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SPECIAL ISSUE

## VICTORY

## AT

## IA DRANG



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# A Victory in the Ia Drang: The Triumph of a Concept

The 1st Air Cavalry Division in Battle



By Lieutenant General Harry W. O. Kinnard

The dark and ominous Chu Pong massif looms over the Ia Drang Valley. Beyond it lies Cambodia. One of the barren-appearing areas in the center foreground was the site of Landing Zone X-ray and the scene of a vicious three-day fight in November 1965. This aerial photograph was made during the dry season, and what appears to be barren ground is actually a covering of waist-high elephant grass.





Major General Harry W. O. Kinnard and Colonel John J. Hennessey in Vietnam in April 1966, some five months after the battles in the Ia Drang. General Kinnard was the first commander of what was to become the 1st Air Cavalry Division and guided it through its formative years of experimentation and test. Colonel Hennessey, while a lieutenant colonel, formed and commanded the first battalion created to test the airmobile concept. He remained with the division and accompanied it to South Vietnam. At the time this picture was made he commanded the Division's 3rd Brigade. General Kinnard remained with the 1st Air Cavalry Division until the spring of 1966, after which he served a short tour as acting CG, Field Force I. Recently promoted to lieutenant general, he now commands the Combat Developments Command at Fort Belvoir, Va.

Almost two years have passed since the October-November 1965 battles of the 1st Air Cavalry Division (and other U.S. and South Vietnamese military forces) in the central highlands of South Vietnam. Since that campaign U.S. military strength in South Vietnam has grown many fold and the number of search and destroy operations can be counted in the hundreds. But those difficult battles of October-November 1965, hard by the Cambodian border and in the dark shadows cast by the looming Chu Pong Massif stand as a decisive benchmark of the war in South Vietnam. It became a turning point; no longer would the enemy call the tune.

Our spoiling attacks—of which the Pleiku campaign was one—have kept the enemy off balance. No longer can he carry out his plans.

The 1st Air Cavalry's successes in the Pleiku campaign definitely established that U.S. land forces could meet and defeat the enemy on battlefields of his choosing. In saying this I mean no discredit to other U.S. units in Vietnam. It

was given to the 1st Air Cavalry Division to meet and defeat an enemy division in sustained combat over a period of five weeks.

The campaign in the Ia Drang also established the validity of a new concept of land warfare.

The airmobile concepts were first formally enunciated by the Army's Mobility Requirements Board, headed by General Hamilton H. Howze, at Fort Bragg in 1962. This theory of air mobility was converted into reality by the 11th Air Assault Division during two years of development, experimentation and testing. The 11th Air Assault Division was redesignated the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) on 1 July 1965 and arrived in South Vietnam in August-September of that year, when it took on its preferred name of 1st Air Cavalry.

It established a base at An Khe off Route 19 in the central highlands and began operations in late September. But it was the Pleiku campaign a month later that established the validity of the airmobile concept.

I refer to these operations as a campaign because I feel they meet the criteria by which extended movement is deemed a campaign. Engagement was continuous and concentric to one strategic purpose. A large and formidable enemy was given battle repeatedly throughout an area the size of Rhode Island. In the end he was defeated and driven from the area. In addition to the 1st Air Cavalry Division, five Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalions, and other substantial increments of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were employed. This force defeated three enemy regiments that fought under the control of a North Vietnamese Field Front, or division, as well as Viet Cong units and supporting forces.

This was the first time in Vietnam that a major U.S. force had made contact with a sizeable enemy force, held it as long as necessary to give battle, destroyed much of it and drove the shattered remnants out of South Vietnam.

In the year preceding this campaign the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had steadily built up its forces in Pleiku Province by moving men and materiel from the north down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By 1 October 1965 NVA strength in the western highlands was estimated at two complete NVA regiments with one more on the way. Numerous local force and hard core Viet Cong units, such as the H-15 reconnaissance battalion, were also in the area.

During the summer of 1965 the enemy in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces had repeatedly probed the strength and resolution of Republic of Vietnam forces with small skirmishes and ambushes. As the NVA strength in the region grew, so did its boldness; the incidence of aggressive actions by the enemy in the two provinces increased.



As intelligence has since revealed, the Pleiku Province build-up was not a haphazard or piecemeal venture, but was intended to be the key of a carefully laid long-range plan that envisaged the securing and domination of a major portion of South Vietnam. Styled the Long Xuan (winter-spring) campaign, it premised establishing an NVA army corps of three divisions in domain over the northern provinces from the western border to the South China Sea. Control would remain vested in the high command.

Within this general frame the enemy planned to conduct several specified assaults; one of them was directed against the western plateau. This had as its early objectives the elimination of the Special Forces camps at Plei Me, Dak Sut (which is near the I Corps boundary and north of the area of operations of the 1st Air Cavalry during the Pleiku campaign), and Duc Co, the overrunning of the Le Thanh District headquarters and the seizure of Pleiku City.

The commander-designate of the North Vietnamese forces was a brigadier general, who was even then serving as commanding general of NVA Military Region IV. One Colonel Quan was his assistant, and Senior Colonel Ha Vi Tung was his Chief of Staff.

The 32nd NVA Regiment got to South Vietnam in January 1965; the 33rd came in the early autumn, and the 66th was en route when the scenario began to unfold. The curtain-raiser of this division-controlled, full-length campaign was to be an assault on the CIDG-Special Forces camp at Plei Me, 30 miles southwest of Pleiku City. The NVA plan was for the 33rd Regiment to attack Plei Me camp, exerting just enough pressure to compel a relief force to be committed from Pleiku. The 32nd Regiment would set itself to surprise and destroy the relief force by large-scale ambush. Thereafter the 33rd and 32nd Regiments would join forces for the knockout blow against the camp.

This was neither a highly ingenious plan nor one novel to the region. Its success was contingent on the aggressor being able to both out-think and outmove available reaction forces. We know how they planned it from captured documents. What most amazed me as I read their scheme was that, in phase three of their plans, the two regiments expected to knock out Plei Me within a single hour.

I must now describe my own forces. The 1st Air Cavalry Division had not previously engaged NVA. We had done some sparring with Viet Cong forces in and around "Happy Valley," north of our base at An Khe, and had executed a brief brigade operation in the Suoi Ca Valley between the 10th and 14th of October. These were rela-

tively small-scale operations. Although we had been busy on reconnaissance in all directions, we didn't know much about the highlands to the westward, but we were anxious to learn. At the outset of the Pleiku campaign we actually had one foot planted in the other direction. Because of the Viet Cong threat to the rice harvest in the richly productive littoral around Bong Son, Qui Nhon and Tuy Hoa, our tactical planning had been aimed mostly at these areas. We were actually engaged in "Happy Valley," and along Route 19 in clearing operations to "sanitize" the area for the arriving ROK Capitol Division and in operations near Bong Son with ARVN units.

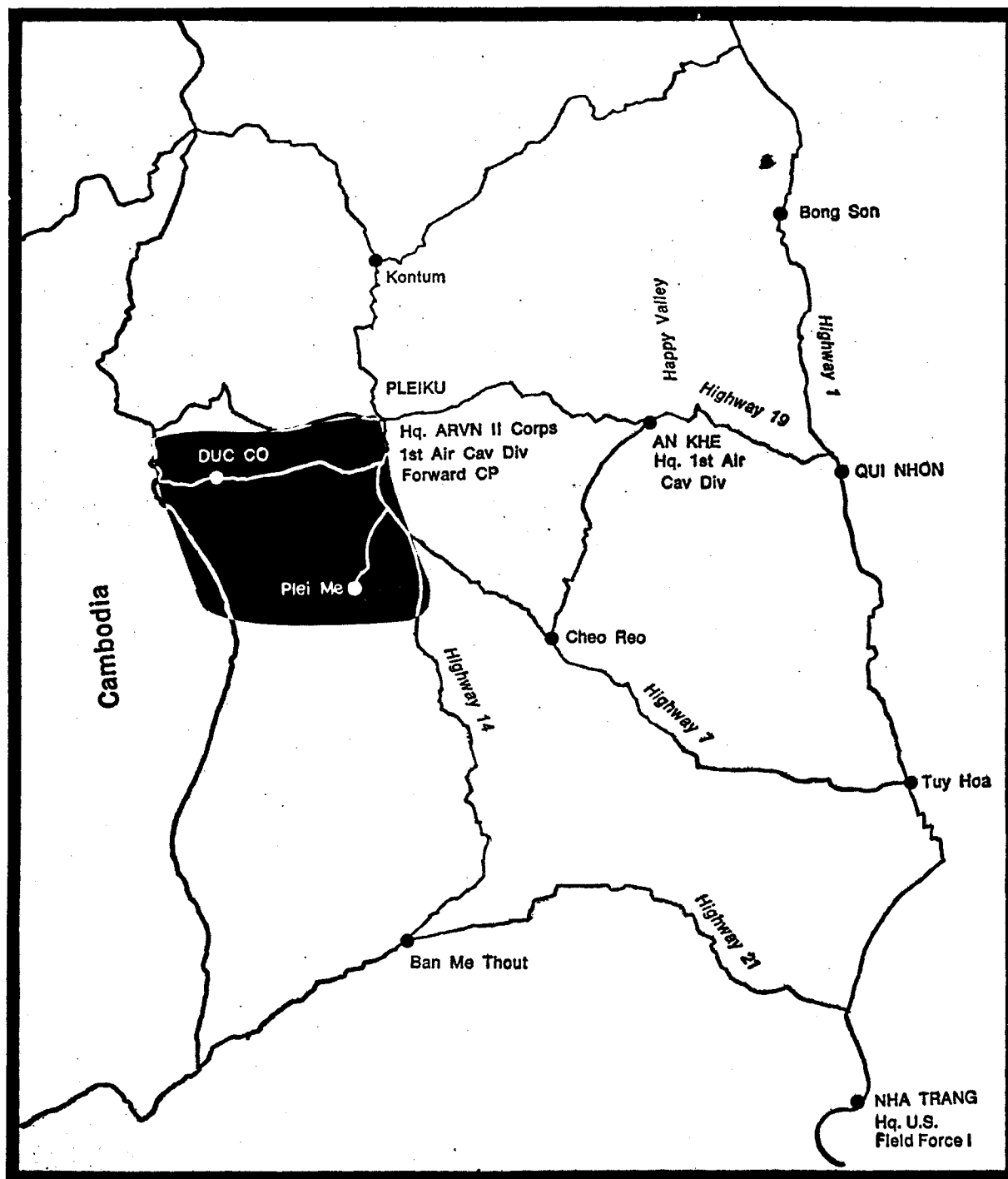
There had been recurring reports in II Corps Tactical Zone that Plei Me would be attacked. But, as so often happened in the Korean and in this war, repetition dulled belief and premonitory warnings were dismissed as rumor. So when the attack broke at 1900 on 19 October, surprise was more than mild and at first did not alter the consensus that the coastal lowlands remained the primary target area for the enemy within II Corps.

