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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BRIGADE, 1ST AIR CAVALRY DIVISION (AM), IN A
SEARCH AND DESTROY MISSION FROM 23 OCTOBER – 25 NOVEMBER 1965
IN PLEIKU-PLEI ME AREA, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. (PERSONAL
EXPERIENCE AS A BATTALION LIAISON OFFICER.)

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS, No. 3-68

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1965, the 1st Air Cavalry Division (AM) was deployed to the Republic of Viet Nam. The division advanced party landed in Nha Trang and moved to An Khe to clear the worlds largest helipad.

The main body of the division landed in Quni Nhon during the period 13 to 20 September, 1965. The division moved from there to its base in An Khe.

From the landing of the division until 31 May 1966 the Air Cavalry Division is credited with killing 9,348 enemy soldiers.

THE DIVISION PLAN

The plan was to be prepared to assist in defense of key United States and Government of Viet Nam installations in the vicinity of Pleiku; also reinforcement of II Corps operations to relieve Plei Me CIDG Camp.

THE EXISTING SITUATION

Intelligence indicated strong enemy forces to the east and northeast of An Khe. Tactical planning was directed toward those areas.

Reports from ARVN II Corps stated that the CIDG Camp at Plei Me would be attacked. These reports were discounted. The attack on the CIDG Camp on 19 October was a surprise.

The 1st Brigade was charged with the security of Pleiku with two additional missions: To provide artillery support for the operation by ARVN troops for the relief of Plei Me and to provide reserve/reaction force for possible commitment to Plei Me.

THE BATTALION PLAN

The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, was attached to the 1st Brigade on 27 October, having completed a previous mission. Initially, the battalion was to be the Brigades reserve/reaction force for defense of Pleiku. (See MAP A) The enemy force was identified as the 101 B or the 33d NVA Regiment. This was the force responsible for the seige of Plei Me. The force facing elements of the 1st Brigade through out the operation was this Regiment.

THE PREPARATION

The battalion commander received the operations order from Brigade on 27 October 1965, and by use of assigned aircraft deployed to position Drake, closing at 1850 hours. From this position the battalion prepared for its mission as reserve/reaction force for defense of Pleiku. While in position Drake the battalion prepared to conduct an airmobile assault on positions in the vicinity of Plei Loung Ya Rang. (See MAP ^C B)

NARRATION

The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment started moving from position Drake at 0805 hours, 28 October 1965. The move was accomplished by use of the assigned helicopter units and all companies closed into their respective landing zones by 1300 hours. Company C, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, set up

a defensive perimeter around the landing zone and established local security. The intelligence of the area was sketchy so patrols were sent out from the landing zone during the remainder of the day.

The remainder of the battalion in their respective landing zones were accomplishing the same tasks.

During the day of 29 October the battalion continued in this role. The companies were conducting search and destroy sweeps in ti's zone of action. Company D occupied a small village and assisted in civic action with medical aid to the townspeople. During the early evening a battalion of artillery landed at the operating base of the battalion. There was no enemy contact for the battalion during the day, but there were frequent signs of recent enemy activity. The companies discovered recently prepared positions and rice caches throughout the area of landing zones and villages.

Throughout the day intelligence reports indicated the most significant contact was made by an element of the Cavalry Squadron. The scout sections spotted and fired on several groups of isolated enemy troops. They were drawing considerable ground fire. The previous night the Cavalry Squadron experienced fleeting enemy contact at its patrol sites.

Intelligence summaries up to this time indicate that the NVA Regiment was attempting to withdraw to the Chu Pong mountain area. The continuous harassment by armed helicopters was making this difficult for the regiment to accomplish. This mountain area was used by the 33d for rehearsals and drills for the attack on the CIDG Camp in early October.

On 30 October 1965 the battalion was given a larger area to cover in its search and destroy missions. One such mission was the searching of all the area around the brigade base, while

the rest of the battalions searched the brigade western sector. Elements of the 9th Cavalry Regiment conducted a screening mission along the brigade west flank and made numerous contacts. Cavalry ships srew fire from numerous points along ridges and streams. They returned fire and engaged the enemy each time; but could not accurately assess damage and casualties to the enemy. Elements of the cavalry squadron also screened the brigade southern boundary with the same results.

