

THE FIRST TEAM IN VIETNAM

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(Edited By 1 Cav Div Museum)

As it enters its 50th year of active service, the FIRST TEAM is leaving Vietnam after 5 1/2 years of combat operations. During its Vietnam years, the 1st Cavalry Division-Airmobile has made significant contributions toward the successful accomplishment of United States objectives in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Fighting in all four military regions of Vietnam, the 1st Cavalry (AM) used its great mobility to strike the enemy with telling force anytime and anywhere.

On 1 July 1965, at Fort Benning, Georgia, the 1st Cavalry Division was officially reorganized under the command of MG Harry W.O. Kinnard, as an Airmobile Division.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The concept of "airmobility" was new in 1965 when the 1st Cavalry Division became the Army's only airmobile division. Helicopters were used extensively for rapid movement of the entire division giving it a quick striking capability only achieved by smaller units in the past.

The task facing the new Airmobile Division was to move full-strength to a combat mission in Vietnam. The bulk of the Division moved by troop ships with the first carrier leaving 15 August. On 28 September, Air Cavalrymen assumed complete responsibility for defense of the An Khe area and the Division's Area of Operation.

The 1st CAV launched the Pleiku Campaign on 19 October 1965. In 35 days the CAV swept across the plateau country west and south of Pleiku demonstrating the combat effectiveness of the airmobile concept. This operation also marked the first confrontation between a U.S. Army Division and North Vietnamese (NVA) Division with the CAV inflicting the first major defeat on NVA regulars. So impressive was the campaign, President Johnson awarded the Division a Presidential Unit Citation.

Success in the Pleiku Campaign changed the mission of the CAV from one of reinforcement and reaction to that of unlimited offense. As 1965 gave way to 1966, the Division moved into the Bong Son Campaign which lasted 41 days and proved that the CAV's offensive capability could be depended on time after time. In that relatively short period 1,342 enemy were killed, five of nine enemy battalions

engaged were rendered ineffective, and three enemy field hospitals were destroyed.

In May 1966, the airmobile division experienced its first change of command. MG John Norton had just settled into his new command when Operation CRAZY HORSE began and was rapidly followed by HENRY CLAY and THAYER I. In October, THAYER II was initiated as an all-out effort to pacify eastern Binh Dinh Province. Ending successfully on 11 February 1967, THAYER II was the Division's longest operation to date lasting 111 days. As a result of the operation, 555 tons of rice was captured, 51 tons of salt appropriated, 3,200 gray NVA uniforms confiscated, and 1,757 enemy killed.

The day following the end of THAYER II, the Division mounted Operation PERSHING with the purpose of pacifying the entire Binh Dinh Province. The enemy by now had learned how quickly CAV units could move and so refused to attempt any major engagements. The Division began the arduous task of "cordon and search" operations aimed at destroying the Viet Cong (VC) strong hold in the villages. The PERSHING area of operations extended over 1,600 square miles of rough terrain, the major part of which had been VC territory. This tedious operation resulted in the destruction of 2,000 feet of tunnels, 1,389 under-ground fortifications rendered useless, 5,396 enemy killed, and 441 tons of rice recovered.

MG John J. Tolson III took the reins of command from Major General Norton in April, 1967. He continued PERSHING so successfully that by September, the RVN held elections for the first time with 95.7 percent of the registered voters participating, and in January 1968, Highway 1 opened for commerce through Binh Dinh Province.

When the enemy launched the TET Offensive late in January, 1968, elements of the 1st CAV were called north to I corps. Attacking with some 7,000 men, the enemy took most of the imperial city of Hue and much of the province capital, Quang Tri. The 1st CAV struck back with almost immediate success around Quang Tri, but Hue proved to be a more difficult problem. It took five weeks of intensive fighting before the enemy defense collapsed and Hue was once more controlled by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

No more than a few days were allotted for the CAV to catch its breath. The next mission called for First Team units to relieve Khe Sanh by reopening the ground supply route. Operation PEGASUS, as the action was officially called, ended successfully on 15 April 1968. It brought death to 640 enemy and the discovery of 261,760 rounds of small caliber ammunition.