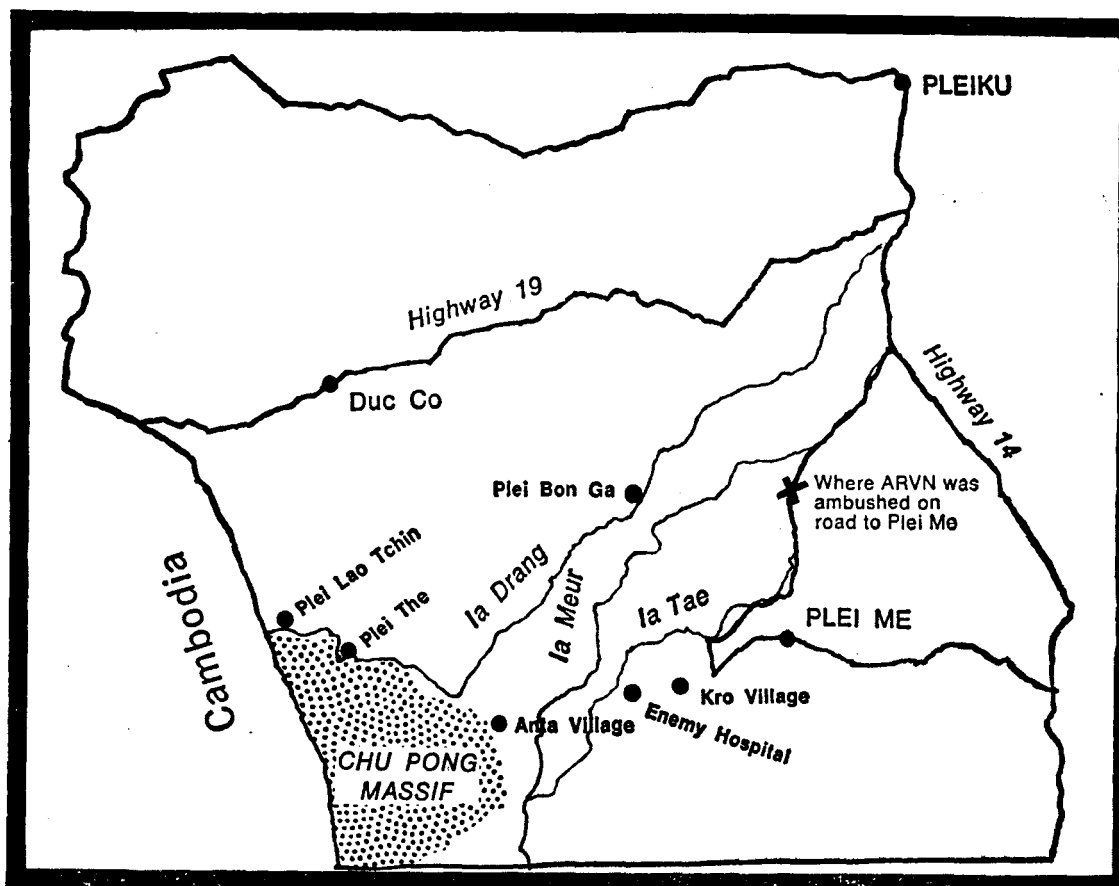
### **19 OCTOBER. Opening moves by the NVA Field Front; the familiar pattern of lure and ambush.**

The first word was that the defenders at Plei Me were taking losses, but the garrison was holding steady (as the enemy had expected and planned). Our G2 estimators were not taken in. Early they read from the action the familiar design of lure and ambush. Estimates of enemy strength were revised steadily upward. By 22 October, with the camp still holding out, Headquarters I Field Force estimated that enemy forces on the scene were sufficient both to destroy the camp at Plei Me and entrap a relief column.

Out of that appreciation came the involvement of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. There was not enough ARVN force in Pleiku Province to both hold the province capital and lift the siege of the camp. Therefore, on 23 October, Major General Stanley (Swede) Larsen, commanding I Field Force, directed me to lift a one-battalion task force from our base camp at An Khe when dawn broke. The mission of this task force was to secure Pleiku and be prepared to react to developments growing out of the attack on Plei Me. Swede also informed me that the big operation then under way southeast of Bong Son in the "Crow's Foot" was to be cancelled and that we could reclaim our Task Force Amos (the 2/17 Artillery Battalion plus security and supporting forces) which had been supporting ARVN units in that operation. Further, we were to assist in keeping open Route 19 for ARVN forces moving from the "Crow's Foot" operation westward to Pleiku. Finally, Swede directed us to continue planning

**Setting the stage.** The area of the Army of Vietnam II Corps (U.S. Field Force I) covers some 28,000 square miles of ancient Annam. Only certain areas of the coastal plain and nearby valleys are heavily populated. In the mountainous, forested interior even such centers as Pleiku and Cheo Reo are relatively small towns. The road net of numbered highways, designed by the French many years ago, is less ambitious than the map may suggest. The colored portion covers the area of operations of the Pleiku campaign of October-November 1965.





**The area of operations of the 1st Air Cavalry Division and ARVN. The region is desolate and covered by dense vegetation and towering forests.**

for operations on the coast north of Qui Nhon around 26 October.

I chose Lieutenant Colonel Earl Ingram's 2/12 Cavalry Battalion for the Pleiku mission because that unit was already "balled up" for a move to the east. The 2/12 smoothly changed its plans and moved in our attached Caribou company in IFR (instrument flight rules) weather, closing at 1500 at Camp Holloway near Pleiku.

In discussing the withdrawal of Task Force Amos with Swede on the morning of 23 October I learned that he had had a request from the ARVN for our 2/12 Battalion to go directly to the relief of the camp at Plei Me rather than stop at Pleiku as a defensive and reaction force. Swede said he had denied this request, feeling the ARVN should move their own units first. I asked on whose authority our battalion could be committed; Swede said he was reserving that decision to himself.

I then decided to send Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles (one of our assistant division commanders) to Pleiku to assess the situation on the spot and advise me on the desirability of beefing up Ingram's reinforced battalion. Based

on Dick Knowles' appraisal that we really had two potential missions and therefore needed more forces, I requested and received permission from Swede to start moving our 1st Brigade Headquarters, another infantry battalion, the balance of an artillery battalion and other units to Pleiku the night of 23-24 October. The 1st Brigade, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harlow Clark (a splendid man and a tremendous leader who later lost his life in an aircraft accident), was then conducting clearing operations east of Deo Mang Pass. I directed Clark to move his headquarters to Pleiku and assume command of Task Force Ingram, already there, and then to assume responsibility for the security of US-GVN installations, near Pleiku, and to be prepared on order to support the ARVN relief column or the camp at Plei Me, or both.

The 1st Brigade Headquarters (plus 2/8 Infantry Battalion, 2/19 Artillery Battalion minus, B and D Troops, 1/9 Cav Squadron, A Battery, 2/20 Aerial Rocket Artillery Battalion, C Company, 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion, B Company, 228th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion

and the 3rd Forward Support element of our Support Command) had closed on TF Ingram by midnight of the 23rd and assumed the assigned missions. With this additional force plus TF Ingram the total force under Clark was a somewhat typical brigade force. TF Ingram had with it (besides the 2/12 Infantry Battalion and B Battery, 2/17 Artillery Battalion) Company A, 8th Engineer Battalion, a helicopter lift platoon from the 229th Battalion, a squad of our 545th Military Police Company, a Forward Air Control Team and a team from our attached 10th Radio Relay Unit. Clark's brigade was atypical in having only two infantry battalions and having two-plus cavalry troops.

Simultaneous with the move of Clark's reinforcements we had sent additional personnel from Division headquarters to reinforce our forward command post at Pleiku.

Meanwhile, at 1800 the ARVN relief column bound for Plei Me had been ambushed seven kilometers from its destination and had been badly shaken. Even so, it had struck back hard enough to compel the NVA 32nd Regiment to withdraw from the ambush site. Word of this ambush had reached me at Swede's quarters where I was staying overnight in preparation for a commanders' meeting called by General Westmoreland for the morning of the 24th. Dick Knowles had called from our division forward command post in Pleiku to Swede's Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Paul Smith, about 2330 with word of the ambush.

I immediately asked Swede to release authority to me and in turn to Dick Knowles to use our forces in Pleiku as judged appropriate by Knowles on the spot. Swede agreed, with the proviso that we retain a security element in Pleiku. I relayed this new guidance to Knowles and Swede paralleled the information to Colonel Ted Mataxis, the senior advisor to General Vin Loc, Commanding General of the II ARVN Corps.

### **23 OCTOBER. U. S. Field Force I reacts; 1st Air Cav committed to support the ARVN relief of Plei Me camp.**

Knowles, Clark, Mataxis and the ARVN commanders in Pleiku had a long, busy night of planning and preparations. They planned for the ARVN relief column to continue to Plei Me with our artillery (secured by our infantry) in support from positions east of the route. Elements of our 1/9 aerial squadron would screen the flanks of the route.

Early on the morning of 24 October Ingram's 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, made a heliborne assault and secured objective Field Goal as an artillery position in support of the ARVN effort. As soon as Field Goal was secure, Battery B,

2/17th Artillery, moved in by CH-47 Chinooks and began to fire. At the same time the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James Nix, was proceeding on a like mission—securing a position for Battery B, 2/19th Artillery, between the ARVN relief column and the Plei Me camp.

On the 25th, the reinforced and resupplied column, accompanied by our artillery forward observers, again moved, and this time our artillery curtailed its advance. At the camp, the enemy pressure continued, but the defenders were now getting help from our nearest batteries. That same day the ARVN column got to the camp and reinforced the garrison. The units of our northernmost artillery position, then being out of range, moved by helicopter back to Holloway to comprise a reaction force.

