

AUGUST 1990

U.S.: \$2.95; CAN.: \$3.50

VIETNAM

Hamburger Hill

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Behind
Enemy Lines



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CROUCHING BEAST CORNERED

Who would control the A Shau Valley?
Hamburger Hill was the key.

As told by Joseph B. Conmy, Jr.

For courageous soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division, Dong Ap Bia, or "Hamburger Hill," would prove to be their toughest assignment. But the nagging question remains: Was it worth it?

The A Shau Valley, situated in southwestern Thua Thien Province, was a constant concern for MACV, the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. Approximately 30 miles in length, the terrain in the funnel-shaped valley was pure hell. Inundated with triple-canopy jungle, razor-sharp elephant grass, and a series of rugged, steep hills, the A Shau was perfectly suited for the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) command-and-supply center because of its nearness to "neutral" Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail.

In the spring of 1963, a U.S. Special Forces unit established a base camp with the local CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) to thwart the penetration of NVA regulars into South Vietnam from Laos. Unfortunately, despite a heroic defense, the base was overrun in March 1966.

In early 1969, the U.S. 9th Marine Regiment undertook an operation dubbed Dewey Canyon, and fought the NVA in the region known as Base Area 611. Intelligence reported that NVA engineers were constructing roads where trucks, as many as 1,000 per day, were moving into the region. In the end, the Marines were successful in driving the enemy from Base Area 611.

In spite of the efforts of the leathernecks, however, the ubiquitous enemy soon returned. By May 1969, all signs pointed to another large-scale NVA offensive aimed at the coastal sec-



Two members of the 101st Airborne Division fire into a North Vietnamese bunker as they near the devastated summit of Dong Ap Bia, also known as Hill 937—but soon to be nicknamed Hamburger Hill. INSET: General Mel Zais awards the Silver Star to Colonel Joseph B. Conmy, Jr.



tion of South Vietnam. Code-named Apache Snow, Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais' 101st Airborne Division (nicknamed the "Screaming Eagles") was given the go-ahead to seek out and destroy the NVA forces in the A Shau. The division's 3rd Brigade got the demanding assignment.

In the early morning hours of May 10, 1969, the awesome sound of 65 UH-1D helicopters stabbed the heavy, humid air. In all, 1,800 men would be making the aerial assault: the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry (1/506), the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry (3/187) and the 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry (2/501) from the 3rd Brigade. In addition, five battalions of the 1st ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Division were brought in for the attack.

Over the next 10 days, the Screaming Eagles would immerse themselves in some of the worst combat during the entire Vietnam War. Located within their Area of Operations (AO) was a chain of massifs: Hills 800, 900, 916 and 937. It was soon apparent that the enemy was here in strength. Captured NVA documents revealed that the 29th NVA Regiment, called "The Pride of Ho Chi Minh," one of the North's premier fighting units, was using Hill 937 as its headquarters. An evil-looking specter, Hill 937 to the Montagnards was the "Mountain of the Crouching Beast." And before it was finished, the 3rd Brigade would understand why.

Preparatory air and artillery bombardments slammed into Hill 937, as Companies B, C and D, 3/187, progressed up the sheer slopes. AC-47 gunships, or "Puff the Magic Dragon," raked enemy positions. But the NVA had years to prepare these bunkers, and the majority of support fire, unless it scored a direct hit, was useless.

For the next week, 3/187 continued their assaults. Several times they were nearly successful, as in one instance before a misdirected U.S. gunship inadvertently fired upon Company B, causing casualties and stalling the attack. — B/4/71 AIA

Due to the incessant shelling of Dong Ap Bia, the vegetation was soon stripped away. Usually a plus for any attacking army, this time it proved to be a severe hindrance for the soldiers. On May 18, with their objective in sight, heavy downpours generated oozy mudslides and caused the assault troops to lose their footing. This calamitous turn of events soon halted the momentum of the attack.

On May 20, the 2/501 was brought in from the northeast, the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment (2/3 ARVN) from the southeast sector, and Companies A and D of the 2/506 augmented the 3/187, who had sustained numerous casualties in their valiant efforts at seizing Hill 937. With these reinforcements, Dong Ap Bia fell to the 101st Airborne. In the end, 46 soldiers would pay the supreme sacrifice, while over 400 were wounded. In a macabre reminder to the infantrymen who stormed Dong Ap Bia, one soldier scrawled on a C-ration box, "Hamburger Hill," and fastened it to a burnt tree trunk. Shortly thereafter, someone else penned: "Was it worth it?"

