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HEADQUARTERS, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMObILE)
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3. Although each report is intended solely as a historical document, an analysis of this military history may pinpoint key decisions and crucial turning points of the battle. Combat lessons learned may stand out for future awareness.
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WILLIAM S. WITTERS
Major, Infantry
Chief

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1ST AIR CAVALRY DIVISION

Republic of Vietnam

Office of Information and History

THE BATTLE OF



Hoa Tien (1)

6 - 7 March 1967

Unit Historical Report No. 9

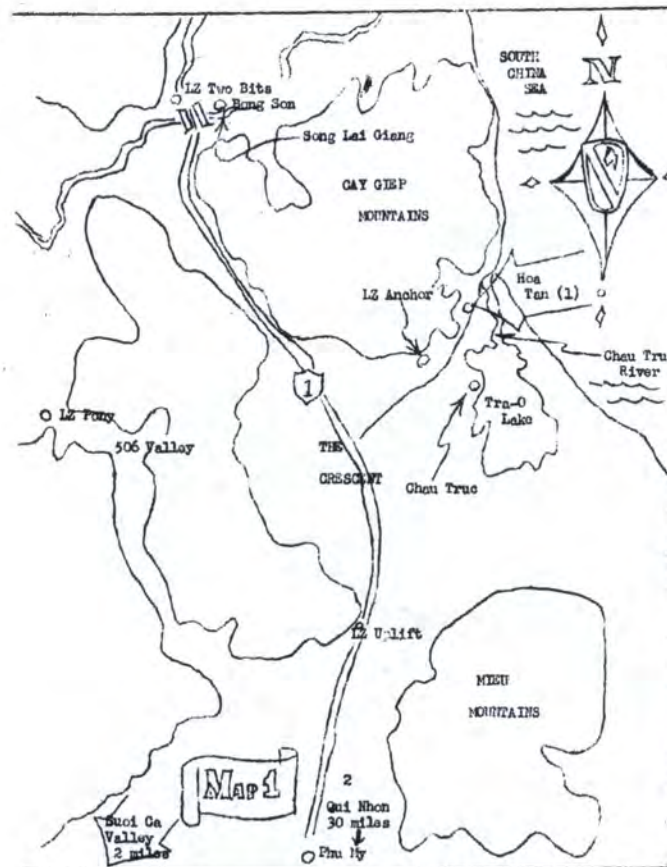
Prepared by

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"A chopper is down! A chopper is down!" came the urgent cry crackling over the radio at Landing Zone (LZ) Two Bits, the 1st Cavalry Division's forward command post and the command post of its primary reconnaissance element, the 1st Squadron of the 9th Cavalry. Ears remained glued to the headset; orders were formulated for instantaneous reinforcement and extraction of the helicopter crew. Additional information came over the wireless later which indicated that the downed chopper had landed to pick up a Viet Cong suspect. It was reported that when the chopper touched down, one of the door gunners had jumped out and run toward the location of the VC suspect. Suddenly, intensive and accurate small arms and automatic weapons fire opened up on both the helicopter and the door gunner. Damaged severely by this hail of lead, the ship, was forced off before the door gunner could get back to the craft; the pilot just barely coaxed his chopper long enough to make a landing 800 meters to the east among the relative security of sand dunes along the coast of the South China Sea. This contact initiated one of the most successful battles of Operation Pershing in Binh Dinh Province when on 6 March 1967 elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division decisively engaged at Hoa Tan (pronounced: Wah Tahn) several companies of the 9th Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment.

The action at Hoa Tan, is a remarkable example of the high level of cooperation and coordination required of US Forces in the Vietnam conflict. To successfully drive the guerrilla from his sanctuaries, usually a superiority in men and equipment is necessary in the area selected for the operation. Consequently, to build up the needed advantage US troops will frequently be moved from their normal area of operations into new locations under new commanders to confront a different enemy. This is necessary to effect a fluid response to the guerrilla's many faceted tactics. More than in any previous war in US history, this coordination has been effectively accomplished. The action at Hoa Tan is illustrative of the capability of US Forces to completely integrate elements to accomplish the mission.

The village of Hoa Tan, a typical farming community, is located in the northeastern end of the Crescent area about forty miles northwest of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh Province. There are extensive rice paddies to the west and south of the village. On the east the Chau Truc River flows in, a north-south pattern to the Tra-O Lake 2.4 kilometers to the south. On the west bank of the river and east of Hoa Tan a finger of land, which figured prominently in the action on 6 March, 200 - 300 meters wide and 1200 meters long parallels the course of the river and acts as a dike during the monsoon season to the rampaging Chau Truc River. As this finger of land is quite fertile and easily accessible to a source of irrigation, a series of terraced rice paddies have been carved into its gentle slope. Several hundred meters north of the village the terrain rised gradually from rice paddies to a small lightly vegetated hill mass. To the west and southwest, the Cay Giép Mountains rise in sharp relief from the extensive rice paddies. Through the center of the village runs one of the major roads of the area which joins with Highway 1 to the south and slowly disappears as a trail in the Cay Giép Mountains to the north. (Map 1) In addition, innumerable hedgerows, trenches, and dikes originally constructed to control the rampaging waters caused by the monsoon compartmentalize the



village. Interspersed randomly throughout the area are the coconut palms so characteristic of the eastern coastal region.

The terrain here was an important factor, for, while the village offered the defensive advantages of good cover and concealment and excellent fields of observation and fire into the rice paddies around the village, it had very few concealed routes of withdrawal thus facilitating an encirclement by US Forces. This battle was fairly unique in this last respect as seldom does a hard core Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army unit place itself in such a vulnerable position. Previously such a situation had occurred on 2 and 3 October 1966 in the Battle of Hoa Hoi. Here also a large enemy force was surrounded and given little chance for escape.

The 1st Air Cavalry Division since September 1966 had been involved in this area as a result of its missions during Operations Thayer I, Irving, Thayer II, and finally Pershing to fully pacify Binh Dinh Province. To further buttress allied units during Operation Pershing, which commenced on the 12th of February, the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division had been placed under the control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. The 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry (3/25) was assigned the southern sectors of the division area of operations. Its mission was one of insuring that enemy main forces did not sweep around the 1st Cavalry Forces to the north and contest areas already cleared of VC and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) forces. One of the units of 3/25, the 1st Battalion 14th Infantry, was given the task of keeping the Suoi Ca Valley region clear. This area had been cleared of enemy forces and all its camps and shelters destroyed. The other unit in 3/25, the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry (minus) under Major James E. Moore, which was to figure so prominently in the action at Hoa Tan, was operating in the Crescent area. Major Moore had two companies, A/1/35 and B/1/35, while C Company of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry (C/1/35) was under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry.

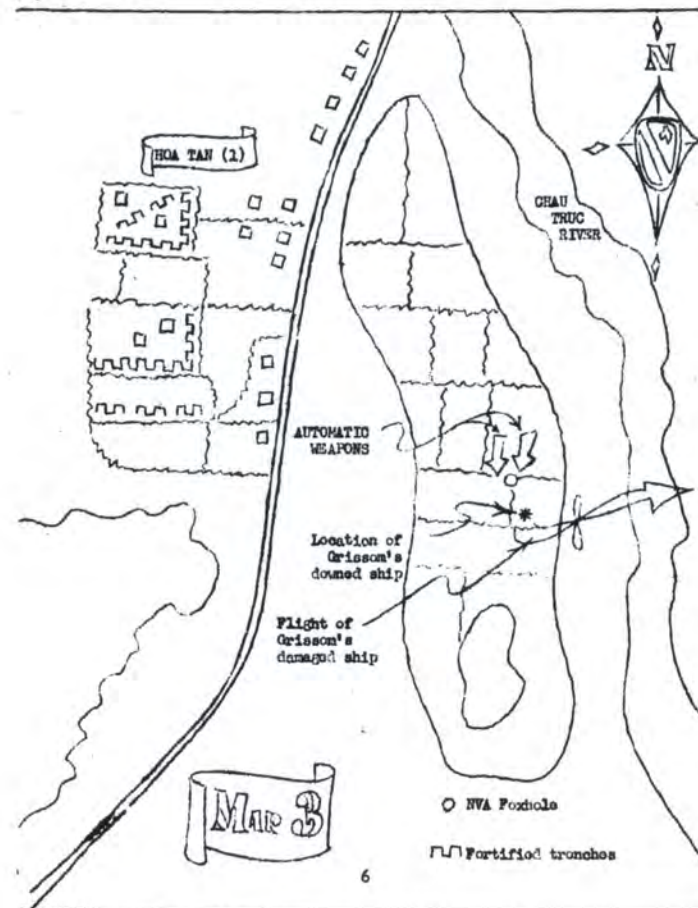
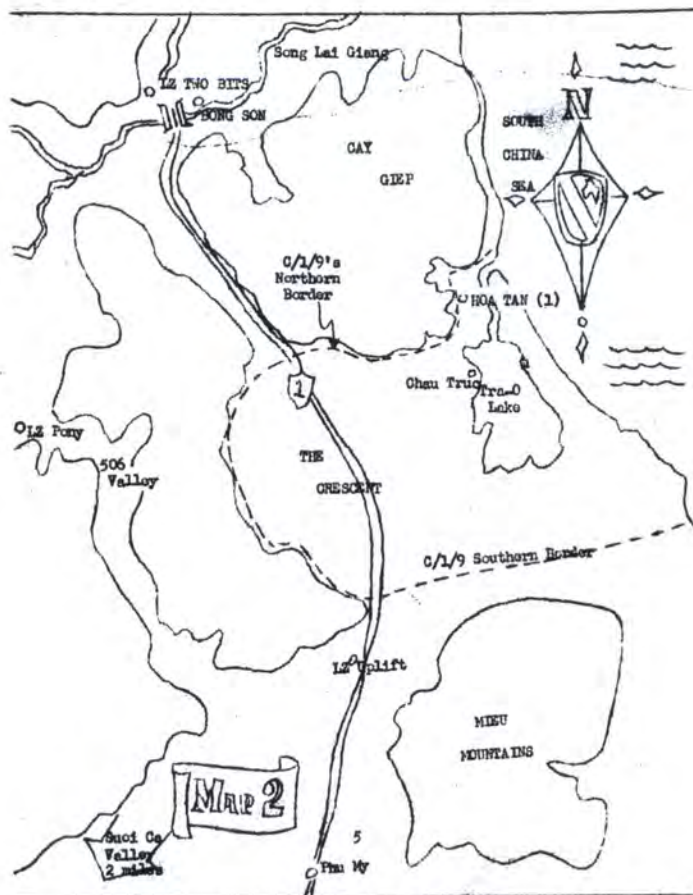
As the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry had a large area of responsibility, C Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry of the 1st Cavalry Division (C/1/9) was attached to provide aerial reconnaissance. In practice, C Troop with their scout (OH-13) helicopters or their weapons (UH-1B) helicopters reconnoiters a large area to determine where the enemy is, then after making contact, their organic infantry platoon (blue platoon) is air assaulted into the area to develop the situation. If the troop uncovers a significant enemy force, a ready reaction company from the unit for which the troop is screening is heliborne in to relieve the blue platoon and further exploit the contact. If a contact proves to be major, then other units are committed as the situation requires. The reaction force on the 6th of March was A Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry of the 1st Cavalry Division which had been placed under operational control of the 3/25 on the 5th of March 1967.