As we learned later, at 2200 on the 25th, the NVA 33rd Regiment ordered that at first light its units would stop the attack on Plei Me and withdraw to the west. A reinforced battalion, the 3rd, would continue pressure on Plei Me and cover the withdrawal. The withdrawing units were to reassemble at a location known to the enemy as Kro Village about eight kilometers southwest of Plei Me and about four kilometers due east of its regimental aid station.

The 32nd Regiment had already left the area in which it had ambushed the ARVN armored column and was headed for its regimental base, about two kilometers north of the Ia Drang and three kilometers east of the Cambodian border.

The Field Front's tactical headquarters, which during the battle was located at Plei Bon Ga, an even 11 kilometers due east of the ambush site, also was on the move. It was headed for Plei Lao Tchín, located on the north bank of the Ia Drang, and about one and one-half kilometers east of Cambodia.

Meanwhile, I had ordered the headquarters of our 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry (the Division's scouting and reconnaissance element, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John B. Stockton), to move to Pleiku and assume command of its troops already there and operate directly under divisional control. Once closed, the squadron was ordered to continue to screen the route to Plei Me and to begin the search for the enemy west of Highway 14 and south of Highway 19—a large, trackless area seldom penetrated by government troops.

As early as 24 October at Nha Trang General Westmoreland had shown an inclination to expand our operations in Pleiku beyond the relief of Plei Me when he had made such statements to Swede as "give Kinnard his head." Swede and I deduced from this that the mission of the 1st Cav in Pleiku would become the finding and de-

struction of the enemy units that had besieged Plei Me and ambushed the relief column. General Westmoreland made this mission definite and explicit in a conference at the command post of our 1st Brigade on 27 October.

**27 OCTOBER. General Westmoreland unleashes the 1st Air Cav mission: clear the enemy out of 2,500 square kilometers of the western highlands.**

During this conference it was agreed that we must now do more than merely contain the enemy; we must seek him out and destroy him. This was converted to a directive from General Westmoreland through General Larsen to the 1st Air Cavalry Division which changed our mission from one of reinforcement and reaction to one of unlimited offense. The division was released from its narrow zone of operations around the CIDG camp and given a tactical area of operations that covered nearly 2,500 square kilometers. We were to find, fix, and defeat the enemy forces that had threatened Plei Me, Pleiku, and the entire western highlands. This was a large order.

Before examining the division and brigade concept of operations it is useful to take a close look at the country into which the 1st Air Cavalry was headed. Visualize, if you will, an operational area approximately the size of Rhode Island, with but two roads or highways—one on the northern boundary (Route 19) and one on the eastern boundary (Route 14). The interior of this area is devoid of roads—indeed, even trails. It is cut by numerous streams, flowing generally from northeast to southwest, forming hundreds of small compartments; the western portion is dominated by a hill mass, averaging 10 kilometers wide and 13 deep, rising some 730 meters above sea level—or 500 meters above the valley of the Ia Drang. Of this area, nearly 80 per cent is covered with medium to heavy upland jungle, with trees towering as high as 100 feet above the jungle floor. Those areas devoid of jungle growth generally were overgrown with shoulder-high elephant grass, shrubs and bushes. It was understandable why the enemy had for a long time been left alone in this forbidding area.

To the 1st Brigade, with the 1 9th Cavalry Squadron now under its operational control, I assigned the divisional mission. It was to conduct an intensive systematic search for the enemy, looking everywhere—in the villages, in the jungles and along the stream beds. By widespread dispersion, made possible by excellent communications and helicopter lift, the brigade planned to sweep large areas systematically. The attached air cav squadron would cover selected parts of the entire area and screen the borders of the

search area. Each infantry battalion was to deploy with supporting artillery into an assigned search area and was further to disperse its companies. Aggressive, intensive patrolling from company bases was to be conducted. When contact with the enemy was established, a rapid reaction force was swiftly to converge in helicopters on the enemy. Chinook helicopters would position the 105mm artillery batteries within range of ground operations and the 2.75 aerial artillery and Air Force tactical aircraft would provide the fire support beyond the range of our tube artillery or to thicken such fires. The tube artillery concept visualized pairs of batteries within mutually supporting distance of each other.

This would be air mobility's first real test. The next few days would reveal whether three years of planning, training, developing and testing would bear the fruits of victory—for a concept and a division.

Coincident with the decision to pursue the enemy, we began to reinforce the 1st Brigade. The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Shoemaker, closed at Camp HoLoway by 1600 hours 26 October. It was joined later by Company B, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry. We also beefed up our combat support and administrative and logistical support.

We further reinforced our already established division forward command post at Pleiku. This element, built around our Division Forward Tactical Operations Center (physically situated in a specially outfitted pod transported by the CH-54 Flying Crane), began the formidable task of coordinating and directing a major offensive effort in the jungles west of Plei Me. I left Dick Knowles in control of this forward installation with instructions to keep me informed, act for me in emergency and to do everything possible to keep such problems as communications, logistics, visitors, press, and coordination with other headquarters from burdening our brigade commander. Dick was already a real pro at this task, and he got even better as the campaign progressed.

**28 OCTOBER. Reconnaissance and search by 1st Brigade; air assault tactics and techniques begin to pay off.**

During the period 28-31 October, the brigade's combat elements began moving westward, searching for the NVA forces that had broken contact. In this it used the air assault tactics and techniques that had been so thoroughly tested during the formative months of the division. The 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, began developing and polishing its technique of aerial reconnaissance-by-fire that made the enemy's withdrawal a costly affair to him. I had been greatly concerned about the combat worthiness of our OH-13 light observa-



tion helicopters employed as scout ships and in highly exposed roles. With their plexiglass bubbles and slow speed the OH-13 aircraft looked like easy targets for the NVA gunners, but during those four days these little craft and the squadron's UH-1B gunships drew enemy fire repeatedly without damage to themselves. They returned it, too, as they unceasingly harassed the withdrawing enemy.

Here, too, for the first time we began to realize the intelligence we gained from enemy ground fire directed against our choppers. The pilots would not be likely to agree that this was a preferred way to learn of the enemy's presence, but our commanders at each echelon became increasingly impressed with the positive value of this proof of hostile presence. It enabled us repeatedly to place return fire on him. Even more importantly it let us find and then fix him in order to mass fires and forces against him.

The search plan of the 1st Brigade was in full swing. Three infantry battalions were deployed throughout the area to the west, with each battalion further dispersed into company, platoon and even squads in search of the enemy. During this period there were brief flurries of action. An example was when Company A, 2/12 Cavalry, made brief contact with an estimated platoon-size force. In this short but violent fire fight, our troops drew first blood in what was to become a blood bath for the North Vietnamese invaders.

### **1 NOVEMBER. An NVA hospital is captured; an enemy battalion attacks three rifle platoons of 1/9 Cavalry; heliborne reinforcements ride to the rescue.**

On 1 November, the first major action of the campaign took place. The morning began normally enough with the aerial scouts of the 1/9 Cavalry out stalking the enemy. At 0720 hours, Troop B's scouts reported eight NVA soldiers in foxholes along the Tae River. Then about ten more were seen attempting to hide from the scouts. The troop's rifle platoon, which was airborne at the time, was directed to the scene. Before the arrival of the platoon, Troop C's scouts had sighted 30 or more enemy nearby. It looked like a real fight was shaping up. By 0808 hours the rifle platoon was on the ground and had moved to contact, swiftly killing five enemy soldiers and capturing four others.

The reason for the enemy concentration became apparent. The cover of the stream bed was being used as a regimental aid station and surgical hospital. The entire hospital with its equipment, surgical instruments and drugs was captured by Troop B's 30-man rifle platoon. In this fight for

the hospital, 15 NVA soldiers were killed and another 15 captured. Those captured soldiers, along with weapons and the seized medical equipment and supplies—more than \$40,000 worth of medicines and surgical instruments—were quickly evacuated by helicopter. The size and importance of the target dictated that the squadron's two remaining rifle platoons be committed, and this was done.

The squadron's airborne scouts continued their screening and at 1400 hours spotted and reported a battalion-size NVA force moving toward the positions of the three rifle platoons. The scouts took the enemy under rocket and machine gun fire. Colonel Stockton, who was directing the fight from the ground, saw the threat to his position in the enemy counterattack which was pushed with utmost ferocity and determination. From 1420 hours until about 1800 hours, this small group of defenders repelled the best the enemy could throw at them.

The squadron was at a disadvantage because the area was out of tube artillery range and the fight moved to such close quarters as to preclude the use of tactical air and even aerial rocket artillery. The first reinforcement fed into the line was a platoon from Company A, 2/12 Cavalry, moved by choppers from a position about 12 kilometers north of the battle area. It came swiftly and began to take some of the pressure off the weary 1/9 Cavalry rifle platoons.

Next, the reconnaissance platoon from the 1/12 Cavalry was extricated from a position 24 kilometers northwest of the hospital site and flown in. It was followed by two more platoons of Company A, 2/12 Cavalry, a platoon of Company B, 2/8 Cavalry, moving a distance of 18 kilometers from the west-northwest, and Company B, 1/8 Cavalry, committed by helicopter from the brigade command post, some 37 kilometers to the northeast.

With the arrival of a second unit of the 2/12 Cavalry in the early evening, the battered platoons of the 1/9 Cavalry Squadron were extricated and returned to their squadron bivouac for a well-earned rest. Using the modern techniques of air mobility they had found and fixed the enemy in the finest traditions of the cavalry.

The commanding officer of the 2/12 Cavalry, Colonel Ingram, took charge of the fight on the ground. After stopping the last NVA attack cold, he regained the offensive, swept the battle area and established solid positions for the night.

The rapid reaction of widely-scattered units in the reinforcement phase of this action had paid off. All of the units were deployed in their own sectors when they were alerted to prepare for movement to the hospital site. From the alert time (approximately 1430 hours for most) until

final commitment of the brigade reserve company at 1700, these units had assembled, loaded into helicopters (that were themselves diverted from other tasks), had flown to the battle site and engaged the enemy in time to be decisive. The elapsed time was approximately 150 minutes. No other unit in the world could have marshalled reaction forces so swiftly over such terrain.

