

Figure 2: I Corps, where they fought

~~term of service in the Army. Littleton will double up as my platoon sergeant until one is assigned. That never happens.~~

~~Tepner will serve well in the battalion TOC. However, later at Tam Ky he will hear firsthand over the battalion's radio net of the casualties Delta Company is taking. He will have deep regret that he is no longer with "his guys." He too will be sorely missed by them, but his assignment as a battalion operations NCO is now an important one. He will not return to Delta Company. After serving in Vietnam, Tepner returned to San Diego and his former job at the printing business. Within several years he had become a junior partner, then owner, growing the business into the largest printer in San Diego. He credits his military experience as the basis for his later leadership and success in business. See Appendix 9.~~

Summing Up the Last Few Months

Delta Company has spent most of our time over the last months since 1 March, conducting combat patrols, ambushes, and RIF missions. Our last stand down was in February and then only for three days. However, being continuously in the field has had many benefits. First, discipline, morale, and camaraderie in our company and within our platoons are excellent. George Washington said, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable, procures success to the weak, and esteem to all."¹⁵

Use of drugs and racial tensions which often exist in rear areas are not a problem for us since we are always in the field. No one in our company tolerates use of drugs in the field. Being mentally sharp and constantly alert is paramount. The danger isn't only from our enemy. We are armed to the teeth. All of us are carrying and using loaded weapons. Racial tension in our company is lessened by several realities. Combat skills and experience are the measure of an infantry soldier, not the color of his skin. We know firsthand we all bleed red and our lives depend on our taking care of each other. There is common agreement on that up and down our leadership chain and within our units.

Another indication Delta Company is a disciplined unit is that we have had no incidents of mistreatment of civilians, detainees, or enemy soldiers whether the latter are dead or alive. Our soldiers also haven't shown any open antagonism toward our officers and NCO leaders. At least not beyond what might be an appropriate concern about an individual or incident. Incompetent leaders don't last long in infantry units. They tend to make their presence known pretty quickly by doing something dumb or not having adequate infantry skills. They are a danger to themselves and others. Commanders usually get them out of the field quickly.

Political discontent or siding with the growing war protest movement among our soldiers is surprisingly not evident. Anti-war demonstrations and political opposition to the war were already well underway and increasing in 1968 before most of the

soldiers in Delta Company arrived in Vietnam. This doesn't mean that all of our soldiers agree with the war or want to be in Vietnam. Many clearly would prefer not to be here, but it is an indication of their sense of duty that they're here and doing a good job as soldiers.

Operating continuously in the field for months, we have practiced and honed our combat skills and techniques. Our soldiers, squads, and platoons have operated in rice patties, mountain jungles, and everything in between. Our squads and platoons have been building the trust and teamwork critical to our combat effectiveness. For the present, we have overcome many of the problems caused by the individual replacement system used in Vietnam.

One of the main problems with the Army's individual replacement system is leaders and men come in and go out as single soldiers in Vietnam units. New replacements aren't trusted at first. They must prove themselves. Not by heroics, but by showing veteran soldiers they won't get anyone killed because of their inexperience or ignorance. Individual enlisted replacements often take weeks to be trusted. Officers may take longer. Time is not always available for soldiers to get to know new soldiers or leaders. Soldiers and leaders must often fight with whoever is assigned for good or bad. We have not had much turnover due to end of tour rotations or casualties, so there hasn't been much disruption in our teamwork.

There is also mutual respect among our three platoons. Each has a solid reputation in the company. We have gained a lot of experience working independently away from the company. If we have a weakness (or at least an unpracticed skill), it's working together as a company under fire by a large enemy force. That capability isn't apparent because we haven't experienced a tactical situation that requires it. At least, not yet.

Perhaps that's why in the last months, our three platoon leaders have seldom met together with CPT Begley to be briefed on a mission, exchange information, hear about the enemy situation, or conduct an after action review when a mission is completed. We all would prefer more communication and Begley's interaction with our soldiers. In Begley's favor, our company has been effective on combat operations and we can take pride in what we have accomplished.

Absence of Heavy Enemy Contact

We expect, but haven't seen, significant enemy contact. As mentioned earlier, our senior leaders know the delay in the construction of our firebases caused the late arrival of our forces. During the time lag, the enemy apparently withdrew the bulk of their forces from our area of operations. Their "stay-behind teams" are small, but effective in bravely harassing our units with small arms and mortars. Except for the men we lost, the A Shau did not live up to its bitter reputation.

Later, it will be clear why. The enemy had decided to concentrate its forces for battle elsewhere in the A Shau. The location is a mountain 60 km (36 mi) to the northwest of FSB Pike. Its name, Dong Ap Bia. 101st soldiers who fight there will give it another name, “Hamburger Hill.” On 15 May as we leave Pike, we are not aware the 3rd Brigade of the 101st, Marine, and ARVN units have already been fighting there for five days. In that battle, the A Shau will uphold its reputation as the Valley of Death.

Our New Mission

At 0100H on 15 May 1969, our battalion S-3, MAJ Warren MacDiarmid, receives orders from 2nd Brigade’s headquarters. The 1-501st is to “prepare for extraction from FSB Pike for possible deployment outside of the 101st area of operations.” At 0335H, the brigade provides additional information: “Responsibility for FSB Pike will pass to 2-327th Infantry at 0900H 15 May. Extraction of the 1-501st will begin at 0800H 15 May. Be prepared to deploy to Tam Ky, Quang Tin Province for an indefinite period under OPCODE to 1st Brigade which will be OPCODE to the Americal Division on order. Mission unknown.”

At 0530H on 15 May, CPT Begley is awakened by a message from MacDiarmid telling him what battalion likely had known perhaps for 24 hours or more, though they may not have known the date or time. Delta Company and the rest of our battalion is being pulled off FSB Pike and Thor early this morning for another mission. Begley passes the message to each of our platoons. Get ready to move by 0730H. After weeks of duty in or around Pike, most of us in Delta Company are ready to do something else. We should be careful what we wish for. We are headed to some place unknown to us called Tam Ky.

Back in Washington DC

On 14 May, the day before we undertake our new mission, four months after he takes office, President Nixon makes his first major address to the nation on what he terms “our most difficult and urgent problem—the Vietnam War.” He says:

We can have honest debate about whether we should have entered the war in Vietnam. We can have honest debate about how the war has been conducted. But, the urgent question today is what to do now that we are there.

Then he makes a starting announcement: “We have ruled out attempting to impose a purely military solution on the battlefield.” Realizing the great sacrifice of America’s military in combat, he adds:

I am proud of our men who have carried the terrible burden of this war with dignity and courage, despite the division and opposition to the war in the United States. History will record that never have America’s fighting men fought more bravely for more unselfish goals than our men in Vietnam. It is our responsibility to see that they have not fought in vain.¹⁶

As President Nixon makes this address to the nation, the Hamburger Hill battle has been raging for five days. The fighting at Tam Ky is already underway with the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division preparing to join the fight. Whatever opinion a person might have about President Nixon, his characterization of America's fighting men is on the mark.

The Initial Move to Phu Bai

At 0800H on 15 May, the 1-501st begins its extraction via three Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopters. Each one can easily carry a platoon. They will shuttle our entire battalion, one company at a time, the 40 miles to the US Air Force airstrip at Phu Bai. The airfield is 7 miles southeast of Hue. Alpha Company is picked up at 0831H. Bravo Company at 0927H. Delta Company is extracted at 1010H. Charlie and Echo Company's recon and mortar platoons are extracted from FSB Thor at 0950H. Our entire battalion closes on Phu Bai by 1100H. Our battalion has never been moved with such urgency or so quickly. We still don't know why.

On landing at Phu Bai, we see the airstrip is a beehive of activity. Our infantry battalion of nearly 500 soldiers is gathered there. An additional 200 soldiers support preparation for our new mission. Our battalion has six companies, a Headquarters Company, Echo Company (with reconnaissance and mortar platoons), and four infantry companies (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta). While in Vietnam, we've not ever seen so many soldiers in one place. We are reminded Delta Company is only one among many. Our sister battalion, the 1-502nd, is also moving to Tam Ky with us and is being marshalled at Camp Eagle.

There to meet us on the tarmac is the soon outgoing 101st Division commander, Major General (MG) Melvin Zais and also the 1st Brigade commander COL Richard Bresnahan. MG Melvin Zais will soon relinquish command of the 101st to MG John Wright on 28 May 1969. COL Bresnahan will turn over 1st Brigade to COL Frank Dietrich on 28 July 1969. Bresnahan will later retire as a Major General. Our new battalion commander, LTC Raymond Singer, is also present. It is the first time I've seen him. This greeting by our senior commanders is very unusual. So is the extensive resupply and refitting that we are about to undergo. It is clear we are being sent on a high priority, difficult mission. So far, that is all we know and we are anxious to know more.

Dozens of stations are set up to provide direct exchange of any weapon or piece of equipment carried, worn, or used by our soldiers. No questions are asked if we need anything. Everything is readily available. Rifles, ammunition magazines and bandoleers, machine guns, grenade launchers, rucksacks, LBEs (load-bearing equipment), helmets, uniforms, ponchos and poncho liners, canteens, radios, all-important radio batteries, strobe lights, first-aid dressings, anti-malaria pills, food rations, fuel tabs and personal care toiletries.

CHAPTER 3

Arrival and First Combat Assault

15–16 May

15 May: The Move to Tam Ky

Transport and Arrival

Fed and fully combat loaded, at 1440H Delta Company and its sister companies board Air Force C-130 troop transports for their short 45-minute flight. Tam Ky is located 109 miles to the south of Phu Bai. Each infantry company requires two aircraft. It is one of the war's fastest, largest, and furthest daytime redeployments of a brigade within a combat zone. By 1821H on 15 May, our entire battalion has closed on the Tam Ky airstrip (BT309187) ready for combat. The 1-502nd will arrive early tomorrow.

The C-130 flights fly our battalion to Tam Ky without incident. In all, 69 C-130 sorties (individual aircraft flights) are needed to move the brigade. In addition, CH-47 Chinook helicopters are also used. The 1-501st battalion S-3 section which now includes SSG Tepner, moves by CH-47. Not far from landing at Tam Ky, they take fire from an enemy 12.7 mm anti-aircraft heavy machine gun. A round passes through the cargo area leaving a 2" hole coming in and going out. Fortunately, no one is hit.

Our Battalion's Initial Field Strength at Tam Ky

The size or strength of an infantry battalion like the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry varies significantly depending on which of three strength levels are being considered: authorized strength, assigned strength, or field (fighting) strength. In this late stage of the war there is a huge discrepancy between authorized strength and fighting strength.

