

SEVEN FIREFIGHTS



IN VIETNAM

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CE OF THE CHIEF OF MILITARY HISTORY
UNITED STATES ARMY

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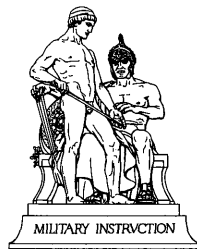
by

John Albright

John A. Cash

and

Allan W. Sandstrum



*OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF MILITARY HISTORY
UNITED STATES ARMY
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Foreword

The military actions that have occurred in the war in Vietnam are as diverse as the geography of the land. To represent the actions described in this small volume as typical is to ignore that diversity: they are, at best, representative, their selection in large measure dictated by the availability of detailed source material. The events are nevertheless illustrative of much that has taken place in Vietnam since American troops were first committed in force in 1965: of heroic achievement and sacrifice, of human error, of experimentation and innovation, of a wily and elusive enemy, of a new dimension in warfare afforded by the helicopter.

To the American public, these accounts will serve as a preliminary record of the achievements of men who served their nation well, a preface to a full military history of the war that is already in preparation. To the soldiers who took part in the actions, the narratives will afford an opportunity to see more clearly, beyond the fog of battle, what happened to them as individuals and as groups. To those who still may have to fight in Vietnam, the accounts will provide a measure of vicarious experience, which is the true service of history.

Washington, D.C.
25 March 1970

HAL C. PATTISON
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

The Authors

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Preface

These accounts of fighting in Vietnam are based upon official U.S. Army records—daily journals, journal files, and after action reports; upon interviews conducted soon after the events by historical officers in Vietnam; and upon interviews and correspondence conducted later by the authors themselves. Although no documentation is included in the published work, a fully annotated copy of the manuscript is on file in the Office of the Chief of Military History.

The editor for the volume was Loretto C. Stevens; the copy editor, Barbara J. Harris. Photographs were selected, with the assistance of the authors, by Ruth A. Phillips. Maps were prepared in the office of The Adjutant General. The painting on the front cover is the work of Spec. 4 Paul Rickert; on the back cover, the work of Pfc. Alexander A. Bogdonovich. The undersigned exercised general supervision over the preparation of the studies.

Washington, D.C.
25 March 1970

CHARLES B. MACDONALD
Deputy Chief Historian for Southeast Asia

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All illustrations are from Department of Defense files except the following: the pictures on pages 21, 25, 38, 40, which are reproduced with the permission of the Associated Press; the pictures on pages 51 and 53, furnished by Capt. George E. Kinback; and the picture on page 107, furnished by Lt. Col. James H. Johnson.

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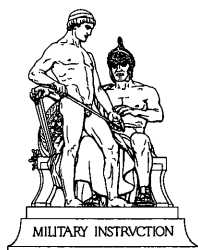
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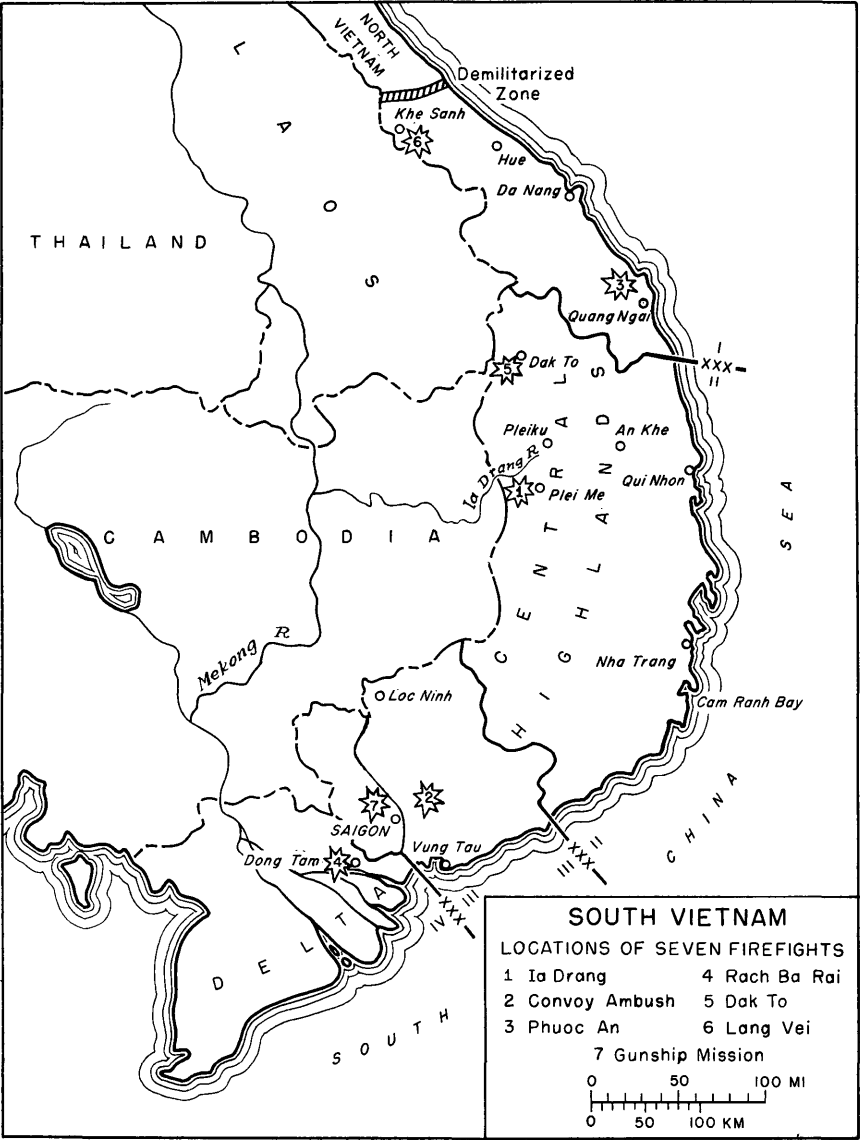
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SEVEN FIREFIGHTS IN VIETNAM



MAP 1

1

Fight at Ia Drang

by

John A. Cash

Up to the fall of 1965 the fighting by U.S. troops in Vietnam had been characterized, for the most part, by hit-and-run counterinsurgency operations against Viet Cong irregulars. It was during the week before Thanksgiving, amidst the scrub brush and stunted trees of the Ia Drang River valley in the western sector of Pleiku Province along the Cambodian border, that the war changed drastically. For the first time regular North Vietnamese regiments, controlled by a division-size headquarters, engaged in a conventional contest with U.S. forces. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), took the lead in this battle. (*Map 1*)

North Vietnamese General Chu Huy Man's Western Highlands Field Front headquarters had conceived a bold plan for operations in the Central Highlands of the Republic of Vietnam. To be carried out in the fall of 1965 and designated the Tay Nguyen Campaign, the enemy plan called for an offensive against the western plateau encompassing Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and Phu Bon Provinces. It specified the destruction of Special Forces camps at Plei Me, Dak Sut, and Duc Co, the annihilation of the Le Thanh District headquarters, and the seizure of the city of Pleiku. Assault forces included the 32d and 66th North Vietnamese Army Regiments.

By the end of October, following an unsuccessful attempt to capture the Plei Me Special Forces Camp, the 32d and 33d Regiments were being pursued by units of the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade in the Pleiku area. The American forces had deployed westward from the division base camp at An Khe when the Plei Me Camp was threatened and for twelve days had engaged in intensive search and destroy as well as reconnaissance in force operations, most of them involving fierce fighting and most of them successful.

On 9 November the 1st Brigade was relieved by the 3d, known as the Garry Owen Brigade. This name was a matter of no small pride

to the troopers of the 3d Brigade. Originally a Gaelic song once sung by the Irish Lancers, Garry Owen was adopted by the 7th Cavalry Regiment of Lt. Col. George A. Custer during the American Indian wars in the nineteenth century. A mark of the *esprit* of the 7th Cavalry, the name and new words to the song came to Vietnam with the brigade. The 3d's forces consisted of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 7th Cavalry, joined for this operation by the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry.

Concerned that the North Vietnamese might slip away entirely, Maj. Gen. Harry W. O. Kinnard, the 1st Cavalry Division commander, directed Col. Thomas W. Brown, the 3d Brigade commander, to employ his units south and southeast of Plei Me. Colonel Brown, a tall, lean officer, well schooled in airmobile techniques and with plenty of experience in infantry tactics, began on 10 November to press the search vigorously with squad and platoon saturation patrolling.

When three days of patrolling turned up few North Vietnamese, General Kinnard ordered Colonel Brown to search westward toward the Cambodian border. Anxious to engage an enemy that was proving to be more and more elusive, Brown focused his attention on the densely wooded area south of the Ia Drang River at the base of the Chu Pong massif, a rugged mountain mass straddling the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

To Brown the prospect of finding the enemy near the banks of the slowly meandering Ia Drang River seemed good. This sector had been a bastion of the Viet Minh who earlier had fought the French in Indochina. And during a recent intelligence briefing Brown had seen on the G-2 situation map a big red star indicating a probable major base for at least one North Vietnamese regiment, which could be using it as a way station for soldiers infiltrating South Vietnam. Friendly troops, furthermore, had not been in this area for some time. If his efforts failed, Colonel Brown planned to search farther south, even closer to the Cambodian border.

On 10 November General Chu Huy Man, undismayed by his heavy losses in the failure at Plei Me, decided to try again on 16 November. The staging area his headquarters selected in preparation for the new attack included the very terrain Colonel Brown had chosen to search.

The 33d North Vietnamese Army Regiment, originally a 2,200-man fighting force, had lost 890 killed, 100 missing, and 500 wounded during the Plei Me debacle. It now began reorganizing its meager ranks into a single composite battalion in the valley between the Ia Drang River and Hill 542, the most prominent peak of Chu Pong in this area. Thirteen kilometers westward on the northern bank of the Ia Drang was the 32d North Vietnamese Army Regiment, still

a formidable fighting force despite some losses during the recent battle. The *force majeure* for the second enemy attempt on Plei Me Special Forces Camp was the newly arrived 66th North Vietnamese Army Regiment. By 11 November its three battalions were positioned along both banks of the Ia Drang, a few kilometers west of the 33d Regiment. Although General Chu Huy Man intended to reinforce the three regiments with a battalion each of 120-mm. mortars and 14.5-mm. twin-barrel anti-aircraft guns, both units were still on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia, en route to the staging area.

Colonel Brown's plan, meanwhile, was developing. On 13 November he directed his operations officer, Maj. Henri-Gerard ("Pete") Mallet, who until a few weeks before had been the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, executive officer, to move the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, to a new area of operations southwest of Plei Me and to prepare a fragmentary order that would put the battalion at the base of the Chu Pong peak (Hill 542) as a jump-off point for search and destroy operations in the vicinity.

On the same day Major Mallet, grease pencil in hand, outlined an area comprising roughly fifteen square kilometers on the situation map. Heretofore the search areas assigned to the infantry battalions had been color-designated. Having run out of primary colors at this point, he designated the sector, which was shaped like an artist's pallet, Area LIME.

At 1700 on the 13th Colonel Brown was with Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore, Jr., the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, commander, at his Company A command post south of Plei Me. He told Moore to execute an airmobile assault into the Ia Drang valley north of the Chu Pong peak early the next morning and to conduct search and destroy operations through 15 November. Although the brigade had been allocated 24 helicopters a day, Colonel Brown could provide the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, with only 16 for the move because his other two battalions needed 4 each for resupply purposes and some local movement of elements of squad and platoon size. Fire support, so important to an air assault, was to be provided by two 105-mm. howitzer batteries of the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery. They would be firing from Landing Zone FALCON, nine kilometers east of the search area. One battery was to be airlifted from Plei Me to FALCON early on the 14th before the assault; the other was already in position. A note of concern in his voice, Colonel Brown reminded Moore to keep his rifle companies within supporting range of each other. Both men were sharply conscious that the battalion had yet to be tested in battle against a large enemy force.

Colonel Moore returned to his command post at Plei Me, where his headquarters soon buzzed with activity. Radioing his Company A and Company C commanders, whose troops were engaged in saturation patrolling throughout their sectors, the tall Kentuckian told them to concentrate their men at first light on 14 November at the largest pickup zones in each sector and to be ready themselves to take a look at the target area. He arranged for the helicopters to lift Company B back to Plei Me early on the morning of the 14th from brigade headquarters, twenty minutes away to the southwest. The unit had just been placed there on the evening of the 13th to secure Colonel Brown's command post and other administrative and logistical facilities. Setting 0830 the following morning as the time for issuing the order, which would be preceded by a reconnaissance flight, Moore continued supervising preparations until by 2200 everything had been accomplished that could be done before the aerial reconnaissance.

That night before going to bed Colonel Moore reviewed his plan and decided on a fresh approach for this operation. Instead of setting down each company on a separate landing zone as he had been doing for the past few days, he would use one landing zone for the entire battalion. His whole force would then be available if he encountered the enemy on landing. Although American units had not engaged a sizable enemy force for some time, the big red star designating a possible enemy base that both he and Colonel Brown had seen on the map loomed large in his mind.

Colonel Moore considered his assets. Firepower would be no problem. The 21st Artillery, tactical air, and gunships had given him excellent support in previous operations, and he knew that Colonel Brown would provide additional fire support if he needed it.

The manpower situation was somewhat different. Of the twenty-three officers authorized for his three rifle companies and one combat support company, twenty were available and practically all had been with the battalion since air assault testing days at Fort Benning, Georgia. In the enlisted ranks the scene was less encouraging, for the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, would be at only two-thirds strength. During the unit's first two months in Vietnam, malaria and individual service terminations had taken their toll. At the moment, 8 to 10 men from the battalion were in transit for rest and recuperation, and each company had kept 3 to 5 men each back at Camp Radcliff, the An Khe permanent base camp, for various reasons—minor illness, guard duty, administrative retention, base camp development. Colonel Moore was not unduly concerned, however, for he had accomplished previous search and destroy missions with approxi-

mately the same numbers. Besides, rarely did any commander field a unit at 100 percent strength.

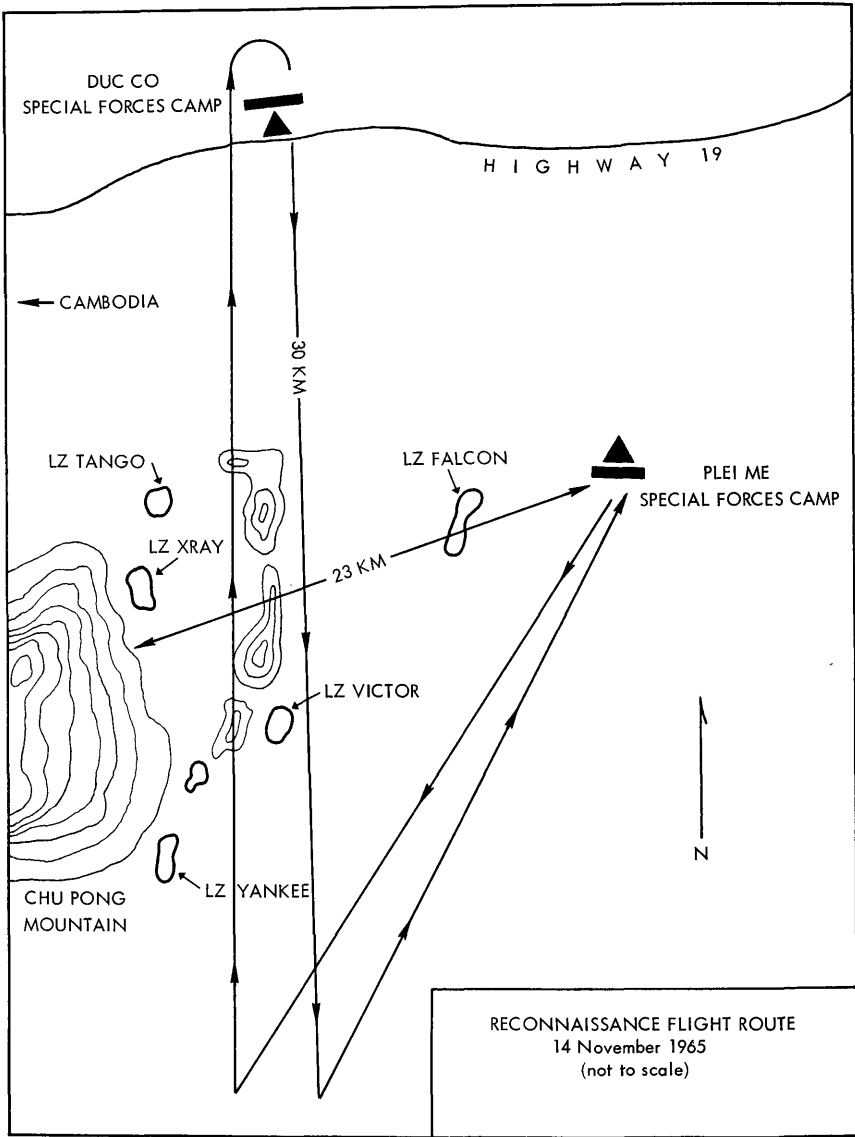
The 14th dawned bright and clear and by 0630 Company B had been lifted to Plei Me from brigade headquarters by CH-47 Chinook helicopters. Since it had already been assembled in one location, Colonel Moore had selected Company B to land first.

