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## AIR CAVALRY DIVISION HISTORY RELATED

Article by Phuong Hong: "Road to Defeat of the American Air Cavalry"; Hanoi, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Vietnamese, 25 and 26 November 1968, p. 2/

### PART I

More than three years ago, on 11 September 1965, the favorite son of U.S. Secretary of War MacNamara, the First Air Mobile Division noisily invaded the coast of Quy Nhon, South Vietnam. This landing the Pentagon said was "the most important and greatest in U.S. troops and equipment ever carried out." Commanding the division was two-star general Kina, a participant of the Normandy landing on 5 June 1944 and a full colonel at age 24. The American generals exhausted all speech to advertise this division. They boasted that "here is the newest invention, relying on the concept of mobility, absolute troop concentration, which can carry out every trype of operation." They flattered, "its most superior capability is that it can carry out the mission of a large reaction force in the highlands and jungles." To put on a show of realism, the 16,500 officers and men of this division on their way across the Atlantic Ocean and through the Suez Canal, dyed all their uniforms a new color: green. Since then, after nearly 1,200 challenging days on the battlefield of South Vietnam, what "combat accomplishments" have been recorded by this American aggressor division "with the capability to make the most unexpected combat exploits?"

### FIRST ADVERSITY

The first battle in which the "air cavalry" division clashed with the "strange Viet Cong" was at Thuan Ninh on 18 September 1965, only a week after the landing on the Quy Nhon coast. With one foot still wet and one dry on the battlefield, it was thrown in to rescue a group of U.S. paratroopers. However, at Thuan Ninh, the rescuer was struck and routed, 200 "air cavalrymen" and paratroopers were killed, ten brand new "Chinook flying cranes" were destroyed, and 50 other aircraft were spotted with bullet holes.

These were not the first soldiers of the "air cavarly" to meet an unfortunate fate in Vietnam. One month before, on 17 August, a major in the forward station of this Division was felled by a round from a guerrilla sniper.

On 10 October, General Westmoreland ordered 6,000 "air cavalrymen" to La Tinh stream to join puppet troops in initiating a coordinated sweep in an attempt to make a superb combat exploit to obliterate the Thuan Ninh incident. However, an additional 383 "air cavalry" officers and men were killed and 17 "Chinooks" were downed the battle. On 14 October the "air cavalry" brigade was compelled to retreat in disgrace. Forwarding the news on this battle, many Western news agencies observed, "The division organized by Mr. MacNamara on a concept of absolute mobility by air does not have the foot mobility of the guerrilla forces in the jungles of Vietnam."

Immediately after the Thuan Ninh battle, French public opinion was sharply critical of the "air cavalry" division: "The American army has had to pay a dear price for their newest military innovation." (AFP, 19 May 1965)

#### HEAVY LOSSES IN THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS

After being whipped in the La Tinh stream area, the First "Air Cavalry" Division dared not aggressively dash forth again, instead hesitated and waited for a favorable position before it jumped. Throughout an entire week from 19 to 25 October 1965, the Puppet special forces camp at Pleime was seriously surrounded by the "air cavalry" stationed at An Khe remained reticent. Only when the Puppets had lost over 1,000 men and two battalions did they slowly send a number of artillery pieces to aid Pleime. Only on the morning of 26 October, supposing that the Liberation Army had tired, did they really send troops to surround and block the roads. However, in the first battle that day, 130 American and Puppet soldiers were killed and wounded on the slopes of Pleime Mountain. In the battles immediately following, the "air cavalry" was beaten unexpectedly in every one. On 1 November nearly 100 men were killed or wounded; on 6 November two companies were annihilated.

Captain Richardson, a survivor of Pleime, related in a panic-stricken manner, "It was truly strange. The rows of ghostly trees continuously opened fire at us. The Viet Cong in the rows of trees and fields of grass could not be spotted and the danger was extreme."