C Troop was initially employed by the 3/25 in the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry's area of operation. The northern limit of its reconnaissance was the southern edge of the Gay Giep Mountain mass, while the southern boundary was

placed just south of the Tra-0 Lake. C Troop had been given this mission in part because it had been several days since friendly units had operated in the area, yet there were definite indications of recent enemy activity. Major Donald B. Adkins, the operations officer of C Troop, later said, "We had suspected that there were enemy in this location. We had been in there before and we saw numerous military-age males around the villages...most of these villages had bunkers and trenches around them... We felt the VC had moved in there and had started fortifying some of these areas." (Map 2)

At first light on 6 March, a red team of C/1/9 composed of two UH-1B gunships commanded by Lieutenant Clinton W. Carter and Lieutenant James Grissom, left Position Pony, one of the 1st Cav's landing zones and artillery positions, with the mission of screening along the southern edge of the Gay Giep Mountains. After screening the area for about thirty minutes, the door gunner in Lieutenant Grissom's aircraft said he saw a man in a foxhole covered with palm leaves on the finger of land to the east of the village of Hoa Tan. (Map 3) As is usually the case when a suspicious individual is noted in a suspected area, the ships circled slowly over the area to observe his reaction. After circling for several minutes, Grissom set his chopper down thirty feet from the foxhole to let his door gunner, Specialist Four James A. Hohman, apprehend the individual. Hohman walked toward where he had seen the foxhole and when he arrived, shoved his M16 into the opening and told the man to come out. Suddenly, the enemy in the foxhole opened up with a burst of automatic weapons fire. The fact that Hohman was on a lower level of the terraced rice paddy than his opponent saved his life and allowed him time to fire a, return burst back into the foxhole and then take cover in a nearby hedgerow. At this time, however, other automatic weapons opened up on the landed chopper and forced Grissom, after receiving several hits, to take off leaving Hohman on the ground. Grissom's rising chopper, accurately engaged by the enemy as it became airborne, was so severely damaged in its hydraulics system that it had to make an emergency landing in the immediate area. Selecting the exposed sandy area on the other side of the Chau Truc River as the safest location, Grissom just barely made the several hundred meters to the partial security provided by the sand dunes. Lieutenant Carter remained circling over the abandoned door gunner to insure that he was provided with as much aerial fire support as possible until further help arrived. Carter, meanwhile, had notified Major Adkins of the developing situation. Adkins, at LZ Two Bits, immediately apprised Major Charles W. Bagnal, C/1/9 Troop Commander, of the contact. Bagnal, while enroute to the scene of the action, alerted the Troop's organic infantry platoon to "saddle up". Arriving at Hoa Tan, Bagnal reconnoitered the area and estimated that: "We had at least a squad of enemy held up in a couple of bunkers...on a rice-gathering deal or something..."

Platoon Sergeant Lonnie G. Samuel, C/1/9's acting infantry platoon leader, was at Landing Zone Two Bits when he received orders to prepare for an air assault into the Crescent area. For this action Samuel would have four squads and a headquarters element totaling thirty-two men. Each rifleman would have fifteen clips of twenty rounds each and several fragmentation and white phosphorus grenades. Each squad had an M-79 (grenade launcher) grenadier and



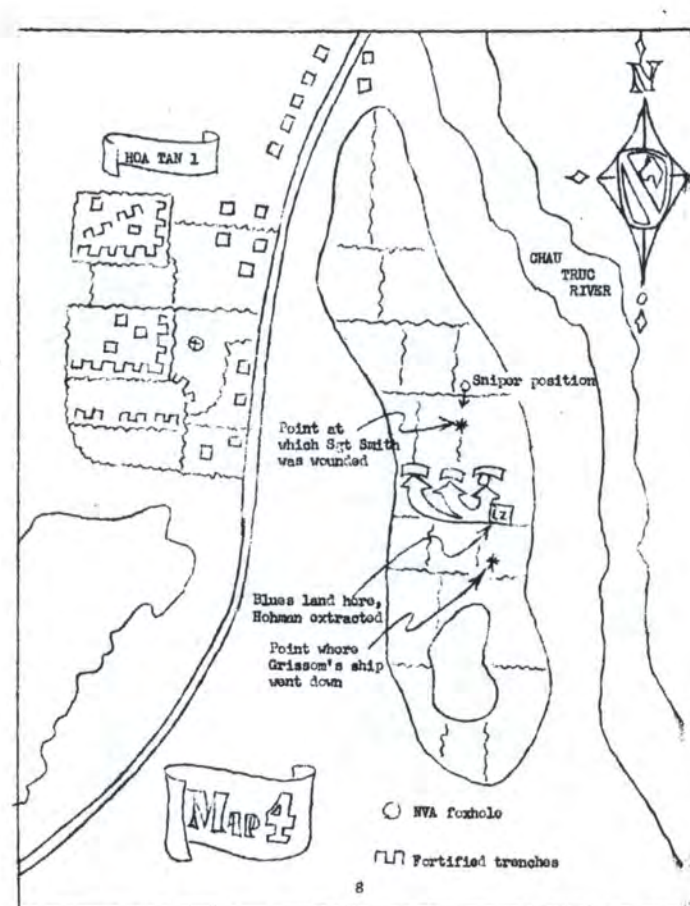
the platoon had two M60 machine guns for support. Samuel's platoon air assaulted into a hot (under enemy fire) landing zone to the east of the village after the area had been "well prepped" by the gunships. When a landing site which is under hostile fire is selected for the blue platoon, the gunships make several strafing runs on the area firing 2.75" rockets, M60 machine guns and 40 millimeter cannons at suspected or observed points of contact. (The 40mm cannon mounted on the front end of UH-UB helicopter accurately fires a round with a killing radius and affect similar to a fragmentation grenade. A chopper so armed carries a basic load of 300 rounds.)

Meanwhile, alone and scared, Specialist Four Hohman, under the protection of Carter's gunship, had made his way to the approximate location where Grissom's gunship had originally landed to pick up the suspect. This was the same area selected as an LZ for the incoming blues. Samuel's platoon was split up at this time with one squad being diverted by air to provide security for Grissom's downed and exposed craft while the rest of the platoon was given the mission of extricating Hohman and developing the contact. (Map 4)

After air assaulting into the selected LZ, Samuel provided security while Hohman was evacuated, and then deployed north with his squads on line up the finger of land to the east of the village. As he moved his people through the terraced paddies and thick hedgerows, he received notification from Staff Sergeant Edward N. Kaneshiro, the second squad's leader, that he had seen a "charlie" in the heavily-foliated hedgerow to his front and was receiving sporadic sniper fire. Samuel sent the first squad, under Sergeant Smith, up to reinforce while Kaneshiro had his men hold their fire. The Troop received its first casualty here as Sergeant Smith, maneuvering his squad in the cover and concealment of a hedgerow running north to south, was wounded as he came into a slight break in the underbrush. Both the squads fell back and Samuel was notified.

Major Bagnal, learning of the first casualty, decided to have the "blues" pull back and to adjust in artillery, aerial rocket artillery (ABA), and Tactical Air support. For the next hour the terraced peninsula was pounded with all of the fire support available. During the fighting on 6 March, five ARA strikes were called in on suspected enemy positions. Aerial Rocket Artillery provided by the 2d Battalion, 20th Artillery was effective and extensive. In support of all friendly elements, 564 high explosive aerial rockets were fired. This rocket artillery with its high pitched whine has a psychological effect as great as its destructive powers. VC or NVA caught in the open conducting an assault on friendly troops and faced with the unpleasant consequences of an ARA strike, will often break and run. On March 6 this fire support must be credited with knocking out many enemy defensive positions and forcing the enemy to keep in his foxholes while friendly units attacked.

