

The Battle of Suoi Tre

Reunion Gives Chance to Share Experiences, Lessons Learned

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On 21 March 2015, 47 veterans of the Battle of Suoi Tre gathered at Fort Carson, Colo., to commemorate the 48th anniversary of the battle. Fifty years earlier, around the time many of the veterans of Suoi Tre received their draft notices, General Chu Huy Man, a Moscow-trained intelligence officer, learned a valuable lesson that would shape the events of that day. In October 1965, General Man was tasked with drawing American units into a fight in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam in order to determine their combat capabilities. After the battle he was to share what he learned with other National Liberation Front (NLF) commanders. He did this by attacking the U.S. Special Forces base at Plei Me. General Man's plan worked as the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 7th Cavalry Regiment and 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment entered the Ia Drang Valley in early November. (See related articles beginning on page 24.) Despite a significant numerical advantage, the North Vietnamese forces were defeated largely due to the accuracy and lethality of the supporting American artillery. The lesson General Man and the Communist forces learned: *Given the choice to attack and overwhelm a major American unit, choose the artillery base.*

Background

Late in 1966, intelligence gathered near the capitol indicated a major attack was planned on Saigon originating from the Iron Triangle, north of the capitol. The Iron Triangle was a historic enemy staging area dating back to the Viet Minh conflict with the French. To deal with this threat, a force of 30,000 American and South Vietnamese troops invaded the area and disrupted the enemy's planned assault on the capitol. This first major operation of the year was called Operation Cedar Falls, which began on 8 January 1967 and lasted 20 days.

This cleared the table for a major operation that had been planned for a year — a major invasion of the enemy's main base of operation in War Zone C. The target of the maneuver was the headquarters of the enemy's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) which was thought to be situated in the zone. COSVN was the headquarters of the commanders who were directing all enemy activity in the entire South Vietnamese theater for the NLF.

On 22 February, nearly three American divisions began setting up a hammer and anvil operation — Junction City — that swept through War Zone C from east to west. The operation became the largest U.S. Army aerial invasion of this or any other conflict consisting of 249 helicopters and a number of fixed-wing aircraft. After three weeks, little was accomplished as the enemy was content to allow American forces to locate many of their base areas and supply depositories. Phase I of Operation Junction City ended on 15 March, and preparations were made to return to War Zone C after a brief rest and maintenance period.

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Phase II of Operation Junction City consisted of revisiting War Zone C with 24 battalions. The target was a suspected area where the 272nd Vietcong (VC) Regiment and the command office of the NLF South Vietnam were located.

A loose cordon was set around the area of operation (AO) using the 173rd Airborne Brigade; 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division; and the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division which established fire support bases. All three brigades were to perform a thorough sweep of their AOs while the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division secured the Highway 13 supply route.

On 18 March, two of the three maneuver battalions of the 3rd Brigade — the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment and 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment — were transported by fixed-wing aircraft from Camp Rainier at Dau Tieng to the staging area at Suoi Da at the base of Black Virgin Mountain (Nui Ba Den). The third element — the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Mechanized Infantry — was sent cross country north into War Zone C with the task of securing a landing zone (LZ) for the insertion of the two other light infantry battalions. C Company, 3-22 IN would remain at Suoi Da to provide security for the staging area of the operation. Ultimately, the mechanized battalion received continuous harassment fire and was unable to reach the original light infantry's landing zone, which was seven miles north of the jump off point northeast of Suoi Da.

On 19 March, 2-1 IN loaded onto Bell UH-1 Iroquois (Huey) helicopters to prepare to move to LZ Gold, an unsecured clearing that was short of the original LZ but closer to the advancing mechanized infantry. Before the first lift, the decision was made to prep the LZ for an hour. After the hour, B Company, 3-22 IN took the place of 2-12 IN and moved to the LZ. The first lift was uneventful. The second and third lifts, however, were attacked with command-detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) resulting in 15 killed, 28 wounded, three helicopters destroyed, and three more seriously damaged. After a sweep of the area, it was clear that the situation could have been much worse as an additional nineteen 82mm mortar rounds and two 175mm rockets rigged for remote detonation were found. The perimeter was finally secured at 1300.

