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PROJECT CHECO REPORT

SILVER BAYONET

28 February 1966

Hq PACAF

Tactical Evaluation Center

Project CHECO

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SILVER BAYONET

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SILVER BAYONET

Following the battle of Plei Me (19 October 1965 to 29 October 1965),^{1/} the 1st Airborne Cavalry took all the area west of that camp to the Cambodian border as its primary objective area, with the broad mission objective to maintain contact. Initially, elements of the 1st Air Cavalry were committed at 1600 hours on 24 October at Plei Me.^{2/} The Plei Me relief operation was terminated 1600 hours, 29 October, and Operations Long Reach was instituted at 0515 hours on 1 November, although contact between friendly and enemy forces was maintained during this break. Long Reach, a search and destroy operation, involving four ~~companies~~^{battalions} of the 1st Air Cavalry,^{3/} took place between Plei Me and the Chu Phong Mountain region. In this operation, a prelude to Silver Bayonet but greatly scaled down in size, 85 tactical air sorties were employed in support, expending GP, frags, incendiary and WP bombs in addition to 20 mm and 2.75-inch rockets. Final figures showed that the VC had lost 216 KIA/KBA, with an estimated 610 additional bodies carried off, and 107 VC suspects captured. Friendly losses were 55 KIA and 194 wounded in action. The operation lasted until 9 November 1965.^{4/}

Operation Silver Bayonet commenced 0800 hours, 9 November,^{5/} coincident with the termination of Long Reach. Under the plan, the 1st Air Cavalry's 3rd Brigade was committed to sweeping the area from a point about seven kilometers west of Plei Me to the border. This comprised an area roughly 20 by 25 nautical miles centered 30 nautical miles southeast of Pleiku. The action during the following three weeks demonstrated convincingly the value of applied tactical airpower on the ground situation.

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The first three days provided little significant activity; however, airpower was continuously overhead. Late on the night of the 12th, the Brigade command post received small arms and automatic weapons fire, and approximately a hundred rounds of mixed mortar fire, from the north and northeast of the perimeter. The post called for a flareship and air cover, and the attack was broken off at 0025 on the morning of the 13th. Illumination was provided for the remainder of the night.

On 13 November, ground forces established the contact they had desired. By this time, elements had fanned out into the Ia Drang valley and some were nearing the slopes of Chu Phuong, the mountain to the southwest, where they began to encounter enemy forces larger than squad size. Two UH1Bs were brought down by intense ground fire, and an A1E was shot down and the pilot was killed. On the 14th, the action became even heavier. "B" Company of the 1st Battalion, 7th Regiment, encountered heavy automatic weapons and sniper fire, and called for tactical air strikes and artillery. The resultant strike accounted for 20 VC killed ^{6/} (possibly 70 more) and five captured. One platoon of this company was cut off from the battalion, practically in the shadow of the Chu Phong slopes, while the battalion was closing in to an LZ not far behind them. An AC-47, requested after night fall, expended 12,000 rounds against the high ground to the west of the platoon's position, but with unknown results.

The enemy seemed determined force a fire fight with this unit, for at 0345 hours on the morning of the 15th, they launched a heavy probe from the southwest. When the location and lines of the attacking forces were determined, "B" Company again called for tactical air. Hobo 01 and 02,

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a flight of ALEs scrambled from Pleiku at 0450 ^{1/} took station on target at 0520, after detailed instructions from the ground Forward Air Controller and the airborne FAC in the C-123 flareship. Although receiving automatic weapons fire all the way up to 3500 feet, Hobo 01 and 02 worked within 300 meters of the "B" Company troops, dropping twelve 500 pound GP bombs, another twelve 100 pound GP's and four 100 pound white phosphorus bombs. Because of darkness and jungle cover, the FAC could not give a bomb damage assessment but he did credit the fighters with 100% target coverage.