The authorized strength for each of our four infantry companies is 6 officers and 164 enlisted. Echo Company's authorized strength is 4 officers and 96 enlisted. The battalion's authorized strength (not counting HHC) is 756. We are going into combat with 55% of our authorized strength. With expected casualties and even

Field Strength Table 1: 1-501st Initial Field Strength, Tam Ky, 15 May 1969

Unit	A Co	B Co	C Co	D Co	E Co	Total
Officers	5	4	4	4	2	19
Enlisted	88	93	80	99	39	399
Total	93	97	84	103	41	418

fewer replacements, our battalion will soon fall well below half of our authorized strength. Our sister battalions, the 1-502nd and the 1-46th, the latter attached from the Americal Division, are similarly undermanned. In addition to the three infantry battalions assigned to 1st Brigade, there's also supporting artillery, helicopter, and supply units. They will operate from support bases in our area of operations.

Our battalion's initial fighting strength at Tam Ky is 19 officers and 399 enlisted (according to the 1-501st *Operation Lamar Plain* after action report.) Field Strength Table 1 shows our field strength by company. Our Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) includes another 14 officers and more than 100 enlisted. Echo Company includes the Recon and Mortar Platoons.

The 1-501st after action report also shows the assigned strength of the five companies (Alpha–Echo) at the beginning of the operation is 601 soldiers. That includes those who are sick or injured, soldiers in rear jobs, on leave, and replacements not yet in the field. The field strength in the chart is based on numbers actually flown to Tam Ky for battle. The field strength of officers does not include the artillery forward observer lieutenant attached to each company from the supporting artillery battalion.

Information about our mission has been sketchy. After 1st Brigade is placed under the operational control (OPCON) of the Americal Division, we are finally told what's happening and why we have been rushed to Tam Ky. The Americal Division has declared a "tactical emergency." The 2nd NVA division is attempting to capture Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province. They are threatening to overrun LZ Professional and other US bases. They have already hit ARVN units hard. We are there to stop them. Other than that, not much information is yet available on our specific battalion or company's mission.

At Tam Ky Airfield

The small asphalt strip at Tam Ky is a strange sight, much different from Phu Bai. Our battalion of 400-plus combat-ready, heavy-laden soldiers is tightly packed in an encampment along both sides of the airfield. They are all doing what soldiers do before combat. Cleaning rifles, checking equipment, sleeping, a few reading a paperback novel carried in their rucksack. Some are talking in small groups. Others write letters home knowing it could be their last.

May Back in the World

1 May	Top hit <i>Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In</i> by The Fifth Dimension
1 May	Mr. Fred Rogers receives first PBS grant for <i>Mister Roger's Neighborhood</i>
9 May	100,000 in Wash DC protest Kent State shootings and Cambodia incursion
11 May	Mother's Day is an anxious day for hundreds of thousands with sons in Vietnam
15 May	Governor Reagan quells riots at Berkley UC by 3,000 white students
15 May	Abe Fortas is first Supreme Court Justice to resign for improprieties
15 May	Earliest confirmed HIV death, 18-year-old teenager
18–26 May	Apollo 10 launches, orbits moon 31x, rehearses moon landing, safely returns
20 May	150,000 rally on Wall Street in support of Vietnam War
21 May	Silver Springs MD draft office demolished by war protesters
25 May	<i>Midnight Cowboy</i> released (#3 '69)
28 May	University of Tennessee, 500 students protest war at Billy Graham Crusade
30 May	Memorial Day antiwar groups take 24 hours to read names of 35,000 war dead
30 May	Families from every state grieve Vietnam War dead from the US's longest war

Our soldiers are holding their most personal thoughts to themselves. No one is openly talking about their fears about the mission ahead. The tight bond within the company is a source of confidence. We are all in this together. There is lots of joking and good-natured teasing. A few dismiss their fears with bold talk. At some level, all of us are fearful both before and in combat. Some more than others. The unspoken expectation is soldiers will overcome their fear and do their duty. That is a good working definition of courage under fire.

My pre-battle anxiety is somewhat allayed because I'm confident we have a solid company. Our movement report shows we are 99 strong with about 30 soldiers in each of our three platoons. Our weapons platoon with machine guns and mortars are put in our three platoons. Only one 81 mm mortar crew is retained at company headquarters. Other mortarmen are serving as riflemen in the platoons. Most of our soldiers have been in the field for months, some for many months. We have had

few replacements. We are an experienced unit. Our guys are physically and mentally tough. They know their weapons and small unit tactics.

In my mind and perhaps the mind of others, there is one area of uncertainty that remains. Our company has not been in any extended firefights with a large, well-trained, and well-equipped NVA unit. That is likely to happen and happen soon. It will be a tougher test than anything we've faced since I joined the company in January. It's not a thought to dwell on.

First Night at Tam Ky

The sun has set. We are getting ready for our first night at Tam Ky. It's been a very long day. In the last ten hours, we've moved from the A Shau to Phu Bai to Tam Ky. As dark closes over the airfield, we settle in for the night. Confined to the grassy area along the airstrip, we are not in a tactical setup. Alpha Company is providing our perimeter security so Delta and the other companies are able to get some needed sleep.

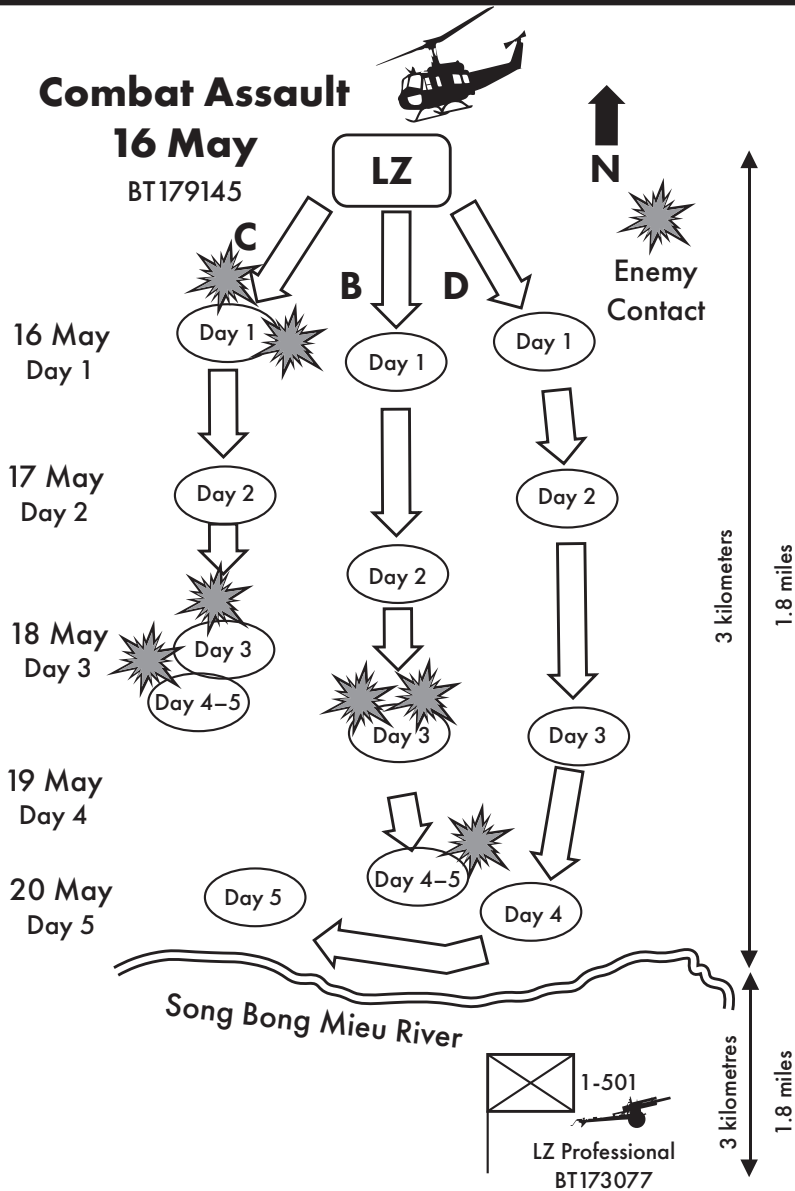
All of us are ready for a good rest not knowing what tomorrow will bring. At 2345H, we are well asleep when five 60 mm mortar rounds fall close by just outside our perimeter. There are no casualties. Most of our guys don't even stir. Those that wake up are soon back asleep. It's only the local Viet Cong welcome wagon saying hello and welcome to Tam Ky. Our arrival hasn't gone unnoticed.

16 May: Our First Combat Assault

Combat Operations Begin

The next day, we awake at first light expecting to be on the move soon. We are not. There is a delay while an aerial reconnaissance of our area of operations is made. At mid-morning, CPT Begley tells us we will make a battalion combat assault by helicopter later today. The pickup zone (PZ) is our current location at Tam Ky Airfield. Bravo Company and the Recon Platoon are going in first. Charlie and Delta will follow in order. Alpha Company will remain at the airstrip for security. We don't get any specifics on the enemy situation.

Alpha Company of the 101st Assault Helicopter Battalion will carry us to the battlefield with their UH-1D Huey Iroquois helicopters. Using 15 helicopters, they will continue to shuttle units from the PZ to the LZ until all three of our companies and the Recon Platoon are on the ground. Map 1 gives an overview of the battalion's initial heliborne combat assault and the first five days of combat operations at Tam Ky described in this and the following chapter. The battalion's plan, not known to us at platoon level, is for our three companies to be inserted well north (about 6 km or 3.6 mi) north of the firebase, LZ Professional. The companies will fan



**Map 1: First Combat Assault and
Combat Operation, 16–20 May**

out upon landing and move south toward LZ Professional (BT173077) on three parallel routes conducting reconnaissance in force (RIF) missions expecting to find and engage NVA forces of a yet unknown size.

The battalion LZ at BT179145 is 15 km (9 mi) southwest of Tam Ky. Temperatures are expected to climb to 120 degrees by mid-afternoon with humidity above 90%. The area around the airstrip where we're encamped is already approaching 100 degrees. Eggs could be cooked on the black asphalt runway. We haven't yet acclimated to the hotter climate. The mountainous A Shau Valley area was much cooler.

The terrain at the LZ is relatively flat and open with scrub brush and wild wheat-like grass surrounded by tree-covered hills. It's a large, former rural village, now uninhabited and in ruins from years of war. The LZ will be prepped with artillery before our arrival. We are told to expect a hot LZ, immediate enemy contact on landing. At 1455H artillery preparation of the battalion's LZ begins. As artillery fires fall, Bravo Company is picked up at the Tam Ky airstrip in three lifts of five UH-1 Hueys each. Bravo's first lift touches down at the LZ on time at 1511H just as the artillery ceases. The LZ is green. No enemy contact on landing. Bravo Company begins moving south to its objective.

An Air Cav team from Bravo Troop, 2-17th Cav, provides close air support as the artillery prep ends. The team's two AH-1G HueyCobras have a mix of aerial rockets, 7.62 mm miniguns, and a 40 mm rapid-fire grenade launcher. The team also has two LOH-Cayuse helicopters with mini-guns. They will scout targets for the team. By 1535H all of Bravo Company and the Recon Platoon have landed without taking enemy fire.

