

# The Battle of LZ Albany

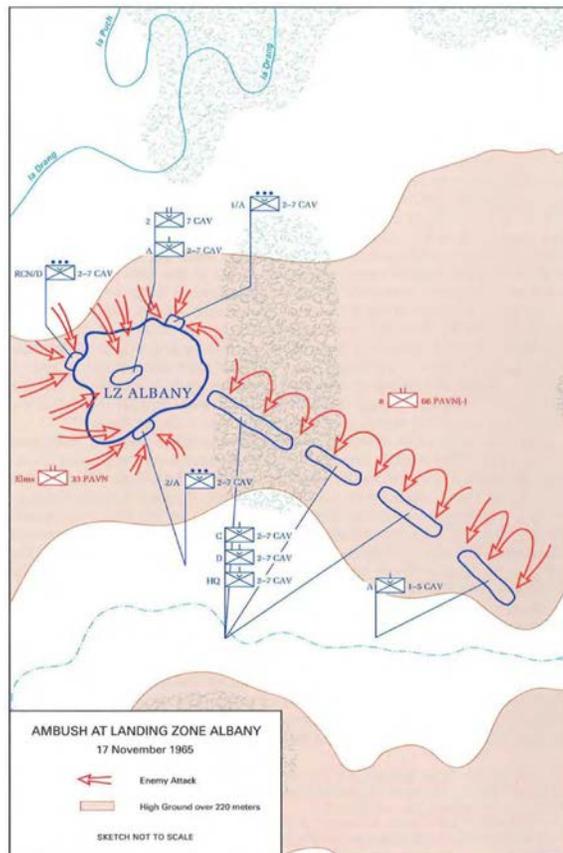
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**Editor's Note:** This article first appeared in the April-June 2014 issue of *INFANTRY Magazine*.

The Battle at Landing Zone (LZ) Albany — fought between the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry of the U.S. Army and the 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, along with the 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment of the Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) on 17 November 1965 — was the deadliest single-day battle during the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> Using the lens of doctrine, one can see that LTC Robert McDade, the 2-7 CAV commander, violated three of the five principles of patrolling: reconnaissance, control, and common sense.

After World War II, the United States remained acutely aware of communist regimes around the world, with particular focus on Southeast Asia. Before 1961, the U.S. presence in South Vietnam consisted of advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), whom played a supporting role as the nation underwent military and social struggles. The leader of the North Vietnam communist movement, Ho Chi Minh, and the elected leader, Prime Minister Diem, were catalysts in the escalation of U.S. force beginning in 1961.

Consequently, their actions led to the commitment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam. The decisive point for U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War came on 2 August 1964 when three North Vietnamese ships attacked the USS Maddox, an American destroyer. The attack spurred President Lyndon Johnson to order the bombing of North Vietnam, and by April 1965, 60,000 American troops were deployed to Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>



The first major American direct fire conflict took place in November of 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley. The conflict is divided into two engagements: the Battle at Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray and the Battle at LZ Albany. The Battle at LZ X-Ray occurred on 14-16 November between the PAVN's 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment (commanded by Senior Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An) and the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry (commanded by LTC Harold Moore) with aid from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5th Cavalry (commanded by LTC Bob Tully).

Marching from a drop zone two miles southeast of LZ X-Ray, 2-5 CAV arrived at 1200 on the 15th as reinforcements for 1-7 CAV, which was in continuous enemy contact beginning on 14 November. Marching from LZ Columbus (two miles east of LZ X-Ray) to provide additional support, 2-7 CAV arrived once the majority of the fighting was complete at 0900 on the 16th. At 1040, COL Tim Brown, the brigade commander in charge of U.S. forces on the ground, ordered 1-7 CAV to pull out of LZ X-Ray by helicopter. A relief in place was conducted as 2-5 and 2-7 CAV took over defensive positions held by 1-7 CAV. The remainder of the day on LZ X-Ray consisted of sporadic enemy mortar and rifle fire. Into the night the men maintained 100-percent security, without sleep and in defensive positions. On the morning of 17 November, COL Brown ordered 2-5 and 2-7 CAV to leave LZ X-Ray, as it was marked for an Air Force bombing. The units responded quickly. LTC Tully led his men off of LZ X-Ray at 0900, and LTC McDade followed 10 minutes later. Moving to its assigned location of LZ Columbus, 2-5 CAV led the way with 2-7 CAV following. Eventually breaking off to the north, 2-7 CAV moved to its assigned destination of LZ Albany.<sup>3</sup>

