

AIR CAVALRY IN BATTLE

A New Concept In Action

by Major Thomas H. Harvey, Jr.

A foreboding and premonitory quiet pervaded the air as the point squad approached the village to within ten meters of the line of dense hedgerows and bamboo trees. Suddenly, the alert squad leader, SFC Scott R. Hunley, noticed movement behind the thick shrubs. Almost simultaneously as he shouted the warning, "down", each squad member instinctively flattened himself in the dirt as a hail of automatic weapons fire flew overhead. And thus began Act I of the scenario of the Dam Trao Lake Battle which has become the classic example of air cavalry operations in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

The connotation of "air cavalry" operations as employed by The First Team imparts an intrinsic uniqueness that cannot be found in any other division or brigade size organization in the United States Army. The techniques developed and refined by the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, the 1st Cavalry Division's air cavalry squadron, and for several years the only unit of its type in the United States Army, have reached a state of professional acumen as to be invaluable and almost indispensable to the operations of the division. Besides the continuous reconnaissance and information gathering conducted by the squadron, its most significant contribution to the division comes as an economy of force unit. In part, the squadron's mission is "to engage in combat as an economy of force unit". Corollaries of this mission type order are: avoid decisive combat engagements; maintain contact with the enemy; develop the situation. Each facet of this air cavalry mission is demonstrated in the Dam Trao Lake Battle; it was as if a script had been written to play for the world the archetypal air cavalry operation.

As practiced in the 1st Cavalry Division, a "cav" operation, as it is more commonly called, has several distinct phases which follow

a natural progression. The transition from one phase to the next depends upon the degree of contact established and how rapidly the situation develops. The first phase is intelligence, either gathered by the squadron itself or originating from agents through divisional resources, indicating the location of an enemy force. The second phase involves the investigation of this intelligence through air reconnaissance by one of the air cavalry troops to determine if exploitation by ground forces is warranted. Frequently air observation quickly reveals that no further action is required. However, in the event that there are some indications of the enemy's presence the troop commander has the option of employing his reconnaissance rifle platoon (Blues), or if the situation appears too big for one platoon, he can recommend the employment of a larger force. Normally the troop's rifle platoon is air assaulted into the location. If and when contact with the enemy is established, the troop commander must decide upon the magnitude of the enemy force and whether he will need a reaction force already on standby. The troop commander retains operational control of all reaction forces he calls into the battle until he has more than a company size force from the battalion which his troop is supporting. Then control of all elements is assumed by the battalion commander who has the responsibility for the area. From this phase on the operation assumes the complexion of a typical airmobile engagement. A recapitulation of the phases of an air cavalry operation breaks out in the following manner:

1. Intelligence
2. Air reconnaissance
3. Ground reconnaissance
4. Situation development
5. Reinforcement

6. Battalion control and exploitation

7. Victory

Allusion has been made to a reaction force and a digression is in order to discuss this all important factor of a cav operation. An air cavalry troop, under squadron control, usually orients on a specified brigade area of operations. Seldom does a clear cut direct support relationship exist; however, the success of the air cav is immutably related to the responsiveness of the brigade to the intelligence on enemy activity developed by the troop. The air cavalry troop can function with a great deal of latitude and aggressiveness so long as there is the realization that a sizeable reaction force is available. If such a force is not available, then troop operations are significantly inhibited and reduced to only an aerial reconnaissance role. In order to exploit the cav concept the brigade operations center must remain closely tied in with the activities of the cavalry troop. Perhaps one of the most successful exponents of the cav concept was Col. Fred E. Karhohs, commander of the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division at the time of the Dam Trao Lake Battle. He keyed many of his operations on the findings of the air cavalry troop and was always ready to react with a large force if the troop made a significant contact. He was the quintessential practitioner of the cav concept and we shall see how his adherence to this concept paid large dividends at the Dam Trao Lake.

