mm Howitzers located at Ha Tay (2) and Phu Xuan (1) attempted to fire high angle fire over the 400 meter high mountains into the objective area. (see map B) During this period the artillery did not get any of its rounds over the mountains tops. The artillery had to walk the rounds slowly towards the objective because excessive adjustments in range could have caused the rounds to land on itself and battalion, as they were located on gun-target azimuths. The company D mortars firing from the top of the hill to the rear did get a few rounds into the objective area. However, while they were firing, two H-13 scout ships from the 9th Cavalry Squadron of the 1st Cav Div. Suddenly flew into the valley and the line of fire, the mortar rounds narrowly missing their helicopters. The scout ships promptly got out of the valley and radioed the battalion, reporting, having seen two Viet Cong hiding in the jungle near a clearing. Finally, the battalion commander took a calculated risk and ordered Company to proceed without the customary artillery fire support. Company B proceeded in a classic wedge formation: with the 1st platoon flanking on its right and the 3rd platoon on its left while the 2nd platoon, the company headquarters and mortar platoons would continue down the ridge advancing into the objective. At 1700 hours, this latter element, were slowed down by the mortar element with its one 81mm mortar and eighteen rounds of HE ammunition. The rugged terrain presented an obstacle with huge boulders, crevices and thick jungle, limited their advance to a position approximately short of the objective, while the left flank, the 3rd platoon was already on the valley floor, and the right flank, the 1st platoon was about one hundred meters from the objective, and reporting huts, bunkers and signs of recent Viet Cong usage.

The battalion commander flew over the company in his UH-1D Command Chopper, and decided that the company would be unable to reach and establish a satisfactory defensive position at the objective before dark. He directed Company B to pull back its elements and establish a perimeter defense and bivouac for the night. (see Map "C"). The company commander complied and spent the night in a perimeter defense on the hill approximately one kilometer from the objective. The battalion's S-4's logistical helicopters flew in additional mortar ammunition (forty rounds) for the night,

along with water cans and C-rations. Early in the night, which was uneventful, the battalion radioed to the company commander that Company B was to proceed as soon as possible on the following day to valley floor and establish the blocking position, again on the assumption that the unit could get to the objective without artillery support. The plan of action for the 17th of February called for the company (minus) to move at first light down to the valley on the right side of the ridge, dig in a perimeter defense around the clearing, and prepare to defend from all directions. The third platoon was to stay behind on the scene of the night's bivouac, with the company executive officer, until the morning logistical helicopters had lifted out the empty water cans and the extra mortar ammunition. It would then move on the left side of the ridge down into the valley and sweep east into the blocking position.

THE CONTACT AND THE ATTACK

At approximately 0730 hours, on 17 February 1966, Company B moved out as planned in a file formation consisting of the first platoon, the headquarters element, the mortar platoon, and second platoon. (See Map "C", Overlay No. 1) Upon reaching the huts and bunkers that the first platoon had found the day before, the company commander at first gave orders to burn the huts and blow up the bunkers, and then deciding that he'd rather not have a trail of smoking huts showing his route, he countermanded his order. Upon reaching the Song Bien stream, the company turned right on a trail along the south side of the stream. The platoon leader of the first platoon reported that he had reached a small clearing, which was probably LZ Pete. He also reported that one of his elements had seen footprints, of at least three men, in the sand. The company commander acknowledged, but lacking additional information came to no conclusion except that there were a few Viet Cong in the area. The company commander moved forward to the first platoon which was, by this time, spread out as security along the north, east, south sides of the clearing. Upon arriving at the clearing to confer with Lt. Clark, the company commander found that there were four or five huge bomb craters, each approximately thirty feet in diameter with two partially filled with water, along the west side of the clearing. Having had the battalion commander point out LZ Pete to him from the air two days previously, and not recalling any B-52 bomb craters, the company commander radioed to the second platoon in the rear to check the area to the west for another clearing with a rice paddy in it. While awaiting word on that reconnaissance, he analyzed the terrain and decided to set up his block at his present location since the clearing could accommodate approximately four UH-1D helicopters, and the surrounding terrain was conducive to defense. He designated this position as the objective, LZ Pete, and directed his mortar platoon and company headquarters to set up in one of the dry bomb craters.