It was truly an appropriate statement because, while the battle was over in the A Shau, it was just beginning on the home front. During the course of the fight, an Associated Press correspondent asked a question that would start a great controversy back in the United States: "Why are you attacking this mountain with troops? Why don't you just pull back and hit it with B-52 strikes?"

Later, the same reporter was interviewing a wounded soldier from 3/187, who remarked indignantly: "That damned Blackjack (referring to Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt, CO of 3/187) won't stop until he kills every damn one of us."

When these two reports appeared in newspapers across the United States, the American people were in an uproar. Politicians, such as Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Stephen M. Young (D-Ohio), became outspoken critics of the strategy employed, calling it "senseless and irresponsible."

A 155mm howitzer fires in support of the 101st Airborne as it sweeps the eastern edge of the A Shau Valley during Operation Apache Snow. The operation was intended to clear North Vietnamese forces completely from the strategically located valley near the Laotian and Cambodian borders.



To further inflame matters, *Life* magazine, in its June 27 publication, displayed the photos of the 241 servicemen killed in Vietnam during the preceding week. At the top of the text, a letter from a soldier who fought at Hamburger Hill served as the title. It read: "You may not be able to read this. I am writing in a hurry. I see death coming up the hill."

The public was understandably confused and mistakenly thought that the entire 241 men pictured had been killed assaulting Hamburger Hill. Some believe that the *Life* piece, like the 1968 Tet Offensive, was another turning point in the war.

But the nagging question has always been: Was it worth it? Colonel Joseph B. Conmy, Jr., USA (Ret.), commanded the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, during the battle for



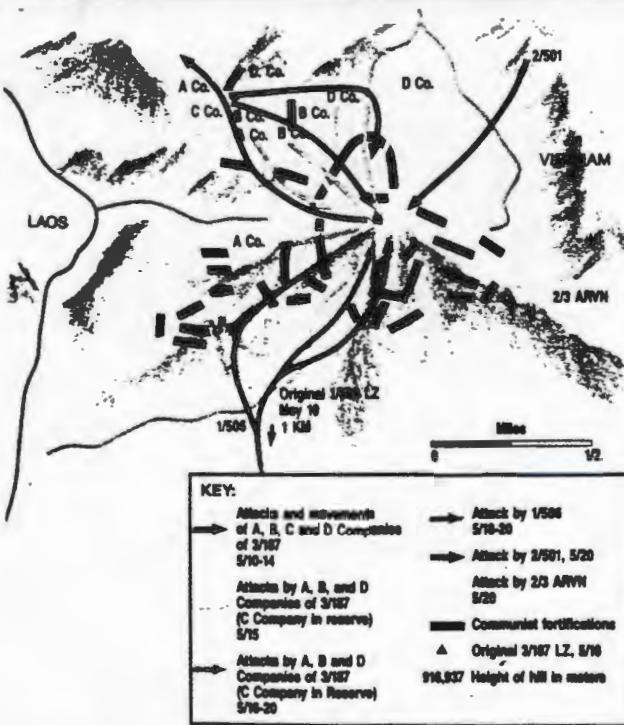
Dong Ap Bia. Until recently, Conmy has withheld any comments on the operation. Now, since his former division commander, General Zais, has passed away, he has come forward.

Conmy vehemently asserts that the battle for Hamburger Hill was justified. In a widely circulated letter, Conmy states: "I believe it would be unfair to let the families of the dead believe that their loved ones were killed in a senseless operation, the main purpose of which was to win promotions for career officers."

From his Virginia home, Colonel Conmy consented to being interviewed for *Vietnam* magazine by senior editor Albert Hemingway.

Vietnam: Can you tell us about your military background, Colonel Conmy?

Conmy: I graduated from the Military Academy at West Point in January 1943. I landed at Normandy on approximately D+30 with the 44th Infantry Division and went across France, Germany, and finally ended up in Austria at the Brenner Pass. I went to Korea in the first month of the war. I was with the 7th Regiment of the 3rd Division and the 31st Infantry of the 7th Division. I commanded a heavy weapons company that had 3 officers and 12 men. That's how we left for Korea! We stopped in Japan and our "fillers" were 150 South Korean rice farmers whom we trained briefly in Japan. We made unopposed landings at Wonson. We ended up in the Chosin Reservoir and fought our way out of that trap. I finally came home from Korea in April 1952. I went over as a captain and came back as a lieutenant



TOP: Specialist 5 Joe Kline of B Company, 101st Aviation Battalion, shows off the body armor and equipment of the well-dressed crew chief of a UH-1H "Huey" helicopter. The 101st's helicopter gunship unit denied firing on its own troops. ABOVE: Tenacious defenders in well-prepared bunkers and even mudslides handicapped the assault up Hill 937.

colonel. I survived; however, we lost quite a few men, especially in that first year.