The "air cavalry" passively landed on the foot of Chu Pong Mountain and entered the Ia Drang Valley. The results were even more tragic. Concerning the Ia Drang battle, a U.S. military spokesman admitted, "In this battle the air cavalry division suffered the heaviest casualties of any American unit in the Vietnamese war." The Chu Pong battle was described by an American UPI correspondent, "Besides the dead, there were a great many wounded in the Chu Pong battle; they lie aimlessly waiting for transportation to the hospitals of Pleiku and other important centers. They lie in pain with uniforms ripped to shreds, dizzy from six continuous hours of fighting. Captain Hanmore, a commanding officer, said with tears flowing down his face, "This battle has truly touched me."

Faced with the distressing condition of the "air cavalry," on 19 November General Westmoreland was forced to send an airborne regiment to Chu Pong to rescue the situation. According to AFP and UPI, at a news conference on

20 November in Saigon, with a slightly trembling voice, General Westmoreland, Commander of the American Expeditionary Army in Vietnam, admitted that the U.S. mobile troops in the Pleime area had suffered heavy casualties.

The Pleime, Chu Pong, and Ia Drang battles put out of action 1,700 "air cavalrymen" along with 44 of their helicopters and 88 armored vehicles.

#### BOGGED DOWN IN THE BINH DINH LOWLANDS

In order to stimulate the morale of his defeated soldiers, on New Year's Eve 1966, General Kina declared: the "air cavalry" will begin the Eastern year of the horse by warning the superstitious guerrillas that "this year the horse soldiers will win."

However, not even the "air cavalrymen" believed that. One of them confessed, "In our opinion, when we win a battle, generally it does not mean that we have killed many enemy but mainly that they have stopped shooting at us."

After replacing a large number of soldiers due to "serious wounds," "malaria, cholera, and serious illnesses," a large part of the division was forced to leave the central highland mountains and move to the lowlands. After only a few days there, on 20 continuous days (from 27 January to 17 February 1966), nearly 2,000 men were killed and more than 200 helicopters were shot down in the Bong Son area (northern Binh Dinh). While the troops were in peril on their operations in the lowlands, on 20 February 1966, their largest base at An Khe was struck a thunderous blow: 497 men were killed and 97 aircraft were destroyed. In the spring of 1966, one of Westmoreland's spearheads in the Binh Dinh area with the "air cavalry" as a nucleus was smashed with 9,000 (including 5,000 "air cavalrymen") killed and 374 helicopters shot down or damaged. The casualties and losses were so heavy that Brigadier General Kina, the division commander, was put out to pasture by Johnson and General Horton arrived to replace him.

However, Norton could not change anything. Fifty days later during May, on the steel ground of Hoai An and Vinh Thanh in Binh Dinh, he lost 1,000 of his soldiers.

Since then, the greatest portion of the "most modernly equipped and most rapid air mobile army" has been gradually forced to abandon its "search and destroy" mission to join the Puppets in guarding the "pacification" mission, acting as watchdogs for the lowlands and coast of Binh Dinh. This was a distressing matter to Westmoreland in the second "dry season." The conclusion was that they could not "pacify" anything but were painfully struck instead. In the month of January 1966 alone, in Hoai An District 1,320 "air cavalrymen" were killed before the gun muzzles and wonderful mines of the people's liberation armed forces. When they made a large sweep such as at Loc Giang on 17 December, one battalion and two companies were wiped out. When they stationed an entire brigade at Xuan Son village, at midnight on 26 December 1966, two battalions and one platoon were put out of action in 13 minutes.

Article 76: The rules pertaining to different cases and types of detachments, the assignment's duration, and ways by which the agent is integrated into the detachment corps and reintegrated into his original corps shall correspond to the regulations applicable to government employees.

### Chapter III: Special Assignment

Article 77: An agent detached from the ranks of national security forces shall be considered on special assignment if he occupies a position with either an international agency or a government agency or public enterprise which does not entitle him to the retirement with pension accorded employees governed by the present statute. He may, upon his own request, be allowed to continue serving with the same agency or enterprise.

In this capacity a national security employee shall not be entitled to exercise his rights of promotion or retirement with pension.

A national security employee on special assignment shall be subject to the statutory and pension system governing the office he holds.

The conditions governing his release from the ranks and reintegration into his original corps shall be the same as those prescribed for other government employees.