While he supervised preparations, Capt. John D. Herren, Company B commander, chewed on his pipe and thought of the impending operation. He and his men had gone without sleep the night before, having had to cope with an understandably jittery brigade command post. A few minutes before midnight on the 12th the post had been attacked by a local Viet Cong force that killed seven men and wounded twenty-three. Herren could only trust that the lack of rest would have little effect on the fighting ability of his men.

Amid a deafening roar of helicopters, the reconnaissance party assembled. The ships, finished with Herren's company, had begun to move Battery A, 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, to FALCON, where it would join Battery C as planned. Standing there to hear Colonel Moore were the Company B, Company D, and headquarters company commanders; a scout section leader from Troop C, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry; the commander of Company A, 229th Aviation Battalion (Airmobile), Maj. Bruce P. Crandall; and the battalion S-3, Capt. Gregory P. Dillon. Moore briefed the group on the battalion's mission, the flight route, and what to look for. Then, using two UH-1D Huey helicopters and escorted by two UH-1B gunships, the reconnaissance party departed.

Flying at 2,500 feet and following a pattern that would both provide some deception and allow for maximum viewing of the target area, the four helicopters headed southwest to a point about eight kilometers southeast of the Ia Drang River. Then they turned and flew due north to Duc Co where they circled for five minutes, reversed course, and by 0815 returned to Plei Me. (*Map 2*)

Once on the ground, the members of the party discussed possible landing zones to be chosen from open areas observed during the flight. While they were debating, the brigade fragmentary order, which specified Area LIME as the primary zone of interest, arrived. Within a few minutes the choice narrowed to three landing zones: TANGO, X-RAY, and YANKEE. Colonel Moore wanted the largest site available, one that would not unduly restrict the helicopters. This ruled out TANGO as inadequate. Surrounded by tall trees, it could accommodate three, perhaps four, Hueys at most, or half a rifle platoon. Both YANKEE and X-RAY seemed likely choices, for either could take eight to ten ships at a time; at least a platoon and a half



MAP 2

could be put on the ground at the start, that most crucial of all moments during an airmobile assault. Announcing X-RAY as his tentative choice, Colonel Moore turned to the scout section leader from the 9th Cavalry and instructed him to fly another reconnaissance mission at “nap-of-the-earth” level along the Ia Drang valley. He was to obtain more details about X-RAY, YANKEE, and the surrounding terrain and to look for any signs of enemy activity.

The scout section was back in forty minutes. Although the pilots had seen several trails during their low-level flight, they had drawn no enemy fire. YANKEE, they reported, was usable but risky because it had too many high tree stumps. X-RAY, they confirmed, could easily take eight to ten ships, and just a few hundred meters north of it they had seen communications wire stretched along an east-west trail. This last bit of intelligence was all Colonel Moore needed. X-RAY was to be the primary site, with YANKEE and TANGO as alternates to be used only on his order.

By this time it was 0855 and with the planning completed Colonel Moore reassembled the company commanders, his staff, and representatives of supporting forces to hear his order.

According to the latest available intelligence, an enemy battalion was located five kilometers northwest of X-RAY. Another hostile force of undetermined size was probably just southwest of the landing zone itself, and a secret base was believed to be three kilometers to the northwest. To develop these targets, Moore explained, the 1st Battalion was going to make an air assault into X-RAY, then search for and destroy enemy forces, concentrating on stream beds and wooded high ground. The low-level reconnaissance had no doubt alerted any enemy in the area. To keep the enemy guessing up to the last as to where an actual landing would occur, the 21st Artillery was to fire an 8-minute diversionary preparation on YANKEE and TANGO. This was to be followed by a 20-minute rain of fire on X-RAY, with emphasis on the slopes of a finger with a contiguous draw that jutted out from Chu Pong just northwest of X-RAY. Gunships of the 2d Battalion, 20th Artillery (Aerial Rocket) (Airmobile), were to follow the tube artillery barrage for thirty seconds with rocket and machine gun fire, after which the escort gunships of Company A, 229th Aviation Battalion, were to sweep the area.

Using sixteen Hueys, Herren's Company B was to follow close on the heels of the fire preparation, land, and secure X-RAY, followed in turn and on order by Companies A, C, and D. Once on the ground Companies A and B were to assemble in attack formation just off the north and northeastern sectors of X-RAY, prepared to search east or northeast on order, with Company A on the right. Designated at first as the reserve force, Company C was upon landing to assume the security mission from Company B on order with a "be prepared" task to move west and northwest, searching the lower portion of Chu Pong. If Company C did hit anything, Moore reasoned, at least he would have his entire force readily available as a backup. Company B had priority of fire at the start, but once the westward push from X-RAY began the priority was shifted to Company A.



TRANSPORT HELICOPTERS LANDING INFANTRYMEN

Colonel Moore directed each rifle company to bring one 81-mm. mortar tube and a maximum ammunition load and Company D to bring its three tubes. When all companies had closed at X-RAY, their mortars were to revert to control of the Company D mortar platoon.

Just as he completed his briefing, Colonel Moore learned that the artillery was in position. Setting 1030 as touchdown time at X-RAY for the air assault, with the 20-minute artillery preparatory fires to be completed by H minus 1 minute, Moore knew that it would be a split-second affair.

For this mission the troops of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, would be well prepared. Standing operating procedure dictated that each rifleman carry at least 300 rounds of M16 ammunition, and each grenadier was ordered to bring between two and three dozen high-explosive shells for his 40-mm. grenade launcher. Machine gun crews were to transport at least 800 rounds of linked 7.62-mm. ammunition, and every man was to have no less than two M26 fragmentation grenades. There were to be at least two 66-mm. M72 light assault weapons per squad and five to six smoke grenades in each platoon. Every soldier was to carry one C ration meal and two canteens of water, as well as an ample supply of intrenching tools and machetes.

Colonel Brown arrived as Moore finished giving the order and Moore briefed him separately. The brigade commander liked the tactical plan, agreed with the selection of X-RAY as the primary landing zone, and was satisfied that Moore's concept of the operation followed the guidance he had given him the previous afternoon.

At 1017, after a brief delay resulting from the too hasty positioning of the artillery pieces at FALCON, the preparatory fires began. Thirteen minutes later the leading elements of Company B lifted off the Plei Me airstrip with a thunderous roar in a storm of red dust. With volleys of artillery fire slamming into the objective area, the sixteen Hueys—four platoons of four each—filed southwestward across the midmorning sky at two thousand feet. Two kilometers out, they dropped to treetop level. The aerial rocket artillery gunships meanwhile worked X-RAY over for thirty seconds, expending half of their loads, then circled nearby, available on call. The 229th's escort gunships came next, rockets and machine guns blazing, immediately ahead of the lift ships. As the lead helicopters braked for the assault landing, their door gunners and some of the infantrymen fired into the trees and tall grass.

Lunging from the ships, the men of Company B, Colonel Moore among them, charged into the trees, snap-firing at likely enemy positions. By 1048 the helicopters were already returning to Plei Me for the rest of Company B and advance contingents of Company A.

Relatively flat and open as seen from above, X-RAY took on a different appearance when viewed by the infantryman on the ground. Ringed by sparse scrub brush with occasional trees ranging upward to a hundred feet, the landing zone was covered with hazel-colored, willowy elephant grass as high as five feet, ideal for the concealment of crawling soldiers. Interspersed throughout were anthills, some considerably taller than a standing man, all excellent as crew-served weapons positions. Along the western and northeastern edges of the landing zone the trees were especially thick and extended up the slopes of Chu Pong peak, which was 542 meters high and whose thick vegetation offered good concealment for enemy troops. A dry creek bed with waist-high banks ran along the western edge of the landing zone.

Captain Herren watched with satisfaction as his 1st Platoon leader, 2d Lt. Alan E. Deveny, went about the business of securing the landing zone. In line with orders from Colonel Moore, Herren was using a new technique. Rather than attempt a 360-degree perimeter coverage of the entire area as in previous operations, Herren concealed most of his force in a clump of trees and tall grass near the center of the landing zone as a reaction striking force, while Deveny's squads struck out in different directions, reconnoitering

the terrain fifty to a hundred meters from the western side of X-RAY. A sound technique, it allowed Captain Herren to conserve his forces while he retained a flexible option, which, in view of the 30-minute turnaround flight time for the rest of the battalion, appeared prudent.

As Lieutenant Deveny's soldiers pressed the search, Herren became fully convinced that if there was to be a fight the proximity of X-RAY to the enemy haven across the Cambodian border made X-RAY the likely site. Yet the leading elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, had landed successfully and were thus far unopposed.

Where was the enemy?

The helicopter landing had been spotted. Although elements of the North Vietnamese units that had been scheduled to participate in the 16 November Plei Me attack had left their Ia Drang valley staging areas at dawn the morning of 14 November, the landing of Captain Herren's infantrymen in X-RAY a few hours later had prompted General Chu Huy Man to change course swiftly. Plei Me would have to wait. The 66th and 33d Regiments would attack the landing zone and destroy the Americans. By noon two battalions of the 66th and the newly formed composite battalion of the 33d were preparing for the assault from positions at the base of Chu Pong and the low ground immediately to the west.

At X-RAY the 1st Platoon, Company B, continued to probe. At 1120 Lieutenant Deveny's troops made a discovery: searching the brush, a rifleman surprised an enemy soldier only fifty meters from the landing zone. The North Vietnamese tried to lose himself in the thicket, but the Americans soon captured him. He was unarmed, dressed in trousers and a dirty khaki shirt with a serial number on one of the epaulets, and carried only an empty canteen.

Notified of the catch, Colonel Moore rushed to the spot with his intelligence officer, Capt. Thomas C. Metsker, and his Montagnard interpreter, a Mr. Nik. Questioning the prisoner, they learned that he was a deserter from the North Vietnamese Army and had been subsisting on bananas for five days. He declared that three North Vietnamese battalions were on Chu Pong mountain, anxious to kill Americans but as yet unable to find them.

Elated but cautious, for getting the rest of the battalion in quickly and safely was now doubly important, Colonel Moore told Captain Herren to intensify his search and prepare to assume Company C's mission of exploring the terrain at the foot of Chu Pong, giving special attention to the finger and draw to the northwest. Moore radioed his S-3, Captain Dillon, who was circling the landing zone in the command helicopter, to land and pick up the

prisoner and fly him back to 3d Brigade headquarters for additional interrogation.

Hardly had Moore given Herren his mission when the commander of Company A, Capt. Ramon A. Nadal II, reported. A former Special Forces officer on a second Vietnam tour, Nadal begged permission for his company to follow the lead opened up by Company B's find. Moore had already given the job to Herren, whose men now knew the terrain and were tensed for an approaching fight; he told Nadal to assume the mission of providing security for the landing zone.

For the move northwest Captain Herren directed Lieutenant Deveny's 1st Platoon toward the finger, with 2d Lt. Henry T. Herrick's 2d Platoon on the right. He told both officers to advance abreast. Positioning 2d Lt. Dennis J. Deal's 3d Platoon behind the 1st as a reserve, Captain Herren and his company moved out.

Deveny got ahead of Herrick's platoon after crossing the dry creek bed which ran along the eastern flank of the finger. At 1245 his platoon encountered an enemy force of about platoon size which attacked both his flanks with small arms fire. Pinned down and suffering casualties, he asked for help. Captain Herren, in an attempt to relieve the pressure, radioed Lieutenant Herrick to establish contact with the 1st Platoon's right flank.

Anxious to develop the situation, Herrick maneuvered his 27-man force in that direction. A few minutes after Herren issued the order, the point of Herrick's 2d Platoon bumped into a squad of North Vietnamese soldiers moving toward X-RAY along a well-used trail, parallel to the platoon's direction of advance. The startled enemy turned and scurried back along the trail; firing, the 2d Platoon followed in close pursuit, with two squads forward. The platoon soon began to receive sporadic but ineffective enfilade fire from the right. The lead squads were now at the crest of the finger, about a hundred meters from the dry creek bed. To the right and farther downhill was the 3d Squad.

Lieutenant Herrick intended to continue his sweep, with all three squads on the line and machine guns on the flanks. Although he could no longer see the enemy soldiers, he knew that they were somewhere in front of him. He was about to give the signal to continue when men in his 3d Squad spotted about twenty North Vietnamese scrambling toward two large anthills off the platoon's left flank. As the last of the enemy disappeared behind the anthills, the 3d Squad opened fire. The North Vietnamese returned it, but a 3d Squad grenadier found the range and in less than a minute was pumping round after round into their ranks. Screams mingled with the sound of the explosions.

Without warning, a blistering volley of enemy fire suddenly erupted from the right flank. The opening fusillade killed the grenadier and pinned down the rest of the squad.

Deploying his two M60 machine guns toward the harassed force, Herrick yelled to the 3d Squad leader, S. Sgt. Clyde E. Savage, to pull back under covering fire of the machine guns. Yet even as the gunners moved into firing position and Herrick radioed word of his predicament to his company commander, the situation grew worse. Within a few minutes fire was lashing the entire 3d Platoon from all sides. Covered by the blazing M60's, Sergeant Savage managed to withdraw his squad toward the platoon, carrying the M79 of the dead grenadier, who lay sprawled where he had fallen, a .45-caliber pistol clutched in his right hand. Amid increasingly heavy fire of all calibers, including mortars and rockets, the squad reached the main body of the platoon and joined the other men in hastily forming a 25-meter perimeter.

The machine gunners were less fortunate in making their way into the perimeter. Although the closer team managed to disengage and crawl into the small circle of prone infantrymen, enemy fire cut down all four in the other team. Seizing the fallen team's M60, the North Vietnamese turned it against Herrick's positions.

Except for the artillery forward observer, 1st Lt. William O. Riddle, who soon caught up with Lieutenant Deal, Captain Herren and his command group had dropped behind the leading platoons while Herren radioed a situation report to Colonel Moore. To the Company B commander, who could hear the firefight going on in the jungle ahead, the enemy appeared to be in two-company strength and fully capable of cutting off Lieutenant Herrick's 2d Platoon. Yet Captain Herren had few resources to turn to Herrick's assistance. Already he had committed his 3d Platoon to go to the aid of Lieutenant Deveny, and the company's lone 81-mm. mortar was in action, making quick work of the meager forty rounds of high-explosive ammunition the crew had brought to the landing zone.

Since Deveny appeared to be less closely engaged than Herrick, Captain Herren ordered him to try to reach Herrick. If Deal's force could reach Deveny soon enough, together they stood a good chance of reaching Herrick.