This use of any element not in actual enemy contact as a reserve was a tactic we had developed in training and it paid off in its combat debut. Besides the enemy killed, wounded, and captured and the weapons and medical equipment captured, this action produced an intelligence bonanza. In a captured medical book a map was found whose importance was quickly recognized and led to its being sent to 1st Brigade Headquarters. I saw it there with General Knowles and Colonel Clark. It showed the principal routes of approach used by the 33rd and 32nd Regiments, plus many important unit locations and other valuable data. Based on this map, plus other indications, we decided we had placed too large a portion of our search efforts too far to the west and the north. Accordingly, I issued orders for a tighter search pattern adjusted to the south and east.

During this period the 33rd NVA Regiment found its advance camp at Kro subjected to such constant harassment from the air by cavalry helicopters that it began to withdraw to its base camp at the foot of Chu Pong Mountain. This camp, known to the enemy as Anta Village, lay

in the valley between the Chu Pong Massif and the Ia Drang.

By 1 November, the 33rd regimental headquarters had reached Anta Village, but the remainder of the regiment was stretched out between Chu Pong and Plei Me. These enemy elements continued to draw aerial rocket and machine gun fire throughout their withdrawal.

### 1 NOVEMBER. NVA Field Front has problems but is encouraged by anticipated arrival of regiment-sized reinforcement.

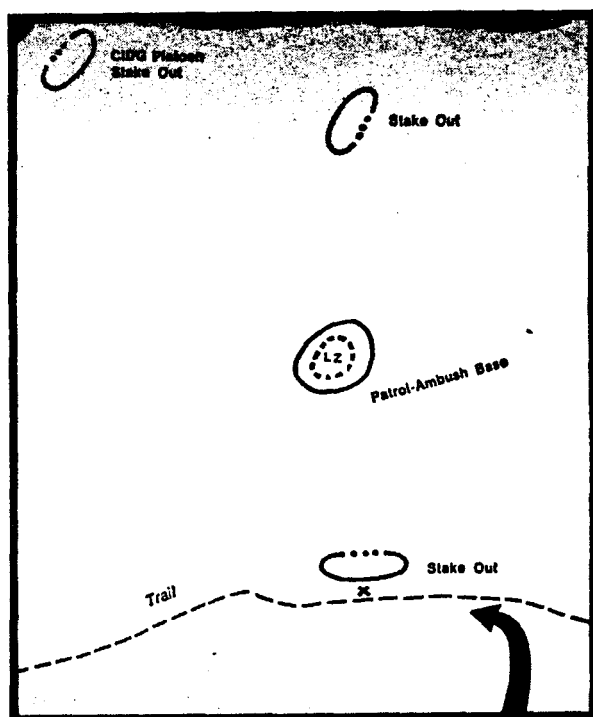
The NVA division headquarters (Field Front) had arrived at its headquarters on the north bank of the Ia Drang. And one bright spot lightened its otherwise gloomy picture: the last of its three regiments was due to arrive momentarily in South Vietnam and would close into assembly areas in the Chu Pong-Ia Drang complex.

Adding to the problems of the 33rd Regiment and the Field Front were the heavy bombing and strafing attacks by USAF aircraft. These attacks achieved increasing accuracy as the secondary target detection system of the air cav division began to click. The precision of the strikes was so upsetting that the 33rd Regiment's cadre held a conference in an attempt to discover how we could make such repeated, accurate air strikes. Since nothing in their background or training had prepared them for the capabilities of an air cavalry division and its supporting arms, the cadre concluded that there were spies within its ranks.

Concerning our secondary target detection system, a word of explanation is in order. During this campaign we refined a previously-tested technique of detecting and reacting to targets of opportunity. The division tactical operations center (DTOC) received direct reports from the aerial surveillance and target acquisition platoon (this ASTA platoon utilized OV-1 Mohawks) and USAF sources, plus reports from the Radio Research Unit. These reports, together with other information, such as spot reports from the cavalry squadron, were evaluated, and information on any target confirmed in the vicinity of our maneuver elements was passed on to the controlling brigade headquarters. The brigade then reacted by maneuvering forces to engage the target, by firing artillery, by directing supporting tactical air strikes, or by any combination of these actions.

If a target was not an immediate threat to our maneuver elements, the DTOC recorded the target for strike by already airborne close air support aircraft which were about to run out of stay-time over the tactical zone. If within range, the target was also scheduled for harassing and interdiction artillery fires.

The 9th Cav's ambush of 3-4 November.



Working together within the DTOC on secondary targeting were the Division G3 Air, G2 Air and the USAF Air Liaison Officer (ALO). The ALO, Lieutenant Colonel John B. Stoner, headed our splendid USAF Forward Air Controller Air Liaison team of 43 officers and men—the largest then assigned to any Army division.

### **3 NOVEMBER. Bold night ambush by platoon of 1/9 Cav; an Air Cav first: nighttime helicopter lift of reinforcements.**

Back to the campaign. On 3 November came the boldest action to date. The 1/9 Cavalry Squadron, conducting a reconnaissance-in-force south from the Duc Co Civilian Irregular Defense Group camp to the Chu Pong-Ia Drang complex, a Viet Cong stronghold for 15 years, established a troop patrol-ambush base on the south bank of the Ia Drang. From this base three promising ambush sites were selected. The night of the 3rd was clear and brightly lit by a full moon; all ambushes had to be set with utmost care.

At 1930 hours the southernmost ambush, manned by Troop C's rifle platoon, commanded by Captain Charles B. Knowlen, sighted a large, heavily armed NVA unit estimated to be a heavy weapons company. The enemy in this force were laughing and talking and obviously felt completely secure this deep in their sanctuary. The enemy unit stopped just short of the killing zone of the ambush for a prolonged rest halt which lasted for an hour and a half. At various times during this seeming eternity enemy soldiers approached as close as 50 meters to our hidden troopers, but failed to discover them.

When the enemy unit finally began moving, Captain Knowlen allowed the entire enemy lead platoon to move through the killing zone in order to destroy the second element, which was carrying the heavy weapons—machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles. When the trap was sprung, ten Claymore mines spewed death for 100 meters up and down the trail. The firing of the Claymores signalled a hail of fire from M-16 rifles and M-79 grenade launchers. The fire lasted two minutes; there was no return fire.

Believing the ambushed unit was the vanguard of a larger force, Captain Knowlen decided not to dally to assess the kill or pick up enemy weapons and equipment. He withdrew immediately to the patrol-ambush base.

Soon after 2200 hours, an NVA force later estimated at a battalion came boiling toward the patrol base. The first ferocious assault resulted in heaps of enemy dead and wounded. The enemy pressed subsequent attacks with greater prudence. He did manage to get numerous snipers into trees

overlooking the landing zone. In the bright moonlight these snipers systematically attempted to pick off our defenders as they fought off the attacking waves.

The squadron's aerial rocket ships, called in to deliver final protective fires, did so with devastating effect. The men in the defensive perimeter doggedly fought on, repulsing all attacks. But each NVA assault increased the toll of dead and wounded troopers inside the perimeter. A little more than an hour after the attack began, at 2315 hours, the commander of the troop base, Major Robert Zion, notified Colonel Stockton that he needed immediate reinforcement lest he be overrun.

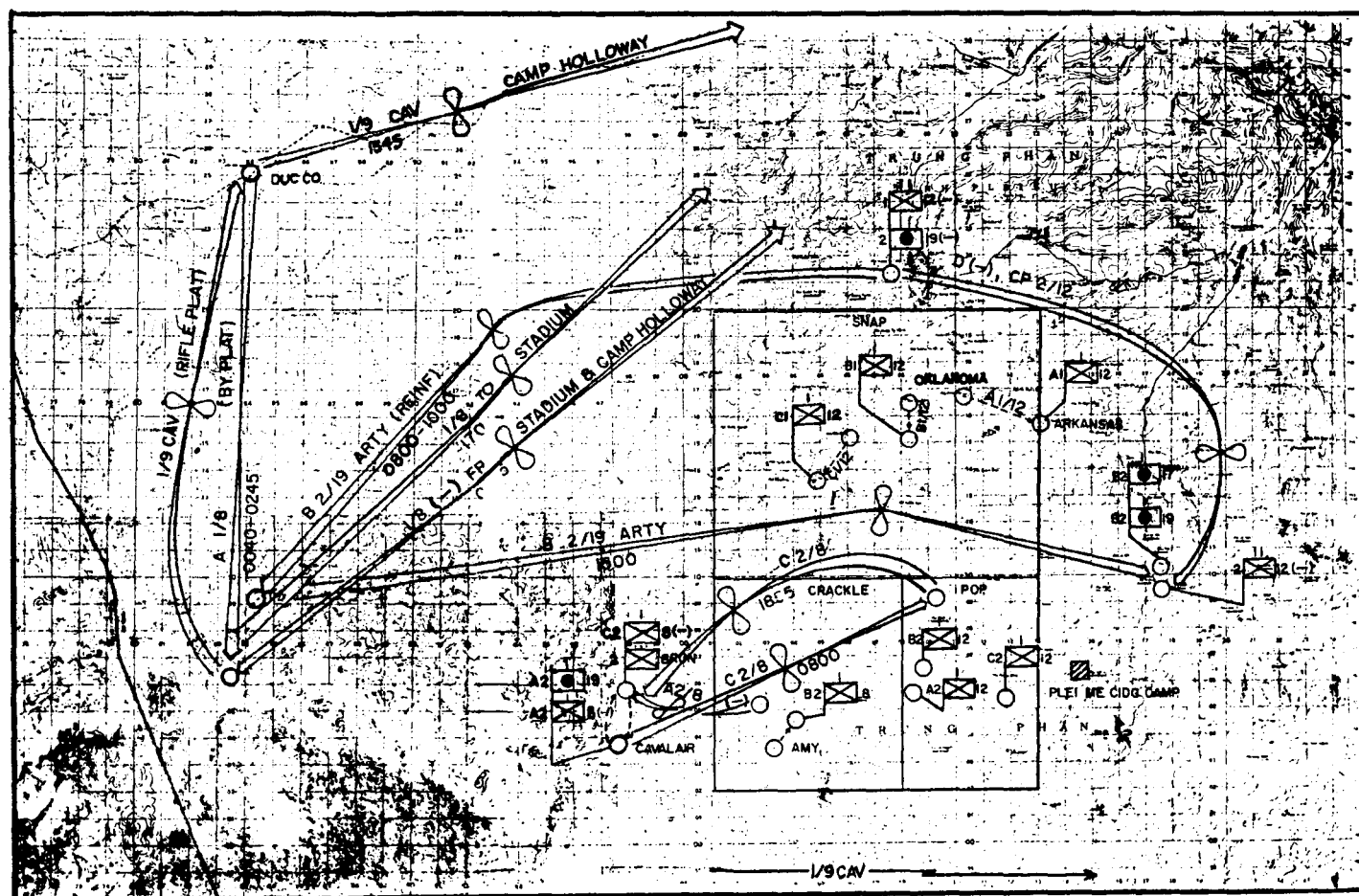
Colonel Stockton ordered Company A, 1/8 Cavalry, which was at Duc Co, to reinforce Major Zion's perimeter. The landing zone within the perimeter permitted landing five helicopters simultaneously; A, 1/8, therefore came in by platoon echelon. The first platoon was on the ground at 0040 hours, the final element closing at 0245.