At 1600H, as one of the AH-1G Cobra gunships extends its reconnaissance 8 km to the south of the LZ, it receives 15–20 rounds of small arms fire from BT159069. The helicopter takes two hits and returns fire. A second Cobra gunship receives 50 rounds of small arms automatic weapons fire at 1615H from BT148067. It also takes two hits. Both aircraft remain on station covering our landing.

There is a temporary halt in the lift of Charlie Company while the two Cobras attack the enemy positions which fired on them. Charlie Company's lift is soon resumed and completed at 1640H. Once on the ground, Charlie Company begins moving southwest. There is no enemy contact on the ground so far.

Delta Company's Combat Assault

A combat assault by helicopter is a unique, fast-paced, often dangerous experience. Adrenaline is on full flow. Everything is rapidly accomplished by standard operating procedure (SOP) in four simple steps: pickup, load, air movement, then off load. Delta Company is first positioned on the airstrip prepared for pick up. We load by platoons. Each platoon is divided into loads of five or six soldiers. A seventh soldier

will be fitted into loads as needed. Five helicopters are used to move a 30-man platoon. For rapid loading, we sit along the runway half of each load on one side, half on the other side. The five Hueys in each lift lands in between each pre-positioned load.

At 1650H, Delta Company's 2nd Platoon is the first lift to be picked up. That makes sense. LT Black has SFC Rios as platoon sergeant and he is our most experienced infantry leader. CPT Begley and his FO, two RTOs, and medic go on the first lift with 2nd Platoon. If we have enemy contact as expected, Begley will have the immediate capability to call in artillery or attack helicopters. At 1702H, the 1st Platoon, our second lift, is picked up with LT Boyd and SSG Sahrle leading them.

The lift of 3rd Platoon is at 1710H. As 3rd Platoon sits along the airstrip, we can see the returning helicopters about a quarter mile away turning and descending as they line up with the runway on their approach. They come in fast, nose high as they flare and slow for landing. The Hueys hover briefly before sitting down on the asphalt pavement.

From the tip of one Huey's rotor to the next is no more than 75 ft. Rotor blade and engine noise is deafening. Rotor wash is strong enough to blow a soldier's almost 3 lb. steel helmet off his head. Some soldiers use their helmet's chin strap only when jumping on or off a helicopter.

Loading takes less than a minute. As each helicopter lands, 3rd Platoon's pre-positioned loads stand up and move quickly in a crouch to the helicopter loading from both sides. The throbbing noise of the five Hueys landing is so loud talking is difficult. There's no need to talk. Everyone knows what to do. The large cargo doors allow two soldiers to get in each door at the same time. Once the first soldiers are in, they extend their hands and pull the others on board. I position myself and my RTO in the third Huey of our five-ship lift. My three squad leaders are in the first, third and fifth helicopters. When we land, I want to be in the middle of my platoon with my squad leaders close by.

There's a pilot and co-pilot up front. The Hueys have a door gunner on each side just at the rear of the open cargo door. Each gunner has a M-60 machine gun on a swivel mount. The two pilots and gunners all wear flight helmets with dark visors. They can talk to one another through their headsets which are part of their helmets.

The senior pilot is in the left seat. He is facing forward calmly controlling the aircraft and holding it steady as we load. He is busy monitoring his flight instruments for signs of trouble; scanning the area outside of the helicopter alert for danger or anything that might affect his helicopter's liftoff and flight. He is also listening for the flight leader's signal they're ready for liftoff.

The co-pilot is in the right seat looking back at us as we scramble aboard with our equipment and weapons. He gives a quick smile and wave. The lower half of his face shows he is not much older than the young soldiers piling into the open cargo space. Both pilot and co-pilot are brave souls. They've already carried soldiers of Bravo and Charlie Companies to the battle. They are not only taking us to battle, but they will also keep us supplied, fly out our wounded and dead,

and pick us up when we are done. They are constantly in danger to enemy fire as they fly or land. Along with medics and artillerymen, they are the best friends of infantry soldiers.

As we finish loading, I give a thumbs up to the co-pilot signaling we are in. He returns it. We are ready to go. The pilot prepares to lift off. The engine revs, the blades are louder as they rotate faster, vibration shakes the chopper's light aluminum frame. The pilot is awaiting the flight leader's command. He's ready to lift off as soon as he hears "let's go" and sees the helicopter to his front take off. On cue, like a flock of huge birds, the five helicopters rise to flight. Each one pauses only a second or two to allow space between their helicopter and the one in front. Nose down, we make a short run down the airstrip and climb fast to our flight altitude of 300 ft. We fall into our flight's staggered trail formation flying southwest from Tam Ky. We are on the way.

The move to the LZ will take just five minutes. The small team of soldiers on our Huey lean back on their rucks, feet toward the open doors on each side ready to jump. I'm in the middle leaning against the rear bulkhead so I can exit from either door. I look at the faces of my soldiers. Two seem lost in their thoughts, another has his head bowed and eyes closed, perhaps silently praying. I smile and give a thumbs up to another. I admire these young soldiers. There is no whining or complaining. Whether volunteers or draftees, you can't tell them apart. They're all committed to getting our job done despite the imminent danger. Like Ernie Pyle said, no one is harder at work than an infantryman going into battle.

The cool, rushing wind blows through our jungle fatigues, a welcome relief from the hot, humid climate below. The momentary comfort is appreciated. Ahead, I can see the smoke from the artillery preparatory fires hanging over the LZ. As we approach, the Hueys drop to tree-top level to avoid enemy fire. The alert door gunners pull the bolt of their guns to the rear ready to fire.

In a minute or so, we will be on the ground. All eyes are looking out now, every ear listening for incoming small arms fire or worse. Worse are white trails of incoming rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) or the bright green tracers from tripod-mounted, anti-aircraft, 12.7 mm (.51 cal) heavy machine guns. We've all heard about the heavy machine guns.

I lean over to look out the right door to see the size and shape of the LZ. I also want to see where we are landing, the compass heading of our landing, and which way our platoon will move once we exit the chopper to link up with our company. There is a large grass fire covering several acres burning on other parts of the LZ sparked by artillery prep fires. We will land away and upwind from the fires. One of our sister companies had several soldiers suffer smoke inhalation serious enough to require medevac.

There is nothing like coming in low and fast into an unknown battlefield thinking you'll be shot at as you land or soon after. (This is why for many infantry veterans,

the sound of a Huey chopper later in life immediately recalls tense moments that happened long ago.) We haven't been updated on Bravo and Charlie's previous insertions. To our surprise and relief, the enemy has decided not to engage us on the LZ.

At 1725H, the last flight of Delta Company is on the LZ. We jump off the Hueys, quickly spreading out, moving crouched low some 10 m away from the helicopter's blades. My squad leaders and I exit on the right side, the direction we will be moving. We kneel and take up hasty security positions. Once clear of the aircraft, I give the copilot a quick salute, thanking his crew for their good work. He acknowledges my signal.

The flight of Hueys takes off. Their time on the ground is less than a minute. We move into the tree line where our company is assembling its platoons preparing to move out to our first day's objective. There's only two hours or so of daylight left. We need to get on the move fast.

Moving to Our Objectives

It is late afternoon. All three companies have departed the LZ (BT179145) and are fanning out as they move south on separate axes of advance. See Map 1. Each company's objective is about 1.5 km or just short of a mile from the LZ. However, "straight line map distances" don't accurately indicate the actual distance units must move, the difficulty of the move, or the time it may take to make the move.

Due to the staggered arrival at the LZ, the units are not abreast of one another. Bravo and Recon who landed first are in the center and well out front of the other two companies by 500 or more meters as they move to their objectives at BT173132 and BT174132. Charlie Company is on the right flank to the northwest of Bravo Company and moving southwest to its objective at BT165137. Delta Company is on the left flank moving southeast to BT183131. Coming in last to the LZ, we are almost an hour behind Bravo Company. We are all moving cautiously at a slow walk in unknown territory, expecting enemy contact at any moment. The late afternoon sun is much hotter than expected.

The company objectives are chosen to guide the direction of our movement as we conduct our RIF missions looking for the enemy. The area through which we are moving has a number of heavily wooded hills several hundred feet high and up to 2 km in length, running from north to south. They tend to channel our movement. The area in between the hills is generally flat, but overgrown and like the LZ, appears abandoned. There are no visible intact huts and very few ruins. Were it not indicated on our maps, we would not know the area was once a large, thriving village. There are no signs of life, people or animals.

Ideal locations for enemy ambushes are everywhere. As the companies move south, we are increasing our separation from one another. On reaching our three

objectives, we will be about 1,000 m (.6 mi) apart. The increased separation allows us to cover more ground and improves our likelihood of enemy contact.

First Enemy Contact

At 1745H, as Charlie Company moves up and along a 300 ft wooded hill just short of their objective, they are fired upon by several AK-47s from BT168139. They return fire with two M-60 machine guns, an M-79, and several M-16 rifles. As Charlie Company maneuvers their 2nd Platoon to flank the enemy position, they see three enemy soldiers flee to the south over the crest of the hill. Charlie Company requests aerial rocket artillery (ARA) from the Cobra Team's two attack helicopters still overflying our area of operations. After the engagement, Charlie's 2nd Platoon moves to the location where the enemy was engaged. They find one bloody shirt, no bodies.

At 1945H, Delta Company reports seeing six enemy soldiers at BT186146 on a wooded slope several hundred meters on our left flank to the east. As the enemy is engaged with artillery, they flee northeast. No enemy casualties are identified. It is getting late. The sun is setting and our movement must cease soon. We are in unknown territory. Moving at night is too risky.

End of Day One in the Field

At 2015H, Bravo Company and the Recon Platoon, having moved 1400 m, reaches their objective and establishes their night defensive position (NDP) at BT174132. Charlie Company is also at its objective after a move of 1200 m and has its NDP at BT165137. Soon afterwards, due to the loss of light, Delta Company, having moved 1100 m, stops 600 m short of its objective (BT183131) on easily defended terrain and sets up its NDP at BT183137. As a point of clarification, NDPs are often different from the day's initial objective. We had the furthest to go to our objective and were the last in to the LZ. There have been no further incidents and no casualties in our battalion today from enemy activity.

It has been another very long day. We are finally in the field at Tam Ky and glad to be away from Tam Ky Airfield. Our first day has been uneventful in terms of enemy contact. We got into the LZ without having to fight our way in. Our first tactical move was successful and unopposed. We and our sister companies have had our first enemy sightings even if they were small teams. They weren't seeking a fight with us, apparently just making their presence known.

The enemy knows we are here. The landing of nearly 50 helicopters over several hours at the LZ wasn't exactly a stealthy arrival. We are on our enemy's home turf and they know the neighborhood and we don't. That is not the only advantage the enemy has. Our units will be on the move. The enemy may simply keep tabs on us and avoid us until we are on terrain of their choosing.

With today's light contact, it is tempting to think this may be like the A Shau where we expected to have heavy contact but didn't. So far, we've had only general reports about large NVA forces in the area, nothing specific. We've had reports like that before. But this is no time to be complacent. It is better to keep our guard up and be ready for heavy contact. Things could change very quickly.