Just as the company commander was preparing to direct the first platoon to move across the stream and dig in on the hill to the north, the second platoon leader called in and reported finding another clearing one hundred meters to the west. The second platoon leader stated that the area between the two clearings was covered with thick jungle undergrowth, approximately eight feet high, through which the stream flowed. The company commander acknowledged the information, and stated that he had decided to set up his block around the clearing with the craters.

Just as the company commander told the second platoon leader to move his element up to the blocking position, the Viet Cong opened fire with an automatic weapon and small arms from the jungle at the eastern edge of LZ Pete. The company

commander, believing the enemy to be only a small force, and at that instant seeing no other decision available, yelled to the first platoon leader, "Go get'em, Joe!" With that command, the first platoon opened fire and moved forward into the jungle in the attack on the unseen enemy.

At this time the Viet Cong bullets were hitting in and around the mortar and headquarters elements. Everybody jumped into the craters and looking over the crest to the east, supported the first platoon with automatic fire. The mortar platoon finished setting up and began putting HE fires on the enemy. The artillery forward observer and the Company D forward observer contacted their units and asked for fires. One man in the mortar platoon had already been wounded in the wrist, and the company senior medic was administering first aid.

The platoon sergeant from the committed first platoon (SSG Leroy M. Zubrod) radioed in that Lt. Clark had been seriously wounded with four to five bullets in the stomach, that several others were wounded also, and that the attack was having trouble due to Viet Cong supporting fires from a hill to the rights.

The company commander radioed to the second platoon to move up and attack the hill to the right of the first platoon. The third platoon, still back on the bivouac area, had just finished loading out the helicopter, and upon hearing the fire fight and monitoring the radios, called in orders. They were told to move directly to the area of the firefight and establish perimeter security to the west. As the second platoon moved past the bomb craters, the company commander pointed out to Lt. Sherman the hill to be attacked and secured. He also attached the artillery officer to him so that he could adjust his fires from higher ground, and get fires close to the attacking platoons. The second platoon assaulted their objective and secured it. (See Map "C", Overlay No. 1). Casualties were moderate, and included the artillery officer who was killed in action.

The platoon sergeant, first platoon, called in and reported that ammunition was low and casualties were high. The company commander turned to his extra officer, Lt. Johnson, and told him to go forward, take command of the first platoon and pull back the unit under cover of the second platoon to the vicinity of the craters. Lt. Johnson, with a couple volunteers from the mortar platoon (which had by this time fired all eighteen rounds of ammunition), moved out across the clearing to the first platoon.

At about this time, the western part of the clearing secured by the three-man engineer demolition team and the rest of the mortar platoon came under assault by at least a Viet Cong platoon (about twenty persons were actually seen). (See Map "C", Overlay No. 2).

The battalion commander radioed to find out why Company B wasn't calling in any artillery fire. Using the Battalion "Black Knight" Code, the company commander reported the artillery forward observer killed in action, and the Company D forward observer seriously wounded, and also the casualty and ammunition status of the company. The Colonel acknowledged the status report and said that he had tactical aircraft available for support and, as soon as Company B could identify all of its friendly lines for the forward air controller, they would come in.

THE WITHDRAWAL AND THE DEFENSE

At about 1045 hours, to further complicate the action, the second platoon on the hill, the elements in LZ Pete, and the third platoon were all hit at once. The second platoon on the hill reported receiving friendly mortar rounds on their position and the company commander could see that they were taking intensive fire. A check with battalion resulted in a negative report on any friendly fires, and a theory that the rounds were probably from an enemy mortar. The cough from a mortar tube behind a hill to the north confirmed this. This necessitated moving the second platoon off the hill and placing it around the clearing at the base of the hill to south. (See Map "C", Overlay No.2) The company commander then told his radio operator, Sp/4 Estill G. Frodge, to contact battalion and get some TAC air in on the hill where the second platoon had been and especially behind the hill to the north where the enemy mortar was. The radio operator did so and directed an excellent pinpoint-bombing mission, whereby several HE and Napalm bombs were dropped and the enemy mortar was silenced. Sp/4 Frodge, throughout the battle, continued to bring in air strikes and rocket fire from helicopters on the areas that the company commander directed.