LTC McDade did not have a clear picture of the operational environment his unit was moving into. He recalled having no idea of what to expect and was instructed to establish an LZ at "a place called Albany" without being given an enemy situation overview.<sup>4</sup> His operation order (OPORD) to the leaders of 2-7 CAV followed in suit with regards to brevity. After returning from LTC McDade's brief, CPT Joel Sugdinis, commander of Alpha Company, 2-7 CAV, informed his subordinates that the situation was "pretty unclear," but confirmed enemy units in the area. CPT Sugdinis told his men that they were the lead element in a battalion march to LZ Albany, where they would be extracted. The men of 2-7 CAV would begin by following 2-5 CAV east and then branch north alone. The entire orders and preparation process took less than two hours and provided little in terms of contingency or alternate course-of-actions plans.<sup>5</sup>

The 2-7 CAV order of march to LZ Albany was: Reconnaissance Platoon, Alpha, Delta, Charlie, and Headquarters (HQ) companies. Last in the order of march was A/1-5 CAV, which had been attached to replace B/2-7 CAV, as it previously fought attached to 1-7 CAV during the battle at LZ X-Ray. As planned, 2-7 CAV followed 2-5 CAV east to a fork in the path where it branched north an additional two miles to LZ Albany.<sup>6</sup>

During the march, Soldiers carried a full combat load that reached weights of 80-110 pounds. The further into the movement, the more arduous the terrain became. Knee-high elephant grass turned to chest high as flat terrain turned into rolling. The thick single overhead tree canopy became a triple canopy, which increased temperatures and humidity. Exhausted from marching and having no sleep for 36-48 hours, Soldiers discarded equipment to lighten their load. As fatigue increased, the ability to remain disciplined was diminished during security halts; taking up defensive positions was second in priority to drinking water and recovering. The unexpectedly thick canopy forced the perimeter security element provided by A/2-7 CAV too close to the main body to effectively provide early warning.<sup>7</sup> While LZ Columbus received preparatory artillery fires, LZ Albany did not. CWO Hank Ainsworth, a Huey pilot assigned to 2-7 CAV, conducted aerial reconnaissance of LZ Albany prior to 2-7 CAV's departure of LZ X-Ray. After completing the reconnaissance, CWO Ainsworth reported negative enemy contact to COL Brown. Armed with that information, COL Brown decided to withhold artillery fires on LZ Albany to mask

the movement of 2-7 CAV. This deception plan set by COL Brown was counteracted when 2-7 CAV set fire to grass huts along its movement route. The high-rising smoke was visible for miles.<sup>8</sup>

Within 150 meters of the LZ, 1LT Pat Payne, the reconnaissance platoon leader, turned the head of the battalion column northwest. When doing so he saw a PAVN soldier asleep on the ground behind a six-foot tall termite hill. Sounding the alarm, 1LT Payne jumped on him and detained the prisoner. His platoon sergeant captured a second resting PAVN soldier while a third member of the apparent PAVN scout element escaped. No official report of an escapee was made to the chain of command. The prisoners made claims of being PAVN deserters but provided no actionable intelligence. The capture confirmed PAVN soldiers in the area. During this time 2-7 CAV halted movement; however, still stricken by exhaustion, the majority of the battalion did not take up formal defensive positions.<sup>9</sup>

After completing the interrogations, LTC McDade called the company commanders forward to establish and disseminate his plan to occupy the LZ. LTC McDade began his briefing before CPT George Forest, commander of A/1-5 CAV, arrived from the rear of the column. All other commanders traveled forward accompanied by their radio transmission operators (RTOs); first sergeants from A/2-7 CAV and B/2-7 CAV also attended. As the battalion commander briefed his plan, the reconnaissance platoon, along with 1st and 2nd Platoons of A/2-7 CAV, reconnoitered the LZ. Before the completion and formal reports from the reconnaissance elements, LTC McDade along with his commanders and staff moved to a cluster of trees in the middle of LZ Albany. All other companies remained spread along a 500-meter battalion column awaiting guidance. At approximately 1315 on 17 November, still awaiting the completion of the reconnaissance and main body's occupation of the LZ, 2-7 CAV began to receive direct and indirect contact. The 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment and 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment of the PAVN were executing a flanking attack from the northeast.<sup>10</sup>