Safely in our NDP, we've set up our perimeter making the best defensive use of the terrain. There are trees and shrubs and some changes of elevation in the ground that permit good fighting positions. Our company perimeter is generally circular about 140 m (460 ft) around and near 40–50 m (130–164 ft) in diameter. We could fit neatly into one half of a football field. Each platoon has a sector to cover (or defend) that is about 50 m long. The company command post (CP) is in the middle. When we are set up no one can tell we are there. That is unless one of the enemy teams we saw today watched us move into our NDP. That is very likely.

After our positions are in and weapons checked, it's time to break out the C-Rations. There are no fires, lights, loud talking or other noises. A can of applesauce or fruit cocktail is high on the menu. Anything with liquid. We will soon be ready for sleep. Our platoon, like our other two platoons, is in three-man positions. One person in each position remains awake on two-hour watches before waking the next guy. The handoffs will continue until daylight. Each position usually draws straws or does rock-paper-scissors to see who is on watch first. Two-hour watches are common through the dark hours of the night. With longer watches, soldiers tend to doze off.

Sitting in a hole dug in the damp earth staring out into the dark looking and listening for enemy movement takes discipline. You can't lean back and rest your head or lean forward and rest your elbows for even a minute without falling asleep. Every now and then your eyes will play tricks on you. Did I see something move? Was it just my imagination? What was that sound? The guessing game goes on all night.

Infantry soldiers go to sleep in their clothes with boots on and weapons close by, realizing nighttime is a good time for an enemy attack. Sleep may be uneasy. If you are on the next watch, you'll be awakened in two hours no matter how much or little sleep you have had. Making it through the two hours on watch is tough. After a strenuous day, all soldiers fight falling asleep on watch. Time goes by slowly and slows down further if you keep checking your watch.

Sleep comes easy after a stressful day. For most infantry soldiers there is not much thought about the difficulties they will face tomorrow. The old saying, "Today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday" applies well to infantry soldiers. Just getting through each day and taking one day at a time is what works best for most soldiers in combat. One of the few Bible verses I know seems appropriate: "Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble for its own" (Matthew 6:34). Right. We will see what tomorrow brings tomorrow.

(This doesn't mean planning is unimportant for leaders, but even combat leaders have to get through today before they can execute tomorrow's plans.)

The night is uneventful for Delta and our two companies in the field. Alpha Company, still back at the Tam Ky airstrip, receives twenty 60 mm mortar rounds. Fortunately, without casualties. The rounds are believed to be fired from a position populated with civilians, only 300 m from the airstrip. A reminder the enemy is always closer than you think.

Casualties and Awards

1-501st Soldiers Killed in Action, 16 May 1969—none

1-501st Soldier Awards, 16 May 1969—none (other awards may have been made that were not mentioned in after action reports)

CHAPTER 4

Finding the Enemy

17–20 May

17 May: A Light Day

An Unexpected Discovery

Waking up on a battlefield is not exactly like waking up in your bedroom back home. As first light dawns, you know sleep time is over. Your eyes open after being aroused from a deep, but short sleep. You quickly realize you are not dreaming. You are an infantryman on a battlefield in Vietnam. Just as suddenly, you realize nothing happened during the night. You are awakening to the beginning of another day, one less day to the end of your Vietnam tour.

At 0645H the battalion TOC, which has been busy through the night, passes a message from brigade to all companies: “Be alert to a strong possibility of increased enemy activity during 16–20 May with a subsequent phase [of activity] during 21–30 May.” The intelligence comes all the way from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington DC. This is highly unusual. Sources for the information are not referenced. At any rate, the information is not further communicated to Delta’s platoons. Perhaps the intel is too general in nature. Another reason may be that we are already on high alert. No one needs to tell us to anticipate heavy enemy contact.

Delta Company, our other two companies, and the Recon Platoon will continue RIF missions today. Yesterday evening, new objectives were radioed to each unit except Alpha Company which is still on the Tam Ky Airfield security mission. Today’s movement continues generally southward toward LZ Professional on three separate axes of advance. Bravo Company and Recon Platoon are to move to BT175117; Charlie Company to BT165126, and Delta to BT183127. The distance to the new objectives is about 1 km (little more than a half mile). See Map 1.

At 0710H before beginning today’s move, Delta Company requests a medevac for a heat casualty identified yesterday evening after we moved into our NDP. It was too late to medevac him in the dark and the soldier hoped he would improve during the night. Though he is conscious, he is still too weak and wouldn’t make it very far with the tropical sun beating down.

At 0745H, Bravo Company is already moving. They've come upon 20 children ages 6–12 huddled in a dilapidated hut at BT172137. They are detained and questioned by Bravo's Kit Carson Scout. Two women soon appear and they are also detained. Apparently the women were taking the children out of harm's way when they saw or heard soldiers approaching. They put the children in the hut and hid nearby until they thought it safe to come out. After being questioned, they are released and cautioned about the danger of going south in the direction our companies are moving. They head north.

Discovering children in large numbers is unexpected and somewhat disconcerting. No one wants innocent civilians, especially children, to be injured or killed. Clearly, our area of operations is still inhabited. Our rules of engagement during daylight conditions are clear, we don't fire on unarmed civilians. We have a responsibility to protect them.

Finding civilians in our immediate area of operations has raised caution flags. We are obviously not in a free fire zone. It is also likely that civilian hooches would have trenches or bunkers for their protection. Sorting out civilians and combatants is part of the difficulty on a battlefield where enemy soldiers may use civilian hooches, trenches, or bunkers to their advantage. Viet Cong fighters (male and female) supporting the NVA of course may appear as non-combatants during the day and soldiers at night.

Multiple Bunkers Seen from the Air

At 0830H, an Air Cav Team with two AH-1 HueyCobras and a LOH-6 Cayuse scout helicopter from B/2-17th Cavalry comes on station. They begin scouting the area to the front of our companies for enemy signs. At 0835, they see the open entrance of a tunnel at BT159135 with a U-shaped firing position at its front. No weapon is seen. The location is just 400 m to the west of Charlie Company's objective for today. They don't fire on the position.

At 0855H, the Cav Team discovers a hooch surrounded by fighting positions at BT170144 just off a heavily used trail running northeast to southwest. This position is now well to our north, just 400 m southwest of our LZ yesterday. Coming down to a low hover, they believe the area is occupied and request clearance to open fire on the position. (Typically, the Cav Team must be fired upon first or clearly identify enemy combatants.)

While awaiting clearance to fire (later denied), the Cav Team spots a dozen or so hooches at BT165116. The area is a kilometer south of Charlie Company's objective for today. Each hut has a trench leading to a concealed bunker. The hooches are each about 10 × 15 ft. The bunker appears to be 5 × 6 ft, but is likely larger underground. Each hooch seems to be in use. Clothes (not uniforms) are drying on a clothesline. Again, clearance to fire is withheld pending seeing uniformed enemy or being fired upon.

At 0928H, the Cav Team spots an enemy 12.7 mm (.51 cal) heavy machine-gun position (without a weapon or gun mount), and a connecting tunnel to a bunker. Nearby trails indicate heavy, frequent, and recent use of the position. It's not attacked, but marked for further observation.

Plans for Tomorrow

At 1000H, the battalion TOC receives brigade's plans for tomorrow (18 May). On the third day of the operation, the 1st Brigade commander directs the 1-501st to spread out more as they move south. This will increase the distance between companies with the intent of increasing the likelihood of enemy contact.

Bravo Company will remain on its current axis of advance and move to BT173113 (Hill 187). Charlie Company will be sent another kilometer to the west to BT164121. Delta Company will move a kilometer further to the east to BT183116. There is a risk to the new strategy. If any company engages a large enemy force, it will take longer to bring the companies together. High temperatures and humidity will limit the speed of movement. All combat, by its very nature, always involves taking risks. Alpha remains at Tam Ky Airfield.

At 1015H, the Cav Team spots a 12 × 12 ft bunker at BT178117 made of logs and dirt. It is not clear this is an enemy bunker. So far today, no enemy soldiers or weapons have been spotted or engaged by the Cav Team. Every time aviators fly up close to a bunker to check out suspected enemy positions, they risk their lives. Flying skills, courage, patience, and good judgment are required. Their decisions may be costly to themselves and others. Bravo Company will likely be passing near the bunker in a day or so.

At platoon level we are not getting reports of the frequent sightings of suspected enemy positions all over our area of operations. But, moving on the ground, we have seen enough to conclude we are operating in an area unlike any we've seen before. There are bunkers everywhere. Having the Cav Team overhead is reassuring. They can quickly engage verified enemy targets and their presence makes it difficult for enemy soldiers to move about during daylight.

More Heat Casualties

As the noon sun climbs high into the bright blue sky, our three companies and Recon Platoon continue their RIF missions. In the strength-sapping tropical oven and humidity, heat casualties begin to mount. We are new to Tam Ky's hot climate, frequently well over 95° in late May with humidity above 90%. In our first days we are moving exposed to the sun's merciless heat.

In the A Shau we mostly conducted operations under a triple canopy in much cooler temperatures. No one is complaining about the heat, at least not out loud.

Soldiers are allowed to gripe about conditions, but infantrymen are expected to tough it out no matter the weather. That's probably part of the problem. No one wants to admit the heat is getting to them.

At 1225H, Bravo Company requests medevac for two heat casualties. One is unconscious. At 1300H, Charlie Company has a heat casualty. By 1326H, Bravo has three more (two from Recon moving with Bravo). All need medevac. The serious casualty is taken direct to 27th Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai. Others are first taken to Tam Ky Airfield for medical evaluation. If their condition requires it, they are flown to Tam Ky North for further evaluation and given saline IVs, plenty of water, and a day or two of rest.

Soldiers are quickly returned to the field as soon as their condition permits. All of our soldiers know to stay hydrated. The problem is we haven't come across any water to refill our canteens. We will need water resupply every day in this heat. By 1400H, medevacs have picked up all heat casualties.

At 1417H, current locations for each unit are reported. Bravo and Recon are at BT175131. They've only moved some 500 m south from their NDP due to heat casualties and checking out suspected enemy bunkers. Charlie Company is at BT173138. They've spent most of the day moving east out of an area so thick with vegetation it was slowing their movement. They are now 700 m directly north of Bravo Company. Delta Company is at BT186133, a kilometer east of Bravo Company.

At 1435H, a Bravo Troop, 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry LOH flying over BT190079 spots a platoon-sized enemy unit and takes small arms fire shattering the helicopter's plexiglass canopy. Fragments of glass wound an onboard observer. An accompanying helicopter calls in artillery on the enemy location.

At 1510H, Alpha Company has a serious heat exhaustion case who must be flown directly to the 27th Surgical Hospital at Chu Lai. At 1540H, Bravo Company has two more heat injuries requiring use of a basket to extract the casualties. At 1645H, two more heat casualties are evacuated from Bravo Company.