It was the first time that a perimeter under heavy fire had been relieved at night by heliborne forces. It was also the first time that aerial rocket helicopters had been employed at night and in





Typical day in pursuit of the enemy. This map and the operations summary on page 82 are reproduced from the 1st Air Cavalry's after-action report of 4 November. The map shows the air and ground movements made by the 1st Brigade on that day and suggests the complexities of planning and directing airmobile operations.



# The after-action report of the 1st Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division, 4 November 1965.

4 NOVEMBER

at ZA082152. Battalion CP and D company remained at ZA077214.

## 1. OPERATIONS SUMMARY:

With the original force in the ambush base established by B Troop 1/9 Cav Sqdn insufficient to withstand the repeated assaults by the aroused N-V-A battalion, it became necessary to effect an immediate reinforcement. Shortly before midnight the rifle company standing by at DUC CO, A 1/8 Cav, was alerted for commitment into the ambush site. Since the landing zone could handle only five ships at a time, it was decided to reinforce by platoon. The first platoon was on the ground at 0040 hours, followed by the remainder of the company in platoon lifts, closing by 0245 hours. It was the first time that a perimeter under heavy fire had been relieved at night by heliborne forces. It was also the first time the Aerial Rocket Artillery was employed at night and in very close support (50 meters) of friendly positions. (Inclosure 10)

By dawn the attacks by the enemy had slackened and incoming fire had diminished to occasional sniping from surrounding trees. At first the remainder of the 1/8 Cav began moving into the L-Z and the 1/8 Cav assumed control of the position. Cav Squadron elements were extracted on outgoing lift ships. (Inclosure 11)

The 1/8 Cav conducted search and destroy screens in the vicinity of the L-Z until late afternoon, and then was lifted back to STADIUM to secure the brigade base. B 2/19 Arty was lifted to an L-Z at YA 841091 to support the 1/8 Cav, and was lifted from there to a position vicinity of ZA173100.

For the 2/8 Cav, the day started routinely enough. B company began movement toward Objective AMY (ZA040048), closing at 0950 hours. At 0800 C 2/8 was airlifted east to an L-Z vicinity of ZA092092 to secure a position for B 2/19 Arty and closed that area at 0855 hours. At 1130 hours Recon platoon was conducting search and destroy operations out of CAVALAIR when it made contact with an estimated two companies of North Vietnamese in the vicinity of ZA978050. Two platoons of A company were committed to the fight at 1210 hours and continued pressure on the enemy. Artillery and tactical air was called in and, after taking punishing blows, the N-V-A force broke contact, leaving 12 captives and 4 KIA on the battlefield. A large number of enemy dead were carried away. Two platoons of C company were recalled to relieve the A company elements, which closed back into CAVALAIR for the night. B 2/19 Arty, meanwhile, was directed from the 2/8 location and sent further east.

At 0800 2/12 Cav began a sweep operation in Area POP with B and C companies moving by foot and with A company airlifted to an L-Z at ZA 131030. B company made contact with a sizeable force of enemy soldiers at ZA087066. The company, supported by artillery fire, maneuvered to overcome the enemy by 1500 hours. The company uncovered a large arms cache (ZA086065) and buried 7 N-V-A soldiers.

Working in Area SNAP, the 1/12 Cav remained in position until the afternoon. A company began a search and destroy operation toward Objective ARKANSAS (ZA131158). At 1625 hours C company commenced a search and clear operation from ZA060152 to ZA048137. B company began movement at 1700 hours and closed for the night

## 2. TASK ORGANIZATION:

1ST BRIGADE	DIVISION
No Change	No Change Except add:
	6/14 Arty (+) (Prov)
	3/18 Arty (-) (Prov)

## 3. INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY:

After failing to overrun US positions on the south bank of the IA DRANG, the 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, broke off the attack and pulled its dead and wounded back from the site of the engagement. The apparent discovery by Cavalry forces of a new N-V-A infiltration unit would cause the FIELD FRONT to re-evaluate its tactical position and begin looking for ways to counteract the continued pressure.

An immediate action was to order the 33d Regiment out of its base at Hill 732, which it had hardly reached, and onto the eastern slopes of CHU PONG in the vicinity of YA922010 with its battalions (when they closed) to take up positions from Hill 732, down through ANTA Village (940010) to the north bank of the IA MEUR (980000).

The fragmented bits and pieces of the regiment were still making their way in a generally westward direction, clinging to stream beds, utilizing all available concealment to avoid detection by the ever-present Cavalry helicopters. There still was one unit reasonably intact—the battalion that had acted as rear guard. Starting later and moving more slowly than the rest, it was still east of main Cavalry positions.

## 4. ACTIVITIES STATISTICS:

FRIENDLY LOSSES	ENEMY LOSSES
KIA	10 KIA—39(BC) 55(Est)
WIA	34 WIA—47 (Est)
MIA	0 VCC—21
	EQUIP—2 night light devices
	4 recoilless rifle sights
	4 mortar sights
	WPNS—15 rifles
	2x82mm mortars
	3x75mm recoilless rifles
	4xAR (Chicom)
	1xlight machine gun
	1 flare pistol
	AMMO—100,000 rounds
	7.62 ammo destroyed in place
	20,000 rounds 7.62 ammo evac
	63x82mm mortar rounds
	45x81 mortar rounds
	44x75mm RR rounds
	19 hand grenades



very close support (within 50 meters) of friendly positions.

By dawn the attacks had slackened and incoming fire had diminished to occasional sniping mostly from trees around the perimeter. At first light the rest of the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Mertel, arrived on the landing zone. Battery B, 2 19 Artillery, was lifted by Chinooks into a nearby firing position to provide supporting fires. Thus the patrol base was made secure. The air cav's first night ambush went into history. The night no longer belonged to the enemy.

#### **4 NOVEMBER. A typical day in the Ia Drang: search and destroy missions in the dark shadows of the Chu Pong.**

The 4th of November was a fairly typical day in the pursuit phase of the Pleiku campaign, so a description of that day's operations will provide a good picture of air cav in pursuit.

The map reproduced on pages 80-81 is from the 1st Cav's official combat operations after-action report of the campaign. It shows the air and ground movements made by the 1st Brigade on that particular day. Also reproduced on page 82 is the text of the after-action report for 4 November.

From an air mobility standpoint alone, the activities of 3 November resulted in an equivalent of 12 company and two battery moves for a one-way distance of more than 325 kilometers. This was only a fraction of the total distance flown by cavalry helicopters that day, but does illustrate the indispensability of helicopters in the roadless jungle.

#### **6 NOVEMBER. Vicious fire fight on high ground near the Meur River; the enemy slinks away during the night.**

The next violent action came on 6 November when Companies B and C, of the 2 8 Cavalry, fought a numerically superior enemy force to a standstill. Both companies were conducting platoon-size search operations from separated company bases. Bravo Company, screening toward the Meur River from high ground about one and one-half kilometers to the east, made first contact about a kilometer from the stream bed.

This contact was with a platoon-sized enemy force, but by 1200 hours, the company was engaged with an entrenched enemy who was committing more and more units to the battle. As the fire fight increased in intensity some elements of B Company were pinned down. The enemy, now in battalion strength, began to encircle the company. Company C, which was west of the river and had been moving to the west, wheeled about and made

a forced march back to the scene of the fight. It began crossing the river and came under heavy fire. Air and artillery strikes were called in, but neither B nor C Company was able to muster enough fire power from its own position to maneuver decisively.

As darkness approached, both sides began to disengage; C and B Companies to prepared positions for the night and the NVA, as it turned out, to slip away.

The objective and detached language of the after-action reports cannot begin to describe the extraordinary heroism of the two companies that day. This, as always, is best expressed by accounts of the actions of individual soldiers.

Sergeant First Class Payton Watson, the platoon sergeant of the 3rd Platoon, Company B, deserves mention. When his company was taken under fire his platoon leader was killed and the platoon leader of the adjacent 2nd Platoon was severely wounded. Sergeant Watson immediately assumed command of both platoons and dashed from his position, exposing himself to heavy machine-gun fire. He ran to one of his machine-gun positions and led the crew to the right flank of the 2nd Platoon, placing the gun in action there. The fires from this weapon halted an attempted encirclement by the NVA forces. Sergeant Watson then left the position, again exposing himself to enemy fire, and directed the actions of the two platoons throughout the remainder of the day; his inspirational conduct was a major factor in this victory.

For Private First Class Thomas Maynard, the war ended that November 6th, but he proved once again that the American fighting man can and will sacrifice his life for his comrades. While trying to resupply forward elements of his platoon with ammunition, PFC Maynard was wounded in the leg. Despite his wound he continued forward with the ammunition until he found cover near a tree. While Maynard and a badly wounded man were behind this tree, an enemy grenade landed between the two soldiers. PFC Maynard immediately attempted to push the seriously wounded man away from the grenade, but when he realized his fellow soldier would be unable to move to safety in time, he fell on the grenade, smothering the explosion with his own body, and saved the life of his comrade.

As in all actions throughout the campaign, the aviation units played vital and courageous roles. The pilots of Lieutenant Colonel Bob Kellar's 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion made repeated trips into landing zones that were under direct enemy fire, delivering supplies and ammunition and carrying out prisoners, wounded and dead.