During these widely scattered actions by company size sweeps and ambushes, the division secured its first North Vietnamese captives. This resulted in more and accurate intelligence concerning enemy forces and activities than we had so far in the operations.

During the day of 31 October 1965, the second brigade continued a general movement to the west. Contact was sporadic and light.

The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, continued in its search and sweeping missions with light enemy contact. This contact was entirely with snipers. Constant sweeps and maneuvering of forces seemed to fragment the enemy forces even more, however, small pockets of resistance were encountered by the cavalry squadron.

The morning of 1 November 1965 we were expecting to meet more resistance. One of the troops of the 9th Cavalry Regiment succeeded in engaging an enemy platoon and capturing a regimental size hospital.

During the day the most significant contact seemed to be with the screening elements of the cavalry squadron. Their maneuverability and speed enabled them to cover large areas of terrain. The technique of "reconnaissance by fire" seemed to draw the enemy

troops into firefights and expose their positions. This enabled reaction by maneuver battalions to take advantage of the speed of airmobility and deployment to meet the existing situation.

After contact with the enemy was made at approximately 1400 hours, three cavalry platoons were heavily engaged by the enemy force. They repulsed several assaults by the North Vietnamese forces. Engaged platoons attempted to resupply and evacuate simultaneously in a small and exposed landing zone. During this operation seven aircraft were hit by enemy fire.

Reinforcements were flown into the battle area in the form of a platoon from each of the maneuver battalions. Late in the afternoon Company B of the 8th Battalion, 1st Brigade, was committed to the battle.

After the commitment of B Company the tide of battle turned. Squadron elements were able to fix the enemy in position. By evening the North Vietnamese had broken contact and withdrawn.

During the time this battle was taking shape, two companies of the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, had moved by foot, under darkness, to a ready position around a village in their area of operation. In the morning they moved into a blocking position meeting a strike force of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group attempting to enter the village to search it. With the assistance of a Psy War Team they were appealing to the enemy to surrender. The area in and around the village was well protected by man traps and punji stakes. A few injuries needed to be evacuated.

The biggest find of the day of course was the regimental hospital captured along with some patients, medical personnel and especially supplies. There were of particular value because intelligence reports indicated that these supplies were already low in the enemy ranks. This would hurt their morale and efficiency.

This action, on 1 November 1965, netted the brigade ninety nine enemy killed - as well as all the medical supplies.

During the day of 2 November 1965 there were no enemy contacts by the maneuver battalions.

Intelligence received from captured documents revealed that movement and activity by the North Vietnamese forces were directed toward the Chu Pong - Ia Drang area.

The day of 3 November 1965 was fairly quiet until late in the evening. As during the previous days, the activity was generated by elements of the 9th Cavalry Squadron. B troop, reinforced with rifle platoons from A and C troop, established a patrol base where a five ship landing zone was located. (See MAP B) The entire cavalry squadron had moved its base of operations west to screen the west flank of the brigade along the Cambodian border. From the patrol base 3 ambushes were sent out. These patrols settled into position, utilizing numerous claymore mines, while interlacing automatic weapon fields of fire along the trails in the ambush site.

That evening, at one of the sites to the south, the patrol leader sighted a large body of enemy soldiers with heavy weapons. This column of enemy troops seemed to take a break within the killing zone of the ambush site. The patrol leader, however, let the column form up again and let the lead element pass through the killing zone - and then sprung his trap. Claymores sited up and down the trail as well as beside it, exploded simultaneously. With automatic fire sweeping the trail the patrol managed to succeed in desimating the portion of the enemy column within the ambush site. There was no return fire. The ambush patrol returned to its base and helped in establishing a defense perimeter.

Late the night of the 3rd and early hours of the 4th of November,

A Company, 1st Battalion of the 8th Cavalry Regiment, airlifted in by platoons to beef up the strength at the ambush site. By daylight the North Vietnamese troops broke contact under continuous aerial rocket attacks.

During the afternoon of the fourth the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment began a search and destroy operation within its assigned sectors, using three companies. The companies went into their respective perimeters in late afternoon within their assigned sectors. (See MAP C)

Intelligence estimates at this time recognized another North Vietnamese unit; the 8th Battalion, 66th Infantry Regiment.