Located in Binh Dinh Province on the east coast, fifteen kilometers southeast of Bong Son, are two large lakes, the northern one of which is the Dam Trao. On the northeast corner of this lake are two large villages each approximately seven hundred meters in length and three hundred meters in breadth. The northern village, An Hoa, lies on a southwest-northeast axis, and the southern village, An Quang, is oriented northwest and south-

east. The two villages are on converging axes and are separated by three hundred meters of sandy terrain and rice paddies. Both villages are contiguous to the lake on the west, with a small spit of land lying on the east west dividing axis between the villages, extending northwest into the lake. Small ponds and rice paddies comprise the immediate eastern confines of the two villages and immediately to the east of the paddies are sand dunes rising slightly above their level. At that time of the year the paddies were dry and the ponds were at ankle depth. These two villages were characteristic of many others found throughout the province, each of which was easily transformed into a fortified village - overnight if necessary. Both villages had such a considerable number of palm trees in and about that there was a virtual canopy over the huts and people within. In addition, both villages were bordered by thick hedgerows and each had its maze and network of trenches excavated by the VC cadre over a period of years. Typical of all villages where combat was an imminent threat, these two had literally hundreds of protective bunkers. Not characteristic of all villages but a feature of the fortified village was the large number of fighting bunkers cleverly concealed until a propitious moment. These bunkers always have good fields of fire and are situated in the trenches and throughout the village in order that a defending force can maintain interior lines and tactical integrity. Once the enemy has elected to stand and defend such an area, he is virtually impossible to dislodge without intensive heavy artillery and aerial bombardment. Light artillery does little damage to the well prepared bunkers.

Prologue and Act I
(Intelligence, Air and Ground Reconnaissance)

Now that the stage is set our scenario is ready to commence. The cast of characters will be introduced during the drama.

Sometime late on 27 June the S-2 of the 2d Brigade received information that a large enemy unit was located in the village of An Quang. Frequently such information proves to be spurious, however, reluctant to miss any opportunity to engage a sizeable force, the brigade commander, Col. Fred E. Karhohs, requested that the village be investigated by the air cavalry troop supporting his brigade.

Although not in a direct support role, C Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry directed most of its efforts in support of the 2d Brigade. A consistent practice in the cavalry squadron is to assign to one of the troops an area of operations (AO) which is coincident with the AO of the brigade with which that troop normally operates. This genders a continuity and harmony in operations which has proved quite successful. Responsive to the requests of the brigade commander the commanding officer of C Troop, Major Donald V. Adkins, planned an operation in the vicinity of An Quang for 28 June.

Early on the morning of 28 June Major Adkins commenced his aerial reconnaissance of An Quang and the surrounding area. The physical layout of An Quang and the dense vegetation in the village did not permit Major Adkins to determine if there were, in fact, any enemy troops present in the village. He elected to insert his Blues at the south end of the village in open terrain with sand dunes and thick shrubs available for cover. After a ready reaction force was designated and an artillery battery was pointed towards the landing zone (LZ), the Charlie Troop Blues air assaulted into the LZ just south of

An Quang at 0810 hours. Once organized on the LZ, the platoon leader, Lieutenant Edward J. Schultz, started his platoon cautiously moving towards the village. At 0817 hours the point squad received a fusillade of automatic weapons fire. Miraculously, and because of the alertness of Sergeant Hunley, not a soul was wounded. Almost immediately Major Adkins flew his aircraft, a UH-1C armed helicopter, over the edge of the village in order to provide suppressive fires. Over the village, practically at a hover, his co-pilot, WO Raymond A. Lossing, observed several individuals with weapons moving towards bunkers. These enemy were quickly dispatched by the alert door gunner and first blood was drawn by Charlie Troop.

Act II

(Situation Development)

Events began to unfold rather rapidly now. During his repeated passes over the village Major Adkins and his crew observed a number of other enemy troops scurrying about. In addition, he became the target of intense small arms fire. He quickly decided to call for the ready reaction force which was on a 15 minute alert at LZ Uplift, a five minute flight to the southwest. Immediately upon learning of the contact both the brigade commander and the squadron commander, Lt. Colonel Robert H. Nevins, Jr., headed towards An Quang.

In the meanwhile, after deciding to seal off An Quang to the north by inserting the reaction force in this area, Major Adkins was relieved on station by his weapons platoon leader, Captain Donald J. Fritsche. Cpt. Fritsche commenced an artillery preparation of the LZ.

Providentially, at the last moment, Fritsche decided to move the LZ from the exposed middle ground between the two villages to a location as

close as possible to the northern edge of An Quang. This location provided rice dikes as cover for the assaulting troops. In a final preparation and for suppressive fires, Col. Nevins and Fritsche flew a cover for the lift ships as they approached the LZ. As he was covering on the left Col. Nevins observed eight to ten enemy troops in green uniforms with weapons and packs hurrying towards their defensive positions. He quickly brought his gunship around and engaged these people, killing four of them and wounding several others.