Having reported the action to Colonel Moore, Captain Herren turned from his radio just in time to see a North Vietnamese soldier not more than fifteen meters away with a weapon trained on him. Rapidly, Herren fired a burst from his M16, ducked for cover, and tossed a grenade.

Off to his left, Herren could just make out men crouched in the dry stream bed, firing toward the finger. Believing them to be mem-

bers of his 3d Platoon and anxious to get them linked up with his 1st Platoon, he headed toward them.

At the landing zone Colonel Moore had meanwhile alerted Captain Nadal to be prepared to assist Herren as soon as Company C was on the ground. The heavy firefight had barely commenced when Company A's last platoon and the lead forces of Company C landed. It was 1330. A few rounds of enemy 60-mm. and 81-mm. mortar fire slammed into the tall elephant grass in the center of the landing zone as Colonel Moore turned to Nadal and ordered him to rush a platoon to Herren to be used in getting through to Herrick. Captain Nadal was to follow with his remaining two platoons and link up with Company B's left flank. Colonel Moore then turned to Capt. Robert H. Edwards, who had just landed with some of his troops, and directed him to set up a blocking position to the south and southwest of X-RAY, just inside the tree line, where he could cover Company A's exposed left flank. Moore knew that this was a risky move because he had only Company D left as a reaction force and still had to defend an entire landing zone in all directions. By this positioning of Edwards' company he would be exposing his rear, but in the light of the rapidly developing situation, which bore out what the prisoner had told him, it seemed the only sensible thing to do.

The S-3, Captain Dillon, had by now returned from brigade headquarters and was hovering above X-RAY, relaying the course of the battle to Colonel Brown's headquarters.

Colonel Moore had established his command post near a prominent anthill in the center of the landing zone. He radioed Dillon to request air strikes, artillery, and aerial rocket fire, starting on the lower fringes of the Chu Pong slopes and then working first over the western and then over the southern enemy approaches to X-RAY. Secondary targets would be the draws leading down from the mountain and any suspected or sighted enemy mortar positions. Priority was to be given to requests for fire from the fighting companies.

Dillon passed the fire requests to Capt. Jerry E. Whiteside, the 21st Artillery liaison officer, and Lt. Charles Hastings, the Air Force forward air controller, who were seated beside him. A few minutes later, Pleiku-based aircraft were blasting the target area, and two strikes were made on the valley floor to the northwest, near the suspected location of the enemy battalion.

Although the artillery also responded quickly, the fire was at first ineffective. Since there were no well-defined terrain features that could be used as reference points to the fighting troops, now hidden by a heavy pall of dust and smoke that hung in the air, it was hard to pinpoint locations for close-in support. Aware of the

difficulty, Colonel Moore radioed Whiteside to use the technique of "walking" the fires down the mountain toward the landing zone from the south and the west, and fires were soon close enough to aid some of the embattled infantrymen.

Anxious to assist Company B, Captain Nadal radioed his 2d Platoon leader, 2d Lt. Walter J. Marm, to move forward. Marm formed his platoon into a skirmish line and started out immediately from the landing zone toward the sound of the firing. Since there was no time to consult with Captain Herren, Lieutenant Marm planned to join the Company B left flank and push through to Lieutenant Herrick's perimeter. No sooner had he crossed the dry creek bed when two North Vietnamese appeared before his platoon and surrendered. A few moments later, just as he reached Deal's 3d Platoon, troops of both units spotted a force of khaki-clad enemy soldiers moving across their front, left to right. Both Deal and Marm had apparently met the left enveloping pincer which had initially flanked Herrick and which was now attempting, it seemed, to surround all of Company B. A fierce firefight ensued, both sides taking casualties. The enemy soldiers then peeled off to the left, breaking contact momentarily and, unknown to Marm, trying to maneuver behind Marm via the dry creek bed.

Taking advantage of the lull, Marm collected all of his and Deal's wounded and ordered one of his squad leaders, S. Sgt. Lonnie L. Parker, to take them back to the landing zone. Parker tried but returned in twenty minutes to report that the platoon was surrounded. Marm doubted that the enemy could have moved that fast but he could not be sure, since enemy troops were now maneuvering to his flank also.

When the North Vietnamese of the flanking force, estimated as company size, entered the dry creek bed they ran headlong into the rest of Company A; Nadal, eager to join the fray, had moved his remaining two platoons forward. First to meet the enemy in the creek bed was the 3d Platoon. The firing was at very close range, the fighting savage. The platoon leader, 2d Lt. Robert E. Taft, going to the aid of one of his squad leaders who, unknown to Taft, was already dead, was himself hit in the throat and died instantly. Recoiling from the first shock, the men of the left half of the 3d Platoon climbed onto the creek bank where, along with the men of the 1st Platoon, they poured a murderous fire into the enemy. A seriously wounded rifleman lay near the body of Lieutenant Taft beneath the deadly cross fire.

As the firefight erupted in the dry creek bed, additional elements of Company C and the lead troopers of Company D landed at X-RAY in the first eight Hueys of the fifth airlift. They touched

down in a heavy hail of enemy small arms fire that wounded a pilot and a door gunner.

Capt. Louis R. LeFebvre, the Company D commander, in the lead helicopter, could see the air strikes and artillery fire slamming into the ground around X-RAY. Leaning forward to unhook his seat belt as the aircraft touched down, he felt a bullet crease the back of his neck. Instinctively, he turned to the right just in time to see his radio operator slump forward, still buckled in his seat, a bullet hole in the left side of his head. Grabbing the dead man's radio, LeFebvre jumped from the helicopter, told those assembled who had landed in other ships to follow, and raced for the tree line to the west, seventy-five meters away. Only four men followed him. Under fire all the way, they reached the relative safety of the dry creek bed, thirty-five meters short of the tree line.

So heavy was the fire, particularly in the northwestern area, that Colonel Moore radioed the remaining eight helicopters not to land. Sporadic rocket and mortar fire, the crash of artillery volleys, and the thunderclap of air strikes that were now ringing the small clearing blended in one continuous roar.

Captain LeFebvre heard firing in front of him and on both sides. His small group had moved into position just to the right of Company A's two platoons, which were still battling the force that had attempted to flank Marm's platoon. LeFebvre and his men joined the firing from their positions in the creek bed, their immediate targets twenty-five to thirty North Vietnamese moving to the left across their front. Soon realizing the need for more firepower, LeFebvre called for his antitank platoon (which had been reorganized into a rifle platoon) to join him. It had come in with him on the last flight and was 150 meters to his rear, assembled on the landing zone, awaiting instructions. The acting platoon leader, S. Sgt. George Gonzales, answered that he was on the way. LeFebvre then yelled to his mortar platoon leader, 1st Lt. Raul E. Requera-Taboada, who had accompanied him in the lead ship and lay a few feet away from him, to send his radio operator forward to replace the man who had been killed in the helicopter.

Just as the radio operator joined him, Captain LeFebvre looked up to see Captain Herren. The Company B commander told him that there were enemy soldiers south in the direction from which he had come. He and his radio operator took positions beside LeFebvre and began firing along with the others. In rapid succession, Herren's radio operator was killed, LeFebvre's right arm was shattered by a fusillade of enemy small arms fire, and Taboada received a bad leg wound. Herren applied a tourniquet to LeFebvre's arm and then resumed firing.

With half of the fifth lift landed, Company C had all of its troops except three Huey loads. While the Company A firefight raged, Captain Edwards, in accordance with Colonel Moore's guidance, quickly moved his platoons into a blocking position, occupying 120 meters of ground immediately adjacent to Nadal's right flank. Edwards was none too soon. A few minutes later a strong enemy force struck Company C from the southwest and west. Lying prone, the Americans put out a withering volley of fire. The North Vietnamese soldiers, estimated at a reinforced company, wore helmets and web equipment and, like those who had hit Companies A and B, were well camouflaged. With the help of well-placed air strikes and artillery fire, however, Company C held them off, killing many. The 1st Platoon managed to capture a prisoner, who was quickly evacuated.

Colonel Moore's gamble in positioning Edwards' forces south of Nadal's rather than to the north proved sound, for by the timely commitment of Companies A and C he had so far succeeded in frustrating enemy attempts to overrun the landing zone. But with his rear still exposed, he directed Edwards to tie in and co-ordinate with Company D to his left, extending the perimeter south and southeast into the brush.

Edwards found Sergeant Gonzales, who had assumed command of Company D after Captain LeFebvre had been evacuated. Leaving skeleton crews to man the mortars, together they quickly moved the antitank platoon and some of the mortar platoon alongside Company C. The reconnaissance platoon had not yet arrived.

While co-ordinating with Gonzales, Captain Edwards learned that the mortars had not been centrally organized. With Colonel Moore's approval, Edwards placed them under his own section leader's control until the battalion mortar platoon leader should arrive with his fire direction center. But the mortars were unable to provide effective fire support because smoke, noise, and confusion made it difficult for the forward observers to adjust. The intensity of the fighting increased as did the noise. Hit by heavy enemy ground fire while making a low-level firing pass over X-RAY, an A-1E Skyraider, trailing smoke and flames, crashed two kilometers northeast of the landing zone, killing the pilot. When enemy soldiers tried to reach the wreckage, helicopter gunships destroyed it with rocket fire.

By this time it was a few minutes before 1500 and, judging by reports from his companies, Colonel Moore estimated that a North Vietnamese force numbering at least 500 to 600 opposed his battalion, with more on the way. Calling Colonel Brown, he asked for another rifle company.

At brigade headquarters, Colonel Brown was following developments closely. Monitoring the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, tactical situation by radio, he had realized from the report of Company B's contact and what followed that the battalion was going to have its hands full. By 1430 he was in the air above X-RAY to see the situation for himself. Below him as the battle raged, he noticed that the artillery was firing halfway up Chu Pong. He radioed Colonel Moore to bring it in closer where it could be more effective. He did not know that Colonel Moore had arranged for the artillery to fire farther out at secondary target areas when not shooting specific close-in missions.

Convinced of the seriousness of the situation, Colonel Brown had given careful consideration to what action to take if Colonel Moore asked for help. Of his two other battalions only one company was assembled at one place—Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, whose troops had just begun to arrive at brigade headquarters for perimeter security duty. These troops were, therefore, the logical choice, and when Moore called for assistance Colonel Brown in mid-afternoon attached Company B to the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry. Another company replaced the troops as perimeter guard at brigade headquarters.

It seemed obvious to Colonel Brown as the afternoon wore on that the enemy was trying to annihilate the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry. Looking to the future, he prepared for further reinforcements. Shortly after approving the use of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, Colonel Brown called Lt. Col. Robert B. Tully, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and directed him to assemble his unit as quickly as possible at Landing Zone VICTOR, which lay three kilometers to the southeast. Since he did not relish the idea of moving a steady stream of helicopters into what might still be a hot landing zone, and since he felt certain that the enemy would expect such a maneuver and would probably be prepared to deal with it, Brown told Tully that he would move by foot to reinforce Moore's battalion at X-RAY the next morning. He then directed the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, to move to Landing Zone MACON, a few kilometers north of X-RAY, where it would be closer to the fight and available if needed.

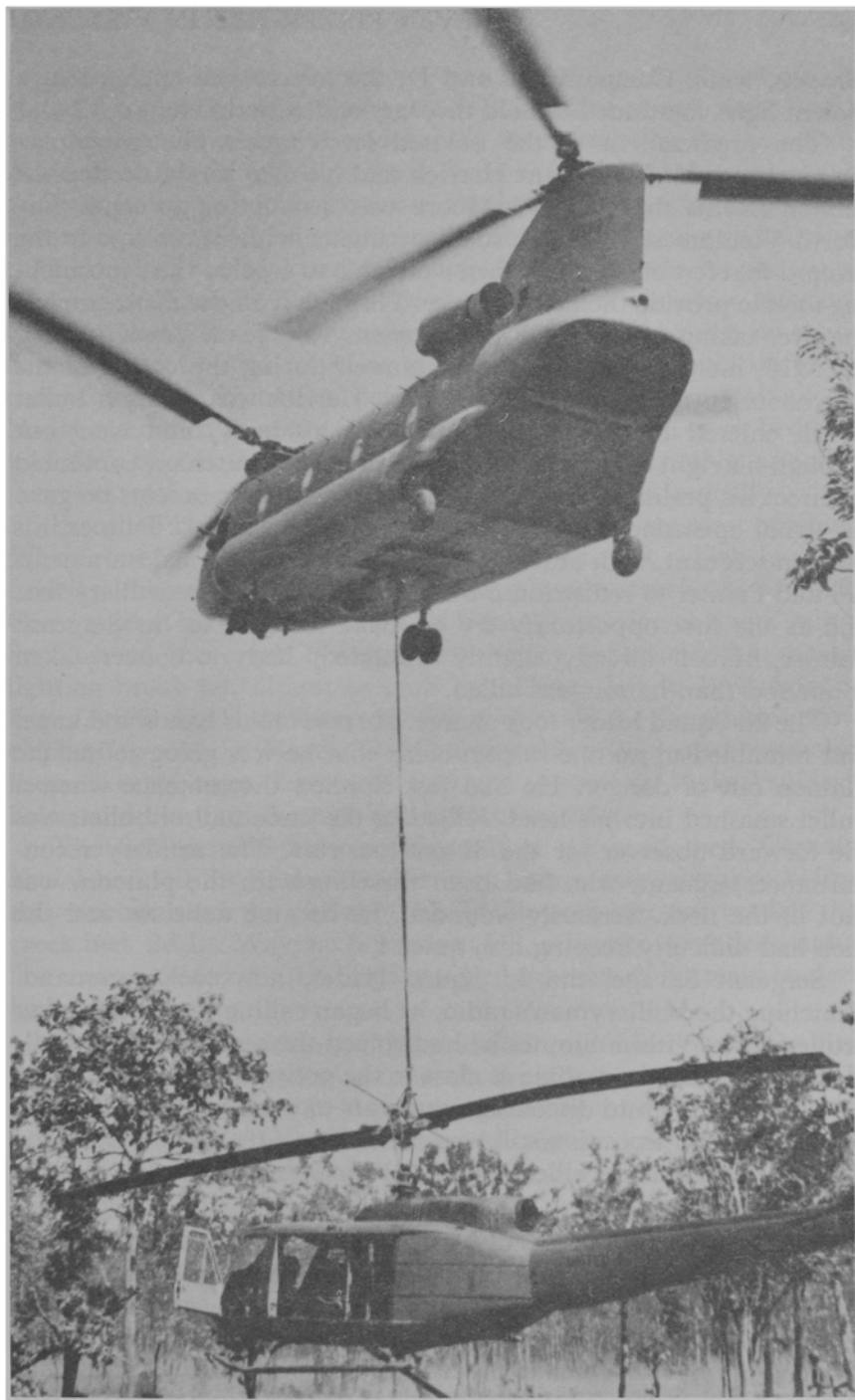
By 1500 Colonel Moore had decided that it was absolutely essential, and safe enough, for the remaining tactical elements of the 2d Battalion to land. Although the eastern sector of the perimeter was still under enemy fire, the fire had slackened considerably because of the actions of Company C and Company D. In minutes after receiving the landing order, the battalion reconnaissance platoon, Company C's three loads of troops, and the executive officer and

the first sergeant of Company D were on the ground. Colonel Moore directed 2d Lt. James L. Litton, the executive officer, to take over from Sergeant Gonzales, who had been wounded, co-ordinate all mortars in the battalion under one central fire direction center, and deploy the reconnaissance platoon around the northeastern fringe of the landing zone as a battalion reserve and to provide security in the area.

Although by this time Colonel Moore, in an attempt to minimize the ships' exposure to enemy fire, was personally directing the helicopter traffic into X-RAY, two helicopters were disabled during the landing. One received enemy fire in the engine compartment while lifting off and had to make a forced landing in an open area just off the northern edge of X-RAY. Another clipped the treetops with the main rotor blade when landing and could not be flown out. Both crews, who were uninjured, were evacuated almost immediately while the helicopters, secured by Company D troopers, awaited lift-out later. Other helicopter crews nevertheless continued to fly missions into X-RAY, exhibiting great courage and audacity under fire.