The Division now moved into the A Shau Valley where no Free World Forces had penetrated since 1966. What the enemy regarded as an inviolable sanctuary was successfully raided by the CAV in Operation DELAWARE. Before moving to another operation, the CAV destroyed bunkers and fortification, and stripped the valley of enemy supplies. Operation DELAWARE produced the capture of 73 wheeled vehicles and 425 enemy dead.

On 14 July, the command passed to BG Richard L. Irby who held the command until 19 August when MG George I. Forsythe became the First Skytrooper. Continuing combat operations similar to those of

his predecessors, Major General Forsythe was to have an additional mission. The order came to move the entire Division to III Corps beginning 26 October 1968. Organized as Operation LIBERTY CANYON, the equivalent of a medium-sized U.S. town tore itself up by the roots, and moving by air and water, it landed at the other end of South Vietnam. Within days, the Division initiated combat operations in III Corps. In two weeks, everything returned to normal.

The operations in III Corps were directed at interdicting enemy supply routes, at locating and destroying caches, and at preventing an enemy build-up which might threaten the Saigon area. The action was named TOAN THANG II and it continued until 19 February 1969. The success of this operation is demonstrated by results of 3,103 enemy killed, 381 tons of rice destroyed, and 751,401 rounds of small arms ammunition captured. Through the spring, enemy activity focused on trying to over-run and destroy CAV fire bases. Time and time again the enemy was repulsed after sustaining heavy losses.

The Division paused in its daily tasks on 23 April to bid farewell to Major General Forsythe and to welcome the new commander, MG E.B. Roberts. While the determined assaults upon CAV fire bases continued, Major General Roberts broadened the Division's ability to strike back. Throughout the year, CAV units uncovered caches choking off food the enemy desperately needed. One of the NVA's primary infiltration routes, the Serpes Jungle Highway, was effectively blocked. Despite the military challenge, the Division carried on a vigorous program of civic action. Tons of food were distributed to refugees and support was provided in building schools, orphanages, and dispensaries.

Moving into 1970, and a new decade, the entire military situation of III Corps area had changed. The enemy's sanctuaries had been destroyed, and his infiltration routes had been plugged. The only threat to complete dominance of the area by free World Forces existed across the border in Cambodia. On 1 May 1970, the 1st Cavalry Division (AM), in concert with other U.S. forces and ARVN units, acted to eliminate this threat. Inside of two months the number of enemy killed would man three NVA regiments. The weapons captured or destroyed would equip two NVA divisions. The rice confiscated was enough to feed all enemy maneuver battalions in the 1st CAV's area of operations for one year.

During the early part of the Cambodia Operation, the Division command passed to MG George W. Casey. He steered the highly successful operation to its close on 29 June. Tragedy struck on 7 July when the Commanding General's helicopter crashed killing all aboard.

MG George W. Putnam assumed command on 21 July 1970 and he continued the Division's task of interdicting infiltration routes and of locating, evacuating, or destroying enemy caches. These operations, coupled with the success in Cambodia, brought ARVN control to the areas in Binh Long Province, Phuoc Long Province, and War Zone "D" which the enemy formerly used with impunity to stage attacks on American and ARVN installations. The desperate condition of the enemy forces during the last six months of 1970 is demonstrated by the success the FIRST TEAM had in the PSYOPS area. The "Chieu Hoi" program during this period resulted in 1,469 persons declaring their support for the Republic of South Vietnam. By the

end of 1970, the 1st CAV expanded its role of training ARVN troops to assume the responsibility of protecting the entire III Corps area, bringing to a close another phase of Vietnamization.

With these great accomplishments behind it, approximately two-thirds of the division returns to a new and vital mission in the United States. One brigade remains in Vietnam to secure U.S. support units in MR III and to continue the job of Vietnamization. FIRST TEAM units returning to the U.S. will locate at Fort Hood, Texas, where they will be instrumental in the creation of a division composed of airmobile, armored, and mechanized infantry units. Thus, in every sense, the 1st CAV continues the tradition of "FIRSTS" that is its hallmark. Today, it can remember proudly the words spoken by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1966,

"Unique in its valor and courage, the Air Cavalry Division has established a record which will stand for a long time for other divisions to match."

EDITOR'S NOTE. This article was written prior to the end of the Vietnam War. Vietnamization was a process employed extensively by the U.S. Military Forces with the primary goal of training South Vietnamese forces to eventually stand alone against the North Vietnamese communists.