Major Bagnal, while the fire support was being adjusted in, contacted Major Moore, the battalion commander of 1/35. As his blues were on the ground

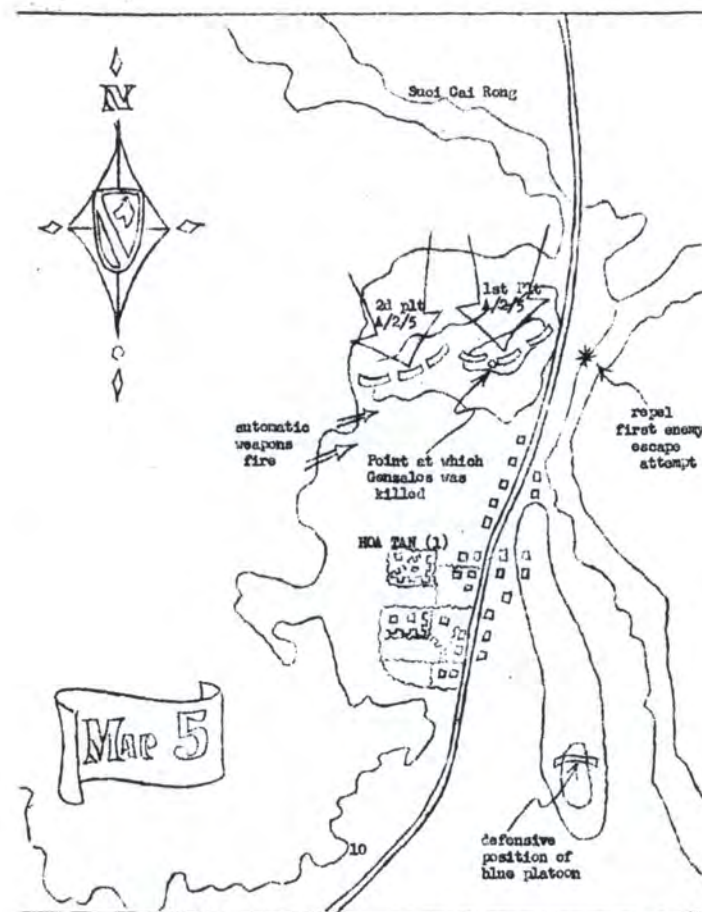


and had received strong resistance, he felt that at least a platoon of NVA were in opposition. He requested that one platoon of the ready reaction force, A Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry (A/2/5), at LZ Uplift be committed to the rapidly escalating situation. Moore readily agreed.

Bagnal sent his organic lift ships to pick up a platoon from A/2/5 which was to be to the north of the finger of land on which the majority of the action was taking place. At 10:30 AM, the 1st platoon of A/2/5 air assaulted into the selected landing zone on a small hill mass to the north. (Map 5) Although the choppers had received no fire while landing, before the platoon had completely unloaded, Private First Class Carlson, a machine gunner, and Private First Class Morton, a rifleman, were wounded. Both were immediately replaced on the choppers and evacuated to medical treatment facilities. The platoon continued to receive accurate automatic weapons fire from the slopes of a hill mass to the west. The gunships, in retaliation, made several passes firing their 40mm cannons, 2.75" aerial rockets and machine guns into the observed areas of resistance. After this there was a strange lull in this section of the battlefield. While the platoon was utilizing the opportunity to position itself in a blocking posture, an alert infantryman reported that he saw movement along the heavily vegetated river bank to the left of the defensive positions. To the men of the 1st platoon, it appeared that they had arrived just in time to stop an attempted enemy escape and that the previous enemy fire had been used as a diversion. Immediately, the M79 grenadiers placed extremely effective fire on the well-camouflaged and concealed figure(s) near the river. After a small barrage, the VC suspect--a confused water buffalo--staggered onto the beach. Shortly after this, the positions were secured and there was a lull in the fightings. The platoon leader, Sergeant First Class Gonzales, took this opportunity to check his defensive posture and to reassure some of the men who had arrived for duty with the platoon only two days before and were experiencing their first firefight. Leaving his small command group, Gonzales made his way toward the new men who had been assigned positions on the right front of the perimeter. Reaching their location, he remained in a half-upright position. There had been no firing for several minutes. Suddenly a short burst of automatic weapons fire from 200 meters to the west killed him instantly.

Major Bagnal was in the air overhead when he received notification of the third casualty of the 1st platoon, A/2/5. He decided that another platoon was needed as there was definitely a significant force opposing his units on the ground. Major Moore, after being informed of the situation, decided to commit the second platoon of A/2/5 along with the company commander, Captain John F. Conlon. Conlon would take control of both infantry elements on the ground.

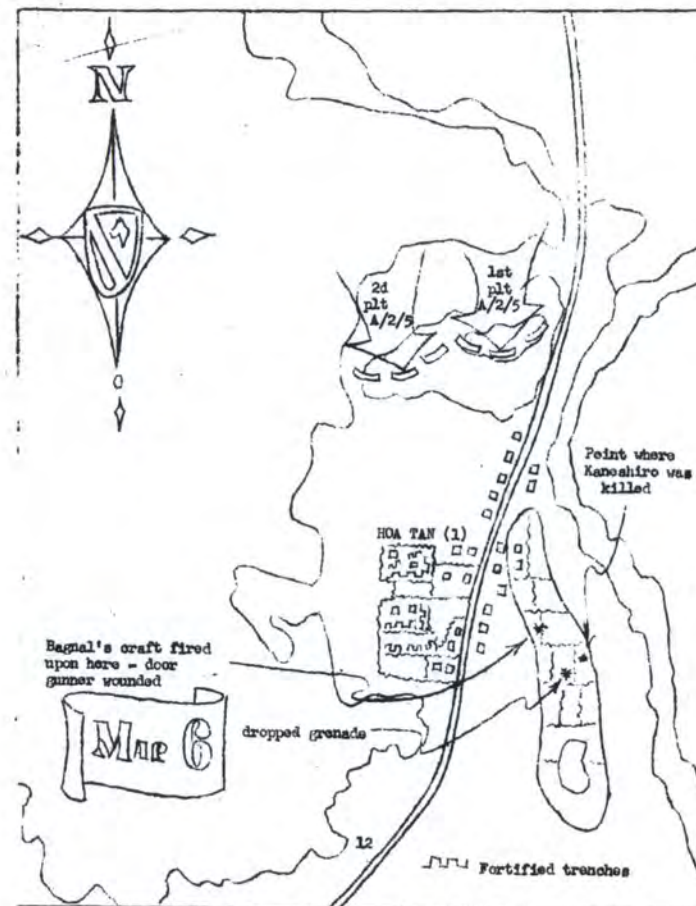
The second platoon was also back at Uplift when the orders were given to reinforce the first platoon. The time was close to 11:30 AM. The second platoon, under Conlon, landed without real incident, although they were still receiving fire from the northwest--the same area from which the 1st platoon had received fire while landing over an hour earlier. The second platoon linked up with the first and continued the joint perimeter further to the west, inclosing the entire hill pass to the north of the village. Conlon then



started calling in artillery and Aerial Rocket Artillery on the automatic weapons locations to the northwest of the village.

The blue platoon of C/1/9 meanwhile waited during this period in a defensive posture to the south, while they adjusted their fire support and while elements of A/2/5 air assaulted into position. Major Bagnal had originally intended to have the two platoons to the north start sweeping down to the contact area to the southeast while the blue platoon acted as a blocking force. As the fight developed, it became clear that the units to the north were effectively pinned down by automatic weapons fire and consequently Bagnal decided to reverse his concept and have the blues sweep the enemy into the two platoons to the north. In accordance with this plan, Sergeant Samuel placed his squads on line with the first squad on the right, the second in the center, the fourth on the left and the third squad in the rear as a reaction and rear security force. At about 12:00 noon the units moved out on line and, simultaneously, it seemed to Samuel, his three squads were engaged. Samuel, ten feet behind the second squad, moved forward to make an estimate of the situation. As he ran forward he crossed into an open area and became pinned down. He called on the second squad, under Sergeant Kaneshiro, to maneuver over to his position and provide covering fire until he could extricate himself. After accomplishing this Samuel and Kaneshiro decided that the best covered means of approach to the enemy automatic weapons, which had stalled the platoon attack, was a hedgerow running north to south along most of the length of the terraced finger of land. Kaneshiro volunteered his squad to maneuver up the hedgerow in order to place flanking fire on the enemy's positions. While Kaneshiro was coordinating with him, Samuel noted what appeared to be a VC raincoat in a hedgerow to the front,, Kaneshiro looked, and while he didn't see the raincoat, he spotted an NVA in a spider hole about ten feet away. Grabbing a fragmentation grenade, Kaneshiro had all of his men get down, and then holding it slightly longer than usual to have less chance of the NVA being able to return the present, he tossed it in the hole with deadly accuracy--killing the sniper.

The second squad now attempted to maneuver up the north-south hedgerow. The lead element was composed of Specialist Fourth David Dunn, Sergeant Kaneshiro and his radio-telephone operator, Specialist Four Claud Burns. Specialist Four Dunn was slightly in the lead as Kaneshiro had abandoned a line formation in favor of a modified column to take advantage of the cover and concealment offered by the hedgerow. Dunn, equipped with an M79, crossed a slight open area to get to the next hedgerow when suddenly an enemy sniper in a hedgerow in front jumped up and from a spider hole less than five feet away, aimed a burst at both Kaneshiro and Dunn. (Map 6) Kaneshiro, reacting instantly, was able to find cover, but Dunn, who was wounded in the initial burst in the arm, tried to get up and was hit again in the back of the head. Kaneshiro withdrew to where Specialist Four Burns had taken cover. Burns and Kaneshiro could see from their position in the hedgerow that Dunn was still alive, but bleeding profusely. Because of the proximity of the sniper to Dunn, the gunships were unable to provide any fire support. Kaneshiro, realizing this, decided to throw a fragmentation grenade into the area where the sniper was last observed. The sniper



promptly returned it in a deadly game of catch. Shortly before the grenade reached Kaneshiro and Burns' position, it detonated and a fragment hit Kaneshiro on the forehead. Private First Class Michael Row, the platoon's medic, who had learned of Dunn's injury and was moving forward to treat him, arrived at this time. Kaneshiro grabbed another grenade and pulling the pin threw it a little farther past the enemy's position. As it exploded, Kaneshiro motioned to Row to follow and both raced through the exposed area between the hedgerows to Dunn's position. Row grabbed the feet and Kaneshiro the shoulders, and they started to move back toward the protection of the hedgerow. Suddenly the sniper, again at a range of less than five feet, fired a burst at Kaneshiro killing him instantly. Row momentarily halted and the enemy fired a shot that grazed the right side of his head, temporarily stunning him. Dunn, Row and Kaneshiro now were lying in close proximity to the sniper and to each other making extraction of friendly elements extremely difficult.