Fighting broke out at the head of the battalion formation and continued down the northeast flank of the battalion. The PAVN fired from positions in the trees and ran through 2-7 CAV lines to cause a splintering effect between elements. The enemy closed with 2-7 CAV Soldiers, thus preventing the use of U.S. indirect fire. Unable to support one another, elements of 2-7 CAV conducted react-to-contact battle drills and mission command on levels as low as squad. Enemy indirect fire came from a PAVN local support-by-fire position near C/2-7 CAV. Still able to maneuver, C/2-7 CAV destroyed the enemy mortar assets. While successful in its attacking efforts, C/2-7 CAV received the most casualties in the battalion during the fight.<sup>11</sup>

1LT Larry Gwin, the A/2-7 CAV executive officer (XO), recalled receiving most of the casualties within the first 30 minutes of fighting. Gwin was co-located with the battalion HQ element in the middle of LZ Albany when 2-7 CAV began its counterattack. Charlie Company's destruction of the PAVN mortar positions provided 2-7 CAV the freedom of maneuver, and 1LT Gwin recalled the enemy's formation disestablishment resulting in the PAVN simply walking around in search of surviving U.S. Soldiers. This enabled 2-7 CAV to employ "sniping" of the PAVN, one by one. Although the PAVN attack became increasingly disorganized, the conflict was far from over.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of multiple breaks in contact, LTC McDade struggled to effectively command his force for a majority of the afternoon and into the evening. Ineffective radio communication was the primary cause. Malfunctioning equipment and the loss of key leaders and radio operators resulted in the inability to maintain communication long enough for the battalion to effectively maneuver. The battalion operations officer, CPT Jim Spires, recalled that the ability to effectively execute mission command was greatly diminished. LTC McDade did not receive a clear picture of what the entire battalion column was experiencing until late in the day. At 1426, LTC McDade, his staff, and the A/2-7 CAV leadership fought as an independent small unit in the small wooded area on LZ Albany, paralleling the actions of the other battalion elements.<sup>13</sup> All components of the battalion remained in squad- and platoon-size formations as

each pulled security, fired on small groups of PAVN soldiers, provided medical aid, and awaited indirect fire and reinforcements.<sup>14</sup>

The 2-7 CAV XO, MAJ Frank Henry, provided indirect fire, air assets, and medical aid. Located on LZ Albany with the battalion HQ, MAJ Henry radioed in artillery and air support, aiding in the suppression and destruction of the PAVN. MAJ Henry and CPT Joe Price, the battalion fire support officer, began by calling in fire on known enemy positions in the trees surrounding LZ Albany. Calling in effective indirect fire on the PAVN positions was a challenging and slow process as the enemy had intermingled among U.S. forces. According to 1LT Payne, the Soldiers cheered as aircraft flew by so close they could see the pilot's profile in the cockpit. The outlook for 2-7 CAV remained positive as reinforcements arrived by air and ground. Marching north from LZ Columbus, B/1-5 CAV made contact with CPT Forest and the men of A/1-5 CAV at 1636. CPT Forest's familiarity with the unit provided quick integration as B/1-5 CAV helped attack the PAVN and relieve pressure on the rear of the battalion column. Recovering at Camp Holloway, the unit's forward operating base, B/2-7 CAV was still raw from its part in LZ X-Ray when it received orders for a night mission onto a hot LZ. At 1845, the company arrived on LZ Albany by helicopter.<sup>15</sup>

By early evening, the battle successfully shifted in the favor of U.S. forces. The arrival of B/2-7 CAV allowed the battalion HQ security perimeter to strengthen and expand. As the perimeter grew, wounded CAV Soldiers in hiding were either found or made their way to the HQ element. After the first round of medical evacuations (medevacs), helicopter pilots refused to extract the wounded from LZ Albany because it was "too hot," but MAJ Henry made a special request for the "229th Huey Slicks."<sup>16</sup> After hearing MAJ Henry's request, CWO Ainsworth recalled that "the whole damn unit volunteered."<sup>17</sup> At 2146, four helicopters began the evacuation of casualties off LZ Albany. Fighting continued in bursts as reinforcements and medical aid continued to arrive at the LZ throughout the night. Air Force bombers dropped napalm around the perimeter of U.S. forces, allowing LTC McDade time and space to reconstitute his formation into larger masses.<sup>18</sup> Finally, at dawn the U.S. CAV leadership assessed the conflict as possibly concluded. CPT Sugdinis, recalled the morning as calm but not comforting. The toll of fighting and the violence of the PAVN attack became clear to the leadership of 2-7 CAV. To ensure LZ Albany was void of PAVN soldiers, LTC McDade commanded 2-7 CAV to conduct a "mad minute" firing of all weapons systems at any and all suspected enemy positions. The action did not elicit a response. The fight at LZ Albany was over, and 2-7 CAV was able to collect its wounded and dead. The PAVN fatalities totaled 403 with 150 additionally wounded. The U.S. forces sustained 151 fatalities and 121 wounded.<sup>19</sup>