On the ground, the welfare of men who were wounded was considerably improved by the fact that four aidmen and the battalion surgeon had landed with medical supplies early in the afternoon. They had set up an emergency aid station near Moore's command post. Rather than expose medical evacuation helicopters to enemy fire, Colonel Moore arranged with the helicopter lift company commander, Major Crandall, to evacuate casualties to FALCON by loading them on departing lift ships. With the help of a pathfinder team which arrived by 1600, the system worked well.

Within a half hour after the rest of the battalion had closed into X-RAY, the forces of Company A and Company B that had been attempting to reach Lieutenant Herrick's platoon pulled back to the dry creek bed under covering artillery and mortar fire at Colonel Moore's direction, bringing their dead and wounded along. Although Company B's 1st Platoon (with 2d Lt. Kenneth E. Duncan, the company executive officer, overseeing the operation) had advanced to a point within seventy-five meters of the isolated force and had eventually linked up with the 3d Platoon, all attempts to reach Herrick had been unsuccessful. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, clearly was facing an aggressive, expertly camouflaged, and well-armed enemy force that could shoot well and was not afraid to die. Nevertheless, Colonel Moore decided to give it another try. He ordered Companies A and B to prepare for a co-ordinated attack, supported by heavy preparatory fires, to reach the beleaguered



CHINOOK RETRIEVING DOWNED HELICOPTER

platoon, while Companies C and D, the former still engaged in a violent fight, continued to hold the line on the perimeter.

The predicament of the isolated force meanwhile grew progressively worse. Lieutenant Herrick and his men sorely needed the reinforcements that Colonel Moore was attempting to send. The North Vietnamese laced the small perimeter with fire so low to the ground that few of Herrick's men were able to employ their intrenching tools to provide themselves cover. Through it all the men returned the fire, taking a heavy toll of the enemy. Sergeant Savage, firing his M16, hit twelve of the enemy himself during the course of the afternoon. In midafternoon Lieutenant Herrick was hit by a bullet which entered his hip, coursed through his body, and went out through his right shoulder. As he lay dying, the lieutenant continued to direct his perimeter defense, and in his last few moments he gave his signal operation instructions book to S. Sgt. Carl L. Palmer, his platoon sergeant, with orders to burn it if capture seemed imminent. He told Palmer to redistribute the ammunition, call in artillery fire, and at the first opportunity try to make a break for it. Sergeant Palmer, himself already slightly wounded, had no sooner taken command than he too was killed.

The 2d Squad leader took charge. He rose on his hands and knees and mumbled to no one in particular that he was going to get the platoon out of danger. He had just finished the sentence when a bullet smashed into his head. Killed in the same hail of bullets was the forward observer for the 81-mm. mortar. The artillery reconnaissance sergeant, who had been traveling with the platoon, was shot in the neck. Seriously wounded, he became delirious and the men had difficulty keeping him quiet.

Sergeant Savage, the 3d Squad leader, now took command. Snatching the artilleryman's radio, he began calling in and adjusting artillery fire. Within minutes he had ringed the perimeter with well-placed concentrations, some as close to the position as twenty meters. The fire did much to discourage attempts to overrun the perimeter, but the platoon's position still was precarious. Of the 27 men in the platoon, 8 had been killed and 12 wounded, leaving less than a squad of effectives.

After the first unsuccessful attempt to rescue the isolated force, Company B's two remaining platoons had returned to the creek bed where they met Captain Herren. Lieutenants Deveny and Deal listened intently as their company commander explained that an artillery preparation would precede the two-company assault that Colonel Moore planned. Lieutenant Riddle, the company's artillery forward observer, would direct the fire. The platoons would then advance abreast from the dry creek bed.

The creek bed was also to serve as a line of departure for Captain Nadal's company. The Company A soldiers removed their packs and received an ammunition resupply in preparation for the move. Aside from the danger directly in front of him, Nadal believed the greatest threat would come from the left, toward Chu Pong, and accordingly he planned to advance with his company echeloned in that direction, the 2d Platoon leading, followed by the 1st and 3d in that order. Since he was unsure of the trapped platoon's location, Captain Nadal decided to guide on Company B. If he met no significant resistance after traveling a short distance, he would shift to a company wedge formation. Before embarking on his formidable task, Nadal assembled as many of his men as possible in the creek bed and told them that an American platoon was cut off, in trouble, and that they were going after it. The men responded enthusiastically.

Preceded by heavy artillery and aerial rocket fire, most of which fell as close as 250 meters in front of Company B, which had fire priority, the attack to reach the cutoff platoon struck out at 1620, Companies A and B abreast. Almost from the start it was rough going. So close to the creek bed had the enemy infiltrated that heavy fighting broke out almost as soon as the men left it. Well camouflaged, their khaki uniforms blending in with the brownish-yellow elephant grass, the North Vietnamese soldiers had also concealed themselves in trees, burrowed into the ground to make "spider" holes, and dug into the tops and sides of anthills.

The first man in his company out of the creek bed, Captain Nadal had led his 1st and 2d Platoons only a short distance before they encountered the enemy. The 3d Platoon had not yet left the creek bed. 2d Lt. Wayne O. Johnson fell, seriously wounded, and a few moments later a squad leader yelled that one of his team leaders had been killed.

Lieutenant Marm's men forged ahead until enemy machine gun fire, which seemed to come from an anthill thirty meters to their front, stopped them. Deliberately exposing himself in order to pinpoint the exact enemy location, Marm fired an M72 antitank round at the earth mound. He inflicted some casualties, but the enemy fire still continued. Figuring that it would be a simple matter to dash up to the position and toss a grenade behind it, he motioned to one of his men to do so. At this point the noise and confusion was such that a sergeant near him interpreted the gesture as a command to throw one from his position. He tossed and the grenade fell short. Disregarding his own safety, Marm dashed quickly across the open stretch of ground and hurled the grenade into the position, killing some of the enemy soldiers behind it and finishing off the dazed survivors with his M16. Soon afterward he took a bullet in the face

and had to be evacuated. (For this action he received the Medal of Honor.)

Captain Nadal watched the casualties mount as his men attempted to inch forward. All of his platoon leaders were dead or wounded and his artillery forward observer had been killed. Four of his men were killed within six feet of him, including Sfc. Jacke Gell, his communications sergeant, who had been filling in as a radio operator. It was a little past 1700 and soon it would be dark. Nadal's platoons had moved only 150 meters and the going was tougher all the time. Convinced that he could not break through, he called Colonel Moore and asked permission to pull back. The colonel gave it.

Captain Herren's situation was little better than Captain Nadal's. Having tried to advance from the creek bed by fire and maneuver, Herren too found his men engaged almost immediately and as a result had gained even less ground than Company A. Understrength at the outset of the operation, Herren had incurred thirty casualties by 1700. Although he was anxious to reach his cutoff platoon, he too held up his troops when he monitored Captain Nadal's message.

Colonel Moore had little choice as to Captain Nadal's request. The battalion was fighting in three separate actions—one force was defending X-RAY, two companies were attacking, and one platoon was isolated. To continue under these circumstances would be to risk the battalion's defeat in detail if the enemy discovered and capitalized on Moore's predicament. The forces at X-RAY were liable to heavy attack from other directions, and to continue to push Companies A and B against so tenacious an enemy was to risk continuing heavy casualties. The key to the battalion's survival, as Moore saw it, was the physical security of X-RAY itself, especially in the light of what the first prisoner had told him about the presence of three enemy battalions. Moore decided to pull his forces back, intending to attack again later that night or early in the morning or to order the platoon to attempt to infiltrate back to friendly lines.

But the move was not easy to make. Because of the heavy fighting, Company A's 1st Platoon had trouble pulling back with its dead and wounded. Captain Nadal committed the 3d Platoon to help relieve the pressure and assist with the casualties. Since he had lost his artillery forward observer, he requested through Colonel Moore artillery smoke on the company to screen its withdrawal. When Moore relayed the request, the fire direction center replied that smoke rounds were not available. Recalling his Korean War experience, Moore approved the use of white phosphorus instead. It seemed to dissuade the enemy; fire diminished immediately thereafter. The success of the volley encouraged Nadal to call for



INFANTRY ADVANCING AT X-RAY

another, which had a similar effect. Miraculously, in both instances, no friendly troops were injured, and both companies were able to break away.

By 1705 the 2d Platoon and command group of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, were landing in X-RAY. Amidst cheers from the men on the ground, Capt. Myron Diduryk climbed out of the lead helicopter, ran up to Colonel Moore, and saluted with a "Garry Owen, sir!" Colonel Moore briefed Diduryk on the tactical situation and then assigned him the role of battalion reserve and instructed him to be prepared to counterattack in either Company A, B, or C sector, with emphasis on the last one. An hour or so later, concerned about Company C's having the lion's share of the perimeter, Colonel Moore attached Diduryk's 2d Platoon to it.

Captain Diduryk's 120-man force was coming to the battle as well prepared as the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, troops already there. Each rifleman had 15 to 20 magazines, and every M60 machine gun crew carried at least 4 boxes of ball ammunition. The 40-mm. grenadiers had 30 to 40 rounds each, and every man in the company carried at least 1 fragmentation grenade. In addition to a platoon-

size basic load ammunition supply, Diduryk had two 81-mm. mortars and forty-eight high-explosive rounds.

When 2d Lt. James L. Lane, leader of the 2d Platoon, Company B, reported to Company C with his platoon for instructions, Captain Edwards placed him on the right flank of his perimeter where he could link up with Company A. Edwards directed all the men to dig prone shelters. Other than for close-in local security, Edwards established no listening posts. The thick elephant grass would cut down on their usefulness, and the protective artillery concentrations that he planned within a hundred meters of his line would endanger them.

Rather than dig in, Company A took advantage of the cover of the dry creek bed. Captain Nadal placed all his platoons in it, except for the four left flank positions of his 3d Platoon, which he arranged up on the bank where they could tie in with Company C.

Company B elected not to use the creek bed. Instead, Captain Herren placed his two depleted platoons just forward of it, along 150 meters of good defensive terrain, an average of five meters between positions, with his command post behind them in the creek bed. He began immediately to register his artillery concentrations as close as possible to his defensive line and ordered his men to dig in.

Company D continued to occupy its sector of the perimeter without change.

By 1800 all of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, had landed. A half hour later Colonel Moore, figuring that the reconnaissance platoon was a large enough reserve force, readily available and positioned near the anthill, changed Captain Diduryk's mission, directing him to man the perimeter between Companies B and D with his remaining two platoons. 2d Lt. Cyril R. Rescorla linked his 1st Platoon with Company B, while 2d Lt. Albert E. Vernon joined his flank with Company D on his left. Diduryk placed his two 81-mm. mortars with the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and allowed some of the crew to man the perimeter. Soon his men were digging in, clearing fields of fire, and adjusting close-in concentrations.

Except for completing registration of artillery and mortar fire, Colonel Moore had organized his battalion perimeter by 1900. Fighting had long since died down to the tolerable level of sporadic sniper fire, and as night came on the last of the dead and wounded were being airlifted to FALCON from the collecting point in the vicinity of the battalion command post, near the anthill. Just before dark a resupply of much needed ammunition, water, medical supplies, and rations was flown in. The aid station had been dangerously low on dexadrine, morphine, and bandages, and the water supply had reached such a critical stage at one point that a few soldiers

had eaten C ration jam for its moisture content to gain relief from the heat. A two-ship zone for night landing was established in the northern portion of X-RAY. Although under enemy observation and fire, it was much less vulnerable than other sectors of X-RAY where most of the fighting had occurred.

At 1850 Colonel Moore radioed his S-3, Captain Dillon, to land as soon as possible with two more radio operators, the artillery liaison officer, the forward air controller, more small arms ammunition, and water. Except for refueling stops Dillon had been in the command helicopter above X-RAY continuously, monitoring the tactical situation by radio, relaying information to brigade headquarters, and passing on instructions to the rifle companies; the helicopter itself served as an aerial platform from which Captain Whiteside and Lieutenant Hastings directed the artillery fire and air strikes. In order to carry out Colonel Moore's instructions, Dillon requested two helicopters from FALCON. By 2125 Dillon was nearing X-RAY from the south through a haze of dust and smoke. Just as his helicopter approached for touchdown, he glanced to the left and saw what appeared to be four or five blinking lights on the forward slopes of Chu Pong. The lights hovered and wavered in the darkness. He surmised that they were North Vietnamese troops using flashlights to signal each other while they moved, for he recalled how an officer from another American division had reported a similar incident two months earlier during an operation in Binh Dinh Province. Upon landing, Dillon passed this information on to Whiteside and Hastings as target data.

During the early hours of darkness, Colonel Moore, accompanied by his sergeant major, made spot visits around the battalion perimeter, talking to the men. Although his troops were facing a formidable enemy force and had suffered quite a few casualties, their morale was clearly high. Moore satisfied himself that his companies were tied in, mortars were all registered, an ammunition resupply system had been established, and in general his troops were prepared for the night. (*Map 3*)

During the evening the 66th North Vietnamese Regiment moved its 8th Battalion southward from a position north of the Ia Drang and charged it with the mission of applying pressure against the eastern sector of X-RAY. Field Front headquarters meanwhile arranged for movement of the H-15 Main Force Viet Cong Battalion from an assembly area well south of the scene of the fighting. The 32d Regiment had not yet left its assembly area, some twelve kilometers away, and the heavy mortar and antiaircraft units were still en route to X-RAY.

At intervals during the night, enemy forces harassed and probed

the battalion perimeter in all but the Company D sector, and in each instance well-placed American artillery from FALCON blunted the enemy's aggressiveness. Firing some 4,000 rounds, the two howitzer batteries in that landing zone also laced the fingers and draws of Chu Pong where the lights had been seen. Tactical air missions were flown throughout the night.

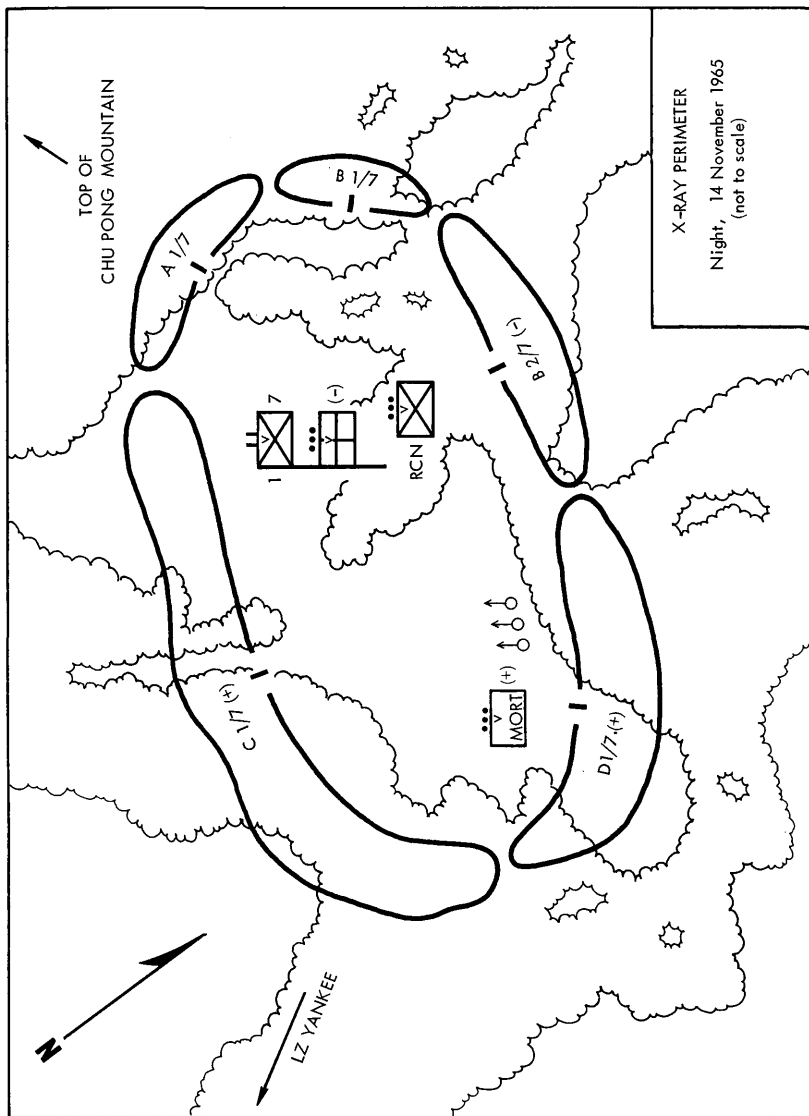
The remnants of Sergeant Savage's isolated little band meanwhile continued to be hard pressed. Three times the enemy attacked with at least a reinforced platoon but were turned back by the artillery and the small arms fire of the men in the perimeter, including some of the wounded. Spec. 5 Charles H. Lose, the company senior medical aidman (whom Captain Herren had placed with the platoon because of a shortage of medics), moved about the perimeter, exposed to fire while he administered to the wounded. His diligence and ingenuity throughout the day and during the night saved at least a half-dozen lives; having run out of first-aid packets as well as bandages from his own bag, he used the C ration toilet tissue packets most of the men had with them to help stop bleeding. Calm, sure, and thoroughly professional, he brought reassurance to the men.