As the situation was rapidly intensifying on the ground, Major Bagnal's gunship was temporarily placed out of action. Slightly north of the second squad's point of contact, Bagnal saw an NVA attempting to escape. He pointed out the individual to his crew chief, but the other door gunner failed to see him. Bagnal made a gun run on the NVA, but missed him on the first pass. As the aircraft came parallel to the sniper's position, the enemy soldier opened up with an accurate burst, one round of which grazed the pilot, Warrant Officer Joe Fulton, and hit the door gunner in the mouth. Another round came through the floor of the chopper and got the same man in the leg. Bagnal immediately turned the situation over to Captain Cecil L. Shrader, his weapons platoon leader, and made his way to the sandbar on which Grissom had been forced to land earlier that morning. Here he exchanged door gunners with another gunship and sent his wounded door gunner to LZ Uplift for medical treatment. The door gunner was later found to have received only minor wounds although, they appeared at the time to be major.

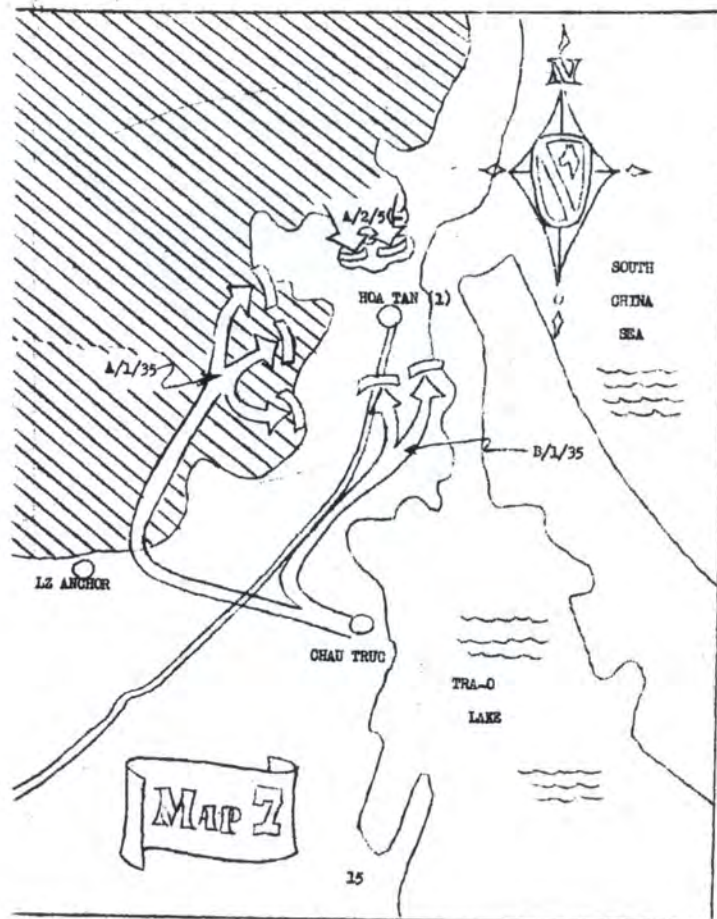
Meanwhile, Specialist Four Burns, Kaneshiro's radio operator, had placed suppressive fire on the sniper and notified Sergeant Samuel of the second squad's predicament. Samuel decided to deploy his fourth squad to relieve the pressure on the second squad and to allow removal of dead and wounded. As the fourth squad was using fire and maneuver to get to the point of the contact, Row, who had been momentarily stunned, now became cognizant of the situation. As "Doc" Row later vividly recalled, "I laid there for a while acting like I was dead...and then Burns threw one grenade to me. I threw the grenade a little farther than the sniper was...then I threw another one. I held it for four seconds (it's supposed to go off in five), and just dropped it over the hedgerow and it went off...after that we didn't have any trouble with this sniper." Row then dragged himself away from the tangled bodies of Kaneshiro and Dunn and collapsed in the relative security of Burns's position. The fourth squad arrived at this time to help evacuate the other two men.

As C Troop's liftships were attempting to evacuate the dead and wounded, Major Bagnal had returned to the area directly north of the second squad's position and had his door gunner and crew chief throw white phosphorus grenades into the bunkers and the hedgerows, where he had first seen the NVA, to provide cover for the extraction of the friendly casualties. The white phosphorus grenades unnerved the NVA and about ten decided to escape toward the north. Bagnal had his door gunners take them under fire. Immediately two were killed and one wounded, and on a second pass two more were killed. In addition, to the north A/2/5 simultaneously reported that they had killed one NVA attempting to flee. Bagnal now estimated that probably an enemy company was in the area and decided to have his platoon pull back to a blocking position to the south until more of Major Moore's elements could arrive in the area. It is probably well to reemphasize here the mission of an Air Cavalry Troop. This mission is one of finding and fixing the enemy and developing the situation. When it becomes obvious that the enemy force is superior in manpower and firepower to the troop, the mission is turned over to larger units up to battalion size.

Major Moore, Battalion Commander of 1/35, who had periodically been in the area observing the contact, had after consulting with Bagnal decided to commit two of his companies located about 3500 meters southeast of Hoa Tan to the action. This decision was made about 12:00 noon when the blue platoon had initiated its second sweep. Moore had toyed momentarily with the idea of air assaulting his elements into position, but as the companies to be used were in relative proximity to the action, he decided to have them move by foot.

Both units, which were to be committed, had been involved in a routine search and destroy mission in the village of Chau Truc on the morning of 6 March. A/1/35 had acted as a blocking force to the south of the village while B/1/35 had swept through the village from the north. No contact had resulted from this action. Moore's concept of operation was to have B/1/35, under Captain Edgar L. Nealon, make a rapid road march to the south of Hoa Tan. The company would then be split into two forces with two platoons relieving C/1/9's blue platoon and the other two platoons assaulting up the highway which ran through the village. Both elements would then push the enemy into the blocking forces of A/2/5. Meanwhile, A/1/35, under Captain Lloyd Yoshina, would also have a dual mission. Its primary function would be to move rapidly over rough terrain on a circuitous route and occupy blocking positions to the west of the village. At the same time the company would leave one platoon at LZ Anchor 2500 meters southwest of Hoa Tan to provide security for A/2/9, a 105mm howitzer battery attached to 1/35 which was going to be airlifted to that LZ to provide a fire base for the battalion's operations. (Map 7)

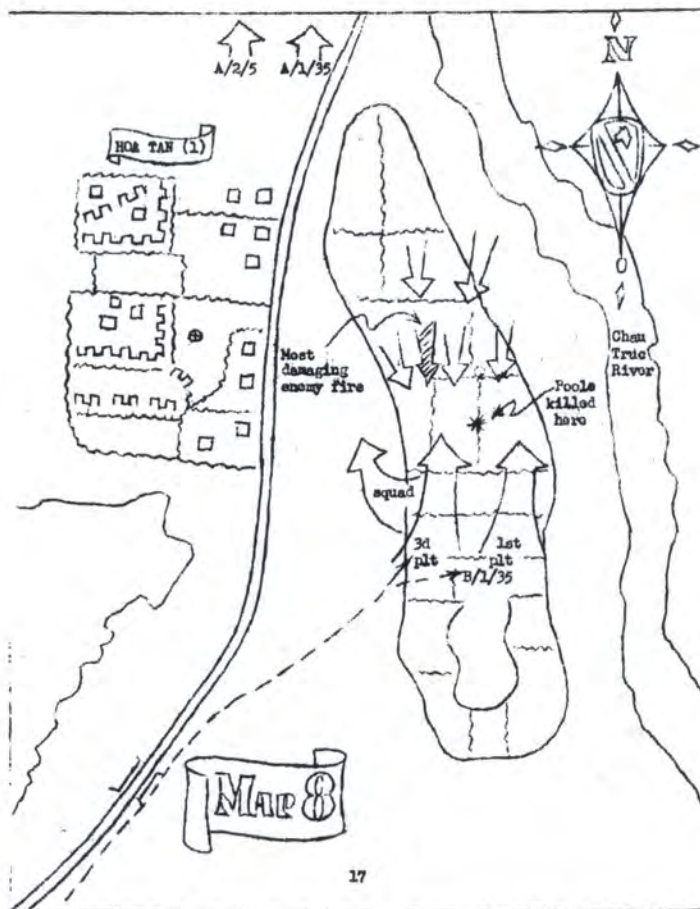
Alpha Company left Chau Truc at 12:00 noon moving with the company in column on a northwest route toward Hoa Tan. Its progress was rapid and after dropping the one platoon off at LZ Anchor, it made its way to the high ridges of the Cay Giép Mountain complex to the west of the village by 3:00 PM. It received no opposition in setting up its positions. Yoshina placed a platoon on each of the main terrain features covering about a thousand meters with his company minus.