At 1805H, unit locations are updated again. Bravo Company and Recon are at BT175117. They reached their objective for today having moved due south some 1400 m during a brutally hot afternoon. Perhaps too far, too fast in the heat. When infantry units are assigned objectives, they push to accomplish the mission. It is in an infantryman's DNA. Charlie Company has also moved a long distance in the heat, 1800 m to their objective at BT164126. They are still almost a kilometer northwest of Bravo Company. Delta is at BT183130. We've covered only 300 m in the afternoon and CPT Begley is calling a temporary halt in the heat. We were slowed down moving through terrain with pretty thick undergrowth. Morale is lifted by our stop. We have no further heat casualties.

At company, platoon, and certainly down at squad levels, we don't know the rationale behind the objectives we are told to reach. Our job is simply to get

there and find the enemy as we move. That has been true for infantry in every war, including this one. Still, there is a temptation to think those up the chain of command are just sticking pins in a map. They aren't moving on the ground with us. An old saying comes to mind, "Nothing is impossible for the man who does not have to do it himself."

End of Day Two

Despite the nine heat casualties in our battalion today, there have been no casualties due to enemy contact. Perhaps the enemy is allowing the heat to soften us up before engaging us? Don't think that will work. We will get acclimatized soon enough. At 1915H, NDPs are occupied and reported. Bravo and Recon remain at BT175117 (Hill 187) and Charlie Company is at BT165126, all at their day's objective. Delta is now at BT183127, having moved an additional 300 m in the last hour. Alpha remains at the airfield in Tam Ky.

Everyone has moved into their night positions soaking wet with sweat. We will get a chance to dry out some before sleeping. The heat casualties aren't a matter of lack of leadership at the company level. Units are doing their best moving during the hottest part of the day. Water is being drank, but our supply is limited. The high tropical heat and humidity in Tam Ky's coastal region is the issue. It is physically draining even if soldiers stay somewhat hydrated. We will need a water source or resupply soon. The five to six quarts of water each soldier carries are not enough in these conditions with the combat loads we are humping.

In reflecting on the day's activity, the frequent sightings of bunkers and firing positions makes it clear we are in a combat zone with active enemy elements. We've been in the field two days and have yet to encounter an enemy force of any size. They are obviously here. Too many US aircraft have been fired on by both small arms and heavy machine guns. The heavy guns are a clear sign that larger NVA units are operating nearby. Anticipation is growing. It is likely only a matter of time before they let us find them. As we know, that likely will be at a time and place of their choosing. We have another night without incident.

18 May: Enemy Contact Increases

Today's Objectives

Company objectives given yesterday remain valid today. Bravo Company and Recon will move just a few hundred meters south to the high ground on Hill 187 at BT174114. Both have advanced much further south than Charlie and Delta Companies. It is tactically preferable, all things being equal (and they usually are

not) for the three companies to advance on one front. This makes it more difficult for the enemy to engage one company at a time. We can also better cover each other's flanks. Bravo needs to slow down or Charlie and Delta need to catch up. Alpha remains at Tam Ky Airfield.

Charlie is to move 500 m south to BT164121. They will still be almost a kilometer to the northwest of Bravo Company. Delta Company is moving south approximately one kilometer to BT185116 along an elongated tree-covered hill. Delta Company will come abreast of Bravo Company one kilometer to the east and will also be on high ground.

Bravo Takes Heavy Casualties

At 0710H, Bravo Company receives 6–7 rounds of 60 mm fire. All rounds fall close, but outside Bravo's perimeter. At 0740H they are on the move to Hill 187. At 0830H, as Bravo Company approaches Hill 187, seven 60 mm mortar rounds are fired from an enemy position estimated to be in the vicinity of BT176117. One soldier is wounded by shell fragments. The rounds are too close for comfort. Artillery is called in on the position. No return mortar fire is received.

At 0835H, the 1-501st TOC closes operations at the Tam Ky Airfield and at 1100H moves to LZ Professional (BT173077) which becomes our battalion's forward operating base. For the time being, Alpha Company will remain at the airfield. Movement and activity of units is monitored as the TOC relocates.

At 0930H, Bravo Company receives three more incoming 60 mm mortar rounds without casualties. Again, artillery fire is called in on the suspected position. Again, no further 60 mm fire is received. Even so, it seems the enemy has Bravo Company under close observation. At 1050H, soon after Bravo's lead platoon arrives on Hill 187, five more 60 mm rounds land nearby. There are still no casualties.

Unknown to Bravo Company, the enemy has been in the area long enough to have established multiple mortar firing positions, with each firing position having predetermined target lists. Key terrain features like Hill 187 are likely high on such a list. By 1120H, artillery, attack helicopters and an air strike are used in sequence to fire on and destroy suspected enemy mortar positions. As is often the case, results are not known.

At 1225H, as Bravo continues to set up and dig in on Hill 187, three heavier enemy 82 mm mortar rounds slam into Bravo Company, wounding eight soldiers. Bravo Company's FO calls in artillery on the suspected mortar position causing a large secondary explosion. No further enemy mortar fire is received. There's a sigh of relief that the 82 mm mortar position appears to have been knocked out.

Two hours later at 1640H, three more 82 mm rounds fall on Bravo Company. The company command post takes a direct hit. The Bravo Company Commander CPT John Pape is severely wounded. He soon dies despite a medic's valiant effort to save him. CPT Pape's RTO, SP4 Lincoln Bundy is also killed by the same mortar

round along with two medics, SP5 Hans Mills and SP4 Russell Jett. Several more Bravo Company soldiers are wounded.

At 1645H, CPT Begley reports he may know the location of the 82 mm mortar firing on Bravo Company and is moving our company to take it out. At 1656H, LTC Singer is enroute to Bravo's location in his command helicopter. He is bringing in two additional medics to aid in treatment of the wounded. Singer will remove CPT Pape and SP4 Bundy. He confirms medevacs are on the way to pick up the wounded.

At 1705H Bravo continues to be mortared. By 1720H, during a brief halt in the enemy shelling, all KIAs and WIAs are evacuated. More rounds are received at 1723H, another soldier is WIA. No further incoming rounds are received. Total casualties for Bravo Company today are 4 KIA and 12 WIA plus two Recon soldiers WIA and a medic from Headquarters Company. The medic, SP4 Daniel Thurston, will have his wound cleaned and bandaged by Gary Winkler, his close buddy and fellow Recon medic. Then, he will quickly return to the field.

Bravo Company's wounded include: SSGs Joe Little and Lee Pinkerton; SGT Dorsey Brewer; SP4s Robert Dawson, Jay Erb, Wayne Hastings, Randy Wright, David Yamamura, and PFCs Ellis Autman, Neil Forman, Lewis Kirkbride, and Eugene Simon. Along with these casualties, Bravo Company has five more heat casualties.

At 1730H, CPT John Gay, the battalion's S-3 air officer responsible for coordination of air support, is told by LTC Singer he is the new Bravo Commander. Gay already had figured he was next in line and has his gear ready to go. At 1801H, Singer flies Gay into Bravo Company. It's a tough time to take command, but Bravo needs him now, not tomorrow.

Charlie Company Is Ambushed

At 0730H, while Bravo Company is being mortared, CPT Dave Gibson's Charlie Company moves toward its objective. Gibson sends SFC Isaac Hayward's 1st Platoon around the backside of the hill where they are headed. The rest of Charlie Company waits on a needed resupply. Just as the helicopter drops off ammunition, rations, and water, heavy firing breaks out on the top of the hill.

Hayward's platoon surprised an enemy platoon by coming up on their rear as they waited to ambush Charlie Company. Enemy fire is intense. PFC Rudy Rossi fires two rounds from his 90 mm recoilless rifle before being killed. PFC John Vollerhausen is also killed. PFC James Coats is wounded, CPL Paul Ganun, the platoon medic, is killed trying to aid the fallen soldiers.

Gibson sends LT Dan O'Neill's 3rd Platoon to reinforce Hayward. Gibson and LT Gourley's 2nd Platoon are attacked at the bottom of the hill before they can move. They kill five NVA with machine gun, rifle fire, and hand grenades. That done, they move the supplies to the top of the hill. They rejoin 1st and 3rd Platoons who have killed another eight NVA.

Charlie Company digs in on the hill preparing for further enemy action. Near dusk, they are hit by mortars. As the barrage ends, a gong sounds below the hill signaling an enemy attack. Charlie Company repels the first of three enemy ground attacks. The exchange of fire is deafening. Two more attacks occur at night, the last around 2200H. All are repelled. One enemy soldier breaks through their perimeter and is killed. The number of enemy casualties is unknown as the NVA remove their dead and wounded under cover of darkness. Gibson thinks the attack may have been a company-sized enemy force.

LTC Singer has an Alpha Company platoon on standby at Tam Ky Airfield to reinforce Charlie Company, but bad weather prevents its arrival. CPT Gibson requests a USAF “Spooky” gunship. Once on station the C-130 is of immediate assistance. The enemy once again attempts to mortar Charlie Company’s position. As the mortar’s distinct sound is heard as it fires its first round, before the round hits the C-130’s mini-guns rain a torrent of 20 mm cannon fire directly on the mortar’s firing position. No more mortars are fired at Charlie Company that night. The C-130 remains on station until it is replaced by another gunship. Charlie Company has a needed peaceful night.

End of Day Three

At 1900H in the last minutes of daylight, CPT Begley is moving Delta Company closer to Bravo Company’s location before darkness closes in. After making a long southward move of over 1.5 km, we are able to come abreast of their position, but still a kilometer to their east. Surprisingly, we’ve not had enemy contact, shelling, or casualties today. As we moved, Begley and our three platoon leaders have been following today’s battle action on our radios. We know we will soon join the fray.

Battalion casualties today are seven KIA and 16 WIA. This includes the casualties mentioned earlier in this chapter. Five other soldiers are heat casualties. Three of the seven KIAs are medics from Headquarters Company. Two were supporting Bravo Company: Medic SP5 Hans Mills and Medic SP4 Russell Jett. The other medic was supporting Charlie Company: Medic CPL Paul Ganun. All valiant young men.

No one working in support of the infantry has more respect than our medics. When an infantry soldier is wounded, if he can speak, his first words are the call “Medic!” There is no hesitation by medics in answering the call. They instinctively and without instruction move toward the wounded. Usually others have to hold them back, telling them to wait until it can be made safer for them. Sometimes that can’t be done and they move to the wounded at great risk to their own lives.

At 2007H, the night defensive position for Bravo Company and Recon Platoon is Hill 187 at BT174114. Charlie Company made it to their objective and are at

BT164121, but are still a kilometer northwest of Bravo Company. Delta Company is at BT185116, a kilometer due east of Bravo Company. With permission from battalion, we moved an additional 400 m south of our day's objective and are now as far south as Bravo Company.

It takes a while to settle down tonight. At 2010H, a USAF AC-47 Spooky gunship is circling Charlie Company's position and dropping flares for the next two hours. Tomorrow is likely to be a different day for Delta Company. There is no doubt now the enemy is willing to engage us. Both Bravo and Charlie Company have been bloodied. Our turn is likely coming soon.