Vietnam: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

Conmy: I took command of the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in July 1968. I remained in command until July 1969. The 3rd Brigade consisted of three infantry battalions, the 1/506, 2/506 and 3/187.

Vietnam: The A Shau Valley was always a thorn in the side of the United States, even at the very beginning of the Vietnam War. How was the operation to drive the enemy from his sanctuary, code-named Apache Snow, conceived?

Conmy: Lieutenant General Richard Stilwell, XXIV Corps commander, and Maj. Gen. Mel Zais, 101st Airborne commander, recognized that the only way we could get control of our Area of Operations was to enter the A Shau and clean it out. And keep it! This was the NVA's marshalling area, launching platform and resupply center for all the attacks along the coast—all the way from Da Nang to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). MACV decided in 1969 to go out there and take it. My 3rd Brigade got the job.

Vietnam: Prior to Apache Snow, there were two preliminary sweeps. One such operation was Dewey Canyon and the other was Massachusetts Striker. How did these two differ from yours?

Conmy: They were similar type missions but they never found the enemy in great strength. We found a major assembly area. Also, it became apparent that it had been in existence for many years. It was extremely well established. The fighting and living bunkers the NVA possessed were the strongest I ever saw—in any war! They had an intricate and sophisticated communications network in the hill mass. The western edge of that hill mass rested on the border with Laos. The enemy could easily get in and out.

Vietnam: That hill mass you speak of contained Hill 937, later named Hamburger Hill. Also, the other mountains as well: 900 and 916, where your brigade ran into some stiff opposition.

Conmy: Well, they were all a part of Hill 937. There must've been 50 different fingers with crests along them.

Vietnam: How were the NVA bunkers constructed?

Conmy: They were very deep. They used heavy logs in the bottom sides of the bunker and rested them against each other in the shape of an A. Then, other logs were placed atop these, along with dirt. After so many years there, these fortifications melted into the jungle. If anything hit those bunkers, other than a 1-ton shell from the battleship New Jersey, it wasn't destroyed. If a round did hit, it would drive the logs of that A frame deeper into the ground. We hammered that hill with 271 air strikes and eight batteries of artillery firing incessantly: four 105mm batteries, two 155mm batteries, one 175mm battery and an 8-inch battery. The mountain was transformed to pulverized dust when it was over. I don't think there was one leaf left!

Vietnam: Your brigade encountered the 29th NVA Regiment on Dong Ap Bia. In the beginning, did you realize what you were up against?

Conmy: There was some intelligence to that effect. However, it was incomplete. We soon found out, within a day or two, that we had gotten our hands on that regiment. Initially, we sent in 9 battalions: 4 U.S. and 5 ARVN. They were spread up and down the central area of the valley and all were going after particular objectives. The 3/187 happened to have the Landing Zone (LZ) adjacent to Hill 937. It was they who made contact first. By the third day, it was apparent they had more than they could handle. We alerted the 1/506 to approach from the south and link up with the 3/187. The objective was actually in sight on May 15! The two battalions were attacking simultaneously. Unfortunately, some friendly gunships strafed our U.S. troops. The commander of the 101st

turned to mud. The men lost their footing and literally slid down the hill.

Vietnam: You finally took Hamburger Hill on May 20?

Conmy: We moved two other battalions into position, the 2/501 and 4/3 ARVN, and staged a four-battalion assault. By noon, we had the hill. That took some coordination. I was in a Command and Control helicopter right above the hill with the CO of the 3rd ARVN Regiment. He and I were trying to keep the phase lines in order so all troops would reach the crest of the hill at about the same time. The last thing we needed was friendly forces shooting at each other.

Vietnam: What kind of commander was General Melvin Zais?

Conmy: He was an outstanding division commander and was always in reach throughout the battle.

Vietnam: Didn't the NVA carry away some of their dead and wounded into Laos?

Conmy: Yes, across the border; at that time in Laos, we had a Special Forces patrol. They were in position to observe the enemy evacuating Hamburger Hill. The leader of that group told me they counted approximately 1,100 dead and wounded carried off that mountain.