Bravo 1/35 was at the same time making a more direct approach from the south along the main road in the area. At about 2:30 PM the company had reached a small bridge at the outskirts of the village and waited here while Aerial Rocket Artillery and a napalm and cluster bomb units (CBU's - anti-personnel bomblets ranging in size from golf balls to tennis balls which are rained from the rear of a pod resembling an external fuel tank) were called in on the finger of land where the blue platoon had suffered its casualties. After this fire support, Captain Nealon split up the company, sending the 1st and 3d platoons to relieve the blue platoon while the 2d and 4th. continued to inarch up the main trail. Second Lieutenant John Gordon McRae Jr., the first platoon leader, was in command of the elements that were to relieve the blue platoon. He also had under his operational control Sergeant First Class Robert Gore's third platoon. McRae moved his men in a platoon line, squads in column formation, across the open rice paddy separating himself from the blues' position while Sergeant Gore followed behind in a platoon file. McRae's forces crossed the rice paddy without incident and formed an assault line on the southern end of the finger approximately at the same place the blue platoon had landed earlier. Sergeant Gore's platoon also crossed the rice paddy and came up on the first platoon's left flank. The blue platoon had been airlifted out shortly before the elements of B/1/35 arrived.

McRae started moving his platoon on line on the right side up the finger of land which was 200 - 300 meters wide, while the third platoon under Sergeant Gore moved on the left side. The first contact was on the right where the second squad of the 1st platoon saw an individual trying to escape. He was taken under fire and killed. He had a fragmentation grenade attached to his belt. McRae got his people on line and moved forward again. Suddenly, over to the left in Gore's area of responsibility he heard heavy automatic weapons fire, then, less than a minute later, his own people received fire. As he tried to maneuver his elements forward using the hedgerows for cover, McRae's platoon came under increasingly heavy automatic weapon and sniper fire. They were now approximately in the same location in which the blue team had suffered its serious casualties. On the right flank the terrain dipped evenly towards the river and the open area between the hedgerows in this area invited sudden death to anyone attempting to cross it. Platoon Sergeant William Poole of the 1st platoon, deploying elements in an attempt to flank on the left of his platoon, was killed now as he exposed himself trying to knock out a bunker which was placing deadly fire on the 1st platoon's positions in the hedgerows. (Map B)

Sergeant Gore, meanwhile, was going by the book in deploying his men on the left side of the attack. (The platoon had initially deployed three squads on line. The weapons squad had been divided and added to the first and third squads giving them each a machine gun.) As a former drill sergeant instructor, Sergeant Gore relied on the "school solution" in this, his first main battle. The concept of operations here was to force the enemy from the sanctuary of the hedgerows into the blocking forces to the north. He noted later of the tactics utilized, "This action...I refer to as a rabbit hunt...flushing the enemy out." While Gore's men were deployed to hunt, one of the hunted in a



hedgerow to the front fired an accurate burst which hit Private Taylor of the second squad. The platoon's medic moved up to help him and determined that Taylor was dead. The medic now was in an exposed position and every time he attempted to move the sniper would place accurate fire on his location. Gore saw that the terrain which had favored the NVA over on McRae's right flank now favored him on the left. The terraced rice paddies allowed five of his people to maneuver with relative impunity and position a machine gun placing enfilade fire (a fire running parallel to the enemy's position) on the snipers, thus allowing them to extricate his medic. Gore at this time hesitated between sending these elements on a sweep from the left or pulling back and having artillery and TAC Air called in on the position. He was not sure of the exact locations of the 1st platoon and was afraid that his people might end up firing at them. He also was afraid that the enemy sniper was, in fact, part of a much larger force that was moving up and down the trench to his front. This apprehension was reinforced by the fact that M79 rounds had been steadily placed in the enemy's location with relatively minor effects. McRae, with his advance stalled on the right, contacted Gore and they both agreed that the time had come to fall back and call in some artillery. As both platoons were heavily engaged, they felt a larger force was in the area than originally believed. ...

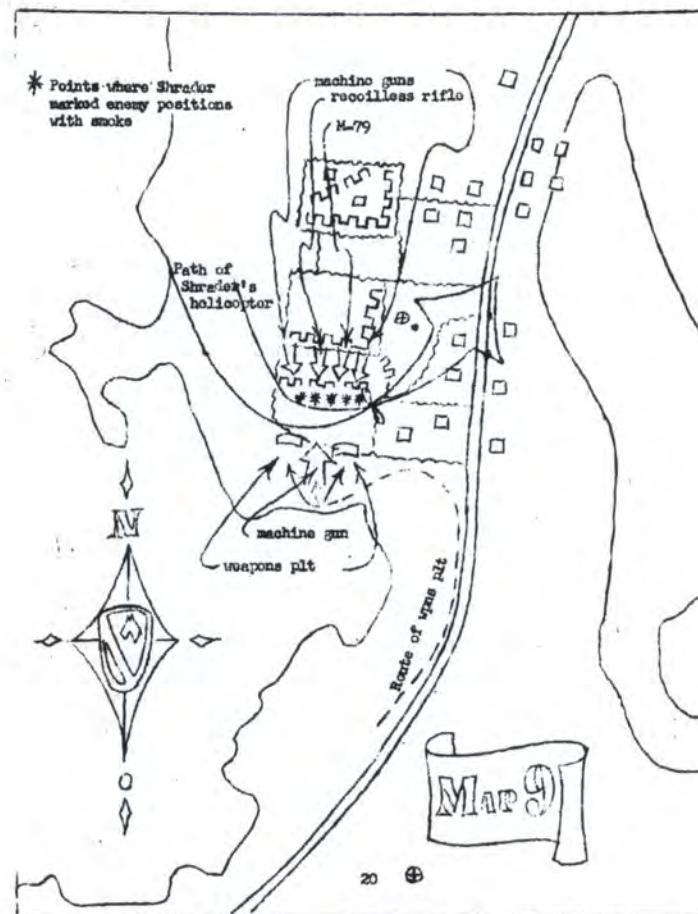
. On the left side of the company's two-pronged attack, Captain Nealon was in the process of deploying his people against a small extension of the hamlet of Hoa Tan to the southwest of the village. This area had given no indication of enemy activity, but it did present definite possibilities for an enemy ambush. There were twenty to twenty-five palm thatched huts in the area and a series of thick hedgerows which both encircled and intersected the hamlet. . Heavily foliated coconut palms interspersed in the hedgerows provided excellent cover for snipers. Nealon decided to sweep the area before moving on. His concept of maneuver was to have the weapons platoon move to the left and take positions up in the southernmost hedgerow and then sweep forward. The weapons platoon, including the platoon leader, numbered seventeen men and had been readily utilized previously as a regular rifle platoon. While the weapons platoon maneuvered on the left, the second platoon was to maneuver on the right several hundred meters north along the main trail and then, if the weapons platoon became pinned down, the second platoon would sweep to the left. Between the crossfires provided by the 2d platoon and the weapons platoon, Nealon felt that any enemy force in this kill zone would be immediately annihilated.

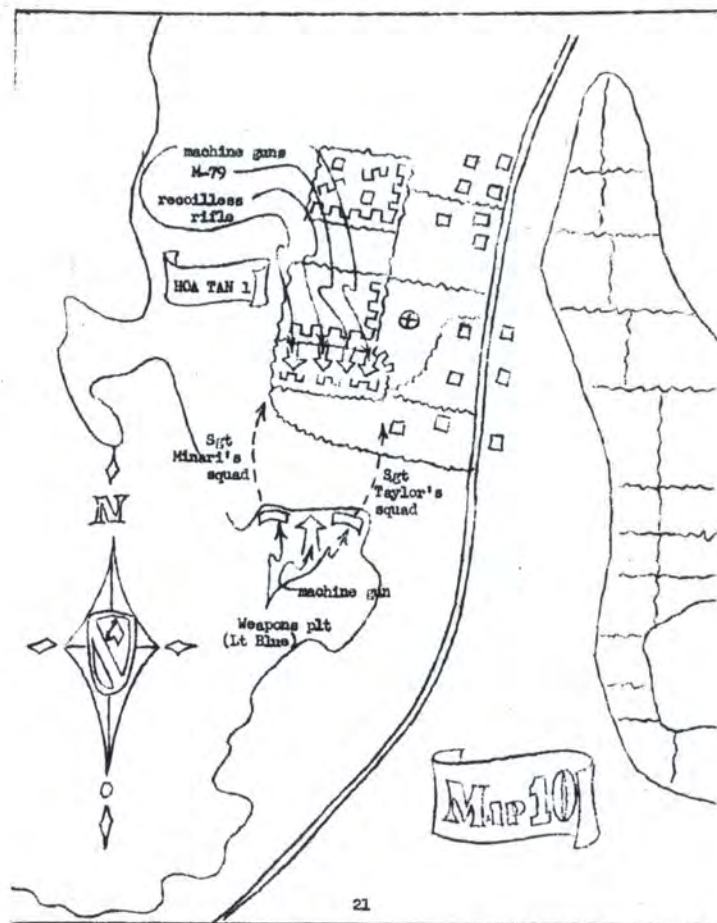
Circling overhead as Nealon's elements deployed were the omnipresent gunships of C/1/9. At least two gunships were in the air providing surveillance and fire support from dawn to dusk on the 6th and on the morning of the 7th. Captains Cecil L. Shrader, Robert A. Letchworth, and Robert B. McIntosh and Lieutenants Grissom and Carter were constantly exposing themselves and their ships to deadly enemy ground fires. Major Bagnal, while providing the same support as the other ships, also adjusted in four of the five aerial rocket artillery strikes and helped Major Moore coordinate the ground attack. The importance of this air support was clearly demonstrated to the elements of