The two cavalry companies had sustained the heaviest casualties of any of our units thus far in

the campaign, but they had inflicted grievous losses upon the enemy. The after-action report records 77 enemy killed by body count, with an estimated 121 additional killed that were carried away, and an estimated 271 wounded. Captured weapons and equipment included three heavy machine guns, three light machine guns, two automatic rifles, 23 carbines or assault rifles, 100 hand grenades, a rocket launcher, 10,000 rounds of ammunition and 45 individual packs.

I had been planning to replace the gallant, but spent, 1st Brigade with the 3rd Brigade, commanded by Colonel Thomas W. Brown, and this seemed a logical time to do so. The changeover, completed on 9 November, marked the end of the first phase of the campaign. This phase saw a North Vietnamese regular army regiment, operating in its own trackless "stomping grounds," found, engaged, and nearly destroyed by a new unit which had landed in Vietnam the month before.

**6 NOVEMBER. The NVA Field Front reassesses its situation. Decision: to launch a three-regiment attack on Plei Me.**

When the last of the 33rd Regiment's elements limped and straggled back into the Chu Pong sanctuary, after the fight on 6 November, the cadre began to count noses. The head count showed 890 men of the original 2,200 killed with more than 100 missing or unaccounted for, plus more than 500 incapacitated by wounds. Materiel losses also were heavy with the regimental antiaircraft company having lost 13 of its 18 guns and the regimental mortar company having lost five of its nine tubes. Six more mortars were lost by the battalions, along with most of the recoilless rifles. The losses of ammunition, food and medical supplies also had been crippling.

As the North Vietnamese Field Front officers evaluated their situation they reached a decision. With American units seemingly withdrawing to the east of Plei Me, the decision was to regain the initiative by an attack. The target, incredibly enough, once again was the Plei Me camp. The division headquarters set 16 November as the date for the attack and issued orders to its three regiments.

The 32nd Regiment had remained a cohesive fighting force despite the casualties sustained during the ambush of the ARVN armored task force on the road to Plei Me.

The 33rd, as has been seen, suffered tremendous losses in its attack and subsequent withdrawal from Plei Me, but it still was to be committed again. With a view toward this future commitment, the 33rd began reorganization of its

decimated battalions into a single composite fighting unit.

The real cutting edge for the attack, however, was to be the newly infiltrated 66th Regiment, fresh from North Vietnam and spoiling for a fight. It would be in the van of the three regimental efforts against Plei Me.

On 11 November the 66th was along the banks of the Ia Drang with some elements on the high ground to the west. The 33rd Regiment maintained its position at Anta Village in the valley between the Ia Drang and Chu Pong. The 32nd Regiment remained north of the Ia Drang.

To add punch to the attack, Field Front decided to commit a battalion of 120mm mortars and a battalion of 14.5mm twin-barreled anti-aircraft guns. These two units, en route down the infiltration trail, were scheduled to arrive in time to participate in the attack.

The next five days were to be spent in preparation for the attack. Thus, for the first time, a full, three-regiment NVA division would be committed offensively against a target in South Vietnam.

The second phase of the campaign opened with three battalions of the 3rd Brigade—the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore (later promoted, Colonel Moore assumed command of the 3rd Brigade); the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert A. McDade; and a 2nd Brigade battalion attached for the operation—the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Tully. Initially these three battalions began search operations south and east of Plei Me to insure that the enemy had not, in fact, slipped away to the east as well as to the west.

These search missions continued through the 13th. Very few enemy were found and so the brigade began a gradual shift to the west. The 2/5 Cavalry and Battery C, 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, air assaulted into position Falcon, about eight kilometers from the base of the Chu Pong Massif. The area was code named "Bronze." The next search area to the west was named "Lime" and was assigned by Colonel Brown as a search zone by Lieutenant Colonel Moore's 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry.

**14 NOVEMBER. Opening rounds of the three-day battle at LZ X-Ray. Field Front has hopes for a Dien Bien Phu victory over the Americans.**

Few units that have a rendezvous with destiny have an inkling of their fate until the historical moment has come. So it was with the 1/7 Cavalry on the morning of 14 November. Nestled near the foot of one of the mountains in the Chu Pong hill mass was a tiny clearing, measuring scarcely

more than 100 by 200 meters in size. Colonel Moore had named it "Landing Zone X-Ray." For the next three days that forlorn piece of real estate, which became known to the world simply as "X-Ray," was the scene of almost unbelievable gallantry and heroism.

The haunting dream of a "set piece" battle in which the Viet Minh insurgents would batter themselves to pieces against the rocks of modern weaponry led to the tragedy of Dien Bien Phu. Yet air mobility, with its ability to transport massive artillery support over impossible terrain, lured the enemy into just such a battle as the French had hoped for. Nothing in the training or background of the NVA commanders had prepared them for the lethal potential of a seemingly unprotected airmobile infantry battalion.

This is how the fight unfolded. At 1050 the first company, Bravo, had landed and by 1210 the bulk of the battalion had closed. With Company C securing the LZ, Bravo moved north and west toward a finger extending down from the Chu Pong hill mass. At 1245 B Company became moderately engaged and by 1330 hours was under attack by at least two companies of NVA infantry. The westerly platoon of Company B, cut off in the violence of the first enemy assault, fought on as an isolated island of resistance.

Just as Bravo engaged, a few rounds of mortar fire fell on the landing zone. Rocket fire also fell in several sectors.

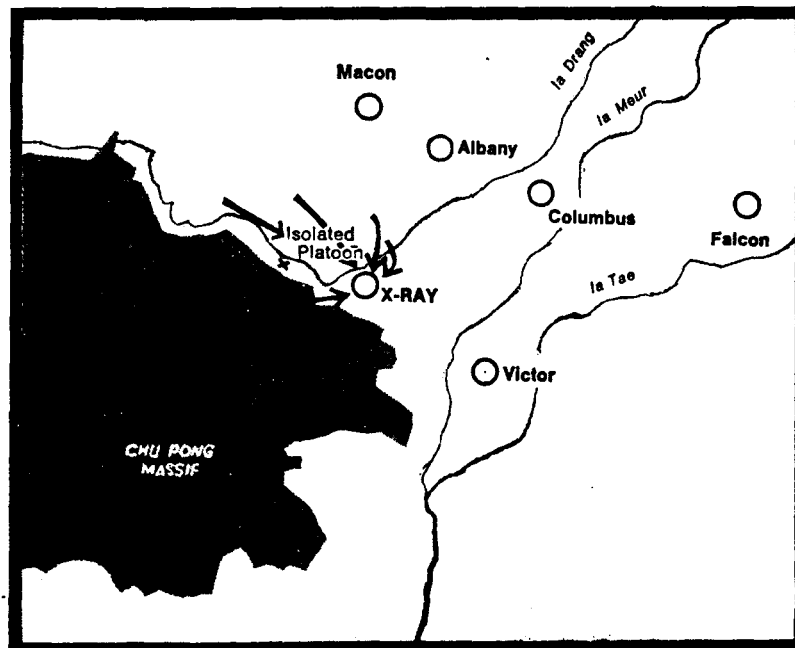
Company A was moved up to the left flank of Company B and immediately became engaged with

an enemy company driving toward Bravo's left rear. Fire was then coming into the landing zone itself, and aircraft bringing in the remainder of the battalion had to be waved off. Thus far, all the action had occurred to the west and northwest of the LZ in heavy jungle and tall grass.

Then Charlie Company, which had moved off the LZ to the east, was attacked by a two-company force of enemy. Elements of Delta Company were moved to reinforce Charlie and tactical air, aerial artillery and tube artillery support was called to within 100 meters of friendly positions. The attack was beaten off and the eastern portion of the LZ became secure and relatively free of fire.

On learning of the intensity of the fight, the brigade commander, Colonel Brown, ordered Company B, 27 Cavalry, to move from its assembly area 35 kilometers south and east of X-Ray to reinforce the 17 Cavalry. By 1800 hours it had landed in X-Ray and Lieutenant Colonel Moore placed it initially in reserve prepared to counter-attack any penetration of C Company or for commitment in the area of contact of Company A or B. This was not necessary and Colonel Moore later placed Company B, 27 Cavalry, on the perimeter for the night and designated the battalion reconnaissance platoon as his reserve. Throughout the night the NVA attempted to crack the perimeter of the isolated platoon of B Company, 17, but intensive protective fires of artillery ringing the position and the gutty fighting of the platoon itself broke up every attack. The

**The battle for X-ray, 14-17 November. Arrows indicate enemy attacks on the landing zone and isolated platoon.**



*7th Cavalry riflemen, using assault fire, move through the buffalo grass in pursuit of the fleeing enemy. The imaginative use of artillery, and especially airlifting into position by helicopter, was one of the real innovations of the Ia Drang campaign. Below the 105-mm howitzer, troopers at a landing zone along the Ia Drang study a map before moving to relieve units being beleaguered by the enemy in a jungle clearing near the Cambodian border.*

main perimeter also was subjected to repeated probes, and these, too, were repulsed. During the night the two 105mm artillery batteries at Landing Zone Falcon pumped out more than 4,400 rounds of high explosive in close support of X-Ray. Some of the volleys fell within 50 meters of the perimeter trace.

Meanwhile, Colonel Brown had ordered the previously alerted 2/5 Cavalry to move by choppers to LZ Victor about three and one-half kilometers southeast of X-Ray and from there to move overland to X-Ray.

Before any reinforcements could reach X-Ray on the morning of the 15th, the 7th and 9th Battalions of the enemy's 66th Regiment and the composite battalion of its 33rd Regiment launched a series of massive attacks on the tiny perimeter. In these thrusts some enemy closed to hand-to-hand combat with Charlie Company. The company stood its ground and with its own supporting fires, plus reinforcements from Company A, 1/7 Cav, and the battalion reconnaissance platoon drove back the enemy. Tactical air and artillery strikes continued to take an awesome toll of the NVA infantry.

The combined heavy fires of the infantrymen and their supporting arms finally broke the back of the attack; the field was strewn with NVA bodies. By 0900 the fire into the landing zone had so slackened that it was possible to airland Company A, 2/7 Cavalry.