19 May: Heavy Contact Expected

Yesterday was a tough day for Bravo Company. The effectiveness of enemy mortar fire has everyone's attention. We all expect to receive more of the same today. Death raining down from the skies is unsettling. The enemy knows it is to their advantage to engage us with indirect fire weapons from a distance. However, Charlie Company's long afternoon firefight tells us NVA units will stand and fight, especially if they fight from concealed bunkers with overhead protection.

The further south our battalion moves, the more enemy resistance stiffens. Today Bravo Company and Recon Platoon will move southeast a short 500 m to BT178107. This will put Bravo Company just 200 m north of the Song Bong Mieu River. Recon's final position will be on the south end of Hill 187 at BT172109, 400 m north of the river and just several hundred meters to the west of Bravo Company. Our companies will have to cross the river if we are to continue moving south to LZ Professional.

Morning Operations

Charlie Company doesn't move today. It remains in the vicinity of its NDP last night (BT164122) conducting search operations of the enemy bunkers where yesterday's firefight occurred. After searching the abandoned enemy position, CPT Gibson confirms his company may have been fighting an NVA company. This is the largest enemy force engaged so far. They are fortunate their casualties weren't significantly higher.

At 0755H, before moving out, CPT Gay, Bravo Company commander, has his men do a crater analysis of the 82 mm mortar rounds that fell on the company yesterday. An analysis can usually determine the direction from which the rounds were fired and if they were fired from a single mortar or multiple mortars and firing positions. The mortar rounds came from the northeast, apparently from one 82 mm mortar. The craters show the rounds came in at a fairly steep angle, likely the mortars were no more than 1,000 m away.

At 0800H, log birds begin to resupply each company. Charlie Company has first priority due to its long engagement yesterday afternoon. They are in bad need of ammunition and water. At 0807H, a Forward Air Controller (FAC) and Artillery Forward Observer (FO) come on station to support air strikes in support of Charlie Company.

At 0910H, before beginning its move to the southwest, Delta Company finds an abandoned enemy 82 mm mortar firing pit at BT185116 which shows signs of recent use. Begley thinks this is the mortar firing position that fired on Bravo Company on Hill 187 yesterday. The range to Hill 187 is only 900 m, easy firing distance for the enemy mortar. The firing pit is several feet deep, about 8 ft in diameter with a camouflaged, dirt parapet around the position. It is a well-constructed, textbook mortar firing position. The NVA mortar crews know their business.

At 0937H, prior to Charlie Company's air strikes, the TOC asks each company to confirm their location. Bravo Company and the Recon Platoon are at BT174114 still in their NDP location. So is Charlie Company at BT164121. Charlie is still approximately one kilometer northwest of Bravo Company's location. Delta Company has already moved south one kilometer and is at BT177108, now just a few hundred meters east of Bravo Company.

During the afternoon, all 1-501st units in the field are conducting searches of bunkers and hooches near their current positions. Surprisingly, most of the day has gone by without any units having enemy contact including being fired upon by mortars. Earlier around mid-morning, Alpha Company moved from the Tam Ky Airfield to Tam Ky North to secure 1st Brigade's command post at BT280228. Alpha Company is now under the operational control of 1st Brigade.

End of Day Four

At 1845H, Bravo Company reports finding a tunnel complex at BT173100. The tunnel measures 25 × 5 m with a roof reinforced by what appears to be granite. An NVA medic is captured when he emerges from the tunnel with hands up. The tunnel holds assorted personal and medical equipment and a US claymore mine. The captured medic says his unit had 50 soldiers, but ten were killed late last night (18 May) by our (Spooky) gunship. This may be the unit that ambushed Charlie Company.

Whether true or not, the captured medic adds his unit has moved to the southwest and crossed the nearby river to bury its dead. He continues to give information saying three other NVA soldiers with AK-47s live with him in the tunnel. The prisoner will be extracted in the morning. He is tied up and guarded during the night after gladly accepting an offer of food and water.

At 2015H, NDP locations are reported. Bravo Company is at BT173107. Delta Company is close by on the east at BT177108. Recon is at BT172109 and Charlie Company is still at BT164122. While digging in positions for the night, Charlie

Company finds a month-old dead NVA body. The body is too decayed to tell if it had shrapnel or gunshot wounds. Field strength reports are also given as of 2000H.

There are no casualties today, but the battalion's field strength has declined 30 soldiers in three days due to enemy and heat casualties. Twenty-three of the casualties were yesterday, 18 May. Charlie Company received a few replacements to make up for the three soldiers they had wounded.

Charlie Company Attacked Again

At 2215H, Charlie Company is hit again with a night ground attack with heavy enemy fire from a number of AK-47s, likely at least one RPD machine gun, and RPGs. All are firing from 50–75 m outside Charlie Company's perimeter. Charlie Company soldiers return fire with their own heavy volume of fire glad to be fighting from dug-in positions. CPT Gibson immediately requests a Spooky gunship.

The enemy firing stops. For 20 minutes there is a lull in the firing. The enemy is likely withdrawing, knowing what is coming next. They resume their attack using only mortars as the enemy ground force pulls back. Charlie Company fires its own 81 mm mortar in return. Only one Charlie Company soldier gets a minor shoulder wound, but doesn't need medevac.

At 2250H, the Spooky comes on station and after coordination with Charlie Company's FO, begins to saturate the suspected enemy positions and likely withdrawal routes with its much feared firepower remaining on station until 2325H. A flare ship then comes on station for the next hour.

Finally, things settle down. The day began with expectations that all companies would be in heavy enemy contact. That shoe didn't drop. Today, only Charlie Company has any significant contact and that is believed to be with the largest enemy force yet engaged. The rest of the night is quiet for all 1-501st companies.

20 May: Heavy Contact Expected Again

Later Today in the Nation's Capital

In Washington DC, Senator Ted Kennedy goes to the US Senate floor to denounce the 11-day Hamburger Hill battle which ended today. He says in part:

I am compelled to speak on this question today for I believe that the level of our military activity in Vietnam runs opposite to our stated intentions and goals in Paris. But more importantly, I feel it is both senseless and irresponsible to continue to send our young men to their deaths to capture hills and positions that have no relation to ending this conflict.

President Nixon has told us, without question, that we seek no military victory, that we seek only peace. How then can we justify sending our boys against a hill a dozen times or more, until soldiers themselves question the madness of the action?¹⁸

Senator Kennedy, the US Congress, the national media, and the American people know nothing about the on-going fighting at Tam Ky 100 miles to the south of Hamburger Hill. Neither will they learn about it. It will be a well-kept secret, not revealed until Vietnam combat records from 1969 are released well after the war is over. In the meanwhile, the casualties of *Operation Lamar Plain* continue to climb.

Bravo Company's Busy Day

So far, no 1-501st company has had more difficulty at Tam Ky than Bravo Company. Despite heavy casualties, the loss of their commander, few replacements, and being significantly understrength, they are still an effective combat force. Today is CPT Gay's second day in command after CPT Pape was killed on 18 May. Bravo will have a series of welcome successes today that lifts their morale.

At 0710H, just as Bravo Company begins to move east along the north bank of the Song Bong Mieu River, they spot an NVA 12.7 mm heavy machine-gun position at BT174104 and request an immediate air strike. They keep the gun under observation until 0833H when an attack helicopter team from B/2-17th Air Cavalry with two AH-1 HueyCobras attack the position. The helicopters fire their 2.75 mm aerial rockets, 7.62 mm mini guns, and 40 mm grenades from their rapid fire grenade launcher.

The enemy gun puts up a heavy volume of fire driving off the attack helicopters who are unsuccessful in knocking it out. At 0940H, a second attack helicopter team makes another effort to destroy the gun position also without success. It will be attacked later by an air strike with bombs and napalm.

At 0910H, while the attack on the gun position is on-going, Bravo Company's 1st Platoon moving west finds a tunnel and hooch at BT171107. The tough job of searching a dark suspected enemy tunnel is not for the faint-hearted. The soldiers who undertake this mission have been dubbed "tunnel rats" by fellow soldiers. It's not a derisive term. Tunnel rats are usually small in stature, not in courage. They must fit into the narrow spaces constructed for Vietnamese who are much smaller than the average soldier. Typically, they are armed only with a .45 cal pistol since a rifle is too cumbersome to use in such confined spaces. Sometimes they have a flashlight, sometimes they enter the dark tunnel without any light and must depend solely on feel, smell, and sounds. They are prepared to encounter anything from snakes to booby traps or enemy soldiers. Like the job of point man, not every soldier is qualified or wants to be a tunnel rat.

At 1000H, Bravo's 3rd Platoon joins with 1st Platoon. A search of the tunnel finds two males in their forties. One is missing a leg lost long ago, the stump is fully healed. There are also two women in their twenties and six children of various ages. The men are considered to be Viet Cong suspects (VCS). The women may be as well, but they are kept with the children who are understandably frightened. They will all be extracted soon by helicopter to get them out of danger.

At 1020H, a further search of the area finds several hooches about 40 m east of the tunnel. All of them appear to be storehouses for large quantities of rice and water. Upon questioning by Bravo's Kit Carson Scout, one of the women says about 100 NVA soldiers came through their location last night. The enemy often moves at night so he can't be spotted from the air. Maybe this is the same enemy force that Charlie Company faced the previous day?

Whether CPT Begley ever received this vital information about the size and location of the enemy force reported by Bravo Company is not known. In either case, it is not passed to the platoons in our company. If the information is true, the enemy force mentioned is larger than most of our companies and it may not be the only such force in our AO.

Enemy units have several advantages. They are fighting on terrain they know well having operated in the area for some time. They are difficult to track. The enemy units have no problem moving at night. They also have VC local forces assisting them in their movements and preparation of fighting positions. Everywhere we move there are concealed bunkers, mortar and heavy machine-gun positions, tunnels, and spider holes.

On the other hand, we are generally limited to daytime movement because of our unfamiliarity with the area. As said before, we also have been directed to move south essentially in one direction, so it is easy for the enemy to track our movement. Because we are normally on the move, we don't have the advantage of fighting from concealed positions.

Of course, we have significant advantages. Our capability to call in artillery, attack helicopters, and air support with bombs and napalm is a huge advantage, if we're able to use them. We also have excellent communications and resupply capabilities. Even with those weighty capabilities, in a straight-up infantry fight at close quarters, the weapons, skill, and determination of NVA infantry is equivalent to our own. The NVA soldiers have our respect as a hardened, resourceful enemy and master of small unit tactics.

At 1023H, Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon engages six enemy soldiers at BT172104, just 200 m from the heavy machine-gun position at BT174104. They are likely part of a team protecting the gun. B/2-17th Cav once again is called upon to attack the enemy soldiers. Searching the area, Bravo's 3rd Platoon spots another heavy machine gun at BT169104 along the north bank of the river. The two guns are apparently part of a larger antiaircraft network of heavy machine guns. This is another reminder such guns are usually part of an NVA antiaircraft company supporting an NVA regiment (or larger unit) with upwards of a thousand soldiers. This is an ominous sign of combat to come.