B/1/35 in the ensuing firefight. Captains Letchworth and Shrader were providing close-in support as Lieutenant Thomas J. Blue initially deployed his weapons platoon. As Shrader slowly circled his UH-1B over the area where Lieutenant Blue had initially deployed, he noted from the air large numbers of NVA waiting in the hedgerowed trench to Blue's immediate front. At this time Shrader did not have radio contact with 1/35 because he had been given the wrong radio frequency. Realizing the vulnerability of the friendly elements to ambush, he hovered at treetop level and "popped smoke" on NVA positions. With a sister gunship, under Letchworth, he made several strafing runs on the enemy locations. This proved invaluable, for although there had been some sniper fire, no major enemy force was anticipated in this area. (Map 9)

After Shrader's warning, Lieutenant Blue deployed his men along the southern hedgerow encircling the small hamlet. He placed the lone machine gun in the center between his two squads. Blue then had his platoon, advance on line through the hedgerow and into the open area beyond. He was not sure of the exact positions of the enemy or his strength, but the line formation gave him maximum firepower toward the anticipated location of the enemy. Suddenly, North Vietnamese Army regulars in a trench and hedgerow complex to the front engaged the weapons platoon with "just about everything they had" related Blue. On the left and right flanks, the enemy's light machine guns raked friendly positions in the field. In the center a recoilless rifle pumped rounds into the leading elements. In addition, while an NVA M79 grenadier to the right front placed deadly fire on Blue's platoon, snipers were accurately engaging them from the cover of the abundant palm trees. The weapons platoon immediately dropped to the ground and returned fire--luckily the enemy opening volley had resulted in no casualties. Part of the credit for the ineffectiveness of the enemy fires must be attributed to Captain Shrader's early warning, for besides alerting Nealon's element of the enemy's proximity, it would appear that it unnerved the NVA and caused them to engage friendly units at a greater distance than they normally do. Support for this conclusion is provided by the location of enemy positions which were constructed with restricted fields of fire--ideal for engaging elements in close combat of from five to ten meters but relatively ineffective at greater distances.

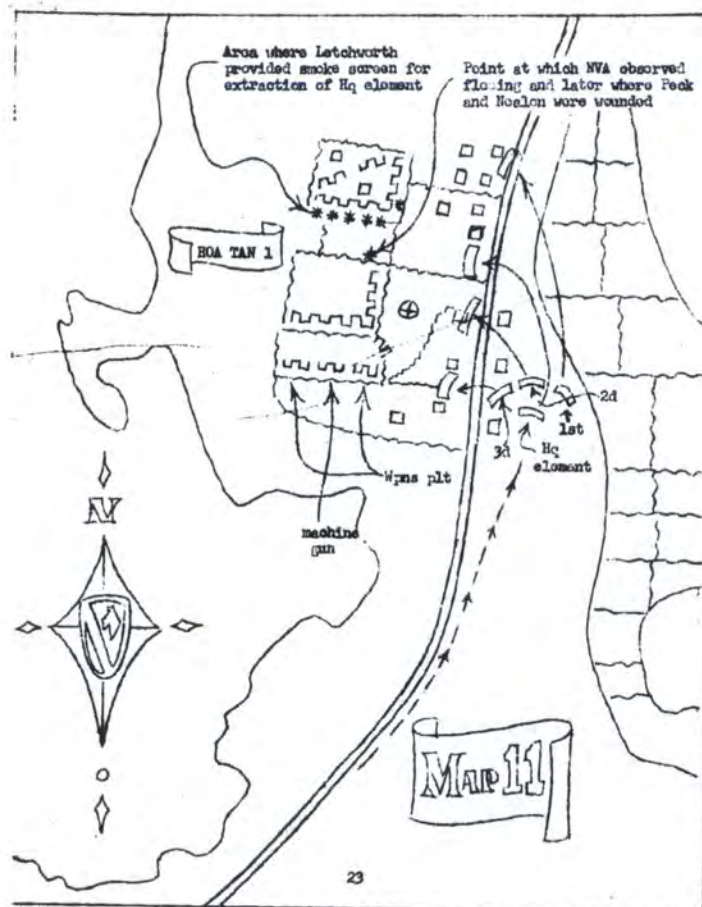
Now using fire and maneuver, Blue withdrew his elements to a defilade position behind a small knoll in the center of the field. He then had one squad and the machine gun provide a base of fire while he sent the other squad under Sergeant Minari maneuvering to the left of the enemy position. Blue now left his machine gun and with his other, squad under Sergeant Taylor, maneuvered to the right in a miniature pincer movement. (Map 10) Meanwhile, Minari's squad had advanced rapidly using the north-south hedgerow until they arrived at the probable location of the enemy machine gun on the left. They then received such intense machine gun, sniper, semi-automatic and automatic weapons fire that the squad assault was effectively halted. Blue on the right had his machine gunner and M79 grenadier engage the enemy's positions in Minari's sector. When the volume of enemy fire abated somewhat, Blue had Minari pull back slightly to an east-west hedgerow from which they had initially received





the enemy's fire. Due to the platoon's continued assault, the enemy had had to pull back from this hedgerow to another combined trench and hedgerow farther north. Lieutenant Blue was not able to advance any farther than this the rest of the afternoon as the enemy effectively placed accurate fire on his elements whenever they attempted to cross the open area between the hedgerows. During the afternoon several individuals attempted to close with the enemy while the rest of the platoon lay down covering fires. Private First Class Guy in Sergeant Minari's squad almost reached the enemy trenchworks to the front before he was hit in the chest and the side by a sniper concealed in the palm trees, Guy, seemingly oblivious to the pain, determinedly reached back and pulled a fragmentation grenade from his web belt. After pulling the pin, he heaved it in the general direction of an enemy automatic weapon and was rewarded as the grenade detonated "knocking out" the position. Someone in Minari's squad yelled "Medic" and Private First Class Fergusson, the platoon's medic, who had only been with the unit a week, rushed forward from his position with Lieutenant Blue on the right through the fire-swept rice paddy to Guy's side. As Fergusson knelt beside him to ascertain the extent of the wounds, intensive fires from the enemy automatic and sniper positions converged on his exposed location and killed him instantly. Shortly after this, Private First Class Nichols in Taylor's squad tried to maneuver up on the right to get in close enough to silence the enemy positions with grenades hoping to allow Guy and Fergusson to be evacuated from their exposed position. As he moved forward, an enemy sniper creased him across the forehead breaking his glasses and temporarily blinding him. He was forced to remain at the spot where he was hit most of the afternoon unable to advance or retreat. Lieutenant Blue had his men make several other attempts to assault the enemy positions but each time accurate enemy fires effectively pinned down the maneuvering elements forcing a stalemate in this area until the decision was made to withdraw about 5:00 PM.

The second platoon and the headquarters element of B/1/35 meanwhile were moving up the main trail. After Shrader's strafing run and Blue's initial deployment, the headquarters element was positioned in the middle of the second platoon. The platoon was in column with squads on line. The second squad was the point squad, the 1st squad was on the right flank, the third squad on the left. When it became obvious that the weapons platoon was heavily engaged, Captain Nealon directed Lieutenant Joseph R. Weis, the platoon leader of the second platoon, "to move and link up with the weapons platoon's right flank and form a reverse 'L' and try and sweep through to relieve the pressure." To accomplish this, Weis had the third squad and second squad swing to the left. The 1st squad on the right flank, under Platoon Sergeant Pollard, swung in a large arc to the left while the company headquarters element positioned itself between the 1st and 2d squads. (Map 11) Prior to this maneuver the second platoon had been on the right side of the trail, and now as they maneuvered left they observed fifteen to twenty NVA attempting to escape to the north. The company headquarters, in the center of the platoon, immediately engaged the fleeing elements and killed two.



As the second platoon and company headquarters started to deploy across the open rice paddies, the 2d and 3d squads became pinned down while the elements to the north encountered only slight resistance. The headquarters element, with Captain Nealon and the artillery reconnaissance sergeant, Specialist Four Steven Peck, in the lead, maneuvered too fast and temporarily found itself in the vanguard of friendly forces assaulting from east to west. If the other squads had been able to maneuver as fast as planned, Nealon would have been in an excellent position to control the company's movements. Instead, Nealon had outdistanced, his other units and found himself now in an extremely exposed position on the furthestmost point of the company's assault. Realizing his vulnerability, Nealon gave a hand signal to the 1st squad under Sergeant Pollard on the right to move up to support. As he raised his arm, a burst of light machine gun fire from a hut to the right front hit Specialist Four Peck, killing him instantly. The same burst caught Nealon on the right arm and knocked him down. The round, almost severing the bone in his arm, caused a profuse amount of bleeding. Nealon rolled over and attempted to direct his company's attack from this exposed position.

First Sergeant Herbert Tinnat, slightly left of the fallen company commander temporarily assumed command and notified the platoon leaders and the battalion commander of the situation on the ground. Tinnat was less than ten feet from the bunker which had fired the deadly burst at Nealon and Peck. He remarked later, as did several others, about the defensive positions of the NVA. The bunkers had very narrow triangular slits in them on one or two sides leaving the bunkers almost defenseless if the assault came from a direction other than the one anticipated. In addition, the aperture confined the horizontal and lateral usage of the weapons in the bunker. The position in front of Tinnat had all of these disadvantages and this saved his life as the NVA in it were unable to engage him. Tinnat places suppressive fire on the position which allowed Private First Class Wayne A. Lorfing, the platoon medic, a chance to move up to Specialist Four Peck and Nealon. Lorfing went first to Peck and, discovering that he was dead, made his way under intensifying automatic weapons and small arms fire to Nealon. Prior to this, Specialist Four James M. Alton, one of the radio-telephone operators, had seen that Nealon had no cover and had thrown his own body between Nealon's and the raking machine gun fire. Lorfing and Alton, in the exposed location, now did what they could for the wounded Nealon.