Vietnam: So, if his count is correct, combined with yours, that would mean almost 1,800 NVA casualties.

Conmy: We figured we rendered the 29th NVA Regiment combat-ineffective. Then the valley belonged to us. We began a thorough search of the area and found more ammunition, weapons and supplies; and tunnels, laboriously dug by the enemy! So, in retrospect, it was a very fruitful operation.

Vietnam: At one point, Secretary of State William P. Rogers was in Vietnam while the battle was raging. While meeting with Stilwell and Zais, there was some talk of pulling out. Zais adamantly refused, saying, "I've got the enemy here, and here is where I intend to fight him," or words to that effect.

Conmy: That's exactly right. That is where we found them, and that is where we intended to fight them.

Vietnam: Also, someone made a statement to the effect that if we backed off, the NVA would simply slip back into Laos as they had been previously doing all along. Rogers was shocked because, apparently, he did not know that this was common practice by the NVA throughout the war.

Conmy: That's right. The military faction understood this. However, I don't think anyone else could comprehend that the enemy had all these safe havens such as Cambodia, Laos and the DMZ. It was extremely frustrating. We weren't even supposed to fire across the border.

Vietnam: It just seems very surprising that the secretary of state was not aware of this situation. The United States had been involved in Vietnam for approximately four years at the time of Hamburger Hill.

Conmy: It is surprising. But I'm not sure many people in government and the press really understood this. It is shocking, though.

Vietnam: Hamburger Hill received quite a bit of negative press. How do you respond to that today?

Conmy: Well, people wanted the war to end. This was a battle; maybe if it had been fought a couple of years earlier, it would have been noted—but probably wouldn't have received the attention that it did. In 1969, there was an uproar in the United States. In their eyes, we were committing mayhem and murder. Our mission was still to save South Vietnam from communism and give it back to them. If nothing else, this battle certainly helped at the time. It was very instrumental in aiding in the eventual withdrawal of our troops from South Vietnam. The enemy had lost his Sunday punch, so to speak. It is my personal belief that the enemy never fully recovered from his losses at Hamburger Hill until the American forces had left Vietnam.





Hill 937 is silent, save wounded men who lie in
airborne masses, each down, past the broken corpses.
Two of the dazed victims are both terminally
broken, but no less conscious, purporting to
the final assault on May 1944.



At the end of their ordeal on Hamburger Hill, wounded airborne troops are put aboard a medical evacuation helicopter, while as many as 1,000 NVA dead and wounded are slipped across the Laotian border.

Vietnam: The casualties for Hamburger Hill were 46 KIA and over 400 WIA. However, there were other battles with similar figures that occurred but didn't cause as much controversy as this one. For example, Hue City and Dak To are two that come to mind. How would you account for that?

Conny: It goes back to what I said before. Battles present a pretty grim picture. And, I guess, the American people had had enough. Also, Senators Edward Kennedy and Stephen Young severely criticized Zais. So much, in fact, Zais finally outlined the entire battle and the reasons why he fought it and placed the report in the Congressional Record.

Vietnam: How did you feel about those attacks levied against Zais?

Conny: I felt they were very unjust. We were trying to win the war. And until a truce was declared, if you didn't go out and get the enemy, he would certainly get you. No commander wants to lose men. However, in the long haul, Hamburger Hill probably saved thousands of American and Vietnamese lives.

Vietnam: So you rotated back to the United States knowing you had beaten the enemy on Hamburger Hill.

Conny: We actually beat them twice.

Vietnam: How's that?

Conny: The night of June 13-14, the enemy staged an all-out sapper attack on Firebase Berthetsgarden, where my Brigade CP was located. They were looking for me and they wanted to spike the artillery pieces. The enemy wanted revenge for Hamburger Hill. They knew my call sign "Iron Raven." They came straight for my operations center, which was nothing more than a bunker. It was pitch black and pouring rain

that night. About midnight, the mortars started dropping in. It lasted all night. We were "eyeball to eyeball" with them. By morning our guns were still intact and they had lost a lot more men than we did.

Vietnam: Did they penetrate the perimeter?