"B" Company gave its own BDA in an official report. "By 0600H, the probe was stopped by highly accurate tactical air strikes." ^{8/}

Enemy action continued through the 15th, marked generally by accurate sniper fire and sporadic mortar fire. By 1410 hours, "B" Company had relieved pressure on their isolated platoon and at this time 70 VC KIA had been confirmed by body count. A reduced battalion, the 2nd of the 7th Regiment, had prepared for movement to reenforce the 1st Battalion under Chu Phong and, upon "A" Company closing, it immediately engaged the enemy. "C" Company, airlifted in later in the afternoon, was diverted north of LZ X-Ray to a perimeter position and was directed to be prepared for operations the next day to the west and to the south.

(Attachment #1. Battle area representation and unit location.)

Early in the morning of the 16th, PAVN forces attacked LZ X-Ray in strength. The 1st of the 7th, in the LZ, repulsed them by 0645, and the enemy withdrew in small groups under cover of sniper fire. 1/7 maintained contact with the fleeing groups while calling for immediate air support, which was answered when FAC Topsail Charlie put a flight of

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three F-100s, Falcon 51, on target at 0805. ^{2/} After placing six 750 pound napalm cans and six 500 pound GP bombs on the retreating PAVN forces, the three F-100s strafed the area between the enemy and the friendly troops, putting 2400 rounds of 20 mm cannon fire to within 100 meters of friendly elements.

Two HULs were shot down during the day. The aircraft and crew of one were evacuated safely, but the other crashed, killing all four crewmen aboard. Attempts by friendly helicopters to investigate drew heavy ground fire from the VC so tactical air was called in. Phantom 41, a flight of four F4Cs, expended 3800 rounds of cannon fire in support of attempted rescue operations ^{10/} before it was determined that extraction of the wreckage could not be accomplished because of intense automatic weapons fire around the downed helicopter. With all evidence pointing toward the fact that the VC were using the downed HUL-B as a decoy to entice other helicopters into a flak trap, and to insure that the weapons and ammunition aboard it did not fall into enemy hands, it was decided to destroy the crashed Huey. After being warned about the suspected flak trap, Hobo 35, a flight of two ALEs, ^{11/} was sent in by FAC Topsail Kilo. On target at 1730, the ALEs placed their ~~twelve~~ 500 pound GPs, four WP and twelve 100 pound general purpose bombs directly on the helicopter, while firing 1600 rounds of 20 mm cannon shells for suppressive effect. The HULB was destroyed, and the aircraft exited the area safely. Several more strike sorties were FAC directed against gun positions in the hill until ground fire was silenced.

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This same day saw the initial use of B-52 aircraft in the Chu Phong area ^{12/} when at 1600 hours, 18 B-52s dropped 344 tons of 750 pound GP bombs on the southeast slopes. This was followed by the dropping of 30,000 propaganda leaflets and 50,000 safe conduct passes, and a surrender appeal by an aerial loudspeaker mounted in an Air Force U-10 aircraft. These bombings and leaflet drops continued though the following days.

On the 17th, elements of the 2nd and the 7th working the ground to the north of LZ X-Ray were ambushed, pinned down and split into two perimeters by the VC. Their position was located in a savannah, covered with head-high elephant grass. The enemy occupied high ground around them and subjected them to extremely heavy automatic weapons and small arms fire. Snipers in trees kept the friendlies pinned down as the VC drove a wedge between the two perimeter positions to keep them from reenforcing each other. The action developed into hand-to-hand fighting, with the enemy holding numerical and fire superiority, and inflicted heavy casualties, especially on the most forward of the two perimeters.

Close air support was requested but the action was so close that painstaking coordination between the airborne FAC and ground observers was necessary. The strikes were called in by Captain Joe Pirie, the Army FSSC on the ground with the ambushed troops. Pirie called for the target to be marked with 20 mm cannon fire from the fighter since WP markers were considered too

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dangerous to the closely engaged friendly forces. The fighters worked the VC back steadily with 20 mm fire until they had sufficient room to drop napalm and GP. The napalm drops were so close that a few American troops were singed, but the consensus was that the very close-in fighter strike had saved many lives, even though a calculated risk of injury to friendly personnel was taken.

This one enemy ambush action contributed to the heaviest U.S. casualty figures during the action, but the overall integrity of the operation was not downgraded, and casualties for the period were listed as moderate.