Before the second attack, which came at 0345, bugle calls were heard around the entire perimeter. Some sounds seemed to come from Chu Pong itself, 200 to 400 meters distant. Sergeant Savage could even hear enemy soldiers muttering softly to each other in the sing-song cadence of their language. He called down a 15-minute artillery barrage to saturate the area and followed it with a tactical air strike on the ground just above the positions. Executed under flareship illumination, the two strikes in combination broke up the attack. The sergeant noted that the illumination exposed his position and it was therefore not used again that night.

A third and final attack came over an hour later and was as unsuccessful as the previous two. Sergeant Savage and his men, isolated but still holding throughout the night, could hear and sometimes see the enemy dragging off his dead and wounded.

At brigade headquarters, Colonel Brown continued to assess the significance of the day's activities. Pleased that the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, had been able to hold its own against heavy odds, and with moderate casualties, he was convinced that the fight was not yet over. He radioed General Kinnard for another battalion, and Kinnard informed him that the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, would begin arriving at brigade headquarters the following morning.

Having decided much earlier to try again for the third time to reach the isolated platoon and at the same time to secure the perimeter, Colonel Moore was ready by the next morning. Both he and his S-3 felt that the main enemy effort would be against the



MAP 3

platoon. This time he intended to use three rifle companies instead of two. Since Captain Herren's men were most familiar with the ground, he planned to reinforce Company B with a platoon from Company A and to use Company B as the lead force again. Colonel Moore and his command group were to follow Herren's force. Companies A and C were to follow behind on the right and left, respectively, protecting the flanks and prepared to assist the main effort on order. The S-3, Captain Dillon, was to stay behind with the remainder of the battalion at the perimeter, ready to command it as a reserve force if necessary.

Ten minutes after first light, Colonel Moore directed all company commanders to meet him at the Company C command post where he would discuss final plans and view the attack route with them. He also told them to patrol forward and to the rear of their perimeter positions, looking for possible snipers or infiltrators that might have closed in during the night.

Upon receiving these instructions, Captain Edwards of Company C radioed his platoon leaders and told them to send at least squad-size forces from each platoon out to a distance of 200 meters. No sooner had they moved out when heavy enemy fire erupted, shattering the morning stillness. The two leftmost reconnaissance elements, those of the 1st and 2d Platoons, took the brunt of the fire, which came mainly from their front and left front. They returned it and began pulling back to their defensive positions. Well camouflaged, and in some cases crawling on hands and knees, the North Vietnamese pressed forward. In short order the two reconnaissance parties began to suffer casualties, some of them fatal, while men in each of the other platoons were hit as they attempted to move forward to assist.

When he heard the firing, Captain Edwards immediately attempted to raise both the 1st and 2d Platoons on the radio for a situation report, but there was no answer; each platoon leader had accompanied the reconnaissance force forward. He called Lieutenant Lane, the attached platoon leader from Company B, 2d Battalion, and his 3d Platoon leader, 2d Lt. William W. Franklin, and was relieved to discover that most of their forces had made it back to the perimeter unscathed; a few were still attempting to help the men engaged with the enemy.

From his command post, Edwards himself could see fifteen to twenty enemy soldiers 200 meters to his front, moving toward him. He called Colonel Moore, briefed him on the situation, and requested artillery fire. Then he and the four others in his command group began firing their M16's at the advancing enemy. Edwards called

battalion again and requested that the battalion reserve be committed in support.

Colonel Moore refused, for both he and Captain Dillon were still unconvinced that this was the enemy's main effort. They expected a strong attack against the isolated platoon and wanted to be prepared for it. Also, from what they could hear and see, Edwards' company appeared to be holding on, and they had given him priority of fires.

The situation of Company C grew worse, however, for despite a heavy pounding by artillery and tactical air and despite heavy losses the enemy managed to reach the foxhole line. Captain Edwards attempted to push Franklin's 3d Platoon to the left to relieve some of the pressure, but the firing was too heavy. Suddenly two North Vietnamese soldiers appeared forty meters to the front of the command post. Captain Edwards stood up and tossed a fragmentation grenade at them, then fell with a bullet in his back.

At 0715, seriously wounded but still conscious, Edwards asked again for reinforcements. This time Moore assented; he directed Company A to send a platoon. Company C's command group was now pinned down by an enemy automatic weapon that was operating behind an anthill just forward of the foxhole line. 2d Lt. John W. Arrington, Edwards' executive officer, had rushed forward from the battalion command post at Colonel Moore's order when Edwards was wounded. As Arrington lay prone, receiving instructions from Captain Edwards, he was shot in the chest. Lieutenant Franklin, realizing that both his commanding officer and the executive officer had been hit, left his 3d Platoon position and began to crawl toward the command group. He was hit and wounded seriously.

Almost at the same time that the message from Edwards asking for assistance reached the battalion command post, the enemy also attacked the Company D sector in force near the mortar emplacements. The battalion was now being attacked from two different directions.

As soon as Captain Nadal had received the word to commit a platoon, he had pulled his right flank platoon, the 2d, for the mission since he did not want to weaken that portion of the perimeter nearest Company C. He ordered his remaining platoon to extend to the right and cover the gap. The 2d Platoon started across the landing zone toward the Company C sector. As it neared the battalion command post, moving across open ground, it came under heavy fire that wounded two men and killed two. The platoon deployed on line, everyone prone, in a position just a few meters behind and to the left of the 3d Platoon of Company A's left flank and directly behind Company C's right flank. The force remained where it had been

stopped. It was just as well, for in this position it served adequately as a backup reserve, a defense in depth against any enemy attempt to reach the battalion command post.

The heavy fighting continued. At 0745 enemy grazing fire was crisscrossing X-RAY, and at least twelve rounds of rocket or mortar fire exploded in the landing zone. One soldier was killed near the anthill, others were wounded. Anyone who moved toward the Company C sector drew fire immediately. Still the men fought on ferociously. One rifleman from Company D, who during the fighting had wound up somehow in the Company C sector, covered fifty meters of ground and from a kneeling position shot ten to fifteen North Vietnamese with his M16.

Colonel Moore alerted the reconnaissance platoon to be prepared for possible commitment in the Company D or Company C sector. Next, he radioed Colonel Brown at brigade headquarters, informed him of the situation, and requested another reinforcing company. Colonel Brown approved the request and prepared to send Company A, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, into the landing zone as soon as the intensity of the firing diminished.

At 0755 Moore directed all units to throw colored smoke grenades so that ground artillery, aerial rocket artillery, and tactical air observers could more readily see the perimeter periphery, for he wanted to get his fire support in as close as possible. As soon as the smoke was thrown, supporting fires were brought in extremely close. Several artillery rounds landed within the perimeter, and one F-105 jet, flying a northwest-southeast pass, splashed two tanks of napalm into the anthill area, burning some of the men, exploding M16 ammunition stacked in the area, and threatening to detonate a pile of hand grenades. While troops worked to put out the fire, Captain Dillon rushed to the middle of the landing zone under fire and laid out a cerise panel so that strike aircraft could better identify the command post.

Despite the close fire support, heavy enemy fire continued to lash the landing zone without letup as the North Vietnamese troops followed their standard tactic of attempting to mingle with the American defenders in order to neutralize American fire support. A medic was killed at the battalion command post as he worked on one of the men wounded during the napalm strike. One of Colonel Moore's radio operators was struck in the head by a bullet; he was unconscious for a half hour, but his helmet had saved his life.

By 0800 a small enemy force had jabbed at Company A's left flank and been repulsed, but Company D's sector was seriously threatened. Mortar crewmen were firing rifles as well as feeding rounds into their tubes when a sudden fusillade destroyed one of the

mortars. The antitank platoon was heavily engaged at the edge of the perimeter. With the battalion under attack from three sides now, Colonel Moore shifted the reconnaissance platoon toward Company D to relieve some of the pressure there. He radioed Colonel Brown for the additional company and alerted Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, for action. He would have Company B on call until the battalion's Company A could put down in the landing zone.

Moore ordered Captain Diduryk to assemble his command group and his 1st Platoon at the anthill. Since he had already committed his 2d Platoon to Company C the previous night, Diduryk had left only the 3d Platoon to occupy his entire sector of the perimeter. He told the platoon leader, Lieutenant Vernon, to remain in position until relieved. Diduryk's 1st Platoon had lost one man wounded and one killed from the extremely heavy grazing fire and had not yet even been committed.

By 0900 the volume of combined American fires began to take its toll; enemy fire slacked. Ten minutes later, elements of Company A, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, landed. Colonel Moore directed the company commander, Capt. Joel E. Sugdinis, to occupy Diduryk's original sector, which he did after co-ordinating with Diduryk.

By 1000 the enemy's desperate attempts to overwhelm the perimeter had failed and attacks ceased. Only light sniper fire continued. A half hour later Diduryk's company joined Lieutenant Lane's platoon in the Company C sector. Diduryk's force was augmented by the 3d Platoon of Company A, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, which had rushed there immediately upon landing. Colonel Moore elected to allow it to remain.

Meanwhile, less than three kilometers southeast of the fighting, additional reinforcements were en route to X-RAY. Having departed Landing Zone VICTOR earlier that morning, Colonel Tully's 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, was moving on foot toward the sound of the firing.

Because of the scarcity of aircraft on 13 November as well as the dispersion of his companies over a relatively large area, Colonel Tully had been able to send only two of his companies into VICTOR before dark on the 14th. At that, it had been a major effort to get one of them, Company C, picked up and flown to VICTOR, so dense was the jungle cover. In clearing a two-helicopter pickup zone, the soldiers of Company C had used over thirty pounds of plastic explosive and had broken seventeen intrenching tools.

By the early morning hours of the 15th, Colonel Tully nevertheless had managed to assemble his three rifle companies in accordance with Colonel Brown's instructions. The task force moved out at 0800, Companies A and B abreast, left and right, respectively, with Com-

pany C trailing Company A. Colonel Tully used this formation, heavy on the left, because of the Chu Pong threat. He felt that if the enemy struck again it would be from that direction. He had no definite plan as to what he would do when he arrived at X-RAY other than reinforce. Details would come later. (*Map 4*)

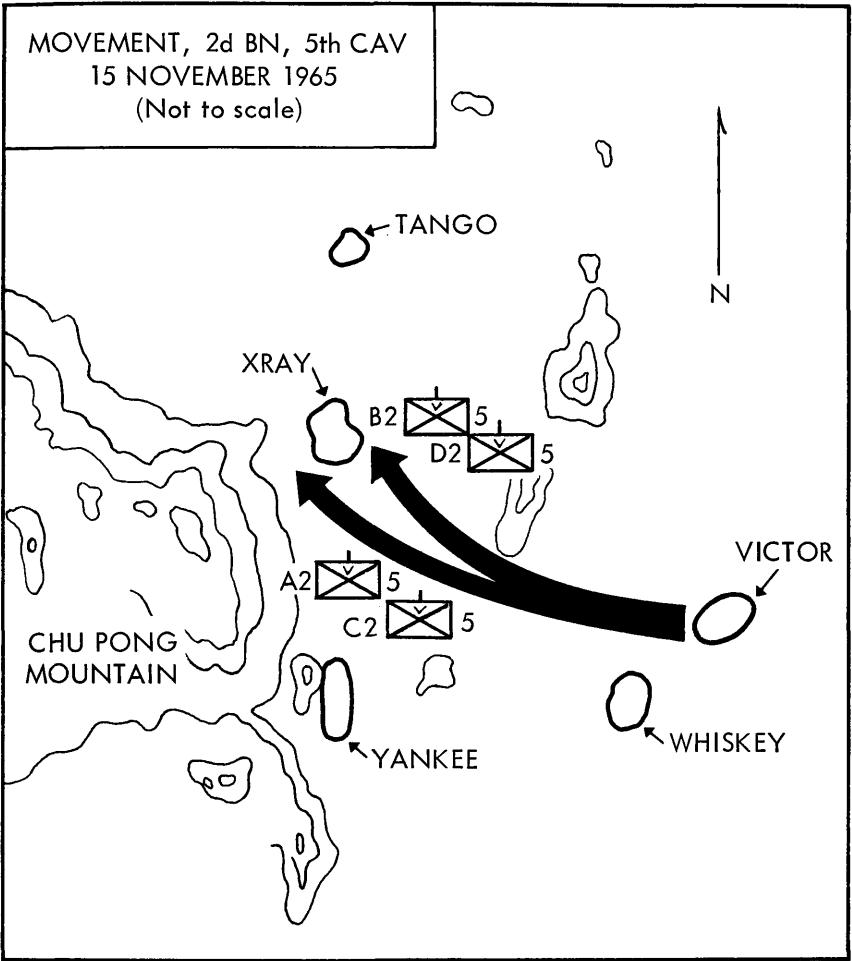
Shortly after the fighting died down at X-RAY, enemy automatic weapons fire pinned down the two lead platoons of Company A, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, as they approached from the east, 800 meters from the landing zone. The North Vietnamese were in trees and behind anthills. The company commander, Capt. Larry T. Bennett, promptly maneuvered the two lead platoons, which were in a line formation, forward. Then he swung his 3d Platoon to the right flank and pushed ahead; his weapons platoon, which had been reorganized into a provisional rifle platoon, followed behind as reserve. The men broke through the resistance rapidly, capturing two young and scared North Vietnamese armed with AK47 assault rifles.

Soon after midday lead elements reached X-RAY. Colonel Moore and Colonel Tully co-ordinated the next move, agreeing that because they were in the best position for attack and were relatively fresh and strong upon arriving at the landing zone, Companies A and C, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, would participate in the effort to reach the cutoff platoon. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, would take the lead since Herren knew the terrain between X-RAY and the isolated platoon. Moore would receive Company B, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, into the perimeter and would remain behind, still in command, while Colonel Tully accompanied the attack force. The incoming battalion's mortar sections were to remain at X-RAY and support the attack.

Colonel Tully's co-ordination with Captain Herren was simple enough. Tully gave Herren the appropriate radio frequencies and call signs, told him where to tie in with his Company A, and instructed him to move out when ready. At 1315, preceded by artillery and aerial rocket strikes, the rescue force started out, Herren's company on the right, Company A, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, on the left.