Conny: A few, but they were eliminated. Enemy soldiers were on the roof of my CP. I was inside with my duty officer, radio operator and sergeant major. Satchel charges blew a door off the building. The sergeant major went out the back door and I kicked open the front door to get that sapper. Just as I did that, I see this guy's face in the doorway staring at me upside down! I shot him in the head with my .45 just as he threw a satchel charge. It landed at my feet and knocked me for a loop. Meanwhile, the sergeant major killed six more on the roof. In fact, two of them were carrying a 50-lb. pole charge. If they ever set that off we would have been blown to kingdom come. I was blinded by the blast, wounded in both legs and had both eardrums shattered. The corps commander, General Stilwell, met me at the hospital in Camp Evans. He said: "What do you want to do?" I said: "General, I commanded this brigade for 11½ months and I want to be there to hand the colors to my replacement." After I recuperated from my wounds aboard the hospital ship, USS *Sanctuary*, I returned to do just that. I loved that brigade. □

Suggested Reading: Hamburger Hill, May 11-20, 1969, by Samuel Zaffiri (Novato, CA; Presidio Press) and The Vietnam Experience, Fighting For Time, 1969-70 (Boston: Boston Publishing Company).

AMBUSH AT ALBANY

The Battle of the Ia Drang at LZ X-ray had been a great victory, but disaster was lurking in the jungle nearby.

As told by S. Lawrence Gwin, Jr.

The first division-sized U.S. Army unit to see combat in Vietnam was the legendary 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), often called the 1st Air Cav or 1st Cav. Ordered to Vietnam in June 1965, the division was formed from the elite 11th Air Assault Division, which had been conducting airmobile training at Fort Benning, Georgia. The unit arrived in August and September and immediately set up base camp in the An Khe area. Not all of the units of the 1st Cav were formed from the 11th Air Assault. Some battalions came from other Fort Benning units that had received no special training.

After several weeks of shakedown training around the "Golf Course" at An Khe, General William Westmoreland ordered the 1st Cav into battle—Operation Shiny Bayonet—in what has become known as the Pleiku Campaign. Essentially, the overall intent of the campaign was to find and test the PAVN (Peoples Army of Vietnam—the North Vietnamese Army) units recently infiltrated into Vietnam, a series of brigade recon-in-force operations. In reality, it served as the first test of the 1st Cav as several units encountered the North Vietnamese units.

The best known of these encounters occurred at the base of the Chu Pong mountain. There, in the so-called Battle of the Ia Drang, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, stood and fought PAVN. According to official accounts, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, fought off numerous assaults by PAVN regimental units, killing more than 1,000 PAVN, while suffering 79 killed and 125 wounded.

The more severe encounter came several days later when Kinnard ordered the sister battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry (2/7), which had also been at X-ray, to move from there to LZ Albany. Upon arrival, it ran head on into a reinforced PAVN battalion. Within 20 minutes, 151 troopers lay dead and 121 were wounded. The two lead companies, A and C, had been, for all intents and purposes, wiped out during the surprise North Vietnamese attack. Few American units during the Vietnam conflict would experience so many casualties in one day as occurred at LZ Albany. Curiously, it remains one of the least known battles of the war.

One of the survivors of the battle was Larry Gwin, the executive officer of the lead company that triggered the PAVN



Members of the 101st Airborne Division take a breather after a 24-hour fight to dislodge Viet Cong from entrenched positions near An Thi on January 29, 1966. Half a year earlier, the division's troops were the first Americans to encounter North Vietnamese regulars, with mixed results.





First Air Cav troops commence a search-and-destroy sweep near their base at An Khe in 1965. In November 1965, the division's 7th Cavalry Regiment ran into soldiers of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in the Ia Drang Valley, tripping a hornet's nest.

attack. He was also one of the few in that unit who came out of the ordeal without being wounded. In a recent talk with Vietnam Senior Editor Alexander Cochran, he recalled that terrible afternoon.

Vietnam: When did you join the Cav?

Gwin: I was already in Nam when they arrived. I had been a battalion adviser with MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] in the Delta for 10 weeks. In mid-September, out of the blue, I got orders to join the 1st Cav in An Khe. I was part of an attempt by MACV to infuse the Cav with combat-experienced officers.

Vietnam: That would have meant that you joined the Cav just as they were arriving in-country.

Gwin: Actually, I was in An Khe before the division arrived in full. On about the 14th or 15th, masses of helicopters and trucks arrived. I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cav, immediately upon arrival. I remember that I had fresh jungle fatigues while those poor bastards were still wearing the old field uniform!

Vietnam: What was your impression about the Cav at this time?