Through the 18th of November, the 1st Cavalry continued to probe and move west and north into the Ia Drang valley. "B" Company of the 2/7 was helilifted into LZ Crook, the westernmost LZ yet used, which they secured late in the afternoon. Enemy fire by snipers, and occasional mortar fire was encountered through the day, but no major action developed for the 1st Cavalry units.

A corollary tactic was employed to satisfy the known need of a blocking force at the west end of the Ia Drang valley and the western slopes of Chu Phong on the late afternoon of 18 November. "Than Phong 7", an ARVN paratrooper task force consisting of the 3rd Airborne Battalion, was helilifted into LZ Gulf, about six kilometers from the Cambodian border. The objective of the ARVN force was to sweep west to just short of the border, then south across the Ia Drang and into the Chu Phong foothills east of Cambodia. Their first day in the LZ was spent securing the perimeter, but light contact was established with the enemy,

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resulting in seven VC KIA body count.

On the 19th, the 1st Cavalry extended its area, with elements going into LZ Gulf. This move, along with the troops in LZs Crook, Columbus, Albany and X-Ray, put the Cavalry in a rough semi-circle around the north and east of Chu Phong. The Than Phong 7 component prepared to begin their sweep to the west and south from Gulf. (Attachment #2. Battle area representation and unit location.) On 20 November, as the ARVN 3rd Airborne started its sweep, the 1st Cavalry's 2nd Brigade replaced the 3rd in the field and set up its forward command post at Duc Co. The 1st Cavalry units in the battle area were replaced by fresh troops against little opposition. The fighting appeared to have become sporadic. A total of only 12 tactical air sorties were requested, compared to 29 the day before, and 27 on the 18th.

From this point until the termination of the operation, the enemy seemed less inclined to mass, or to meet friendly operational units in strength. The intensity and frequency of the actions declined and the scale of the battle diminished. At 1710 hours, 28 November, Operation Silver Bayonet was officially terminated. ^{13/}

This marked the end of the longest continuously fought operation since the struggle in Vietnam began. That it was bitterly fought and closely engaged shows in the comparative casualty figures. U.S. casualties in Silver Bayonet were by far the heaviest suffered in a like period during the war -- 240 KIA and 247 WIA -- but by comparison the enemy losses were staggering. Viet Cong/PAVN KIA by body count added up to 1295; many more were carried away. Nineteen PAVN/VC were

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captured and the weapons taken (448 including 97 crew-served) would have easily outfitted a complete VC battalion. ^{14/} Using only the confirmed enemy KIA, it is obvious that the enemy forces were hurt as none had ever been hurt throughout the history of the Vietnam conflict; the PAVN/VC had lost well over a full regiment. Add to this the weapons captured, stores destroyed, shelters denied them, lines of communication and trails for safe passage interdicted, then the damage inflicted upon them was greatly magnified.

The PAVN/VC forces defended Chu Phong and the Ia Drang valley with a dedication bordering on the fanatic, in the face of massive and at times overwhelming firepower. Perhaps the greatest indications of Chu Phong's worth to them was this intensity with which they attempted to keep the 1st Cavalry off its slopes and away from its approaches. Gauging from all estimates the Chu Phong hills area with its winding draws and valleys constituted a major redoubt, staging area and storage dump for the VC and the PAVN in the western central highlands of Vietnam. At the very foot of the Ho Chi Minh trail, it afforded easy access to Cambodia, with good cover, excellent defensive terrain and potential for great storage facilities. The sheer walls of the valleys, honeycombed with caves, would present a near-impregnable storage area for food, ammunition and other supplies. The entire area around it had long been known as VC country, and ARVN units, even province and district chiefs, did not venture far south of Duc Co or west of Plei Me. It ranked with "C" and "D" zones in its inviolability.

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That the 1st Air Cavalry entered their territory and threatened the Chu Phong redoubt unquestionably stung the enemy into the un-guerrilla-like tactic of standing against superior firepower, which in turn contributed to the very heavy casualties he suffered. Whenever possible the 1st Cavalry, by constantly engaging the enemy forces, attempted to maneuver them into blocked positions where artillery and air strikes could inflict the greatest damage.