Fifteen minutes after the relief force had left the perimeter, Colonel Moore directed all units to police the battlefield to a depth of 300 meters. They soon discovered the heavy price the enemy had paid for his efforts: enemy bodies littered the area, some stacked behind anthills; body fragments, weapons, and equipment were scattered about the edge of the perimeter; trails littered with bandages told of many bodies dragged away.

The cost had also been heavy for the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, which had lost the equivalent of an American rifle platoon. The



MAP 4

bodies of these men lay amongst the enemy dead and attested to the intensity of the fight. One rifleman of Company C lay with his hands clutched around the throat of a dead North Vietnamese soldier. Company C's 1st Platoon leader died in a foxhole surrounded by five enemy dead.

The relief party, meanwhile, advanced cautiously, harassed by sporadic sniper fire to which the infantrymen replied by judiciously calling down artillery fire. As they neared Sergeant Savage's platoon, lead troops of Captain Herren's company found the captured M60 machine gun, smashed by artillery fire. Around it lay the mutilated bodies of the crew, along with the bodies of successive North

Vietnamese crews. They found the body of the M79 gunner, his .45-caliber automatic still clutched in his hand.

A few minutes later, the first men reached the isolated platoon; Captain Herren stared at the scene before him with fatigue-rimmed eyes. Some of the survivors broke into tears of relief. Through good fortune, the enemy's ignorance of their predicament, Specialist Lose's first-aid knowledge, individual bravery, and, most important of all, Sergeant Savage's expert use of artillery fire, the platoon had incurred not a single additional casualty after Savage had taken command the previous afternoon. Each man still had adequate ammunition.

Colonel Tully did not make a thorough search of the area, for now that he had reached the platoon his concern was to evacuate the survivors and casualties to X-RAY in good order. Accordingly, he surrounded the position with all three companies while Captain Herren provided details of men to assist with the casualties. The task was arduous, for each dead body and many of the wounded required at least a four-man carrying party using a makeshift poncho litter.

As he walked the newly established outer perimeter edge to check on the disposition of one of his platoons, Captain Bennett, the commander of Company A, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, fell, severely wounded by a bullet in his chest fired at close range by a hidden North Vietnamese sniper. A thorough search for the enemy rifleman proved fruitless, and Colonel Tully directed his force to return to X-RAY. With Herren's company in single file and the casualties and Tully's units on either flank, the rescue force arrived at the landing zone without further incident.

Colonel Moore now redispersed his troops. Since he had two battalions to employ, he worked out an arrangement with Colonel Tully that allowed him to control all troops in the perimeter. He took Company D, minus the mortar platoon, off of the line and replaced it with Colonel Tully's entire battalion. Tully's force also occupied portions of the flanking unit sectors. The wounded and dead were evacuated and everyone dug in for the night.

That evening at brigade headquarters Colonel Brown again conferred with General Kinnard, who told Brown that the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, would be pulled out on the 16th and sent to Camp Holloway just outside Pleiku for two days of rest and reorganization.

Although the North Vietnamese had suffered heavy casualties, not only from their encounter with the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, but also as a result of a B-52 strike on Chu Pong itself that after-

noon, they had not abandoned the field entirely. Sporadic sniper fire continued at various points along the perimeter during the early part of the night. The moon was out by 2320 in a cloudless sky. American artillery fired continuously into areas around the entire perimeter and on Chu Pong where secondary explosions occurred during the early evening. At 0100 five North Vietnamese soldiers probed the Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, sector; two were killed and the others escaped. Three hours later, a series of long and short whistle signals were heard from the enemy, and a flurry of activity occurred in front of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry. Trip flares were ignited and anti-intrusion alarms sprung, some as far out as 300 meters. At 0422 Diduryk's attached Company A platoon leader, 2d Lt. William H. Sisson, radioed that he could see a group of soldiers advancing toward his positions. He was granted permission to fire and at the same time his platoon was fired on by the enemy. In less than ten minutes Diduryk was under attack along his entire sector by at least a company-size force. His company met the attack with a fusillade of fire from individual weapons, coupled with the firepower of four artillery batteries and all available mortars. Calling for point-detonating and variable time fuzes, white phosphorus, and high-explosive shells, Diduryk's forward observer, 1st Lt. William L. Lund, directed each battery to fire different defensive concentrations in front of the perimeter, shifting the fires laterally and in depth in 100-meter adjustments. This imaginative effort, along with illumination provided by Air Force flareships, proved highly effective. Enemy soldiers nevertheless attempted to advance during the brief periods of darkness between flares and in some cases managed to get within five to ten meters of the foxhole line, where they were halted by well-aimed hand grenades and selective firing.

At 0530 the enemy tried again, this time shifting to the southwest, attacking the 3d Platoon and some left flank positions of the 2d Platoon. This effort, as well as another launched an hour later against the 1st Platoon's right flank, was also repulsed.

During the firefight, the Company B executive officer, radio operators, and troops from the reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, made three separate ammunition resupply runs under fire to the anthill. At one point the supply of M79 ammunition dropped to such a dangerously low level that Diduryk restricted its use to visible targets, especially enemy crew-served weapons and troop concentrations.

By dawn of the 16th the enemy attack had run its course. Diduryk's company had only six men slightly wounded, while piles



COMPANY B SWEEPING FORWARD OF THE BATTALION PERIMETER

of enemy dead in front of the positions testified to the enemy's tactical failure.

Still concerned with possible enemy intentions and capabilities and no doubt wary because of what had happened to Company C on the previous morning's sweep, Colonel Moore directed all companies to spray the trees, anthills, and bushes in front of their positions to kill any snipers or other infiltrators—a practice that the men called a “mad minute.” Seconds after the firing began, an enemy platoon-size force came into view 150 meters in front of Company A, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and opened fire at the perimeter. An ideal artillery target, the attacking force was beaten off in twenty minutes by a heavy dose of high-explosive variable time fire. The “mad minute” effort proved fruitful in other respects. During the firing one North Vietnamese soldier dropped from a tree, dead, immediately in front of Captain Herren's command post. The riddled body of another fell and hung upside down, swinging from the branch to which the man had tied himself in front of Diduryk's

leftmost platoon. An hour later somebody picked off an enemy soldier as he attempted to climb down a tree and escape.

Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and the reconnaissance platoon meanwhile made a detailed search of the interior of X-RAY itself. There were three American casualties unaccounted for, and Colonel Moore was still concerned about infiltrators. The search turned up nothing.

An hour later Moore considered it opportune to push out from the perimeter on a co-ordinated search and to sweep out to 500 meters. The move commenced at 0955. After covering fifty to seventy-five meters, Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, platoons met a large volume of fire, including hand grenades thrown by enemy wounded still lying in the area. Diduryk quickly lost a weapons squad leader killed and nine other men wounded, including the 2d Platoon leader and platoon sergeant. Under artillery cover, he withdrew his force to the perimeter. Colonel Moore and Lieutenant Hastings, the forward air controller, joined him. A few minutes later tactical air, using a variety of ordnance that included rockets, cannon, napalm, cluster bomb units, white phosphorus, and high explosive, blasted the target area. The strike ended with the dropping of a 500-pound bomb that landed only twenty-five meters from the 1st Platoon's positions.

The sweep by Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, began again, this time using fire and maneuver behind a wall of covering artillery fire and meeting scattered resistance which was readily eliminated. Twenty-seven North Vietnamese were killed. The sweep uncovered the three missing Americans, all dead. The area was littered with enemy dead, and many enemy weapons were collected.

By 0930 the lead forces of the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, reached X-RAY, and an hour later Colonel Moore received instructions to prepare his battalion, along with Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and the 3d Platoon, Company A, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, for the move to Camp Holloway. The remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, were to be left behind to secure the perimeter. Moore did not want to leave, however, without another thorough policing of the battle area, particularly where Company C had been attacked on the morning of the 15th. Captain Diduryk therefore conducted a lateral sweep without incident to a distance of 150 meters.

As the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, began its move to Camp Holloway, the casualties with their equipment, as well as the surplus supplies, were also evacuated. Captured enemy equipment taken out included 57 Kalashnikov AK47 assault rifles, 54 Siminov SKS semi-automatic carbines with bayonets, 17 Degtyarev automatic rifles,



COLONEL MOORE AND ENEMY CASUALTY

4 Maxim heavy machine guns, 5 model RPG2 antitank rocket launchers, 2 81-mm. mortar tubes, 2 pistols, and 6 medic's kits.

Great amounts of enemy weapons and equipment had been previously destroyed elsewhere in the battle area, and Moore arranged with the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, to destroy any enemy matériel left behind at X-RAY. Included were 75 to 100 crew-served and individual weapons, 12 anti-tank rounds, 300 to 400 hand grenades, an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 small arms rounds, and 100 to 150 intrenching tools.

American casualties, attached units included, were 79 killed, 121 wounded, and none missing. Enemy losses were much higher and included 634 known dead, 581 estimated dead, and 6 prisoners.

2

Convoy Ambush on Highway 1

by

John Albright

When the 11th Armored Cavalry—the “Blackhorse Regiment”—arrived in the Republic of Vietnam in September 1966, the threat of ambush hung over every highway in the country. Since the regiment’s three squadrons each had a company of main battle tanks, three armored cavalry troops, and a howitzer battery, the Blackhorse was well suited for meeting the challenge.

Each of the cavalry troop’s three platoons had nine armored cavalry assault vehicles (ACAV’s). The ACAV was an M113 armored personnel carrier modified for service in Vietnam and particularly adapted to convoy escort. With the M113’s usual complement of one .50-caliber machine gun augmented by two M60 machine guns, all protected by armored gun shields, and with one of its five-man crew armed with a 40-mm. grenade launcher, the vehicle took on some of the characteristics of a light tank. Fast, the track-laying ACAV could keep pace with wheeled vehicles and also deliver withering fire.

Aware that convoy escort would be a primary mission of the 11th Cavalry, the regiment’s leaders had concentrated in the five months between alert and departure for Vietnam on practicing counterambush techniques. In countless mock ambushes, the cavalrymen learned to react swiftly with fire. The first object was to run thin-skinned vehicles out of the killing zone; the armored escorts would then return to roll up the enemy’s flanks, blasting with every weapon and crushing the enemy beneath their tracks.

In mid-October, a month after arriving at a staging area at Long Binh, a few kilometers northeast of Saigon, the regiment issued its first major operational order. The Blackhorse was to establish a regimental base camp on more than a square mile of ground along Interprovincial Highway 2, twelve kilometers south of the provincial capital of Xuan Loc. (*See Map 1.*)



ARMORED CAVALRY ASSAULT VEHICLE

Even as the tanks and ACAV's entered and cleared the site for the base, leaflets were dropped from helicopters onto nearby hamlets to alert villagers that the Blackhorse soldiers had come to stay. As the days passed, convoy after convoy rumbled through Xuan Loc on National Highway 1, then south on Highway 2 and on to the developing base camp. Always escorted by ACAV's, the convoys kept this stretch of National 1 open to a degree unknown since the beginning of the Viet Cong insurgency.

While work on the base camp continued, two of the 11th Cavalry's three squadrons were called far afield to assist in other operations. Since the remaining squadron was engaged in searching and clearing surrounding jungles, only company-size units remained to provide perimeter security for the camp. By mid-November the developing base, fat with military supplies of all kinds, had become an inviting target, lightly defended and still only lightly fortified.

Intelligence reports in early November indicated that the 5th Viet Cong Division, which had been fighting to dominate the Xuan Loc area and close Highway 1, was assuming the offensive. When word came that enemy troops had left their usual hideout south of

Xuan Loc and were headed in the direction of the base camp, the 11th Cavalry's commander, Col. William W. Cobb, asked for the return of one of his detached squadrons. The request granted, the 1st Squadron began arriving at Long Binh in late afternoon of 20 November on the first leg of a move to the base camp.

Although the howitzer battery and Troop A moved on immediately to augment defenders of the base camp, the rest of the squadron paused overnight at Long Binh to "top off" with fuel and "pull maintenance." These men would leave early the next morning, after a convoy taking along staff sections, clerks, cooks, medics, and other support troops from regimental headquarters had arrived at the camp.

As night fell on 20 November, the two forces that would fight the next day drew closer together. The last vehicles of the 1st Squadron closed at Long Binh in a heavy rain, their crews tired from a 12-hour road march at the end of almost two weeks in the field. Rain continued to pour while the support troops loaded supplies and equipment into the trucks that were to join the convoy the next morning. At the same time, the monsoon that drenched the troopers of the Blackhorse pelted the two battalions and headquarters of the 5th Viet Cong Division's 274th Regiment—the battle-hardened Dong Nai Regiment—as they moved into ambush positions along National Highway 1, west of Xuan Loc.

Midway between the provincial capitals of Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc, Highway 1 dropped sharply to a stream bed and then rose to a gently rolling plateau. A dirt road running north and south intersected National Highway 1 at this point. Low hills rising only 10 to 20 meters above the road level began about 180 meters from the highway on both sides.

On the north side of the highway, grass high enough to hide a standing man covered the ground. Rising like an island in the sea of grass was an expanse of jungle 1,000 meters square, beginning at the north-south dirt road and running parallel to Highway 1, 300 meters north of the edge of the highway.

Along the south side of the highway a wall of jungle had grown up around the trees of an old rubber plantation stretching from the province boundary east for 1,000 meters and ending abruptly at a banana grove. The banana grove lined the south side of the highway for 300 meters before it gave way to an open area ending at the hamlet of Ap Hung Nghia.

Because the jungle and banana grove offered concealment for approach and withdrawal, the commander of the Viet Cong 274th Regiment placed his main force of over a thousand men on the south

side of the road, camouflaged and ready to fire automatic weapons and antitank rockets point-blank onto the highway. The ambush extended from just inside the west end of the jungle to the outskirts of Ap Hung Nghia, a distance of 1,500 meters. To handle any U.S. troops who might dismount and take refuge on the north side of the road, the Viet Cong commander deployed infantrymen alone or in groups of two or three across the highway in the tall grass. (*Map 5*)

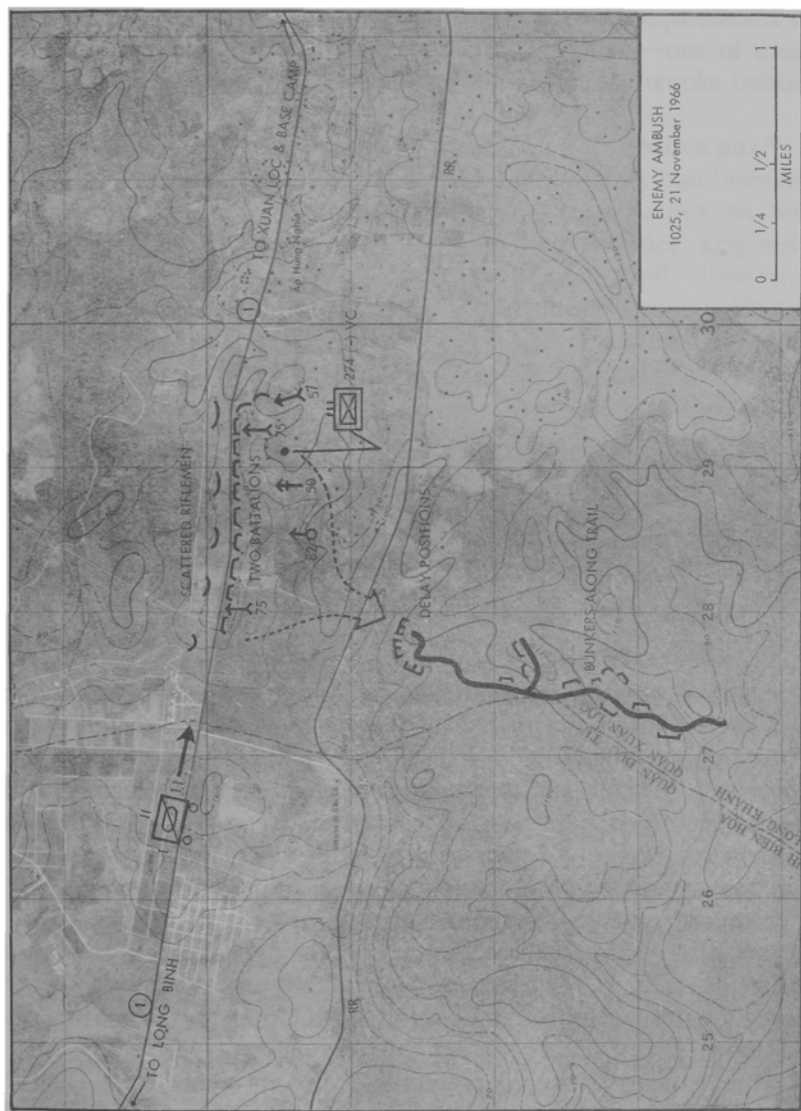
In the classic manner of Viet Cong ambush forces, heavy weapons marked both ends of the killing zone. A 75-mm. recoilless rifle, positioned less than fifteen feet from the road, marked the beginning of the killing zone, just twenty feet inside the west end of the jungle close by the banana grove. A second 75-mm. recoilless rifle dominated the road in the eastern half of the killing zone from the forward slope of a slight hill just to the east of the banana grove. A 57-mm. recoilless rifle farther up the hill, three hundred meters to the east, and an 82-mm. mortar deep in the jungle were to provide supporting fire. Heavy machine guns hidden in huts scattered through the killing zone were to engage American helicopters and jets. Regimental headquarters operated on the crest of a hill five hundred meters west of Ap Hung Nghia, overlooking the entire section of road in the killing zone.