At 0926 the first platoon of B Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry was on the ground and was receiving furious automatic weapons fire from both An Quang and An Hoa, the village three-hundred meters to the north. Fortunately there was good cover and only one man was wounded. At this juncture the commanders of all elements conferred on the radio net and the unanimous and obvious conclusion was that there was indeed a sizeable enemy force at hand and this force was prepared to stand and fight. The next decision to be arrived at was just what the potential of this enemy force was and how much terrain did they occupy.

After fire was received from An Hoa, Col. Nevins flew over this village at low level to determine the disposition of the enemy. Once again he observed a number of well equipped hostile troops moving to defensive positions. Also, as to be expected, he received considerable small arms fire from the area. However, he exacted his own toll of enemy dead during the process. A quick conference between Col. Karhchs and Col. Nevins brought about the decision to insert the remainder of the reaction force at the north end of An Hoa and thus seal off both villages. It was also decided that Charlie Troop would retain operational control of all units until the situation was further developed.

Another drama was developing at the command post of Charlie Troop at their base camp. Immediate airstrikes had been requested but for one reason or another there were no O-1 aircraft available for a forward air controller (FAC) to fly. In a display of close teamwork and cooperation with a sister service Charlie Troop provided one of their UH-1D lift ships to get the FAC, Captain John Lewis, over the target area. For the next one hour and forty-five minutes Lewis displayed the highest caliber of professionalism and courage by vectoring and putting in several airstrikes, all the while subjecting himself to intense hostile fire. These strikes were conducted between and during the air assaults of additional troops.

Shortly after the initial contact was established it was noticed that groups of enemy troops were attempting to exfiltrate the battlefield around the right flank of Charlie Blues. Not void of resources Col. Nevins offered the use of one of Delta Troop's (the ground troop of the squadron) rifle platoons to assist the Blues in blocking the avenue of escape. At 1040 the third platoon of D Troop, 1/9th Cavalry was air assaulted next to Charlie Blues and completely sealed off the southern exits.

With the decision to commit the remainder of the reaction force there was still the reservation of "let's wait and see" before any additional units would be committed to the fray. The decision was very short in coming: at 1057 hours when Bravo Company (-), 2/5th Cavalry was air assaulted at the northeastern edge of An Hoa intense fire came from well emplaced enemy troops. It was quickly decided by all commanders concerned that the situation had been sufficiently developed to the point that there was no doubt about the fact that a large force was in strong evidence. It was time to phase into the next act of reinforcement and exploitation,

Act III
(Reinforcement and Exploitation)

The well practiced machinery of the airmobile division was quickly put into motion and within a very short while two companies, A Company, 2/5th Cavalry and D Company, 2/5th Cavalry were on their way. It was at this point that Col. Karhohs decided the magnitude of the operation had reached such scope that it was time for his battalion commander, Lt. Col. Joseph McDonough, to assume operational control of all elements. This did not end the mission of the cavalry troop for the two rifle platoons came under Col. McDonough's control and would continue their blocking mission. It also meant that the aircraft of the troop, flying in teams, would continue their aerial reconnaissance and screening of the battlefield. This effort would provide all around security for the ground elements and would increase tenfold the difficulties of enemy exfiltration from the contact area. This screening had been in process throughout the engagement and would continue even through the night.

Within an hour's time, D Company, 2/5th Cavalry was air assaulted on the beach area three hundred meters to the east of An Hoa and A Company, 2/5th Cavalry was assaulted just to the south in a position four hundred meters to the east of An Quang. By this time Air Force fighters were stacked up overhead waiting their turn. Between each troop lift the unrelenting pressure was maintained on the enemy by the superbly accurate bombing of the fighter pilots.

One must witness first-hand the extent and thoroughness of the defenses of a fortified village in order to comprehend the tenacity with which the enemy can occupy and hold on to such a village. Without a doubt he suffers

a number of casualties but his fortifications can withstand all but a direct hit by large ordnance. Based on experience from Phan Thiet, far to the south, to Duc Pho, far to the north, Col. Karhohs directed that an intensive artillery and aerial bombardment be used to devastate the fortifications before any ground assault be attempted.