The two craters that were half filled with water were by this time full of semi-naked wounded with the medics administering morphine and changing bandages. Also in a crater with the wounded was the mortar platoon sergeant. He was not wounded, but had been having spasms of cowardice ever since the firefight started. A severe "chewing out" by the company commander and the first sergeant finally got him back up to the edge of the crater and to his job of calling in artillery fires.

At the same time that the second platoon began receiving mortar fire the third platoon had just reached the clearing west of LZ Pete. (SEE map "C", Overlay No.2) Upon sighting several Viet Cong to their left front, the platoon opened fire. During the ensuing firefight, the platoon leader's hand was almost shot off at the wrist. Several others were wounded and killed. The executive officer, Lt. Stephans, took immediate command of the platoon and moved them into the middle of the rice paddies in the clearing, where they had fair protection behind the rice paddy dikes. Lt. Stephans called the company commander and reported his status, and stated that he thought they could break through the Viet Cong to LZ Pete. The company commander believed that Lt. Stephans would be unable to fight his way in while carrying the platoon casualties and equipment. Therefore, he vetoed the idea and told Lt. Stephans to keep the third platoon in the middle of the rice paddy where the observers in helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft could more easily identify them. Lt. Stephans complied and throughout the remainder of the battle commanded his own defense. He used the artillery forward observer sergeant to call in artillery and mortar fires. He brought in TAC air strikes around his position, including the strip of land between the third platoon and the rest of the company. During the battle, one of two Skyraiders dropped his bombs too close to the platoon wounding some of his men. When the second aircraft started to come in, Lt. Stephans ran out into the incoming fire and waved the second aircraft off, thereby saving the lives of many of his men. He also carried some of his wounded to the safety of the dikes. He was wounded in the arm during this action but continued to fight. A short time later Lt. Stephans shot two Viet Cong out of a tree with his M-70 grenade launcher. (2)

By about 110 hours, the company was extremely low on ammunition and it appeared that half the company was a casualty in some form. The company commander anticipated that the Viet Cong might try a mass assault, and ordered the company to move the wounded up to the edge of the craters, fix bayonets, and prepare for an assault. Pfc. John Martin, the son of an Atlanta newspaper editor, later wrote

about this phase of the action as follows; "Then they started rolling grenades down on us. Someone moved a fire team up on the hill to stop them. But we figured we had a better chance just to move out in a hurry, than to wait for one of those grenades. We were just lying half-joking and half-crying. Then the C.C. said those wounded who could move were to get on line and fix bayonets. All I thought of was "This is Custer's Last Stand". I thought that was it. That's when I started to get scared. Air support saved the platoon from annihilation. Skyraiders dropped napalm so close that one white phosphorous bomb hit the edge of the holed-up platoon and one officer threw himself back first into the mud to douse his burning shirt". (3.2)

At about 1130 hours, volunteer pilots from the 227th Aerial Helicopter Battalion of the Division flew a UD-1D helicopter down the valley over LZ Pete and pushed out in excess of a basic load of M-16, M-79 and caliber .45 ammunition, along with grenades and batteries. Some of the ammunition was spread out over the clearing but most it landed in the craters. The helicopter took over a hundred Viet Cong rounds from automatic weapons, but miraculously continued to fly and made it safely home without any of its crew being wounded. Another chopper re-supplied the third platoon at the same time in the same manner. Note my comments about this later on.

With the arrival of the supplies, morale shot up 150%. Troops dashed out to get the boxes. Others made small assaults on the enemy. This enabled wounded, who had laid still out in the field all morning to be pulled into the crater.