## **Analysis**

During the Battle at LZ Albany, LTC McDade and 2-7 CAV violated reconnaissance, control, and common sense. The second principle of patrolling, reconnaissance, is defined as "the responsibility to confirm what you think you know, and to learn that which you don't."<sup>20</sup> Violation of reconnaissance occurred when LTC McDade ordered the reconnaissance platoon to move as the lead element in the battalion column instead of acting as forward element detached from the battalion column. LTC McDade chose to move onto the LZ with his commanders and staff before the reconnaissance was complete and before the LZ was formally occupied. This is an additional violation of this principle. As a result of these violations, LTC McDade's subordinates were unable to paint for him a picture of LZ Albany prior to occupation or call-in fires on the LZ once the reconnaissance platoon discovered the enemy. LTC McDade and 2-7 CAV learned what LZ Albany held firsthand and fought reactively rather than proactively.

The fourth principle of patrolling is control. It is defined as clarifying the concept of the operation and commander's intent, coupled with disciplined communications, to bring every man and weapon available to overwhelm the enemy at the decisive point.<sup>21</sup> The violation occurred when LTC McDade did

not provide clear a mission and intent to his subordinates prior to the initiation of movement. His subordinates were in equal violation by leaving the OPORD brief without receiving clarity of the battalion commander's intent. Furthermore, LTC McDade violated the principle of control when he called his company commanders to the head to the battalion. This provided the PAVN an initial advantage over 2-7 CAV upon contact. Detaching the commanders from their respective companies slowed the ability of 2-7 CAV to bring maximum arms to bear against the enemy or to exercise disciplined communication upon initial contact.

Burning huts during the movement to LZ Albany and not providing clear intent for actions on enemy contact violates the principle of common sense. Smoke created en route to the final destination neutralized the battalion's deception plan. Despite knowledge of likely enemy in the area of operation, the battalion commander did not provide any formal guidance with regards to actions on enemy direct fire contact. Violations of common sense resulted in the enemy's ability to mass forces onto 2-7 CAV's suspected route as well as gain and maintain the advantage upon initial contact.

The Battle at LZ Albany was the deadliest single-day battle in the Vietnam War. Reviewing the movements, reactions, and decision-making processes involved can afford valuable lessons learned. While conflict with the PAVN would have likely been unavoidable, either on LZ Albany or en route to the objective, the resulting consequences could have been mitigated had the principles of patrolling been followed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth R. Pierce, "The Battle of the Ia Drang Valley" *Military Review*, 69.1 (1989): 95-97.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), xli-xlvi.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Gwin, *Baptism: A Vietnam Memoir* (NY: Random House, 1999), 110-124.

<sup>4</sup> LTG (Retired) Harold G. Moore and Joseph Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young: Ia Drang, the Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam* (NY: Harper Perennial, 1993), 217.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 217-219.

<sup>6</sup> Gwin, *Baptism*, 127-128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 127-129.

<sup>8</sup> Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers*, 222-225.

<sup>9</sup> Merle L. Pribbenow, "The Fog of War: The Vietnamese View of the Ia Drang Battle," *Military Review*, 81.1 (2001): 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 94-97.

<sup>11</sup> Gwin, *Baptism*, 131-133.

<sup>12</sup> Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers*, 237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

<sup>14</sup> Gwin, *Baptism*, 145-147.

<sup>15</sup> Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers*, 230, 237, 264-265.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 280-283.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 285.

<sup>20</sup> SH 21-76, *Ranger Handbook* (Department of the Army, 2011), 7-1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 7-1.

When this article was written, **CPT J. Dallas Henry** was attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He began his military career as a member of the 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. While with 1-38 IN, he served as a mobile gun system

platoon leader, Headquarters and Headquarters Company executive officer (XO), and as the rear detachment battalion commander. CPT Henry deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) 12-13. CPT Henry is a third generation combat arms officer and the grandson of 2-7 Cavalry XO MAJ Frank Henry. The review of this battle remains pertinent and practical in the ever important understanding of the principals of patrolling and how a clear understanding of the mission and operating environment can have an effect.