Gwin: You have to remember that these poor guys had been on a ship for months coming across the Pacific. They were sure that there was a VC behind every bush. During the first week, everyone was shooting at each other. Actually the Cav's transition was very good. My impression was that the Cav had been reorganized from the 11th Air Assault. This was a hard-core U.S. unit. These guys were pros, like the 82nd Airborne. I was assigned as the XO in A Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry. My company commander was Captain Joel Sigdinis.

Vietnam: Well, what about your outfit, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry? People talk about it being an "unlucky battalion" formed from a mechanized battalion.

Gwin: I remembered noting that there were a lot of fat NCOs! Then I found out that the 2/7th had been organized from the 2nd Infantry Division, then also at Fort Benning, not the 11th Air Assault. And the morale was terrible. The troops were okay. But the senior leadership was lacking. The battalion commander was an autocrat whom everyone detested.

Vietnam: What about the first month in-country?

Gwin: We cleared brush around the "Golf Course." We went on a few operations so that everyone got a chance to get on and off a helicopter. We did a lot of flying out from base camp to patrol bases. We conducted several combat assaults in "Happy Valley." This was a good idea. You have to remember that 2/7th had not had any airmobile training! These were not experienced troops. We suffered our first casualties. And our NCOs slimmed down very fast.

Vietnam: In early November, the 1st Cav launched the Pleiku Campaign—Operation Shiny Bayonet. Weren't there several major contacts with the NVA, at Plei Me Special Forces Camp, and then in front of the Chu Pong Mass going on?

Gwin: Not really. Then General Kinnard, the division commander, came down and briefed the battalion officers one day. He told us that the 1st Brigade had run into hard-core PAVN units, there had been heavy contact, and you guys are going in soon. We were then moved forward overland by truck from An Khe through the Minh Yang Pass to Pleiku. Then we moved by chopper to somewhere in the bush only five clicks from the Chu Pong and LZ X-ray.

Vietnam: This was to be the 2/7th's first combat operation?

Gwin: Yeah, and we were apprehensive. I then learned that the 1/7th had been in heavy contact, that they were suffering casualties, and that we were going in at dawn to help them out. We could hear sporadic reports on the radio about what

was happening. My company commander was from the 1/7th, knew the troops and was concerned. The next morning we were lifted into X-ray. As soon as we landed, I heard rounds popping over my head, and the guy next to me got hit!

Vietnam: The 1/7th had landed the day before and then had withstood a series of determined NVA ground attacks that afternoon and evening. Did you have any sense of this when you stepped off the chopper at X-ray?

Gwin: I remember the carnage of combat, a line of 15 dead Americans with ponchos over them. The Chu Pong was being pounded with air and artillery. There was occasional incoming fire. We knew that we were into something, though most of it was over by then. Soon we were joined by more fresh Cav troops from the 2/5th. That evening, a platoon from the 1/7th that had been cut off for 24 hours came in, and I saw the "1000 yard stare" for the first time. They were staggering from exhaustion, dragging their dead with them. That evening—the night of the 15th—we dug in on the perimeter and waited. The night was very still. We thought that we were going to be hit that night, and we stayed up, 100 percent alert. At 4:30 in the morning, the PAVN hit the other side of the perimeter and, for the next two hours, there was just a sheet of iron overhead. Then at dawn, we had a "mad minute."

Vietnam: That has got to be some sobering moments for all. The point should be made that you all have been up for more than 36 hours at this point.

Gwin: Right. And the next night, the 16th, we stayed 100 percent alert but nothing happened. That evening, the remainder of the 1/7th had been flown out. The morning of the 17th, Joel Sigdinis learned then that B-52 bombers were coming in to wipe X-ray out and we were going to move overland to a place called LZ Albany.

Vietnam: How many men were there in your company and battalion?

Gwin: I guess that there were about 400 in the battalion and Alpha had 120 men. We were to be the lead company, spearheading the march.

Vietnam: What did you think your mission was? This seems to be one of the unknowns as that would at least influence the method of movement, tactical or otherwise. Was this just a "walk in the sun?"

Gwin: We were going to walk to Albany to be picked up and flown back to Pleiku for a rest. But we moved tactically. Our company led the battalion out in a wedge. We expected to run into the PAVN, and we moved in tactical formation. The terrain was mainly forest, clear visibility up to 100 yards, with waist-high grass. After about two or three klicks, it got hotter and the terrain changed remarkably as the forest got much thicker. The canopy got triple, the undergrowth got very thick—festooned with hanging vines and Spanish moss. The undergrowth enshrouded us, and all was obscured in a dim, eerie light. Visual contact became very important. We were very tired.