While Company B defended, other elements of the battalion were also committed. Company A moved towards LZ Pete along its planned route of march. They moved into the Viet Cong main camp (*See Map "B"*), surprising a handful of the enemy who had returned to get heavier weapons to use on the surrounded Company B. Company A killed these Viet Cong and captured numerous recoilless rifles, and a number of mortars, along with communications equipment, and important documents. They continued to push toward LZ Pete. From there, they moved southwest along a stream and ridge toward the enemy. Elements of the First Battalion of the Fifth Cavalry were heavily engaged about three kilometers east of LZ Pete. The Viet Cong Regimental Commander, somewhere in the area, was being monitored by the Division Intelligence Section attached to the Second Brigade. He had become excited, broken code, and was giving commands in clear Vietnamese on how to continue to annihilate the American units.

Meanwhile, Company B continued to defend. Mortar fire from Company D was falling on the Viet Cong along with TAC air strikes, Artillery fires continued to be poor due to the need of continual supervision of the mortar platoon sergeant, the only available trained forward observer.

Around 1200 hours, the company commander called the battalion commander, informing him that some of the wounded had been in need of evacuation for over two hours. The company commander suggested that Company B could put out enough suppressive fires on the surrounding terrain to enable another rifle company to land in LZ Pete and attack the enemy. This action would allow the dead and wounded to be evacuated. The battalion commander agreed that it might work, but told the company commander that with the Viet Cong maintaining contact with Company B, the big plan of the day would work better, and told him to hang on.

The Viet Cong continued to snipe, probe and attempt to annihilate the company. The company hung on with the support of air strikes and by returning a large volume of automatic weapons fire when fired upon by Viet Cong. At 1400 hours, two more UH-1D helicopters brought in ammunition again. Due to the heavy enemy fire and wounded crew chief, the wound were not able to be evacuated.

At about 1400 hours, Company B, Second Battalion, Twelfth Cavalry, commanded by Captain Dean Knox, was attached to the Second Battalion, Fifth Cavalry. At about 1530 hours they were heli-lifted into the clearing west of LZ Pete where the third platoon was located. See my personal notes. They landed opposed only by light resistance, and by 1700 hours the immediate area around LZ Pete was secured. At this time the nine dead and fifty-five wounded men from the surrounded company were evacuated. Around the LZ were the bodies of fifty-four Viet Cong.

By 1900 hours, the remainder of the Second Battalion, Fifth Cavalry closed into LZ Pete.

As a result of all company actions, the enemy, which was finally determined to be a Heavy Weapons Battalion of the Quyet Chien Regiment, lost one hundred and twenty-seven men killed (body count) and equipment consisting of: four 57mm recoilless rifles, three 81mm mortars, one 75mm recoilless rifle, seventy-five rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition, and ten rounds of 57mm recoilless rifle ammunition.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. The success of Operation "Eagle's Claw" depended to a large extent on the positioning of Company B in a blocking position around the landing zone in the Song Bien Valley. From this position they would could block the Viet Cong retreat, and also provide a safe landing zone for the brigade reserve (the Second Battalion, Twelfth Cavalry) if they were committed. The artillery defensive fires around the blocking position at LZ Pete were to be an important part of the scheme of defense. Thus the initial inability of the artillery to hit the objective could have been remedied prior to moving the infantry to contact. If an artillery battery (105mm) had been heli-lifted to the vicinity of Phu Ninh. (See Map "C") It would have been able to fire directly up the Song Bien Valley and support the blocking position at LZ Pete.
2. The company commander of Company B, with the mission of establishing the blocking position as soon as possible on 17 February 1966, choose to follow the standard operating policy of having the logistical helicopters pick up his extra mortar ammunition and equipment at the location of his bivouac. Thus he split his unit, at a time when he would need the entire company. Since it was only an additional one thousand meters down to the valley floor, he would have been more successful if he had maintained his unit integrity and had the company carry the extra mortar ammunition and equipment.
3. Units operating in thick jungle should carry a sufficient number of colored smoke grenades to be able to identify their position to tactical aircraft for an extended period of time.

4. Officers and men in the infantry rifle companies should have extensive training and practical experience in the procedures of calling in and adjusting artillery and mortar fires.
5. Men will fire their weapons at suspected and known enemy if they know that helicopters will re-supply them with ammunition.

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