### Chapter IV: Temporary Retirement

Article 78: A national security employee shall be considered in temporary retirement when by suspending his activities in his original corps or occupation he is no longer entitled to promotion or pension.

An agent shall be put in temporary retirement either by his own request or by request of the service. Moreover, there shall be a special temporary retirement for female employees and shall correspond to that applicable to female government employees.

Article 79: The cases in which temporary retirement shall be possible, its duration as well as the conditions for reintegration of persons concerned when the retirement period expires shall be prescribed by rules applicable to other government employees.

A national security agent who has been put on temporary retirement and who at the time of his reintegration refuses the post assigned him, shall be subject to discharge from the ranks by recommendation of the Board of Discipline.

### Chapter V: Service with the Colors

Article 80: A national security employee doing his compulsory military service shall be placed in a special category called "service with the colors."

suffering heavy casualties, and disastrously exhausted, Westmoreland was forced to roar, "All forces must give priority to the reoccupation of Hue;" General Thompson, commander of the "air cavalry" still rejected that demand with the reason that, "Even in the division command post at Dong Lam, the shortage situation has become one of most imminent peril. The number of artillery rounds used for harrassing fire has been reduced. Daily the division uses 115,000 gallons of gasoline (1 gallon is equal to 3.7 liters) and many times there are only 700 gallons."

Not only did the "air cavalry" division not have troops to rescue Hue but mainly because of the means and materials needed for the mobility of this "most modernly equipped" division, it was struck heavily by the Liberation Army. The American generals thought that by utilizing helicopters, they could "attain an unprecedented surprise and mobility factor" but when only their source of gasoline was cut off, this entire division with a mission of "fighting fire" was paralyzed, standing helplessly to watch their comrades being consumed by the fire of people's war and becoming burned themselves.

#### "FLYING HORSE" BECOMES CRIPPLED HORSE

Immediately following the "sky fire" calamity in Hue, the American marines fell into the awful circumstance of having more than 6,000 men detained in the "hell fire" of Khe Sanh. They called for help to the last but the American "air cavalry" troops still had not regained the normalcy to fly on the mission of rescue. Only at the end of April did the "air cavalry" dare to follow a Puppert airborne battle group gradually "crawling" to Khe Sanh. This operation, in which American generals Cushman and Rosson placed many hopes, bore the name "Flying Horse" Pegasus and was aimed at breaking the seige of Khe Sanh base. However, the groups of most modern helicopters painted with a horse head as a totally ostentatious insignia, slowly tiptoed along Route 9. They had to both move and to resist the blocking fire net and ambush positions of the liberation armed forces. Stepping through a door of the Khe Sanh base perimeter, Thompson hurriedly reported to upper echelons, "The seige of Khe Sanh has been broken!" At that time, the "air cavalry" was still suffering such heavy blows that, only a few days later, they had to swiftly flee despite the fact the American marines were being gradually killed and exhausted by the encirclement. The strange "flying hourse" became additionally lame, Route 9 was still cut, and the American "hell" in Khe Sanh returned to the situation of a solitary island in a sea of successive attack by the Liberation Army. Withdrawing to his base, General Thompson sighed, "That was truly a fearful operation!"

#### A SHAU, DONG LAM, "DARK AND MISERABLE" DAYS

Panic-stricken and confusingly carrying out the so-called "long distant blocking of an enemy attack on Hue," General Westmoreland threw the "air cavalry" into the Shau Valley. Accompanying the First "Air Cavalry" Division was the American 101st Airborne. This unit had also been equipped to form a type of new "air cavalry" unit and also suffered heavy continuous blows. Perhaps the American commanders hoped that through this "far leaping" operation,

the First "Air Cavalry" could save part of its "prestige." However, unexpectedly on the very first day of 19 April, before the ready and deployed fire net of the Liberation Army, the American air mobile troops were dealt a dizzying blow: 34 helicopters were downed in the battle and more than 300 "air cavalymen" were killed. Three-star General Rosson, commander of the Provisional Corps, and in direct command of the operation, panic-strickenly cried, "I have never lost such a large number of helicopters. Up to the present time, this is the hottest spot we have ever entered." Commenting on this incident, the English news agency Reuters stated, "This is the blackest day in the history of the air cavalry division since it arrived in Vietnam during September of 1965."