Vietnam: Your troops had to be exhausted at this point.

Gwin: As exhausted as we were, the prospect of Pleiku kept us going. Then I heard that our recon platoon had captured two PAVN soldiers, and I went forward to see them. They were two skinny little men. They didn't seem dangerous but were well equipped, with khaki uniforms, canvas harnesses, potato masher grenades, ammo pouches, sneakers—the full load. I remember being nervous. These buggers were PAVN, hard-core all the way. Joel thought that they were deserters.

Vietnam: I believe that they later turned out to be scouts, one of which had escaped and warned the remainder of the battalion about your presence?

Gwin: I remember that Lt. Col. Robert McDade, the battalion commander, along with his interpreter and the battal-



TOP: Initial nervousness of newly arrived 1st Air Cav men was justified. This soldier from 1st Infantry Division was wounded trying to tear down a propaganda poster that proved to be booby-trapped. ABOVE: A radioman dies as the 7th Cav's 2nd Battalion runs into a well-prepared PAVN ambush at LZ Albany on November 17, 1965.



TOP: Radio contact is made with an overflying helicopter by 1/8th Cav, 1st Air Cavalry Division. The loss of platoon radios, along with the fire coming from all directions, contributed to 2/7th Cav's confusion at LZ Albany. ABOVE: A casualty must lie unintended while intense gunfire keeps his comrades under cover—and partially under water.

ion intelligence officer, came forward to question them. I moved away from them, so I don't know what they said. The battalion commander interrogated them for 20 to 30 minutes. What we didn't know then was there were more than two and that interrogation time gave them time to go back and warn the PAVN battalion commander that we were coming.

Vietnam: Then these prisoners did not warn you about what was about to happen?

Gwin: We were deadly serious. We had seen PAVN at X-ray, both dead and alive. There was a distance period some 20 to 30 minutes during the walk from X-ray to Albany where everything went quiet. I remember asking, "Where are the helicopters?" In a few minutes, we resumed our trek forward. Within another 500 yards, and less than 30 minutes later, we reached Albany. Just as we got there, we could see the clearing. We sent two platoons around to secure the LZ, and Colonel McDade moved forward into the open area that had a clump of trees in the middle. I followed them into the clearing.

Vietnam: What did the LZ look like?

Gwin: A large grassy field that sloped gently downward to the left. A large clump of trees arose from the middle of the field about 100 yards away. I saw the battalion commander and his team move toward the trees. Our mission was to go to Albany and secure it. So I moved out into the open. The field was fine for an LZ. I estimated that it could take up to eight ships at a clip. We'd be out of there in no time. We'd been in the center clump less than two minutes when a few rounds erupted from the jungle that I'd just left. I figured it was PAVN stragglers. Then the jungle seemed to explode in a crescendo of small-arms fire, as if everyone in the woods had opened up with every weapon they had. Mortar rounds started landing in the LZ. The jungle literally opened up with 500 people shooting at each other. We now know that this was the signal for the PAVN to charge.

Vietnam: We now also know that the soldier who had escaped your capture had returned to his battalion and that you walked into an ambush that the PAVN probably had 30 minutes to set up.

Gwin: It was very clear that we had run into something big, but it was very confusing because the rounds were in back of us.

Vietnam: In other words, your lead company plus the battalion command group had been cut off from the rest of the battalion?

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was happening. My company commander was from the 1/7th, knew the troops and was concerned. The next morning we were lifted into X-ray. As soon as we landed, I heard rounds popping over my head, and the guy next to me got hit!

Vietnam: The 1/7th had landed the day before and then had withstood a series of determined NVA ground attacks that afternoon and evening. Did you have any sense of this when you stepped off the chopper at X-ray?

Gwin: I remember the carnage of combat, a line of 15 dead Americans with ponchos over them. The Chu Pong was being pounded with air and artillery. There was occasional incoming fire. We knew that we were into something, though most of it was over by then. Soon we were joined by more fresh Cav troops from the 2/5th. That evening, a platoon from the 1/7th that had been cut off for 24 hours came in, and I saw the "1000 yard stare" for the first time. They were staggering from exhaustion, dragging their dead with them. That evening—the night of the 15th—we dug in on the perimeter and waited. The night was very still. We thought that we were going to be hit that night, and we stayed up, 100 percent alert. At 4:30 in the morning, the PAVN hit the other side of the perimeter and, for the next two hours, there was just a sheet of iron overhead. Then at dawn, we had a "mad minute."