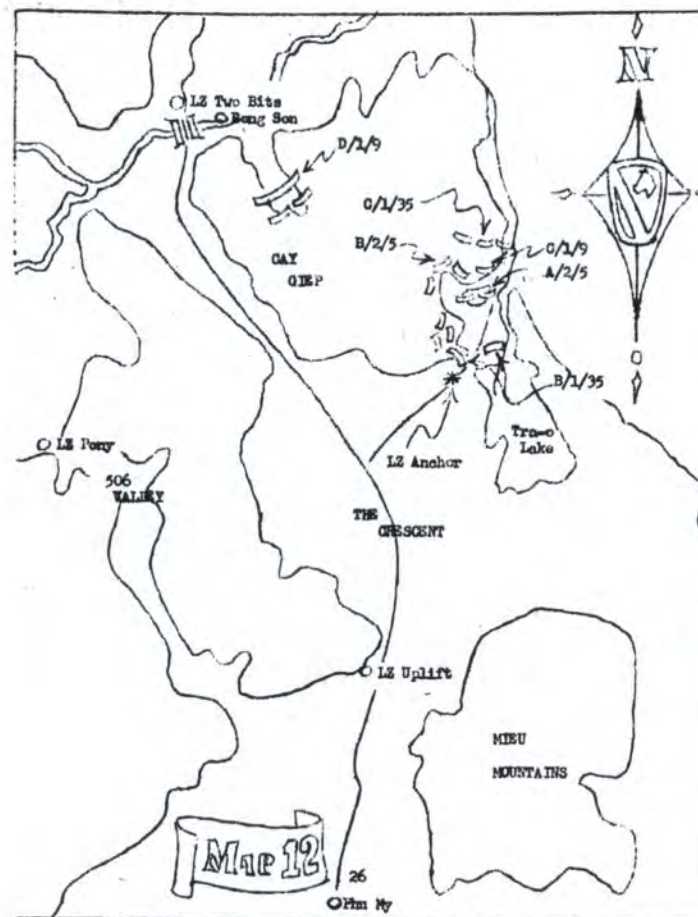
In the air overhead, providing what support they could, were Captains Shrader and Letchworth. Shrader, occupied with 3 Company's two other platoons and the elements of A/2/5, left the majority of the air support for the 4th and 2d platoons to Letchworth. Letchworth had made several gun runs over the area and with his M-5 system (a 40 millimeter cannon mounted on the front of his UH-1B helicopter) and machine guns gave a great deal of support. At this time his chopper was so low and so vulnerable to enemy fire that Shrader, who observed this action, later said, "If he had been hit, and there was a good possibility due to the height and speed at which he was flying, his craft would have crashed in a definitely hostile area with little possibility of us being able to reinforce or extract him."

While Letchworth was making his passes, Second Lieutenant Donald M. Keith, the artillery forward observer with A Battery, 2d Battalion, 9th Artillery (A/2/9) attached to B/1/35, asked if there was any possibility of smoke support to allow the beleaguered friendly units to effect an extraction of the exposed elements of the company headquarters. Letchworth agreed to attempt this even though it would involve flying lower and slower to throw an accurate smoke screen. This tactic worked. Keith rioted afterwards, "He (Letchworth) put out a terrific smoke screen for us with white phosphorus and we were able to get Peck and the company commander back out..."

Meanwhile, Major Moore, learning that there were no helicopters available to pick up B Company's dead and wounded, ordered his command chopper to load and act as a medevac. He also decided to replace the seriously wounded Nealon with Captain Kenneth I. Barton, his battalion staff intelligence officer. The command chopper received intense automatic weapons fire during its descent. This fire increased as it "set down" out in the open rice paddy, slightly to the rear of where B Company's command group had dragged their dead and wounded. Moore scrambled off the helicopter to help evacuate the dead and wounded, and while on the ground he decided to remain and make a personal analysis of the situation. As his chopper was receiving accurate fire, he motioned to the pilot to take off. Moore, after making a quick estimate, recommended to Lieutenant Weis, who had assumed temporary control of the company, to pull back and call in some of the artillery support available. Lieutenant Keith, meanwhile had done some extremely accurate adjustment of artillery fire on the strongest areas of enemy resistance, and the primary enemy locations had been effectively engaged with delayed time fuses for the bunkered positions and trenches and high explosive rounds for the open areas. Captain Barton arrived on the scene about 5:00 PM and completed the withdrawal of friendly elements.

As it became apparent that B/1/35 would not be able to finish sweeping through the village of Hoa Tan that day, Major Moore decided to partially encircle the village by placing blocking forces on the dominant terrain to the south, west and north of the village. In addition, several units were air assaulted into position in blocking and ambush sites on probable enemy escape routes to the north and northwest. (Map 12)

As the action had developed, it became obvious that friendly elements had uncovered an entrenched enemy force of significant size. As the best enemy escape route was to the north, Major Moore positioned B/2/5 in a valley 1500 meters northwest of Hoa Tan. He had been given operational control of this unit around 2:00 PM. The B/2/5 company commander, Captain Gerald M. McKenna, placed ambush sites along the main routes of egress in his area. One ambush was set on a main trail which ran through the site selected for the company command post in the center of the valley. Other ambushes were placed on both the left and right sides of the valley paralleling tributaries of the Suoi Cai Rung River.



At about this same time, the operations officer of 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, Major Tippin, was air assaulting C Company, 1/35 into a blocking position four kilometers to the north. The company landed in a relatively open area on the northeast edge of the Cay Giép Mountains with their objective being to occupy the dominating terrain of the mountain mass about 1000 meters south. C Company was faced with the unenviable task of moving through extreme heavy brush up almost vertical terrain. After extremely rough going the company, under Captain Joseph Caudill, arrived in position about dusk and established blocking positions overlooking possible escape routes along the coast and in the heavily forested region in the center of the eastern Cay Giép Mountains.

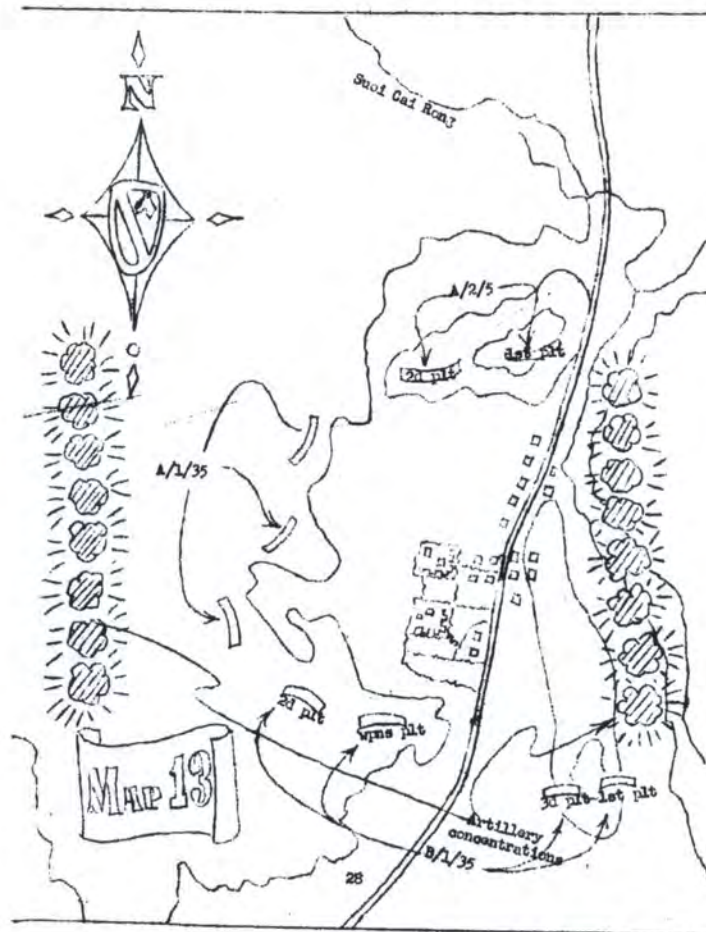
Meanwhile, C/1/9's blue platoon, an hour after being extracted from the finger of land east of Hoa Tan and taken back to LZ Two Bits, was again given the order to "saddle up". This time the platoon was to air assault into an ambush position about 1600 meters north of the village on the major trail leading into the Cay Giép Mountains. In addition, two infantry platoons from D/1/9 were placed under Major Moore's operational control at 4:00 PM and placed on the northwest side of the Cay Giép Mountains in "VC Valley"--a favorite enemy escape route and sanctuary.

In closer to the village, Major Moore decided that the best way of effecting an encirclement was to control the dominating terrain in the area. Gaps between units would be covered with interlocking bands of automatic weapons fire and artillery. Artillery would also be utilized to keep the enemy in his bunkers in the village and on likely avenues of escape. The longest gap between units was an open area to the east of the village where there was almost a thousand meters (north and south) between friendly elements; however, extensive artillery concentrations had been placed along both banks of the Chau Truc River to fill this gap. (Map 13)

To the north occupying the same blocking position during the night that they had during the day, were the two rifle platoons of A/2/5. Captain Conlon had two-man foxholes every ten to fifteen meters around the hill mass. To the east of A/2/5's position, the river was covered by M79 and machine gun fire. On the west side A/2/5 had interlocking bands of fire with the elements of A/1/35 which were situated on the main terrain features west of the village.