While this hot steel was falling on the target area a platoon of M-48 tanks and four twin 40mm anti-aircraft vehicles (dusters) were proceeding to the area. Once again the aircraft of the troop were employed in yet another mission. Scout aircraft, OH-13S's, were used to guide the tracked vehicles over the best route. This has proved to be a highly successful means of delivering armor to the battlefield in an area where it is necessary to pick a suitable route around the many pitfalls found in the rice paddies and poor roads.

In an effort to beat the on rushing hours of darkness an assault was initiated at 1530 hours by Bravo and Delta companies on An Hoa. Bravo company attacked from the north and Delta company moved in from the southeast. Both companies used tanks and dusters and both units encountered a fierce, fanatic enemy who was still well entrenched and was determined not to give ground. In the area of the Delta company assault one of the dusters became immobilized and the company suffered four KIA's and eight WIA's. Neither company could penetrate the elaborate defensive bunker complex. Besides the bunkers there were a number of snipers positioned high up in the palm trees. It was decided to redeploy all units in a cordon about the two villages and continue the artillery upon the area.

As the pressure continued Col. Nevins directed the Delta Troop commander, Captain Michael Crumley, to take additional elements of his troop and reinforce the squadron units already on the ground. Thus at 1615 Delta

Troop (-) was constituted with Charlie Blues under their operational control and they began to extend their cordon north towards A Company, 2/5th Cavalry. By 2010 hours all units were established in a tight cordon from the north of An Hoa around the eastern sand dunes to the southern end of An Quang. It was also decided to extract the first platoon of B Company, 2/5th Cavalry from their somewhat tenuous position between the two villages. This lonely platoon had almost been forgotten up to this point but indications pointed to the enemy strength as being at least one battalion. At 2115 hours the platoon was extracted under the cover of darkness.

Now the bombardment recommenced in full fury. The only avenue of escape remaining was to the west over the water and this was blocked off by a continuous low-level screening conducted by the aircraft of Charlie Troop. The weather was hazy and the on-again off-again proposition of artillery illumination made flying difficult, but not for one minute was the vulnerable west without air cover.

The cordon proved its worth as upon several occasions enemy troops attempted to escape. One group made their way towards the positions of A Company, 2/5th Cavalry and made a futile effort at breaking out. They threw several hand grenades into Delta Troop's positions but were repulsed by the alert sky troopers. Several of the enemy were killed in this foray.

Act IV

(Victory)

The early morning hours of 29 June found the cordon still intact. A cessation of all fires was observed in order that a large number of civilians could be evacuated. During the previous day's battle groups of civilians

had made their way out of the villages. Firing had been stopped on these occasions and all in all several hundred civilians had been evacuated from the area of contact.

The enemy was not yet defeated; Delta Troop began to receive sniper fire from the southeast corner of An Quang. Once again airstrikes were called for and the Air Force responded with alacrity and efficiency. They delivered 16 separate strikes that day and much of their ordnance included 2000 pound bombs which left quite a hole. This ordnance achieved remarkable results. It appeared obvious that the remaining forces of our adversary had regrouped and consolidated in An Quang and they still had a sufficient number of bunkers to present a stiff resistance. However, the heavy bombs eventually devastated all defenses. The Charlie Troop men said the ground actually trembled even at their location each time one of the bombs detonated.

A push began in An Hoa while the bombardment continued on An Quang and by noon time 31 enemy bodies were found. By early afternoon our forces pressed into An Quang and met no resistance from a thoroughly beaten and demoralized enemy.

As occurs so frequently in such a battle only conjecture can be made as to the unit designations of the opposing forces. In this case it was only after some prisoners were taken and documents were examined that it was determined that the 9th Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment had been reduced to an ineffective combatant. A total of 84 enemy bodies were found. There were also 21 individual weapons, 25 packs, and 1200 rounds of ammunition captured. This does not tell the full story for even as late as a month and a half after the engagement NVA soldiers were captured who participated in the Dam Trao Lake Battle. They related how some 150 enemy troops were killed and a number of others wounded.

Epilogue

The "cav concept" does not have its only application in a village environment. It has been successfully employed in the Ia Drang Valley, Phan Thiet, the An Lao Valley, Duc Pho, the Bong Son Plain, the Song Re Valley, and Chu Lai. Its success has thrived on the resourcefullness and imagination of the troop commanders, squadron commanders, and brigade commanders. It is their cav concept which has ushered in a new and dramatic approach to warfare which has capitalized on mobility, fire power, and the indomitable spirit of the Sky Trooper.