On 5 November 1965 there was little activity within the brigade sector, except for the finding of vast amounts of equipment and arms in the second brigade area. This seemed to indicate that the enemy forces were disorganized and demoralized by the constant pressure placed on them.

The same activity existed during 6 November - with the exception of the 8th Battalion of the Second Brigade. They had hit an entrenched enemy battalion, but disengaged that night.

On 7 November the 1st Brigade attempted maneuvers that would squeeze the enemy into a vise. First Battalion, 12th Cavalry, conducted an attack against scattered light resistance.

The brigade continued employing search and destroy missions within its area of operations. There was scattered enemy contact throughout the day with no significant contact.

After the last few days of relative quiet, friendly intelligence was not sure of the disposition of the entire 33d Regiment. Indications pointed toward the enemy withdrawing further south or east.

On 9 November the 1st Brigade yielded control of its maneuver battalions to the 3d Brigade. During the rest of the day and that night there was no enemy contact.

The 3d Brigade moved maneuver elements east of the Plei Me area and proceeded to conduct search and destroy missions. There was one contact made, by the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, killing two and capturing one North Vietnamese soldier with a safe conduct pass.

During this time the intelligence gained still did not confirm or deny enemy disposition strength or location. They seemed to be regrouping and ~~re~~^{SUPPLYING}equipping.

On 11 November the brigade employed saturation techniques in its search and destroy missions. Some of the companies even broke their areas down to squad size, saturation patrols, to attempt to uncover any equipment or positions. Trying to gain some information of any type at this time seemed extremely important. The enemy forces could have withdrawn south and west, back across the border to Cambodia, but could also be in the area of operations waiting for a chance to inflict damage on the division.

Intelligence later revealed many interesting items that were occurring during this time in the enemy headquarters. The enemy felt that with the American forces withdrawing to the east that they would regain the initiative by attacking the Plei Me Civilian Irregular Defense Group Camp. Using, for the first time in the campaign, a full North Vietnamese division in the attack in South Vietnam.

The day of 12 November was relatively quiet with the usual elements of the brigade in search and destroy missions. Just before midnight, however, the whole complexion of the day changed. An estimated battalion size force of either North Vietnamese or Main Force Viet Cong hit the brigade base camp with a violent attack.

An estimated 100 rounds of 60mm and 80mm mortar fell on the brigade positions. It seemed they were aimed at the command post complex and refueling points. Aerial rocket ships were sent to assist the brigade and are credited with silencing the mortar attacks. More than one hundred demolition charges were found the following day when the area was screened by elements of the brigade.

The brigade positioned maneuver elements south and west of Plei Me on the 13th of November. The maneuver elements of these battalions assumed the search and destroy missions that were designed to find the enemy and, hopefully, to gain more intelligence.

On the morning of 14 November the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, made the first contact of what was to be the biggest battle of the war. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, landed in an area adjacent to the Chu Pong mountains. At 1050 hours, B Company landed at landing zone X-RAY (See MAP D) with the bulk of the battalion closing by 1200 hours. By 1300 hours, Bravo Company had moved west towards a finger of the Chu Pong range and became engaged by at least two companies of North Vietnamese Infantry. One of Bravo Company's platoons was cut off, remaining isolated until the following day.

Simultaneously, with Bravo Company's engagement, sporadic mortar ^{and} ~~and~~ rocket fire was being received on the landing zone. Automatic weapons fire started coming into the landing zone from the west. Aircraft brining in the tail of the battalion had to be waved off because of the intense fire sweep~~ing~~ the landing zone. (See MAP D)

Charlie Company then moved east from the landing zone, being immediately engaged by a two company force. Elements of Dealt Company were committed as a reserve to Charlie Company

combining with aerial rocket artillery and tube artillery to successfully repel the attack and securing the eastern portion of the landing zone.

The Brigade Commander alerted Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment for commitment to landing zone X-RAY.

The remainder of the battalion were finally fed into the landing zone by fifteen hundred hours. Attempts to retrieve the isolated platoon from Bravo Company proved fruitless although communication with the isolated platoon was maintained throughout the fight. It became apparent that the battalion was engaged with a force of at least 600 enemy troops.

Throughout the night the enemy forces were repeatedly thrown back from the landing zone and the isolated platoons' positions. Pilots of the lift ships braved the fire-swept landing zones to bring in supplies and reinforcements, and to evacuate the wounded.