The following morning, A and B Companies of 3-22 IN remained at the firebase to provide security and patrols in the area. Meanwhile, 2-12 IN was sent on a sweep of the area west and northwest of the firebase. To the south, units of the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment were sent to reinforce 2-22 Mechanized Infantry as it struggled to move north towards the firebase.

Eventually those units linked and moved into position along the edge of the Suoi Samat River two kilometers southwest of Forward Support Base (FSB) Gold. The 2-12 IN settled into the jungle near the originally proposed LZ (Silver) for the evening. The day was uneventful for all of the units with 2-12 IN and 2-34 AR with 2-22 IN finding only abandoned enemy encampments. At 0429 on 21 March, an ambush patrol from B/3-22 reported movement in the jungle beyond FSB Gold. Shortly after, the jungle fell silent with no further movement reported. At 0630, as the patrol was preparing to move back to the FSB, they spotted two enemy and engaged them with grenades and small arms. A major firefight ensued. The B/3-22 commander, CPT Walt Shugart, began to organize a squad to support the troops in contact. Before they could leave the wire, the sound of mortar rounds leaving tubes rang out from the surrounding jungle. The FSB began receiving heavy mortar fire around the perimeter and at the artillery emplacements. As hundreds of 61mm and 82mm mortar rounds fell on FSB Gold, the situation report (SITREP) reached the brigade tactical operations center (TOC) at Suoi Da. Forward air controllers were immediately sent in their O1 Birdog aircraft to direct close air support over FSB Gold. F4 Phantoms from

Bien Hoa Airfield scrambled to provide support. COL Marshal B. Garth, 3rd Brigade commander, commandeered the only available aircraft (an OS23 bubble helicopter) to direct the battle from above.

Meanwhile at FSB Gold, the VC were engaged in an all-out assault to overrun the base, leaving no survivors, just as they had done against Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units in the past. The attacking force consisted of the four battalions of the 272nd VC Regiment reinforced with two additional infantry battalions and supported by the U80 Artillery Regiment. All told, 2,500 enemy troops were committed to the assault on the 450 defenders of FSB Gold. At 0635, the concentration of the mortar barrage shifted onto A Company and the western side of FSB Gold. This initiated a VC ground assault on B Company along the eastern side. By 0638, all B Company platoons were reporting enemy inside the wire. Soldiers with 1st Platoon reported hand-to-hand combat along their portion of the southeastern corner.

The battle was quickly getting out of control. At 0640 the 3rd Brigade TOC alerted the nearby units to prepare for a hasty movement to FSB Gold. By 0655, 2-12 IN was prepared to move out. Five minutes later, three of the four companies received indirect fire wounding 13 and killing one Soldier. LTC Joe Elliot, the battalion commander, was among the wounded. C Company, which did not receive casualties, was detached from the battalion and sent south shortly after the barrage. A Company followed 15 minutes later after tending to its wounded. The battalion command section, including the wounded LTC Elliot, traveled to FSB Gold as part of this group. B Company remained behind to secure the LZ for the medical evacuation (MEDEVAC).

Meanwhile, the units to the south were blocked by the Suoi Samat River. The 2-22 IN and 2-34 AR had no way to move their tracked vehicles across the river. Scouts were sent to search for a suitable crossing while the situation at FSB Gold worsened. The first air support arrived around 0715 as the 01 Birdog guided four F4 Phantoms to the tree line. They dropped napalm from north to south, first along the edge of the jungle and then closer to the FSB where enemy troops were caught in the open. By this time, enemy mortar fire was beginning to taper off largely due to the accurate counterfire. Nevertheless, the advancing VC continued to attack the center of the FSB with accurate rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire and 57mm recoilless rifle fire from the woodline. The acting commander of 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery, LTC John Vessey, moved to the gunline to rally his artillerymen and organize a hasty repair of the damaged guns. Of the 17 damaged guns, all but three were repaired. (LTC Vessey would later serve as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1982 to 1985.)