Once the ambush was executed the 274th Regiment was to withdraw to railroad tracks parallel to and a thousand meters south of the highway, then along a trail leading due south under a heavy canopy of jungle. Bunkers along the trail for a distance of two kilometers would provide cover against air attack, while bunkers at the beginning of the trail and a hundred meters south of the railroad tracks would provide defensive positions for a delaying force.

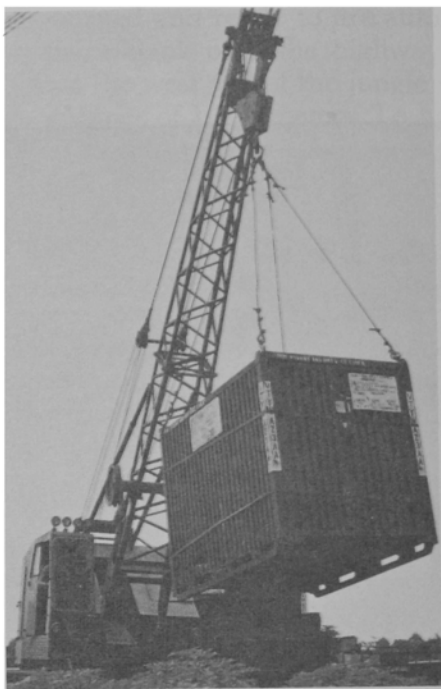
Through the wet chilly night of 20 November, men of the Dong Nai Regiment waited in their concealed positions.

At Long Binh loading of the convoy continued well into the night. Tents housing staff sections were struck, folded, and loaded dripping wet into the waiting trucks. Some drivers then put their trucks in line along the road near the convoy's starting point in the hope of being near the front of the column where they could avoid at least some of the grime and exhaust fumes that would plague others farther to the rear.

By 0600 most of the trucks waited at the starting point, though stragglers and latecomers in a variety of vehicles continued to join the column until almost 0700, the announced starting time. Yet 0700 passed and still the escorts had not arrived; one of those inexplicable waits that always seem to haunt units on the move now set in. After a while support units and staff sections that had assumed they could not be ready to leave with the morning convoy saw their



MAP 5



HOISTING CONEX CONTAINER FOR CONVOY LOADING

chance. They quickly finished loading and lined up their vehicles at the rear of the column. A long column grew longer. Five-ton trucks carrying document-filled CONEX containers (steel cargo transporters), S and P's (stake and platform trucks) loaded with small prefabricated buildings and supplies, jeeps and their trailers, $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton trucks, $2\frac{1}{2}$ -ton "deuce and a half's," and even two large ordnance vans loaded with post exchange supplies and the regiment's finance records, a most precious cargo, joined the column.

Word filtered down through the convoy that the column would roll at eight, then at nine. But not until 0840 was the convoy escort commander designated—1st Lt. Neil L. Keltner, commanding the 1st Platoon, Troop C, of the 1st Squadron.

Keltner quickly gathered the vehicles for his escort, four ACAV's from his platoon and four from Troop C's 2d Platoon. He found, sandwiched among the trucks, an ACAV from Troop A that had missed that troop's move the preceding day. This ACAV—numbered A34—he quickly integrated into his escort force.

He might need this additional armor and more, Keltner mused, for with the help of Capt. Robert Smith, the forward air controller who was circling above the ever-lengthening line, Keltner estimated

that the convoy now consisted of over eighty vehicles “of about every size and shape in the U.S. Army inventory.”

For the march, Keltner placed his ACAV's in pairs: a pair at the head and rear of the column and at two points equidistant within the column. He added his own vehicle to the two—one of them was the A34 from Troop A—that were some twenty trucks behind the head of the convoy.

At 0920 Lieutenant Keltner gave the signal: “Move out.”

Rising from the grass along the road where they had been dozing, truckers and their passengers donned flak jackets, put on helmets, picked up their weapons, and mounted their vehicles. Engines came to life all along the line and the convoy began to roll. After traveling less than a mile, the lead vehicle turned onto National Highway 1 and passed through the village of Ho Nai. The men aboard could not know it but at this point a Viet Cong observation post somewhere in Ho Nai flashed word to the 274th Regiment that the convoy was on the way.

Haphazardly formed, lacking unit integrity, the convoy was by its very nature difficult to protect. Great gaps within the column began to develop early as lightly laden vehicles pulled far ahead of heavily loaded trucks. Accordion-like, the line stretched.

The convoy had been on the road less than forty-five minutes when a noncommissioned officer, M. Sgt. Joseph Smolenski, at the 11th Cavalry's tactical operational center, received an intelligence message in the form of a code word and a location. Instantly recognizing the code word as one the intelligence staff had been told to watch for, he rushed the communication to Maj. Grail L. Brookshire, the regimental S-2. Brookshire realized at once that the message indicated the presence of the headquarters of the 274th Regiment, the best combat unit in the 5th Viet Cong Division. As revealed by the co-ordinates, the enemy location was fifteen kilometers west of Xuan Loc, along Highway 1 and near Ap Hung Nghia. Confirming that a convoy was on the road, the S-2 saw the position of the enemy troops for what it was—an ambush.

Only a minute passed after receipt of the message before the S-2 radioed a warning of the enemy location to the 1st Squadron's operations center at Long Binh. At the same time the assistant S-3, Capt. Harlen E. Gray, ordered the Blackhorse light fire team (two armed Huey helicopters) aloft to cover the convoy. With a “Wilco” received from Blackhorse flight operations on the order, Captain Gray alerted the 1st Squadron on the regimental command net, re-enforcing the warning of a minute before on the intelligence net and using the 2d Squadron, located five kilometers nearer to the 1st Squadron's operations center, as a relay station.

While commanders and duty officers at the two headquarters frantically worked to protect the convoy, the object of their concern continued to rumble eastward toward Xuan Loc, with the forward air controller circling overhead. No warning had yet been sent to the convoy commander. Lieutenant Keltner's major concern remained the accordion-like motion of the convoy and the large gaps that constantly appeared in the column.

Dodging 55-gallon drums placed in the road to slow traffic, the lead trucks rolled through a Vietnamese National Police checkpoint midway between Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc, the men on the trucks waving to the policemen. Lieutenant Keltner's ACAV in the second group of escort vehicles was within a thousand meters of the ambush site when his radio crackled with a message from 1st Squadron headquarters.

"Suspected enemy activity at co-ordinates 289098."

It was a routine enough message, delivered in a matter-of-fact manner. The lieutenant asked for more information. Squadron headquarters had none. Keltner had received similar messages before and the enemy each time had failed to show up. He was not particularly worried about this one, but he immediately radioed the air controller to verify the location of the front of the column and the relation of the lead vehicles to the suspected enemy position.

Two controllers were by this time circling overhead; since Captain Smith's fuel was low, Maj. Mario J. Stefanelli had arrived to relieve him. Both officers already were alert to the possible enemy activity, for less than two minutes before Keltner received the message from his squadron Captain Smith had received a coded message from the 11th Cavalry operations center with the same information. As Smith finished copying the message, Major Stefanelli assumed air controller responsibility for the convoy, allowing Smith to decode the co-ordinates undisturbed. Smith still had enough fuel to stay overhead a few minutes longer. He was just finishing his decoding when Keltner's call reached Major Stefanelli.

The head of the convoy, Stefanelli answered, had just passed the suspected enemy location.

Keltner quickly radioed his ACAV's to warn them of the imminent danger. All but the lead ACAV—C22—answered. A few seconds later C22 reported receiving fire from small arms and automatic weapons and asked permission to return fire. Even as Keltner gave the permission, his own vehicle came alongside the edge of the banana grove that lay south of the highway, and Keltner informed squadron headquarters that the convoy was under fire. It was 1025.

Reacting to earlier counterambush training, Lieutenant Keltner decided to run the column through the small arms fire. From the

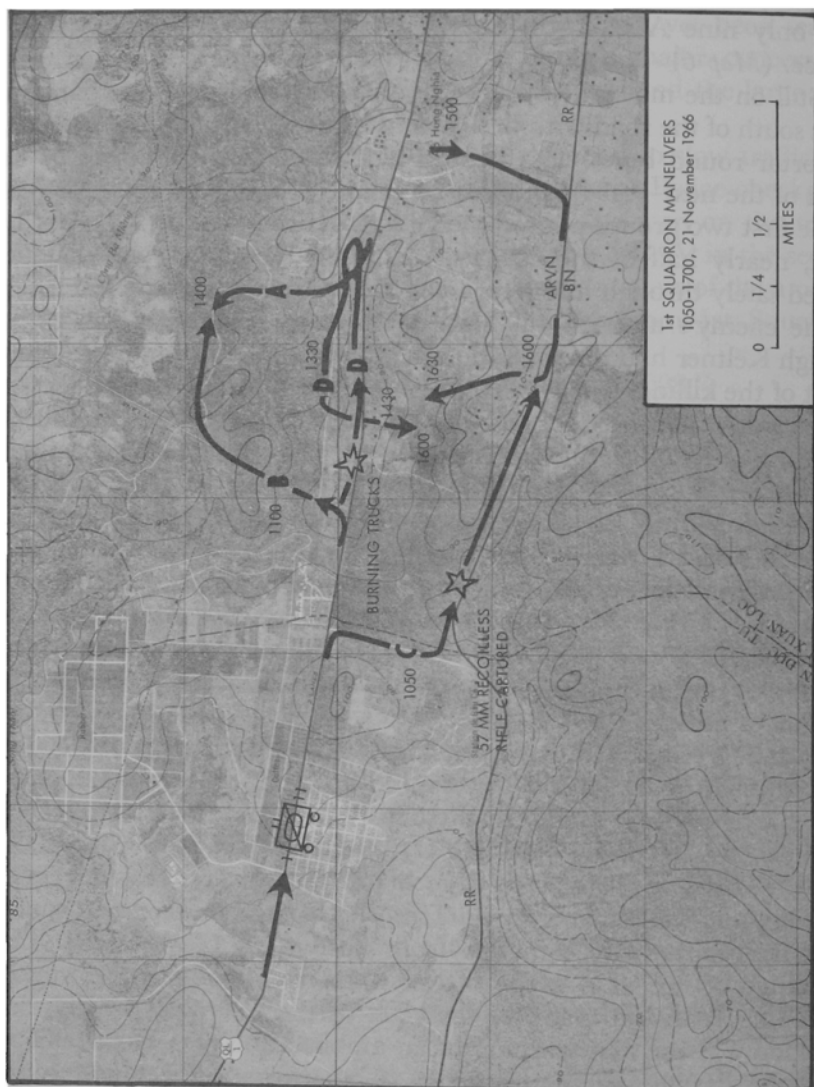
report of the lead ACAV he believed that the fire was but a harassing tactic, or at the most that it came from only a platoon or a company of Viet Cong. In any case, with eighty vehicles to protect and only nine ACAV's to do the job, Keltner felt he had little choice. (*Map 6*)

Still on the move, he ordered his own crew to spray the banana trees south of the road with fire. Just as his machine guns opened up, a mortar round burst close behind his ACAV and immediately in front of the next—A34—but did no damage. While all the ACAV's of the first two groups poured machine gun fire into both sides of the road, nearly half of the convoy, including Keltner's own vehicle, passed safely through and beyond the killing zone. But the full force of the enemy's ambush still had not been brought to bear. Even though Keltner had received the warning too late to stop the column short of the killing zone, he had been able to alert his escorts almost at the exact moment the Viet Cong moved to spring their ambush. The Dong Nai Regiment had been denied the benefit of total surprise.

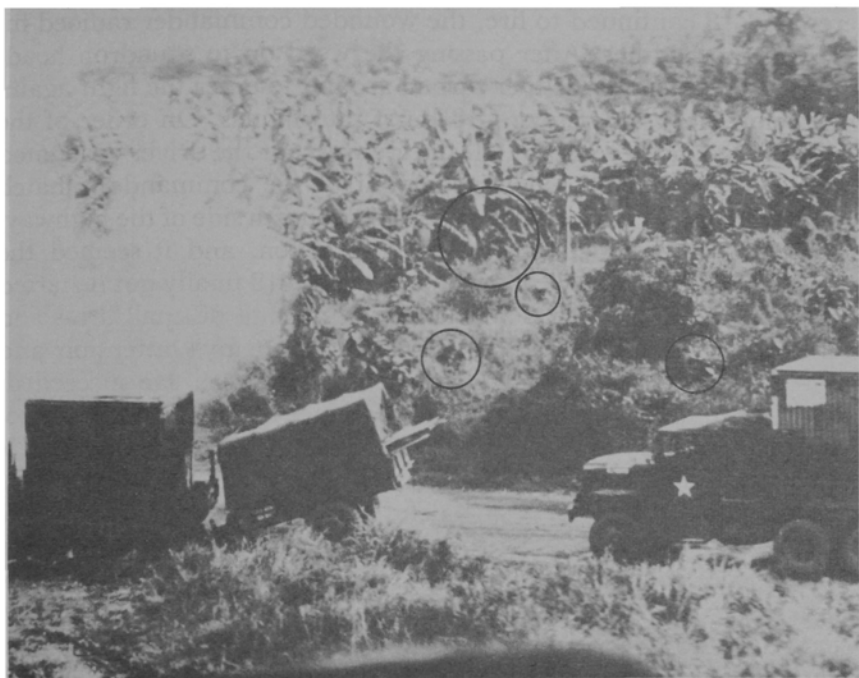
At Long Binh Lt. Col. Martin D. Howell, the squadron commander, heard Keltner report small arms fire. Like the lieutenant, he believed it to be harassing fire but nevertheless dispatched the remainder of Troop C to the scene. With Charley Troop roaring out of the staging area and the light fire team helicopters, alerted earlier, rushing to the scene, help was on the way even before the battle reached a peak.

Although most of the front half of the convoy had passed out of danger, eight trucks had fallen behind because the first of the eight was carrying a heavy load. As these last trucks and the section led by the next two ACAV's—C18 and C13—entered the killing zone, the ACAV's fired first into the edge of the jungle and, as they kept moving, into the banana grove. The Viet Cong answered with small arms and automatic weapons from both sides of the road. The exchange of fire at a range of less than twenty meters became a deafening roar. To many of the men in the following trucks, this fusillade was the first warning of an ambush, for vehicle noises had drowned out the earlier exchange. The trucks not yet under fire began to slow down, their drivers displaying the uncertainty they felt about what lay ahead.