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The battle lasted through the night and the entire day of the 15th of November. Any attempt at reconnaissance by the battalion trapped on the landing zone was met by intense enemy fire. By 0900 hours the initial attack of the enemy had been broken by means of intense air and artillery support.

Reinforcements were attempting to break through the enemy forces to aid the trapped battalion. Although the main attack that had lasted almost an entire day had eased, the landing zone was ^{SURROUNDED} ~~surrendered~~ by the enemy. The night of the 15th was spent alert for the attack that did not materialize until approximately 0400 hours the 16th. Then the enemy began light probing attacks on the perimeter. These attacks were from squad to platoon size elements. At 0430 hours a two company attack hit Bravo Company. This was beaten back by small arms and supporting fires. Another company sized assault was initiated against the northeast portion

PM 15 NOV

of the landing zone at 0600 hours. At 0627 hours still another attack was launched, against the northern position of the landing zone. These were also repulsed.

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16 Nov
A combination of firepower and a sweeping maneuver forward of the defensive positions at approximately 0900 hours cleared the immediate area of enemy troops enabling the battalion to be relieved in place by elements of the 5th Cavalry Regiment.

Throughout this two day period recon and ^{SCOUT} ~~scout~~ ships received heavy fire coming from the jungle in the vicinity of the Ia Drang Valley.

Intelligence reported enemy losses at approximately 834 troops by body count.

Meanwhile, the enemy had started a general movement north and west towards the Ia Drang Valley.

On 17 November 1965 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, conducted an approach march. After clearing the sector assigned, the battalion swung in a westerly direction from landing zone Columbus to Albany. (See MAP E). Upon reaching Albany the battalion encountered heavy fire on both flanks. The two lead companies took heavy casualties - being penetrated by the enemy in areas of the column ~~of ranks~~ - causing confusion. A breakdown of communications resulted in the commanders not knowing where their units were on the ground. As a result, the battalion could not use supporting fires.

At approximately 2200 hours B Company, 5th Cavalry Regiment linked up with the 7th and they spent the night in a defensive posture.

On the afternoon of the 18th, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, guarding the artillery positions, engaged the lead elements of an enemy attacking force. Mortars and automatic fired poured into the battalion positions for almost four hours.

The artillery depressed their tubes and fired in a direct fire role. Eventually the attack was broken and only sporadic sniper fire came into the battalion position the rest of the night. This attack was to be the last ^{MAIN} enemy effort against cavalry positions for the rest of the campaign.

The North Vietnamese troops found that an assault against cavalry positions were costly. Between the automatic fires and artillery support, the cavalry elements desimated the fighting force of the North Vietnamese. All that was left to the enemy was to try and reach their sanctuary in Cambodia. The only enemy contact now was small units flushing out stragglers.

Elements of the cavalry squadron tried in vain to gain enemy contact, but to no avail. The remains of the enemy force seemed to have succeeded in reaching their sanctuary in Cambodia.

On 26 November elements of the division began the movement back to An Khe.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The battle at Plei Me was found to be a carefully conceived plan of the North Vietnamese. It was a campaign to gain a foothold and secure a major portion of South Vietnam. This would give the North Vietnamese a foothold to mount further engagements in the Corps area. It would have been a major military victory for the North Vietnamese as well as a psychological setback for the people of South Vietnam.

The success of defeating the enemy forces in Plei Me belongs to the 1st Air Cavalry Division (AM). The enemy had ⁹ guessed accurately the strength and location of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. If Pleiku had fallen to the enemy they would control the highlands.

The Corps reserve was located at Pleiku and the commitment of this force would weaken the defense of Pleiku and it would undoubtedly have fallen to the enemy. The mobility and firepower of the division were too much for the enemy forces to contend with.

Success or failure of airmobile operations depends on many factors. Resupply of much needed supplies such as ammunition, rations, water, and evacuation of wounded, are essential factors to the commander on the ground. Attempting to bring in these supplies or services to an unsecure landing zone usually results in the additional loss of aircraft and lives. For resupply of ammunition and rations a palletised load could be utilized and dropped into an area without the aircraft having to land. This could be accomplished at the battalion S-4 level.