From across country by foot came the 2/5 Cavalry, sweeping across the ridgeline southeast of X-Ray and into the perimeter itself, closing at 1245 hours. Colonel Brown had designated Colonel Moore, the senior in X-Ray, as commander of the forces there. Moore ordered the 2/5 Cavalry battalion with two of its rifle companies and Company B, 1/7 Cavalry, to attack to the northwest to extricate the isolated platoon of Company B, 1/7 Cavalry. This attack quickly reached the lost platoon and found it had killed approximately 75 of the enemy in 24 hours of fighting. Of that number, 30 dead were found around the perimeter. The platoon strength at the beginning of the battle was 27 men of whom eight were killed, 12 wounded, and only seven remaining uninjured. By 1600 the 2/5 with the heroic platoon had re-entered the perimeter of X-Ray.



Colonel Moore ordered the forces in X-Ray to form a tight perimeter for the night. Enemy probes began at approximately 0100 hours and by 0400 hours a 250- to 300-man attack was made against Company B, 2/7 Cavalry, in the 1/7 Cavalry sector. Three more attacks were staged against Company B ranging in size from 100 to 200 men. All of the attacks were beaten back by the combined firepower of infantry, artillery and tactical air.

**16 NOVEMBER.** At X-Ray battle's end the great expectations of the Field Front lay shattered along with more than a thousand of its dead.

At 0655, on orders from Colonel Moore, all the troopers along the perimeter opened fire with small arms and machine guns, systematically spraying trees, bushes and anthills to their front. This "mad minute" of fire accomplished its primary purpose of bringing down several snipers who had climbed trees close to the perimeter during the night. It also produced a bonus effect by flushing a 40-man NVA element that had been using the cover of the high grass to crawl into an assault



position. This group, mistakenly thinking the heavy fire indicated they were discovered, began to rise from the grass and run in confusion. The milling enemy became a "covey rise" to be shot by the defenders of X-Ray.

During the day the remaining elements of the 2/7 Cavalry moved to X-Ray by foot from a new landing zone named Columbus, about five kilometers northeast. Two artillery batteries had landed there the preceding day, raising the total to four batteries firing in support of X-Ray.

Remaining at Columbus to furnish security were elements of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Fred Ackerson. Two artillery batteries, one from the 2nd Battalion, 17th Artillery, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel H. O. Amos, and the other from Lieutenant Colonel R. W. Short's 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, were positioned on Columbus.

With the arrival of the 2/7 Cavalry at X-Ray, Colonel Brown ordered the 1/7 Cavalry Battalion to move back to Camp Holloway near Pleiku to rest and reorganize. Accompanying the battalion was Company B, 2/7 Cavalry, which also had been in the thick of the battle almost from the start

and the 3rd Platoon of Company A, 2/7 Cavalry, which had joined Company B the previous day. Company A, 1/5 Cavalry, was attached to Lieutenant Colonel McDade's 2/7 Battalion to provide him with a full-strength unit. This cross attaching of our companies to battalions other than their own was something we had contemplated and practiced. It functioned smoothly throughout this operation and was of real importance.

By late afternoon of the 16th it seemed that the NVA regiments wanted no more of X-Ray. During the three-day attack, the 66th and 33rd Regiments lost 834 killed by body count, with an additional 1,215 estimated killed, mostly by artillery and air. The NVA, as usual, carried off all they could of their dead and wounded.

We evacuated from the landing zone 56 assault rifles, 54 assault carbines, 17 automatic rifles, five antitank rocket launchers, four heavy machine guns, and two 82mm mortars. More than 100 crew-served and individual weapons, too badly shot up to be of value, were destroyed.

Starting on the 15th, USAF B-52 bombers had begun to pound the interior of the Chu Pong Massif. We later learned that this was highly



demoralizing to even the most hardened soldier. The NVA soldiers lived in fear of these attacks not only because the bombs hit before the aircraft could be heard, but also because they believed each raid covered a 20-kilometer area and that ordinary trenches and foxholes were of no protection.

On the 17th a new use of B-52 bombers began as they flew sorties of what amounted to direct support of our ground scheme of maneuver. Colonel Brown ordered the two battalions remaining on X-Ray to maneuver far enough away from that landing zone to allow the B-52's to drop their bombs on enemy positions close by.

Accordingly, the 2/5 Cavalry and 2/7 Cavalry moved off the LZ with a mission to sweep north, with the 2/5 Cavalry bearing slightly to the east and heading for Columbus. The 2/7 Cavalry which was minus its Bravo Company, but had Company A, 1/5 Cavalry, attached, was to follow the 2/5 Cavalry for approximately 3,000 meters, then was to sweep west and northwest toward a map location that appeared to offer a helicopter landing zone. This map location was named Albany.

#### **17 NOVEMBER. A wild, incoherent infantry battle erupts out of a meeting engagement at LZ Albany.**

The 2/5 Cavalry closed at Columbus at 1140 hours without incident, but the 2/7 Cavalry was about to undergo its ordeal by fire. The battalion set out behind the 2/5 with A Company, 2/7, in the lead, utilizing the battalion recon platoon in lieu of its own missing platoon; followed by C Company, D Company, and the command group. At the rear of the battalion column was A, 1/5 Cav.

After clearing the 3,000-meter limit, the battalion swung westerly and made its way through the dense jungle toward Albany. About 300-500 meters short of its objective area, the lead element captured two prisoners without any resistance. As the lead element passed through the clearing that was to become Albany, it began receiving extremely heavy fire from its left and right front and from its right flank. Initial surprise had gone to the enemy; the remainder of the enemy patrol that escaped capture had done its job well. The commander of the 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, had been given 20 minutes' warning.

The enemy battalion had been moving in an easterly direction toward Columbus to attack the artillery there, but had stopped for a noon rice break when the patrol brought news of the approaching cavalry column. The enemy battalion commander accepted penetration by the lead elements of the cavalry column into his positions where a close-quarters battle would be to his advantage. He then planned to follow with a com-

pany-sized thrust at the exposed flank of the column.

The brunt of the flanking move by the NVA was borne by C and D Companies, and in some cases the enemy thrust penetrated through the ranks of the column. D Company and part of the headquarters element began moving to the east to link up with the lead elements of A, 1/5 Cav, which also had taken heavy enemy fire. Remnants of C Company, along with the battalion command group, fought their way westward to the clearing where A Company and the recon platoon were making their stands.

Although initial surprise was achieved by the North Vietnamese, the Cavalry troopers reacted quickly and courageously.

Words cannot adequately describe the agony on Albany that afternoon as these two determined forces fell upon each other in a dense jungle. The meeting engagement quickly became a wild melee of individual and small-unit fights. Friend and foe were intermingled for a distance of more than 1,000 meters as they slugged toe to toe.

Initially, the inability to precisely locate individual units in the battle precluded the use of supporting artillery and tactical air. It was an infantrymen's battle for several hours.

By mid-afternoon the pieces were sorted out and heavy supporting fires placed on the NVA elements still pressing the attack. The first strikes were by aerial rocket artillery, followed by a tactical air napalm run, which broke up an NVA company-sized attack that was just forming against the westward edge of the forward perimeter.

By 1825 hours the fire around the clearing had slackened to the point where it could be used as a landing zone to bring in Company B, 2/7 Cav, from Camp Holloway, where it had been placed on alert as soon as word of the fight reached brigade.

Although the enemy kept pressure on both perimeters during the night, he did not try heavy assaults against the positions as he had earlier at X-Ray. Illumination by Air Force flare ships and a continuous ring of artillery shells and tactical air strikes kept the enemy at bay and allowed units from both perimeters to make repeated forays out from the positions to bring back friendly casualties. At approximately 2200 hours, Company B, 1/5 Cav, marched overland from Columbus and linked up with the eastern perimeter, giving it needed reinforcement. It was decided that the units should not try to fight their way further in the darkness and the two perimeters were maintained for the night.

Daylight found the enemy gone. The 2/7 in a demonstration of great fighting spirit had won the day, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. The enemy abandoned more than 400 of his dead and a great many weapons.

On the night of 18 November it was the turn of yet another battalion, the 1st Bn, 5th Cavalry, and the artillery at LZ Columbus. Almost overlooked after the battles at X-Ray and Albany, the attack against the 1/5 Cavalry at Columbus followed the same pattern of several earlier battles in the Pleiku campaign: fanatical assaults by a numerically superior, well-armed and determined enemy. The battle lasted throughout the late afternoon and into the night. The enemy infantry on several occasions penetrated nearly to the point of hand-to-hand combat with our troopers in their fox-holes. Once more gallantry, coolness, and professional competence were on display everywhere. Another cavalry battalion had taken everything the enemy could throw at it, and had turned on him and had smashed and defeated him.

Going back to 16 November, planning officers and commanders of several headquarters including MACV, Field Force I, and the II ARVN Corps, had held numerous discussions of various operations and plans involving the commitment of ARVN units to the battle. These discussions had gone on for several days and included at various times Brigadier General William E. DePuy, MACV's J3; General Larsen; Lieutenant General John A. Heintges, MACV's deputy commander; and General Westmoreland. On the ARVN side were General Vin Loc, the II Corps commander, and various members of the ARVN high command.

The upshot was an agreement for a brigade of two or more ARVN airborne battalions to enter the battle by landing at Duc Co, then moving south to block the area along the Cambodian border from north of the Ia Drang to the northwest corner of the Chu Pong Massif. This ARVN brigade was to receive helicopter support from Colonel Cody's 52nd Aviation Battalion and to receive artillery support from us. An included part of this plan called for the road from An Khe to Pleiku to be kept open by us and an RVN Marine brigade.

With respect to our own units, General Knowles recommended on 18 November that we introduce our 2nd Brigade Hq and return Colonel Brown's 3rd Brigade Hq to An Khe for a richly deserved breather. I had approved and ordered this to take place by noon on 20 November.

Thus by noon on 20 November while the two battered NVA regiments were recoiling in defeat from their unsuccessful probes at our artillery positions, our 2nd Brigade under Colonel Ray Lynch established its headquarters at Duc Co. Here they were located side by side with the headquarters of the ARVN Airborne Brigade, and the final chapter of the Pleiku campaign had begun.

The 2nd Brigade had under command four infantry battalions (the 2/12 and 1/8 Cavalry that

had fought earlier under our 1st Brigade and the 1/5 and 2/5 Cavalry that had fought under our 3rd Brigade in the bitter fighting in the Ia Drang). Also under command of the 2nd Brigade were two artillery battalions: the 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harold Smith, and Lieutenant Colonel Amos' 2/17 Artillery. The plan of the 2nd Brigade was to sweep southeast toward the blocking positions of the ARVN Airborne Brigade. The artillery of our 2nd Brigade was so positioned that it could support either our own forces or the ARVN Airborne units, or both at once.