In prisoner interrogations, two themes cropped up with regularity. One, they had been told the Americans were poor fighters who would turn tail and run - and this they found not true. The second theme was almost basic to each interrogee's story - they suffered more, and were more demoralized by the constant bombing than any other one factor. Most prisoners captured were uniformed PAVN (Peoples Army of Vietnam) troops. These were dispirited, dazed and sick; they had malaria and festering wounds four or five days old that they could neither treat nor get treatment for, and all were hungry. Several stood in open clearings and waved safe conduct passes (dropped following the B-52 strikes) at FACs and helicopters flying by.

The number of prisoners taken, however, was relatively few, and despite the possible decimation of the equivalent of two regiments, it would be wrong to assume that the turning point had been reached. Each day saw new enemy troops show up in the field, and these troops were not demoralized and had not lost any desire to fight. They were well dressed and armed, well trained and motivated. These new soldiers, for all practical purposes, could have entered the fighting from only two

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placed; from Cambodian sanctuary or from the Chu Phong hills. In any event, there were undoubtedly more where these came from, and although the heavy losses unquestionably were a blow to the enemy, they did not break his ability to join battle.

Most likely the action phased down as the PAVN realized that it was highly unprofitable to stand and fight in the valley, and so withdrew into the hills. At the same time, the 1st Cavalry was aware that a single brigade could not storm the Chu Phong redoubt without receiving crippling casualties.

In terms of battlefield statistics the Americans caused the heaviest casualties to the enemy for a single action for the entire course of the war. This was done at the highest cost to date in U.S. casualties in Vietnam. Tactical fighter strikes during the battles on the 14th through the 17th of November, involving the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 7th Regiment, contributed directly in keeping the cost from mounting. Without airpower in its entirety; the close air support and interdiction, the B-52 strategic bombers-turned-tactical, the FACs, and the overall coordination and response within the Tactical Air Control System, the cost would have been much higher.

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SILVER BAYONET

Footnotes

(References as noted provided in copies 6 and 40)

- 1/ (C) Project CHECO study, "The Siege at Plei Me", Interim study #5, 24 February 1966. (Not provided)
- 2/ Ibid
- 3/ (C) Extract from 2AD U-55 Report, DO 04703, 8 November 1965, Report #65-45 (DOC 1).
- 4/ (C) Extract from 2AD U-55 Report, DO 04822, 15 November 1965, Report #65-46 (DOC 2).
- 5/ (C) Extract from 2AD U-55 Report, DO 04986, 28 November 1965, Report #65-47 (DOC 3).
- 6/- (C) Extract from USMACV SITREP (U.S. Ground Forces) #112, Cite 40 615, 16 November 1965 (DOC 4).
- 7/ (U) Msg Det 3 62521 TFW to 2 TACC DCO-I 0052 November 1965, 15 November 1965 (DOC 5).
- 8/ (C) Extract from USMACV SITREP (U.S. Ground Forces) #113, Cite 40 648, 16 November 1965 (DOC 6).
- 9/ (U) Msg 6251 TFW to 2 TACC, DCO-I 08590 65, 16 November 1965 (DOC 7).
- 10/ (U) Msg 12 TFW to 2AD, EFTO 0043 Nov 65, 16 November 1965 (DOC 8).
- 11/ (U) Msg 6251 TFW to 2 TACC, DCO-I 08627 Nov 65, 16 November 1965, (DOC 9).
- 12/ (C) Extract from 2AD U-55 Report DO 04986, 28 November 1965, Report #65-47 (DOC 3).
- 13/ (C) Extract from USMACV SITREP (U.S. Ground Forces) #126, Cite 43152, 29 November 1965 (DOC 10).
- 14/ Ibid.

NOTE: The following documents are of interest to the reader and are included in all copies:

Atch #1 - Battle area representation and unit locations 15 Nov 65.

Atch #2 - Battle area representation and unit locations 19 Nov 65.

1st Air Cav Unit Locations - 1800H 15 Nov 66