The problems of resupply can be recognized by the enemy forces problems throughout this operation. When the enemy lost it's regimental hospital it lost most of it's medical capability to care for their wounded. This could also effect the troops morale to the extent that it seriously impaired their will to fight and it's efficiency. This was evident in their abandonment of supplies and equipment and using safe conduct passes to surrender. For a unit to be effective it must have the required amount of supplies and equipment and know these can be a resupply if needed. The North Vietnamese forces did not have this capability.

✓ The use of aerial rockets as a fire support means for the maneuver elements was an outstanding success. It gave the commander accurate and immediate fire support when needed. It proved to be highly effective in breaking enemy attacks and inflicting high casualties to the enemy both physically and phsycologically.

Another valuable technique that was employed in conjunction with airmobile operations was reconnaissance by fire. This technique was employed by the Air Cavalry Squadron. This technique was extremely effective on several occasions during the campaign. It was successful in flushing out enemy soldiers that were hiding in dense jungles. The limiting factor of this technique, when used by helicopters without infantry troops aboard, was that the reconnaissance units could not land and take advantage of the contact. Without infantry along the reconnaissance elements would undoubtedly lose lives and aircraft.

Reconnaissance in force was demonstrated to be another effective method employed during the Plei Me campaign. When combined with a responsive airmobile infantry unit, the technique demonstrated its effectiveness on 3 November. When the perimeter under intense enemy fire could be reinforced and resupplied at night. Using aerial rockets and artillery the infantry set up an intense volume of fire keeping the enemy off balance. The lift ships were able to land, unload and bring out the wounded before the enemy could react.

Counter-sniper action proved effective when troops on the line conducted a "Mad Minute." This was especially effective at first light and discouraged infiltrators and snipers.

LESSONS LEARNED

Troops must be especially watchful for booby traps and punji-stakes. A two man buddy system proved to be effective in countering this threat.

Search and destroy operations where enemy and civilians mingle present many problems. To effectively clear tunnels and holes, smoke or tear gas should be used to keep from injuring innocent civilians.

Pathfinders should be used in landing zones to assume the duties of landing zone control and navigational assistance. The equipment the pathfinders use are useful, especially at night. They can assist in night resupply and directing air force aircraft in flare operations. This would enable personnel used in these tasks to concentrate in their tactical missions.

When an air assault on a landing zone during a tactical move it is best to land the maximum amount of aircraft at one time. This will put the maximum of troops on the ground initially in case the landing zone becomes unsecure by enemy fires.

Training of troops in the method of speedy loading and unloading should be continuous. Speed is essential in loading and unloading at all times. If a landing zone is receiving enemy fire, the speed of loading or unloading will save lives and aircraft. The aircraft are always prime targets for enemy gunners.

The importance of pre-palletized loads must be considered for all tactical operations. These loads can be loaded into CH-47 helicopters or C-123 or C-130 Air Force aircraft or slung beneath the cargo helicopters for an even faster resupply of forward units. When a unit is in heavy contact with the enemy it is even more desirable to have palletized loads. This will

enable speedy resupply to maneuver elements and insure the units maintain the fires needed to keep the enemy off balance.

Civil Affairs have played an important role in all phases of the operation. Without effective relations with civilians throughout the area of operations, timely and accurate intelligence could not have been received or acted upon.

Approximately two thousand seven hundred civilians from enemy dominated villages were evacuated to a new village under government control. These people were fed and re-clothed as well as having medical attention administered. These people were dominated by the Viet Cong and if extensive civil affairs programs were not effective, these people would have been lost to the government. They would have supported the Viet Cong activities until such a time that they would have been enemies of the Republic of South Vietnam.

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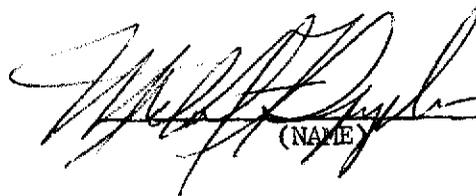
5 February 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Instructional Methods Division

SUBJECT: Classified Information

1. This memo has been read and signed by the content evaluator, a person with expertise in the subject area.

2. To the best of my knowledge, this staff study/monograph (roster number 038, ICAC 3-68) contains no classified information, and in the opinion of the undersigned requires no classification LAW AR 380-5.


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