By 0815 the northeast corner of the FSB had been completely overrun. A/3-22, which had been manning the western half of the FSB, sent reinforcements to B Company on the eastern half. Minutes later a night ambush patrol from A/3-22, which had been positioned two kilometers west of the FSB, arrived. Knowing that the men at the FSB could not hold out much longer, COL Garth checked the progress of the armor and mechanized units to the south. When he learned that suitable crossing had not yet been found, he ordered them to sink an armored personnel carrier (APC) in the Suoi Samat River and drive over it if need be. Within a few short moments, an accommodating site across the river was located, and the relief force sped across. Help was en route if the defenders at FSB Gold could just hold out. CPT Shugart ordered the firing of 105mm flechette rounds, commonly known as beehive rounds, directly into the advancing enemy. This initially quelled the advance, but more enemy continued to pour out of the woodline. By 0820 the enemy advance was overwhelming, and the decision was made to retrograde B Company's forces into fighting positions within the artillery perimeter. During the retrograde, an M45 Quadmount machine gun in the northern sector of the FSB was overrun and turned towards U.S. forces. Fortunately, an alert artilleryman reacted with one direct lay High Explosive (HE) round, eliminating the threat before the enemy was able to fire shots.

Around 0830, COL Garth ordered the A Company and Headquarters, 2-12 IN group to stop in place immediately. COL Garth asked if CPT Jon Palmer, A6, was anywhere near the trail running from their earlier position to north of the clearing where FSB Gold was located. CPT Palmer quickly checked his map and replied "negative." COL Garth responded, "Good, I spotted a platoon of VC laying on the side of that trail waiting to ambush any relief column coming down. Start up your column and head to the battle. I'll deal with that ambush group with gunships."

By 0840, the secondary positions were fully manned. This opened up more avenues of attack allowing for more flechette rounds to be used on the enemy, which was quickly closing on hand-grenade range. Minutes later, C/2-12 IN arrived at the northwest corner of the FSB just as the F4 Phantoms made another napalm run along the eastern woodline. At 0901, A/2-12 and the command group burst through the western woodline. With reinforcements present, A/2-12 and B/3-22 prepared for a counterattack.

At 0912, APCs from C/2-22 moved out of the southern woodline raking enemy with machine-gun fire as they moved towards the southern tip of the FSB. Shortly after, more APCs from Recon Platoon 2-22 and tanks from 2-34 AR moved out of the woodline, sweeping south to north along the western side of the FSB. After clearing the southern end of the FSB, C/2-22 turned north and cleared the eastern perimeter.

Defeat was clear for the VC, and they began to retreat towards the jungle. CPT Shugart ordered B/3-22 to counterattack with A/2-12. The two companies fired point blank into the VC caught inside the perimeter. They then moved east to the original B/3-22 fighting positions. Soldiers from 2-22 and 2-34 AR pursued the retreating VC into the jungle northeast of the FSB, but they were quickly pulled back for fear of a possible ambush. They returned to the FSB and began searching and collecting the enemy bodies.

The final count revealed that 647 of the 2,500 attacking VC were killed. It was the largest one-day loss of the war for the VC. Shortly after the battle, GEN William Westmoreland flew to the clearing to congratulate the survivors. All participating units were awarded the presidential unit citation. Within a few days of the battle, many of the Soldiers within the brigade fell victim to the infusion program, a plan that pulled Soldiers from a seasoned unit into other units in theater. The intent was to allow room for new Soldiers in these units, ensuring the brigade would not be left with all new Soldiers when the original draftee's commitment was fulfilled. This program left many of the Soldiers who fought at Suoi Tre unable to talk about the events of that day with those they fought alongside for many years.

Decades after the war ended, units present formed their own veterans organizations and would meet annually to reconnect with those they fought alongside as young men. On 21 March 2015, members of all units present on that day — including those that provided aerial support — met for the first time in nearly five decades.

William "Bill" Comeau was a factory worker when he was drafted in December of 1965. He was sent to Fort Lewis, Wash., where he was assigned to A Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment for basic training in a train and retain unit. After basic training, the unit was sent to Vietnam with the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. Comeau served as the company's radio-telephone operator (RTO). After his tour he returned to his hometown of New Bedford, Mass., where he still lives. He attended and graduated from East Coast Aviation Technical School in 1971 and served as a technician for more than 40 years.