However, there was not only one day but a whole string of continuously black days for them. Although only stating part of the truth, the English correspondents transmitted the news that "By 29 April, at least 50 helicopters and two heavy transport C130 aircraft were shot down by the Viet Cong." Immediately afterwards, the operational bases, artillery emplacements, and field helicopter pads of the First "Air Cavalry" Division were struck continuously by the Liberation Army. Faced with the new heavy losses of the "air cavalry," General Cushman, commander of the American forces in the five northern provinces, sat in Da Nang and trickily hedged with half-truths, "We may leave that place (the A Shau Valley) and we also may stay." However, they did not dare remain. On 15 May, after losing more than 2,000 men and nearly 200 helicopters, the First "Air Cavalry" abandoned A Shau in a disorderly manner and returned to its base. However, only five days later on the night of 20-21 May, the Liberation Army attacked, dealing them a heavy blow right in their lair at Dong Lam. More than 150 aircraft were destroyed and many fuel dumps, ammunition dumps, and barracks burned furiously for eight continuous hours.

Thus, in a space of 31 days (from 19 April to 20 May 1968), nearly 350 helicopters of the "air cavalry" were finished, four-fifths of all the aircraft in the division's table of organization. Since then, Thompson is not seen taking his troops to "fight fire" in the Tri-Thien area anymore. They think these are "extremely dangerous tasks." Nearly all of the activities of this mobile division were only round and round the base to guard itself in order to refit and reorganize its ranks.

#### PRESENTLY BREAKING WINGS IN THE DANGEROUS TAY NINH JUNGLE

During the last days of October and the first part of November, the First "Air Cavalry" Division was suddenly directed in one shot by General "Honest" Abrams from the far north to the far south of the battlefield. The American command confessed their passive defense situation: "The transfer of the First "Air Cavalry" Division from Tri-Thien to the northwestern Saigon area is aimed at coping with the communist troops in the three provinces with the most serious situation: Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuoc Long." The "tropical lightning" division was routed in Tay Ninh; hundreds of American battalions were scattered in circle upon circle but Saigon was still fearfully threatened. Abrams therefore was forced to foolhardily pull the First "Air Cavalry" from the hot area of the north to have additional troops in the South. This

was a troop transfer without trumpets and drums. Only after 10 days did Abrams dare to publicly announce the news. They imagined that with this stealthy move, they would at least win a few moments of surprise and avoid being struck.

However, in the very first days the dangerous Tay Ninh jungle "greeted" the American "air cavalry" in a fairly "appropriate" manner.

On 6 November (while the Americans were still hiding the news of the transfer), in their first clash with the local troops of Tay Ninh at Suoi Ngo stream, 180 "air cavalrymen" were killed (including one captain). Only on the following morning did they dare to pick up the bodies and they lost an additional platoon with three helicopters shot down on the spot.

On the following days, their units dared not grope out of their fortifications, remaining motionless within the bases. However, on the night of 13-14 November, the Tay Ninh Liberation Army, manifesting their glorious momentum of victory, attacked their base at Soc Con Trang. Although there were many blockhouses of reinforced concrete, many rows of armored vehicles, and covering barbed wire, both the "air cavalry" command post and a company were destroyed.

Two days later on the morning of 16 November, an "air cavalry" battalion stationed northeast of Thien Ngon was struck a thunderous blow. After 50 minutes of weak resistance, this entire battalion was wiped out.

Thus, in only their first ten days (from 6 to 16 November) in the Eastern Nambo area, one base command post, one battalion, four companies, and two platoons of the First "Air Cavalry" Division were destroyed by the army and people of Tay Ninh and 28 aircraft were also smashed to bits.

Tay Ninh therefore has begun to break the wings of the First "Air Cavalry!"

This American mobile unit originally formed for "lightning attack" is presently being torn into small pieces to carry out a defensive mission over a widespread position filled with danger. With their most modern helicopters, they became mayflies flying into the glorious fiery land of Eastern Nambo which had already incinerated the Junction City Operation and burned the American "tropical lightning" troops, a road section of their coming fate which can be no different.

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