A/1/35 had only two rifle platoons to cover its sector for the night of 6 March as one platoon was still acting as a securing force for the 105mm howitzer battery, A Battery, 2d Battalion, 9th Artillery (A/2/9) at LZ Anchor. As Captain Yoshina had over 1000 meters to cover, he had his men withdraw from a position along the rice paddies west of the village to the heavily vegetated hill mass to his rear. This was dense jungle-type terrain, and so artillery concentrations were scheduled about 1000 meters to hit rear along probable escape routes.

To the south, split into two separate forces as they had been during the day, were the elements of B/1/35. The first and third platoons under



Lieutenant McRae had taken up positions on a small hill mass directly south of the finger of land on which they had been fighting. McRae's elements were on the right side with automatic weapons, starlite scopes (infra-red devices which enable infantry soldiers to ascertain movement over a wide area as any object producing heat will show up on the scopes), and M79's to cover the area to his east along the river. On the west side of this hill mass, Sergeant Gore had approximately the same equipment for surveillance of the 600 meter rice paddy between his elements and those of the weapons platoon. The company headquarters, the second platoon and weapons platoon had, after withdrawing late in the afternoon, taken up positions on a small hill mass south of their contact point. The weapons platoon had set up its positions on the eastern side of the hill while the western side was covered by the second platoon. Again both elements tied in with units on the right and left with starlite scopes and interlocking fields of fire.

In addition to the encircling forces, artillery was used extensively to keep the enemy in the village. Harassment and interdiction from A/2/9 kept on an irregular schedule to confuse and disorganize the NVA. This 105mm howitzer battery fired over 600 high explosive rounds during the afternoon and night of 6 March. Although the night was overcast, only three rounds of illumination were fired as Major Moore planned to leave the enemy guessing as to the actual locations of friendly units, hoping a major enemy force would stumble into his blocking position while attempting to escape. Added to the considerable fire support of A/2/9 were the fires of A Battery, 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery (A/1/30), a 155mm howitzer battery located at LZ Uplift, the command post of the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry. Two hundred and thirteen high explosive, four white phosphorus and four smoke rounds proved crucial to the overall effectiveness of the encircling operation.

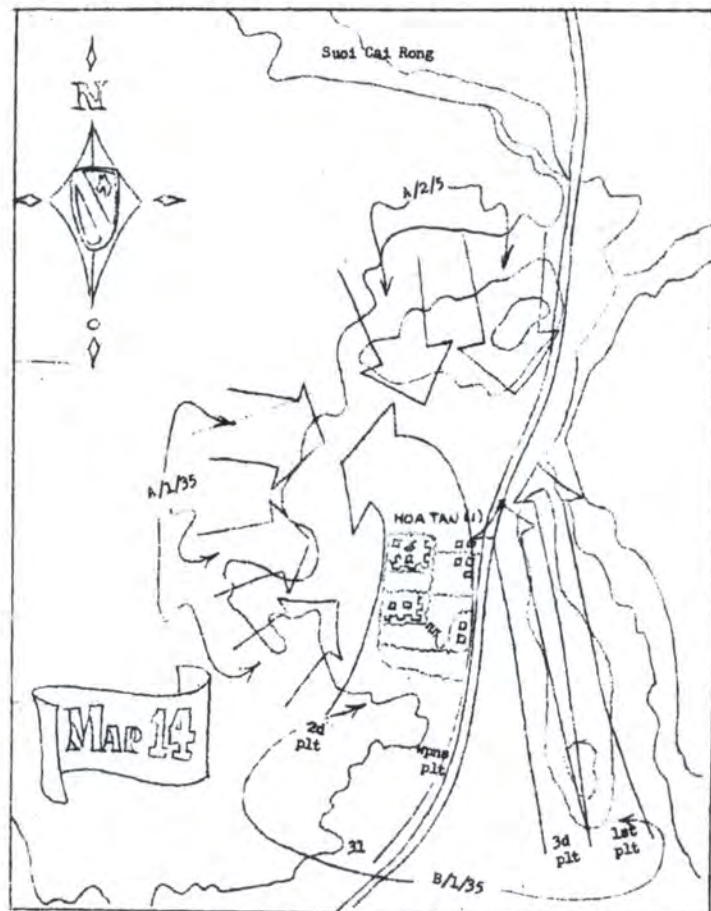
During the night friendly elements experienced no major enemy probes. The biggest problem encountered was the cold moist wind from the South China Sea which made it a very uncomfortable night for the encircling infantry. Private First Class Charles Hoffmann of A/2/5 later vividly recalled, "Our night there was one I will never forget because we originally left LZ Uplift...without our heavy gear; just weapons and ammo. We spent the night cold and damp with one poncho among four men."

After fairly uneventful night, Sergeant Gore's platoon from B/1/35 to the south of the village, observed an odd procession boldly proceeding out of the village right through the middle of the rice paddy separating the first and weapons platoons. As it was 6:00 AM and still partially dark, Gore had his men hold their fire until he could identify the figures. Most of them appeared to be women and children, but one nude NVA carrying his khaki uniform under his arm was trying to use the civilians as cover. As the platoon attempted to engage him, one of the choppers from C/1/9 which had returned at first light, took him under fire. The result was one naked NVA-killed.

Major Moore's operations order formulated on the night of 6 March was essentially the same as the one planned the previous day. A Company, 1/35 would block on the edge of the hill mass to the west of the village. A/2/5 would remain in their blocking positions to the north of the village. B/1/35 would again attempt to assault through the village in much the same manner as before with the 1st and 3d platoons under McRae moving on line up the small finger of land to the east of the village. The second and weapons platoons would move on line sweeping both sides of the main trail to the west of the village. There was one minor change, though, for the weapons platoon would assault toward the village on the right side of the trail rather than on the left as it had done the day before. (Map 14) Major Moore later picturesquely described the initiation of the attack, "B Company at 8 o'clock after a pretty good artillery preparation ala WW I or WW II...jumped off in the attack--just like in the movies..." As the units moved toward the village, the elements under McRae met with no resistance while Captain Barton's weapons and second platoon received some light fire when the units got inside the first hedgerow. Fire was returned immediately and this was the last contact experienced. The sweep was without further incident. Major Moore now sent B/1/35 on an intensive police of the battle area which resulted in the discovery by the weapons platoon of one NVA soldier with a Soviet model SKS 7.62mm carbine and ammo in a bunker which had been bypassed in the initial sweep. Further on, the same platoon found a badly wounded NVA soldier who was immediately evacuated to a medical facility. The continued police of the battlefield resulted in the capture of three light machine guns, three AK47's (the 7.62 assault rifle, standard infantry weapon used by USSR and Soviet bloc nations), five more SKS's, one rocket launcher, one US M79 grenade launcher, one US M-1 Carbine, four M16's, (a US infantry assault weapon), twenty-five Chicoms grenades and a great deal of ammunition, much of it still encased in its original shipping wrappers. While B/1/35 was sweeping through the village, B/2/5 was conducting a search and destroy operation in the same valley in which they had set up ambush positions the night before. During this maneuver, the company found four NVA suspects in a bunker about 1000 meter directly north of the hamlet of Hoa Tan.

The rest of the units committed on the sixth of March made additional sweeps during the seventh with negative contact. Early on the morning of the eighth the units were withdrawn from the area and a B-52 strike was called in to the northwest of the village. An aerial inspection afterwards revealed no significant results.

One of the prisoners of war captured on the morning of 7 March later stated that several companies and the battalion headquarters of the 9th Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment, had been in the village at the beginning of the contact. The battalion's command post had been located on the finger of land to the east of the village where US forces encountered such intense opposition. A glance at the casualty statistics reveals the extent of the damage done to the 9th Battalion's combat effectiveness. The enemy lost eighty-one killed by body count and an unestimated number of dead and wounded. By comparison, US forces under the command of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry suffered seven killed and nineteen wounded.



The battle of Hoa Tan was an outstanding battalion size action of Operation Pershing since it dealt a crushing blow to the 9th Battalion of the 16th NVA Regiment. There were several factors which were crucial to its success. The terrain around the village with its limited avenues of escape, the immediate exploitation of the situation by C Troop and the positioning of US units in blocking positions to the north, the forced inarch of elements of the 1/35 over thirty-five hundred meters in less than three hours, and the effective use of artillery, Aerial Rocket Artillery, and Tactical Air Support. But above all, the most outstanding factor was the cooperation between units from different organizations which seldom operate together. Throughout the afternoon and night of 6 March, the interchange of information and support among these elements must be considered as the greatest factor in producing this major victory over the enemy forces..

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PARTICIPANTS IN THE ACTION AT HOA TAN (1)

- A. Major Charles W. Bagnal, Commanding Officer C 1/9 Cav, was awarded the Silver Star for his actions at Hoa Tan (1).
- B. Staff Sergeant Edward N. Kaneshiro, Rifle Platoon C 1/9 Cav, personally eliminated an enemy sniper position. He was killed while attempting to rescue a wounded comrade.
- C. Specialist Fourth Class Claud Burns, Rifle Platoon C 1/9 Cav. As RTO for the second squad, Burns kept his platoon leader informed of enemy positions, so that squads could be properly maneuvered.
- D. WO1 Mickey Potter, Lift Section C 1/9 Cav. One of several lift pilots who flew daring medevac and troop insertion missions during the action,
- E. Captain Robert A. Letchworth, Weapons Platoon C 1/9 Cav, provided constant aerial coverage and reconnaissance for troops on the ground,
- F. Captain Cecil L. Shrader, Weapons Platoon Leader C 1/9 Cav, marked enemy positions with smoke for infantry elements, and provided constant aerial coverage and reconnaissance.