The second enemy gun is not as fortunate as the first one. A FAC flying in support of our battalion directs a twin-engine, two-seat, Marine F4E Phantom fighter-bomber to the gun position by firing a white phosphorous (WP) rocket where he wants the bombs to land. The Phantom jet carries a wide range of ordinance up to 18,000 lbs. (250 and 500 lb. bombs, napalm cannisters, and a 20 mm cannon).

The Phantom pilot drops four 250 lb. bombs on the gun position. One of the bombs scores a direct hit.

At 1340H, Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon continues its search operations at BT174107 just north of the river. They encounter another group of civilians, one woman age 30 and four children. They are moved to the Bravo Company CP which now has 25 detainees. Due to scheduled air strikes, the civilian detainees are not evacuated by helicopter until afternoon at 1500H. It will be their first helicopter ride. The children are crying and afraid of the loud helicopters. Being told by their women caretakers they are being taken to safety doesn't help. Humanitarian acts like this done by Bravo Company's soldiers to protect children are commonplace during the war.

At 1845H, an additional three women and eight children are detained by Bravo Company as they move east along a trail near Bravo's position. No one would have guessed so many civilians have remained in the area. It is notable that there are no men with these groups of women and children. Likely the adult women are also local VC, but unarmed wives and children are treated as non-combatants. They are soon released and allowed to continue moving out of the area.

Update on Other 1-501st Units

At 0800H, near to Bravo Company's location, at BT172106 Delta Company's 2nd Platoon finds a 3 × 4 ft wood cabinet in a hooch. The cabinet contains two NVA rucksacks. Documents in the rucksack appear to be training documents. Also found in the rucksacks are one AK-47 magazine, 40 rounds of AK-47 ammunition, one Chinese grenade launcher, one hand-made grenade, an NVA canteen, five 60 mm mortar fuses, one US pistol belt, several shirts, and pants, seven rockets for attachment to RPG warheads, and three pick heads without handles. The last items are a vital tool for digging tunnels and bunkers.

Soon afterwards, with our being so close to the Song Bong Mieu River, CPT Begley expects we will be crossing the river in the next day or so to continue our move south to LZ Professional. He tasks me to take a small recon team to look for a crossing site. The river is approximately 200 m away. I take my RTO, SGT Littleton, and two of his squad members. We move quietly, stopping frequently to listen and observe. It takes 30 minutes to move the short distance to the river. Once at our objective we see the muddy river has steep banks about 50 ft high. The jungle covers both banks. It's about 100 ft across and appears to be fordable at several places. We complete the reconnaissance in about an hour and report our findings to CPT Begley.

At 0918H, Charlie Company begins its day searching the enemy positions used to fire on them yesterday and last night. They find two Chinese hand grenades, one RPG round, two NVA helmets, and a black shirt typically worn by the VC. The number of AK-47 casings found scattered about indicate the attack was made by a platoon-sized enemy unit. At 1120H, Charlie Company requests a medevac for a soldier with a broken ankle. The condition of another soldier who apparently suffered a concussion injury last night has worsened and he will also be taken out on the medevac.

At 1218H, Delta Company reports we have detained ten civilians: an elderly woman, one female around 20 years old, two females thought to be 15 years old, and six children of various ages. All were found near BT174106 moving east and apparently leaving the area. Our presence in the area seems to be creating a high degree of anxiety among the local civilians who have remained here. Maybe they expect a battle will happen soon and are getting out while they can? After questioning by our KCS, this group is also released and allowed to continue leaving our area.

At 1400H, 1-501st unit locations are updated by the TOC. Alpha Company is still securing the 1st Brigade's command post at Tam Ky North. Bravo is spread out in its search operations. The CP is at BT173106 along with the 2nd Platoon. The 1st Platoon is at BT176108 and 3rd Platoon at BT174106. The platoons have not ventured far. They are all within a few hundred meters of the company CP. Delta Company remains close to Bravo Company's location and is at BT172105, now just west of Bravo Company by 100 m or so. The Recon Platoon is at BT173106 near the Bravo Company's CP. Charlie Company remains well to the northwest at BT166114. Their location will be advantageous to events tomorrow.

The scorching hot afternoon passes. Most of our units have limited their activity due to the sweltering sun and high humidity. At 1725H, Charlie Company has movement to their front and both flanks. They immediately request an attack helicopter team. Soon two LOH-6 Cayuses and two AH-1G HueyCobras arrive and begin scouting Charlie Company's front and flanks. Minutes later, Charlie Company requests a medevac for a heat casualty. The extraction is delayed due to the enemy's proximity.

End of the Fifth Day

At 1700H, while we are moving west toward our NDP, at BT164107 Delta Company discovers eight male bodies wearing khaki shorts and green shirts. The bodies are somewhat decomposed and appear weeks old. No weapons are found with the bodies, but they seem to be NVA or main force VC soldiers. A ninth body similarly

clad and decomposed is found at our NDP location. Once in our NDP, we find a recently used 12.7 mm heavy machine-gun position and 60 mm mortar baseplate. The camouflage vegetation is still green.

At 1735H, Charlie Company spots four NVA soldiers in the open at BT165119 several hundred meters north of their position. As artillery is fired on their position, 15 NVA soldiers are seen scrambling into nearby bunkers. Charlie Company's FO continues to fire artillery on the enemy position while CPT Gibson requests an air strike. The air strike goes in at 1801H. No bomb damage assessment is made.

At 1910H, night defensive positions are reported. Alpha Company is preparing to move to LZ Professional to provide security there, but will remain at the 1st Brigade CP one last night. Bravo Company is at BT173107. Delta is now about a kilometer west of Bravo Company at BT163105, both companies are still just north of the Song Bong Mieu River. The Recon Platoon is at BT173105 near and just south of Bravo Company. Charlie Company remains at BT164115.

We settle in our NDP. All of us are looking forward to the cooler nighttime temperatures. Surprisingly, there have been no battalion casualties today. We've completed five days in the field. There are so many signs of the enemy's presence, we are surprised we've not had heavy contact.

Since our arrival, only Bravo and Charlie Company have had significant enemy contact. None of Delta Company's soldiers have been killed or wounded. Bravo Company has had the highest casualties. In addition to the loss of their commander and his RTO, 15 of their soldiers have been wounded in recent days plus two medics and two Recon soldiers. Charlie Company has had two soldiers killed and three wounded. Five medics from Headquarters Company supporting Bravo, Charlie, and Recon have become casualties.

We are told the enemy is present in large numbers in the Tam Ky area. Where they are and in what strength is unknown to us. So are their intentions. Are they purposely avoiding contact? Taking time to assess the combat power and capabilities of the 1st Brigade? Biding time until they can engage us on their terms or ground favorable to them? When will they choose to fight us in a sustained battle? Maybe soon.

Casualties and Awards

Casualty Table 5 shows the 1-501st casualties due to enemy action for the first five days in the field at Tam Ky. Heat casualties would add another 20 or so to our losses. However, most of them are soon returned to the field after being rehydrated and are not reported as casualties. We don't know the extent of enemy casualties most of which are caused by our air support and artillery.

A Brutal Day-Long Engagement

21 May

Early Morning Activity

Today is Delta Company's sixth day in the field at Tam Ky. It starts out much like the other days. We pull in our claymore mines and trip flares, check weapons, pack up our rucksacks, fix morning coffee, and get a quick bite. It is our regular routine, but an uneasy feeling hangs in the air. There is no specific enemy intelligence to inform us the enemy is close by in force. We take that for granted, but uncertainty prevails. Clausewitz speaks of soldiers "boldly advancing into the shadows of uncertainty." That is us. Uncertainty in battle, he further explains, requires trust in junior leaders, confidence in training and battle experience, and bravery in battle.¹⁹

As the day starts, we are still in our NDP at BT163105. Our three platoons are already awake as dawn breaks. It is our standard practice to be ready for an early morning enemy attack. That has never occurred since I joined the company five months ago. But it is a good practice, especially since we know the enemy is near. Our sister companies all follow the same procedure. Charlie is a kilometer to our north at BT164115, Bravo Company (BT173107) and the Recon Platoon are a kilometer to our east. Alpha Company will be moving from Tam Ky Airfield to LZ Professional to provide firebase security.

At 0500H, it is still dark when Charlie Company detects movement outside their perimeter and engages with M-79 grenade launchers and hand grenades. As dawn breaks, a 35-year-old woman and 10-year-old child are found dead outside the perimeter. Other women and children detained on the previous day were removed from danger. Why these two were there and what they were doing is not known. It is a sad start to the day. No soldier can be blamed for these unfortunate deaths.

At 0633H, we hear a Light Observation Helicopter (LOH-6 Cayuse) from Bravo Company, 2-17th Cavalry making a quick, first-light overflight of the battalion's immediate area of operations. The LOH draws enemy AK-47 fire from BT174104 just a few hundred meters south of Bravo Company on the far southern side of the Song Bong Mieu River. An onboard observer is wounded and the LOH goes off station. Two AH-1G HueyCobra helicopters armed with ARA engage the enemy position. Results are unknown.

At 0730H, Bravo Company's calls in an air strike at BT169104. The air strike will also be across the Song Bong Mieu River and just 600 m south of our position. Enemy movement of unknown size was detected there the previous day. Our FO ensures that the FAC knows he is to keep the bombs south of the river. The results are not reported to us.

Apparently, we will not be crossing the river today as planned. Our three 1-501st companies have been given reconnaissance in force (RIF) missions to move in a different direction. Battalion is directing all three of our companies to converge on a suspected enemy position of unknown size at BT165110. Little intelligence is available and even less is passed down within the companies. Each company will move to an assigned grid coordinate looking for the enemy. Bravo and Recon are to move one kilometer northwest to BT172109. Charlie moves due south 100 m to BT163115. Delta is to move north 500 m to BT163110.

A Morning Memory

Earlier, at first light, Delta Company's SP4 Bill Stephens and PFCs Bill "Scotty" Scott and Mike Hatzell, all 1st Platoon, awake to the heat and humidity of another tropical day. Having just come from the A Shau Valley's dense forests, high mountains, and moderate temperatures, they like others are still adjusting to the body-draining heat and humidity of the coastal lowlands near Tam Ky.

After breaking down the night defensive position they shared, they quickly prepare for the days move. Next comes breakfast. They hurriedly eat a C-Ration breakfast, avoiding the greasy canned mystery meat which makes stomachs queasy in the heat. They are starting the day with a celebration of sorts. Six months plus one day ago, they arrived together in Vietnam on 20 November 1968. Scotty and Mike were in basic training together at Fort Ord, California. After finishing training, they were sent immediately to Vietnam and arrived together at Delta Company's home base at LZ Sally. That is where they met Bill Stephens who had also just arrived.

Today, all three are officially "over the hump" in their 12-month combat tour. They can begin their countdown to boarding a "freedom bird" and heading back to the "world" and home. In GI parlance they are now "short." They won't think of themselves as true "short timers" until a few more months pass. But each soldier will begin their short-timer calendar, eagerly ticking off each passing day until their DEROS (Date Expected to Return Overseas) arrives.