Yet the convoy kept moving and the road ahead remained clear. The exchange of fire grew in volume as those trucks with "shotgun" riders began to engage the ambushers on the right (south) side of the road. The crash of exploding grenades added to the noise of battle. Then a round from a recoilless rifle struck C18 on the edge of the loading ramp but failed to stop the ACAV.



MAP 6



BURNING TRUCK WITH TRAILER, OPPOSITE BANANA GROVE. Circles enclose partially concealed enemy troops. (Photograph taken north of the road.)

As the firefight continued at close range, the trucks forming the rear of the column, not yet in the killing zone, began to pull over to the side of the road. Those immediately behind C18 and C13, already under fire, stopped and the men aboard raced for cover in ditches on either side of the road. The only vehicles moving at that point were the last eight trucks from the first half of the column and ACAV's C13 and C18.

Hardly had C18 escaped one round from a recoilless rifle when another burned a hole in its right side, starting a fire. This hit wounded the ACAV commander, but the crew continued to fire the .50-caliber machine gun and the M60's into the enemy position south of the road.

Now another recoilless rifle round struck the heavily loaded lead truck whose slowness had opened a gap in the truck column. The gasoline tank exploded, instantly killing the two men in the cab. The truck lurched to the left into the ditch on the north side of the road, its trailer still on the pavement, partially blocking the highway. A column of thick black smoke shot into the morning sky. While the

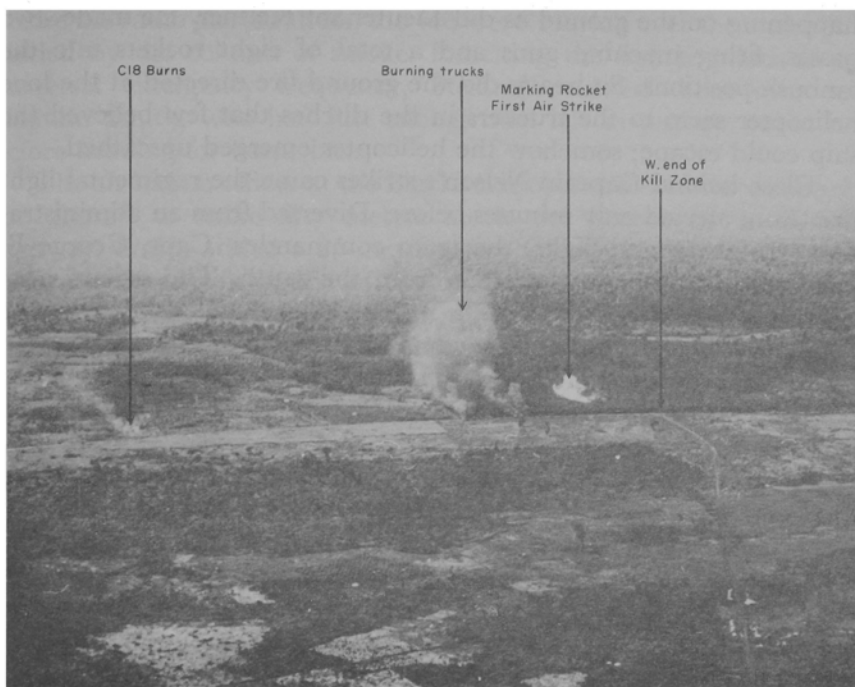
crew of C18 continued to fire, the wounded commander radioed his situation to Keltner. After passing the word on to squadron headquarters, Lieutenant Keltner turned around to enter the fight again, but before he could return C18 burst into flames. On order of the critically wounded sergeant, all the crew except the driver evacuated the vehicle, dragging the sergeant out of the commander's hatch and carrying him into the high grass on the north side of the highway. Only light fire had come from that direction, and it seemed the safest place to go. The driver of the burning C18 finally got it started again and headed down the road through a hail of small arms and antitank rocket fire, hoping to distract the enemy's attention and allow the other crewmen to make good their escape. He succeeded, but four hundred meters down the road met his death when one of the thousands of small arms rounds fired at the moving ACAV found its mark.

Even as C18 fought to the death, the troopers in C13, a few meters farther forward along the road, moved to counter small arms fire and grenades raining on the three remaining trucks to their front. Racing forward, the driver interposed his ACAV between the trucks and heavy enemy fire coming from the banana grove on the right side of the road, but not before a recoilless rifle sent a second truck up in flames.

As C13 came abreast of the burning truck, another round exploded against its right gun shield, destroying the M60 machine gun, killing the gunner, and wounding everybody but the driver. A recoilless rifle round struck the engine compartment and C13 began to burn. Although the driver himself was now wounded, he continued to move forward, deeper into the killing zone. Veering past the truck trailer that partially blocked the road, he went fifteen hundred meters past the end of the ambush. Only then did the crew abandon the burning vehicle. Moments later C13 exploded.

After C13 had rolled down the highway spewing smoke, there was a sudden silence. For the first time the men who had taken cover in the ditches alongside the road could hear jet fighters circling overhead and hear as well as see a flight of helicopters turning to make firing runs. The silence on the ground lasted perhaps ten seconds before it was broken by the roar of another round from a recoilless rifle aimed at one of the trucks that the trailer of the lead truck had blocked. So close was the range that the crash of the impacting round mingled with the roar of the backblast. Then came another blast, and a third, and a fourth, as the Viet Cong gunners methodically destroyed two more trucks.

The men replied with fierce counterfire. Sharply conscious that no ACAV's remained in the killing zone to provide fire support, they



AERIAL VIEW OF CONVOY AMBUSH AFTER FIRST AIR STRIKE

fully expected the Viet Cong to emerge from their ambush and overrun the ditch. But the enemy was feeling the air attacks. The column of smoke from the burning trucks was a beacon upon which air support was converging.

A minute after the first truck was hit, the two forward air controllers attacked with the only weapons they had—white phosphorus marking rockets. Flying their slow observation craft through heavy small arms fire, they searched for the Viet Cong. Seeing puffs of smoke from weapons firing in the banana grove, Major Stefanelli placed his first rocket there. His ship hit by ground fire but still operational, Captain Smith aimed his rocket into the jungle opposite the burning trucks. As Stefanelli fired a second rocket into the banana trees, Smith aimed his at a group of twenty Viet Cong who had risen and were running south. Even as the first trucks were hit and the first rockets struck, the ambush was breaking up.

When the two light aircraft pulled out of their diving attacks, the only Huey gunship operational with the 1st Squadron that day moved in. From having monitored the 1st Platoon's radio frequency, the pilot, Capt. Turner L. Nelson, knew almost as much about what was

happening on the ground as did Lieutenant Keltner. He made two passes, firing machine guns and a total of eight rockets into the ambush positions. So heavy did the ground fire directed at the lone helicopter seem to the truckers in the ditches that few believed the ship could escape; somehow the helicopter emerged unscathed.

Close behind Captain Nelson's strikes came the regimental light fire team, alerted only minutes before. Diverted from an administrative mission in mid-flight, the team commander, Capt. George E. Kinback, approached the scene from the south. The second helicopter, piloted by Capt. Frank Y. Sasaki, had taken off from the Blackhorse helipad at the base camp and approached from the east. About three kilometers south of Highway 1, Kinback observed Sasaki's ship and directed him toward the column of smoke rising from the first of the stricken trucks.

As the two ships lined up for their first firing run, Kinback tried unsuccessfully to get instructions from Keltner by radio. Captain Nelson, circling north of the road, was unable to contact either Kinback or Sasaki. Yet lack of communications imposed little delay, for not only could Kinback and Sasaki spot the burning trucks, but heavy fire from the Viet Cong positions gave away the enemy's location.

On the first pass the two Hueys loosed machine gun fire and six pairs of rockets at the Viet Cong. On the second pass they had help from Captain Nelson, who was at last in communication with the team and fell in behind the regimental gunships. On this run the three Hueys poured continuous machine gun fire and nine pairs of rockets into the enemy positions. On a third and then a fourth firing run they expended the remaining six pairs of rockets and continued to hit the foe with machine gun fire.

While the fourth helicopter firing run was in progress, the regimental operations center radioed an order for the team to move north of the road to make way for a strike by Air Force jets. The arrival of jets in a battle only eight minutes old brought pure joy to those men of the convoy who were still crouching in the ditches. Three F-100's now joined the fight. The men on the ground had no way of knowing—nor would they have really cared—that they got this support less by calculated design than by a lucky break. An air controller on a routine administrative flight had seen the smoke of the first burning truck. Knowing that a preplanned air strike for a nearby South Vietnamese Army division was minutes away, he called the Blackhorse operations center and offered to turn the fighters over to the 11th Cavalry. The Blackhorse air liaison officer on duty at the center, Air Force Maj. Charles F. Post, had jumped at this unexpected windfall and informed Major Stefanelli. But even

before the radio alerted them, the jets were roaring over the ambush, guided by the column of smoke. Reaching the fighter pilots on a universal emergency frequency, Stefanelli turned them over to Captain Smith, who had just enough fuel left to put the strike in before heading for home base.

The air liaison officer at the Blackhorse operations center directed the aircraft to strike fifty meters inside the jungle, south of the highway. Smith added a 25-meter safety margin, rolled his aircraft over, dived, and fired one of his two remaining marking rockets. Plunging through intense fire from the enemy, the jets dropped six high-drag 500-pound bombs at the western edge of the ambush. Smith then marked for a napalm run, and the jets dropped six tanks on more enemy troops running south; they followed with a strafing run of 20-mm. cannon fire on Viet Cong fleeing along a trail in the jungle south of the road.

As the air strike took place, Lieutenant Keltner, on the ground, was directing the commander of his lead ACAV to take that part of the convoy that had escaped the ambush on to the base camp. He himself turned his vehicle along with C10 back toward the burning trucks. Coming first upon C13, burning on the road, Keltner directed C10 to remain with the wounded crewmen who had taken cover in the high grass on the north side of the road until a helicopter could arrive. Then C10 would rejoin Keltner.

Alone, Keltner's ACAV pressed on at top speed toward the burning trucks, the lieutenant in the process radioing for a medical evacuation helicopter for the wounded. A helicopter from the Blackhorse base camp, already overhead and monitoring Keltner's frequency, responded immediately.

As Keltner's ACAV sped along the highway, ten Viet Cong suddenly darted across its path. Both the Viet Cong and the gunners in the ACAV opened fire. Five of the enemy fell; the others made it into the scrub jungle south of the road. Keltner's left machine gunner, hit in the head, died instantly. During this brief engagement a 57-mm. recoilless rifle fired five rounds at the lieutenant's vehicle. Despite the speed of C16—thirty-five to forty-five miles an hour—the last round hit its left side. Although the antitank round failed to stop Keltner's ACAV, the lieutenant and his right machine gunner were wounded by fragments and the intercom and radios were knocked out, leaving Keltner only a portable radio lashed to the outside of the commander's hatch. Intended for maintaining contact with the air controller, this radio provided the only remaining link between Keltner and his platoon.

When he reached the abandoned and still-smoldering hulk of C18, Keltner could detect no sign of the crew. He stopped long

enough to remove the vehicle's machine guns, then drove on till he reached the burning trucks. From the ditch along the south side of the road, the men from the trucks were still exchanging small arms fire with the Viet Cong. Five to six minutes had passed since C13 and C18 had been knocked out. Calling for a second medical helicopter for the wounded truck drivers, Keltner rode down the line of trucks to make certain he had missed no casualties. Finding none, he continued to the rear of the convoy, where he left his dead gunner and exchanged his ACAV for C23 which had an operable intercom and radios.

Mounted in C23 and accompanied by C16, Keltner returned to the burning trucks, his gunners firing from the moving vehicle into the jungle. When the men from the trucks told him that most of the enemy fire was now coming from the north, Keltner radioed for an air strike against the edge of the jungle lying north of the highway. This call coincided with the end of the strafing run by the F-100's, but in response to a request by the 1st Squadron operations center, initiated only minutes after the ambush was sprung, two F-5 Freedom Fighters had arrived over the ambush site. They swept in on the target, hitting the west edge of the patch of jungle with cluster bomb units that sounded like rolling thunder to the troops along the edge of the road.

Observing the strike while cruising along the road with his machine gunners firing into the jungle on either side, Keltner called in an adjustment to Colonel Howell, who had arrived overhead in a Huey, and on the second pass the aircraft dropped napalm tanks closer to the south edge of the jungle. This did the job; no further enemy fire came from the north.

After another quick but unsuccessful search for the crew of C18, Keltner returned again to the burning trucks even as the first of the relief forces began to arrive.

When Colonel Howell had reacted to Lieutenant Keltner's first report of small arms fire by ordering Troop C to the scene, he had some qualms that he might be sending troops to deal with only a few snipers. But when Keltner's report of burning trucks came a few moments later, Howell ordered both Troop B and Company D (a tank company) to follow Troop C. As the squadron moved, Colonel Howell mounted his waiting helicopter. As soon as he gained altitude he could see the column of smoke from the trucks and the bombs of the air strike rising from the killing zone.

Guiding on the smoke, the colonel was soon over the ambush site, talking to Keltner, adjusting the second air strike, and formulating his battle plan. Troop C would go south of the highway and then east along the railroad tracks, cutting off the most obvious route of re-

treat, while Troop B would swing north in an arc connecting each end of the ambush. The tanks of Company D would push along the highway to force the enemy into the encircling troops.

As the relief force drew closer to the ambush, Colonel Howell and Lieutenant Keltner adjusted the second air strike to be brought against the enemy positions. Minutes later, Troop B swung north through the strike zone, Troop C turned south, and Company D's tanks swept into the grass north of the highway. It was 1100, only thirty-five minutes since the ambush had struck, and the squadron already had traveled over twenty kilometers.

While the squadron maneuvered, Keltner searched again for C18's missing crew. This time he found the men in the grass north of the road protecting their critically wounded commander. Within a few minutes a helicopter had evacuated them.

Twenty minutes after the relief force arrived, the southern pincer made contact with the enemy as 1st Lt. James V. Stewart fired at what proved to be the rear guard of the 274th Regiment, fleeing south across the railroad tracks. Stewart's crew killed two Viet Cong and captured a Chinese-made 57-mm. recoilless rifle. For the rest of the day the tanks and ACAV's continued closing the circle around the ambush site. Cruising through the grass adjacent to the highway, Company D flushed out and killed, one at a time, five Viet Cong. Troop A, released from the base camp, joined the squadron and killed one enemy soldier, and Troop B captured another. By 1600 it became clear that, even with the help of a South Vietnamese infantry battalion that made a cursory search of the area, the squadron had failed to trap the main force of the enemy.

Colonel Howell then directed the squadron to coil around the ambush site for the night.

After encountering a few enemy patrols that night, the squadron searched the battlefield the next day and for two days following. The men found bunkers along the escape route and a total of thirty enemy dead. The convoy and its escort had lost seven men killed and eight wounded, four trucks and two ACAV's destroyed.

From the beginning, the battle had not gone well for the Viet Cong. The ambush, designed to open with the crash of recoilless rifle fire and grenades, had begun with the sputter of small arms fire while half the convoy sped through unscathed. Alerted, most of the men had entered the killing zone firing into the jungle on both sides of the road. Not until the middle of the convoy reached the killing zone had the enemy fired heavy weapons. Almost from the first, Blackhorse helicopters had struck from the sky. The ACAV—new to the men of the Dong Nai Regiment, who had never seen a vehicle quite like it—poured more fire into the Viet Cong ranks than any

other "personnel carrier" they had met. The clincher had come when the Ho Nai outpost flashed word that the relief force was on the way just minutes after the ambush struck; the regimental commander, whose troops were already beginning to flee south as jets came in to bomb, was obliged to order withdrawal when the fight had scarcely begun.

Late in the afternoon of 24 November—Thanksgiving Day—the squadron returned to the Blackhorse base camp.

National Highway 1 remained open.