Vietnam: That has got to be some sobering moments for all. The point should be made that you all have been up for more than 36 hours at this point.

Gwin: Right. And the next night, the 16th, we stayed 100 percent alert but nothing happened. That evening, the remainder of the 1/7th had been flown out. The morning of the 17th, Joel Sigdinis learned then that B-52 bombers were coming in to wipe X-ray out and we were going to move overland to a place called LZ Albany.

Vietnam: How many men were there in your company and battalion?

Gwin: I guess that there were about 400 in the battalion and Alpha had 120 men. We were to be the lead company, spearheading the march.

Vietnam: What did you think your mission was? This seems to be one of the unknowns as that would at least influence the method of movement, tactical or otherwise. Was this just a "walk in the sun?"

Gwin: We were going to walk to Albany to be picked up and flown back to Pleiku for a rest. But we moved tactically. Our company led the battalion out in a wedge. We expected to run into the PAVN, and we moved in tactical formation. The terrain was mainly forest, clear visibility up to 100 yards, with waist-high grass. After about two or three klicks, it got hotter and the terrain changed remarkably as the forest got much thicker. The canopy got triple, the undergrowth got very thick—festooned with hanging vines and Spanish moss. The undergrowth enshrouded us, and all was obscured in a dim, eerie light. Visual contact became very important. We were very tired.

Vietnam: Your troops had to be exhausted at this point.

Gwin: As exhausted as we were, the prospect of Pleiku kept us going. Then I heard that our recon platoon had captured two PAVN soldiers, and I went forward to see them. They were two skinny little men. They didn't seem dangerous but were well equipped, with khaki uniforms, canvas harnesses, potato masher grenades, ammo pouches, sneakers—the full load. I remember being nervous. These buggers were PAVN, hard-core all the way. Joel thought that they were deserters.

Vietnam: I believe that they later turned out to be scouts, one of which had escaped and warned the remainder of the battalion about your presence?

Gwin: I remember that Lt. Col. Robert McDade, the battalion commander, along with his interpreter and the battal-



TOP: Initial nervousness of newly arrived 1st Air Cav men was justified. This soldier from 1st Infantry Division was wounded trying to tear down a propaganda poster that proved to be booby-trapped. ABOVE: A radioman dies as the 7th Cav's 2nd Battalion runs into a well-prepared PAVN ambush at LZ Albany on November 17, 1965.



TOP: Radio contact is made with an overflying helicopter by 1/8th Cav, 1st Air Cavalry Division. The loss of platoon radios, along with the fire coming from all directions, contributed to 2/7th Cav's confusion at LZ Albany. ABOVE: A casualty must lie unintended while intense gunfire keeps his comrades under cover—and partially under water.

ion intelligence officer, came forward to question them. I moved away from them, so I don't know what they said. The battalion commander interrogated them for 20 to 30 minutes. What we didn't know then was there were more than two and that interrogation time gave them time to go back and warn the PAVN battalion commander that we were coming.

Vietnam: Then these prisoners did not warn you about what was about to happen?

Gwin: We were deadly serious. We had seen PAVN at X-ray, both dead and alive. There was a distance period some 20 to 30 minutes during the walk from X-ray to Albany where everything went quiet. I remember asking, "Where are the helicopters?" In a few minutes, we resumed our trek forward. Within another 500 yards, and less than 30 minutes later, we reached Albany. Just as we got there, we could see the clearing. We sent two platoons around to secure the LZ, and Colonel McDade moved forward into the open area that had a clump of trees in the middle. I followed them into the clearing.

Vietnam: What did the LZ look like?

Gwin: A large grassy field that sloped gently downward to the left. A large clump of trees arose from the middle of the field about 100 yards away. I saw the battalion commander and his team move toward the trees. Our mission was to go to Albany and secure it. So I moved out into the open. The field was fine for an LZ. I estimated that it could take up to eight ships at a clip. We'd be out of there in no time. We'd been in the center clump less than two minutes when a few rounds erupted from the jungle that I'd just left. I figured it was PAVN stragglers. Then the jungle seemed to explode in a crescendo of small-arms fire, as if everyone in the woods had opened up with every weapon they had. Mortar rounds started landing in the LZ. The jungle literally opened up with 500 people shooting at each other. We now know that this was the signal for the PAVN to charge.

Vietnam: We now also know that the soldier who had escaped your capture had returned to his battalion and that you walked into an ambush that the PAVN probably had 30 minutes to set up.

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