CPT Andrew Loflin was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment in March 2012. He deployed with 2-12 IN in April 2012 to Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. There he served a platoon leader for A Company. He deployed with the battalion again in January 2014 to Zabul Province as the Scout platoon leader. He developed a relationship with many of

the battalion's Vietnam veterans while planning for the 2014 post-deployment ball and the Suoi Tre Reunion. He and Bill Comeau have become close friends and correspond regularly.

“As young Infantrymen, none of us men could have possibly known how historical a battle was taking place on that day. As this was our first ‘major’ battle since our arrival, we had nothing to compare it to. Personally, as my company raced through the jungle to reinforce the beleaguered men at the fire base, I was overwhelmed by the noise that was emanating from the battle site. No compass was needed to get to the fight two kilometers away. I thought to myself, ‘Wow, imagine what it was like on D-Day if this battle is producing such devastating sounds.’ As I helped police up the many dead Vietcong lying about the field for burial, it became very apparent that this was no inconsequential battle. It took 40 years to learn that this battle produced the largest enemy loss during a one-day battle in the war. Although all of the participating units in the battle earned the Presidential Unit Citation, most of the men in my company didn’t learn of it until we formed a veterans group and I wrote about it in an association newsletter. The award was not awarded until July 1968, seven months after the draftees returned to their homes, factories, farms, and offices when their 24-month induction was completed. I worked with Joe Engles, a veteran of the 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment, to organize the battle’s veterans for Heritage Week at Fort Carson, Colo. We were so grateful for all of the preparations that were made by LTC Neil Snyder, commander of 2-77 FA, and LTC Paul Staeheli, commander of the 2-12 IN. We were overwhelmed by the hospitality and the respect that was accorded to us during our visit. Personally, I was very much moved by the number of Soldiers who joined us on the 48th anniversary of the battle. That day fell on a Saturday, and I was amazed at how many Soldiers from our former units took the time to be with us in the middle of what I was told was a four-day weekend. More than 400 Soldiers were present, and these young men have no idea how gratifying and humbling that was for us. When we left Vietnam in 1967, most of us were not given anything to believe that our victory and sacrifices would ever be acknowledged in such a magnificent manner. We’ll be eternally grateful.”

— William Comeau

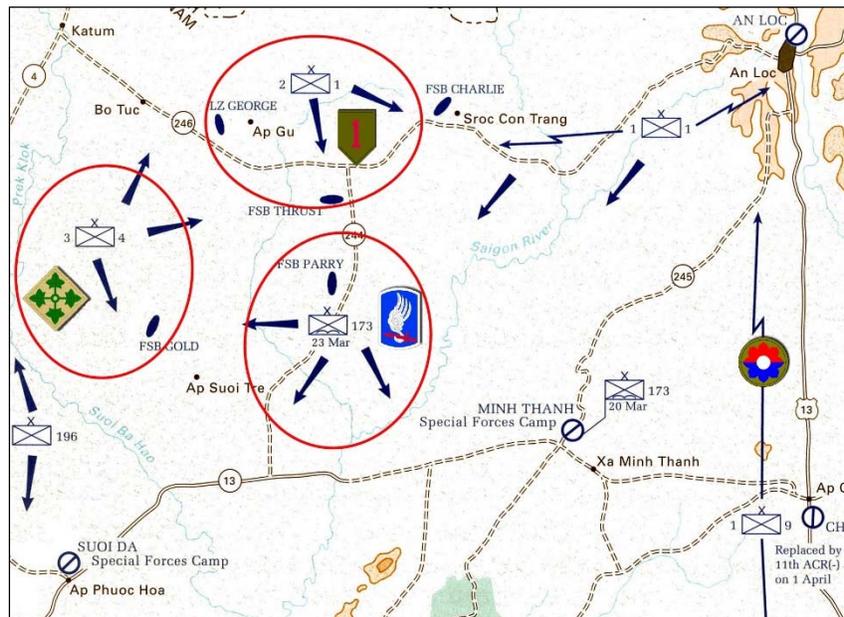


Figure 1



Soldiers with Recon Platoon, 2-12 IN prepare for airlift into FSB Gold. Black Virgin Mountain (Nui Ba Den) is seen in the distance. (Photo by Ken Eising)



Veterans of the battle address Soldiers during the reunion on 21 March 2015. (Photo by 1LT Robert Wojcik)