### **20 NOVEMBER. The ARVN brigade blocks as the 2nd Brigade, 1st Air Cav, flushes remnants of the enemy out of the Ia Drang. The defeated enemy slinks away into Cambodia.**

By 20 November, then, the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade was established on its blocking positions and was searching to the north and south along the border. Our 2nd Brigade established strong points in the jungle and launched company- and battalion-size drives through the dense undergrowth. These actions flushed out the remainder of the 33rd and 66th Regiments that still were lurking northeast of the Ia Drang and sent them staggering toward their sanctuary to the west. When not firing in support of Cavalry troops, the division's artillery units provided fire support for the ARVN Airborne Brigade. One notable case was when two ARVN battalions flushed a battalion of the 32nd Regiment. The 2/17 Artillery, firing in support of the ensuing fight, was credited with more than 250 of the enemy that were killed in the engagement.

It was during the 2nd Brigade's phase that the saga of Toby Braveboy occurred. The 1/9 Cavalry Squadron, flying screening and reconnaissance sorties in support of the brigade, had a scout team working over the old battle area near Landing Zones X-Ray and Albany. It spotted a man waving a bloody T-shirt. The scouts landed and rescued the soldier, who turned out to be PFC Toby Braveboy of Company A, 2/7 Cavalry. He had been wounded in the hand and leg and separated from his company during the first violent moments of that vicious battle at Albany on 17 November, a week earlier. He had persevered, sustained by water and his faith.

When our aerial cavalry reconnaissance and when the patrols of our 2nd Brigade working out from landing zones Golf, Tee, Crooks and Par began finding little or no trace of the enemy, and when similar reports were received from the ARVN Airborne Brigade to the west, it became apparent that the enemy had abandoned all

thought of either offensive or defensive combat with our forces. He had directed all his attention toward salvaging what he could by crossing in small elements into his sanctuary in Cambodia.

**26 NOVEMBER.** The end of the campaign. In Cambodia the Field Front licked its wounds and contemplated the failure of its ambitious Long Xuan (winter-spring) offensive. For the RVN and the U.S. it was an encouraging sign of the turning of the tide.

The 1st Air Cavalry Division had completed its mission of pursuit and destruction. How it had done so, and how well, can be told in small part by the statistics, for example by the statistics of our division aviation units. Our assigned and attached aviation units were directed by two of our subordinate headquarters, the 11th Aviation Group and the Support Command.

Aviation Group, led by Colonel Allen Burdett, commanded its organic units, the 227th and 229th Assault Helicopter Battalions ("Huey" lift and gun ships); the 228th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion (CH-47 Chinooks); and the 11th Aviation Company, which provided general support choppers and the six OV-1 (Mohawk) aircraft for the Aerial Surveillance and Target Acquisition (ASTA) Platoon. These organic aviation units were the constant teammates of our combat and combat support units.

Support Command, led by Colonel John J. Hennessey, controlled the attached 17th Aviation Company (CV-2 Caribous); and the attached 478th Flying Crane Company (four CH-54 Flying Cranes). The Flying Cranes, brand new to Vietnam and to combat, proved themselves extremely valuable in retrieving downed aircraft, moving engineer equipment, and in a host of other ways. The 17th, with its Caribous (aircraft already veterans to this war) provided stalwart, highly responsive and varied support around the clock. During the 35 days of the campaign, these aviation units made "retail" delivery by air of 5,048 tons of cargo from the "wholesale" air delivery terminus at the new Pleiku air field. In addition, in the early days of the operation, before the USAF wholesale operation swung into high gear, our units "wholesaled" 8,216 tons of cargo into Pleiku from depots such as Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. I had considered this "wholesale" delivery a serious misuse of our aviation resources because Air Force aircraft could have been used and our own aircraft were badly needed for the many "retail" delivery and tactical functions forward of Pleiku. I had started at once through multiple channels to secure Air Force lift support as far forward as Pleiku. General Larsen supported my requests. When approved, the Air Force lift began slowly, then grew

till it took over the full wholesale chore and completely freed our aircraft for their more normal functions. This arrangement continued till the road to Pleiku was opened.

We had moved by air infantry battalions and 67 artillery batteries and had air evacuated approximately 2,700 refugees to safety and freedom.

In all this flying we had sustained hits by enemy fire on 59 aircraft (three of these were hit while on the ground). Of the 56 hit in flight only four were shot down and three of these were recovered.

These statistics on aircraft are revealing and, I believe, impressive, but they only hint at the tremendous professional skill and deep dedication of the men who flew and maintained and guided (pathfinders, GCA crews and controllers) and refueled and repaired them—night and day—in all kinds of weather, in a hostile area of few landmarks and still fewer landing zones as one normally thinks of them. Neither do the statistics reveal the all-important teamwork from a single aircraft and one squad all the way up through a full lift battalion and its infantry or artillery or engineer teammates. It was the deep mutual confidence and understanding of each other's capabilities that formed the very linchpin of success.

The logistical statistics, too, are revealing and important. For example, we had continuously supplied our force, which averaged approximately 5,200 men, for 35 days with 7,554 short tons of all types of supplies, of which 2,920 tons entered the division area by organic air; 1,446 tons came overland; 3,188 tons arrived by Air Force planes. Supplies in adequate quantities had constantly been moved all the way forward to the hands that needed them.

One of the biggest logistical questions related to our unproven ability to maintain our aircraft for prolonged periods of combat. The fact was that we had been able to keep our birds flying under very trying circumstances. At the end of this long campaign the division's aviation maintenance men were actually putting back into the air more mission-ready aircraft than were being dead-lined for combat, operational or maintenance reasons. During the peak operational period of 14-19 November, when we were severely pushing our aviation units, maintenance proved equal to the challenge; if we could keep the spare parts flowing we could keep the birds flying. This maintenance challenge was met in all areas, not just in aircraft maintenance. The airmobile repair shops, located with the forward support elements, handled a total of 410 job orders during the campaign, covering automotive, armament, engineer, signal and quartermaster equipment. Of these 410 orders, 366 were completed at the forward sites and only 44 were evacuated to the rear. This included on-site repair of artillery pieces that were firing in sup-

port of Landing Zone X-Ray.

Medical evacuation, too, had passed its trial by fire with flying colors, even though improvement was needed in such techniques as the dispatch and control of our flying ambulances.

Statistics and lessons learned are important but must not overshadow the importance of the men of Support Command whose professional know-how and can-do spirit made possible this heretofore impossible support of a large army unit moving at such a pace and over such terrain and distances.

In another basic functional component of land combat—surveillance and reconnaissance—the results looked promising. Using primarily our organic means (the organic aerial cavalry squadron and the OV-1 Mohawks in our ASTA platoon), we had repeatedly been able to find and fix the enemy. The Army had a true cavalry again—a cavalry whose differential speed advantage over ground vehicles was analogous to the earlier differential of a horse soldier over a foot soldier.

In still another functional area of combat, that of command and control, again the results were gratifying. We had moved major forces over very large areas under diverse and fast-changing command relationships without experiencing any serious problems of communications or control. Here again careful preparations during our prolonged period of testing and development paid off. Such equipment as our "pod" forward command post flown to Pleiku by a Flying Crane worked very well. Our aerial relays also paid handsome dividends. And the time we had spent in perfecting common operating procedures produced the all-important capability quickly to set up all sorts of command arrangements among units and have them function smoothly.

Finally, with respect to firepower, we tried and proved new dimensions. Using Chinooks, we had been able to position tube artillery in the midst of a literally trackless jungle where it provided close support to our infantry and gave them a vital measure of superiority. Besides the Division's tube artillery, our aerial rocket artillery matured and came of age. Aerial rocket artillery (ARA) supplemented and in many cases substituted for tube artillery. As our commanders became acquainted with the firepower potential of ARA and with its flexibility, accuracy, and immediate response, it was increasingly called upon.

For a war billed as one of "low intensity" these firepower statistics are impressive:

During the 35 days we fired 33,108 rounds of 105mm howitzer ammunition in addition to 7,356 rounds of 2.75-inch aerial rockets.

Once again it was the skill and will of all the men concerned in generating these figures that converted the mere numbers of rounds and rockets

into the discreet, accurate, timely, and coordinated explosions that made such a difference. As the first unit in Vietnam with aerial rocket artillery, as well as the first one whose helicopters could emplace artillery howitzers and supply them in areas devoid of roads, we initiated and enjoyed a measure of fire superiority which in my opinion tipped the military balance in our favor.

This account must leave out the highly important statistics and omit, too, the tremendously vital roles played by such units as our medical battalion, our engineers, and our signal battalion. Each of these units, too, performed their traditional respective functions in new and better ways—made possible by using aircraft wherever such use gave an operational advantage.

Statistics and lessons learned aside, in 35 days of campaigning this new division, starting less than a month after it had closed in Vietnam, had chalked up some important firsts, besides the first combat test of the airmobile concept and of the "First Team."

For the first time, following the relief of a besieged Special Forces camp, there was an immediate, prolonged, relentless pursuit of the enemy. For the first time a large Army unit operated continuously over difficult terrain, devoid of roads, and relying primarily on aircraft in every aspect of its operations, to include logistic support.

For the first time in this war an American unit gained contact with the enemy and maintained it over a prolonged period. This produced many significant results; one of the most important was the generation of solid, tactical intelligence based on such tangibles as actual contact with and sightings of the enemy, prisoner interrogations, and captured documents. The resulting intelligence was of great operational value to us; it multiplied our firepower advantage and focused our maneuver. It also permitted higher headquarters to fill many gaps in strategic intelligence.

For the first time large American units and their ARVN allies met and defeated large NVA units fighting as battalions and regiments under divisional control. The importance of this lay not only in the fact that it was the first time this enemy's large units had suffered serious defeat in many years, but also in the fact that we had gained a victory in the all-important first round. This, I believe, stimulated in a timely, vital way the morale of our own forces, and the ARVN forces, while severely shaking the enemy's morale.

To appreciate the significance of this campaign, one needs only to contemplate the probable impact if we had lost by the same margin that we won. Given the situation that existed in Vietnam in October 1965, I believe this victorious campaign was of major military importance and probably of major international political importance as well.