After breakfast, Stephens breaks out two small cans from the bottom of his rucksack that he has been saving just for this sort of worthy occasion. One olive drab can is the much-coveted, succulent yellow peach slices in their own thick, sweet juice. The other is an equally desirable can of pound cake. The two delicacies are high on the list of favored C-Ration foods, but together they are hardly enough for one soldier. The three friends with mouths already watering are happy to divvy

up and share their tasty morning treat. Infantry soldiers take their pleasures where they find them.

As they sit on their rucksacks enjoying a peaceful moment, their celebration is interrupted by the dreaded familiar sounds of several enemy A-47 rifles firing short, frequent bursts only a couple of hundred meters away. Past memories are put aside. By evening, memories of today's events will be etched in their minds for the rest of their lives. At least, that is true for two of them. The tour of one of the friends will unexpectedly end today, his DEROS still many months away.

The nearby gunfire immediately gets our attention. Tension and anxiety increase. Everyone is instantly on high alert, mentally and physically. The adrenaline rush is creating that well-known feeling of "butterflies" in the pit of stomachs. There is real fear too, but no one would see it in the faces of our soldiers. What is evident is a somewhat calm, but grim, sober expression as they quickly go through weapons checks and other deliberate practiced actions as they prepare to face extreme danger.

Not waiting to be told, soldiers shoulder their rucksacks and ready for the word to move out. The orders come quickly and the pace quickens, "Hurry up, let's get moving." Not much explaining is needed. LT Black's 2nd Platoon is our lead platoon. Along with his platoon sergeant, SFC Pedro Rios, the platoon also has a full complement of three proven but junior rank squad leaders. SGT Donald Robinson's 3rd Squad will be the lead squad. SGT LC Carter and Specialist 4th Class Mike Tomaszewski follow with their two squads. The 2nd Platoon is the right choice to lead as our company moves to make certain enemy contact.

Our 1st Platoon, led by 1LT Rich Boyd and his platoon sergeant, SSG Ron Sahrle, follows 2nd Platoon in our company column. My platoon, having lost my platoon sergeant SSG Tepner to battalion, and squad leader SGT Hoffa WIA in the A Shau, is in the rear. Before Tam Ky, we had our turns being lead platoon. That was then, but things have changed. We begin moving toward the sound of firing through scattered trees and heavy brush. Few instructions have been given about our movement or what is happening. As usual, CPT Begley will give us orders by radio as the situation develops.

Bravo Company and Recon Make Contact

At 0830H, CPT John Gay, new commander of Bravo Company, passes his unit through Delta Company's position. They soon will turn north and remain close on Delta Company's right flank. They are spread out in a modified column. The terrain is now mostly open with scattered trees and brush with rice paddies here and there. Most are dry. Our maps show this area is a former large village covering several square kilometers. It has been long abandoned. Few structures of the village remain. There is only an isolated dilapidated hut here and there. They are a reminder people used to live here. The few civilians who were here are thought to have fled or were

evacuated by Bravo and Delta Companies in the last two days. Charlie Company's regretful incident this morning tells us civilians may still be here.

Bravo Company's lead platoon has one squad up and fanned out. Two other squads follow in close behind in column formation. Behind the lead platoon are two more platoons also in column. The entire formation is just about 100 m long, the length of a football field. The Recon Platoon from Echo Company led by LT Valentine Zapert is moving 50 m ahead of Bravo Company screening their advance. Both units are moving cautiously expecting imminent, enemy contact.

At 0900H, Recon spots seven NVA soldiers near a 12.7 mm (.51 cal) heavy machine gun at BT163112, not more than 50 m to their front. The enemy engages the Recon Platoon with the heavy machine gun and AK-47 rifle fire. Recon is immediately pinned down with three Recon soldiers quickly wounded. This is a first indication of real trouble. The NVA has employed heavy machine guns throughout our area of operations. We know the number of guns indicates they are supporting a large unit. How many and where, we don't know. They could be anywhere. We will soon learn they are not only very close, but that they are waiting for us to get closer.

Near 0915H, CPT Gay sends Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon to assist Recon Platoon. For the next 30 minutes, both platoons come under heavy fire and are pinned down. They receive direct fire from the heavy machine gun and small arms plus indirect fire from mortars. PFC Edison Phillips, a soldier from Bravo's 3rd Platoon is killed. Three others are wounded. Delta Company commander, CPT Begley, sends our 1st Platoon under LT Boyd to reinforce Bravo's 3rd platoon.

Seven enemy soldiers scatter as they attempt to break contact with Recon and Bravo Company. One is killed outright. Five flee to the west, one to the north. CPT Gay requests artillery fire immediately to the west of the enemy heavy machine-gun position to prevent the enemy's escape. The enemy gun's position is between Recon and Charlie Company. Charlie Company, led by CPT David Gibson, has already moved to a position several hundred meters to the northwest of the Recon Platoon. Firing artillery is too dangerous with three infantry companies closing the distance between them. The proximity of friendly units will render artillery and tactical air support useless for most of the day.

Soon after, Bravo Company reports the Recon Platoon has captured the 12.7 mm heavy machine gun. It is set up for antiaircraft defense with aerial sights, a shoulder harness, and a tripod mounted, but it is still deadly firing on ground targets. The gun crew must have been surprised to abandon their gun so suddenly.

At 0940H, Bravo Company receives a volley of mortar rounds on their position at BT163112. One soldier is wounded. While under mortar fire, Bravo is engaged by some ten NVA soldiers firing from the north on their right flank. The enemy soldiers are supported by a second 12.7 mm heavy machine gun. Returning fire, Bravo kills two enemy soldiers and has two more of their own wounded.

At 1040H, Delta Company's advance on the left of Bravo Company has been held up to protect Bravo Company's flank as they, the Recon Platoon, and our 1st Platoon close with the enemy. CPT Begley still has our 2nd Platoon in front. The 1st Platoon is now a hundred or so meters to our north. My 3rd Platoon is still in the rear of our company, now closed up behind 2nd Platoon, as our company prepares for an assault on the enemy force.

All three of our platoons have dropped their rucksacks in preparation for the assault. So far, the enemy situation is not clear. As usual, neither the size of the enemy force, nor its location or intentions are known. Typically, the enemy will open fire and pull back. It's their favorite tactic. All we know is that we will move north and enemy contact is expected any moment. My platoon will temporarily stay with the dropped equipment as 2nd and 1st Platoons advance. We cannot afford to leave our equipment unguarded. It would be a treasure trove if it is captured by the enemy.

LT Black's 2nd Platoon warily advances 50 m across an open, dry rice paddy. They are moving alongside a dike toward what looks like a green island sitting in the midst of the abandoned rice fields. One hundred and fifty meters long and maybe 50 m wide, the area is slightly elevated a couple of feet above the surrounding fields. Heavily overgrown with thick, tangled brush as high as a soldier's head, scattered Crepe Myrtle-like trees rise up above the brush. A low 18" high stone retaining wall surrounds most of the elevated ground keeping dirt from washing into the rice paddies by heavy tropical rains. In earlier times, a cluster of families likely lived here as they farmed their nearby fields—a peaceful, rural setting in days gone by.

Once safely across the field, 2nd Platoon pushes a few meters into the thick brush and halts before advancing further. Already drenched with sweat, canteens come out as they await further orders. A hot tropical sun is getting hotter by the minute as it rises higher in a beautiful blue sky framed by white puffy clouds above the very green and lush landscape. SFC Rios comes up to Black's position for an update. As they talk in a low voice, Black reaches into the left chest pocket of his sweat-soaked jungle fatigues and pulls out a small, plastic, waterproof case. Within are his last two C-Ration cigarettes and a small Zippo-like metal lighter. Giving one cigarette to Rios, he takes the other. After lighting both cigarettes, without giving it any thought, by habit Black returns the lighter to the case and places it back in his upper left pocket. That seemingly insignificant act will save his life.

No sooner are the cigarettes lit, SP4 Kenneth Bowles, fire team leader, from SGT Robinson's 3rd Squad, comes up to Black and Rios from his position just a few meters in front of the platoon. Bowles says, "We have come across a bunker. Can we put a grenade in it?" He asks because we have encountered numerous bunkers in the last week without enemy contact. We have been careful not to waste grenades needlessly. Today, we may need all the grenades we are carrying.

With the enemy close by, Black gives Bowles permission to blow the bunker. Bowles smiles and turns to leave. Infantry guys like to blow things up. As he leaves, Black

tells him to be careful approaching the bunker. Bowles disappears into the heavy brush back toward his advanced position in front of the platoon. Within minutes, gunfire erupts in the direction Bowles went. Black and Rios quickly recognize the sound of an AK-47 rifle firing a short, disciplined burst. For about 20 seconds all is quiet, then a grenade explodes. It is quiet again.

Enemy soldiers saw Bowles moving in a crouched position with grenade and rifle in hand toward their bunker and opened fire. Bowles was hit several times and fell to the ground. Somehow, he held on to his grenade. Lying wounded and exposed, he pulled the grenade's safety pin, and threw it into the bunker. Bowles is lying very still in the hot sun. Close to the enemy, he is barely concealed from their view among the low bushes in the bunker's field of fire. He is bleeding profusely and wondering, "How badly am I wounded?" His next thought is a common one for those seriously wounded, "Am I going to die?" In battle, the next question comes quickly, "How do I stay alive?" The will to survive is strong.

LT Black and SFC Rios immediately move a short distance toward Bowles' position, rifles ready, uncertain to what they may find. Taking cover behind a small rise in the ground, Black calls out, "Bowles, are you okay?" The answer comes back quickly, "I'm hit!" Black's and Rios' eyes meet. Both men are thinking what their next step will be. Black begins to tell Rios to hold up while he moves up his squads to provide cover. He does not want Rios to expose himself to enemy fire. But Rios is already moving in a low crouch toward Bowles with only one thing on his mind. One of his men is down and he is going to help him.

LT Black does the best thing he can do. He moves his 2nd Squad led by SP4 Mike Tomaszewski to the right flank of the enemy bunker. From there, they can engage the bunker and provide covering fire for Rios and Bowles to give them an opportunity to pull back to safety. As the squad moves into position, they begin laying down a heavy volume of fire. Immediately, the enemy opens fire and returns an even heavier volume of fire. The noise is deafening and disorienting. Rounds are whizzing by in both directions with supersonic speed, cutting vegetation, hitting the ground and trees with heavy, forceful thwacks and thuds.

Immediately it is clear to LT Black from the volume and direction of the enemy fire there are several more concealed bunkers on his platoon's right front. He directs his 1st Squad led by SGT L. C. Carter to move up on the right of Tomaszewski's 2nd Squad to flank the enemy bunkers. While Carter's 1st Squad moves into position, Black takes advantage of his platoon's covering fire to crawl closer to Bowles' position. Rios is lying nearby, killed instantly by an enemy sniper in a tree not many meters away. Despite being wounded, Bowles had quickly returned fire and killed the sniper. When Bowles exposed himself to fire at the sniper, he was hit again several times. There is nothing else Bowles can do right now for his faithful platoon sergeant who sacrificed his life trying to save him. Bowles' deep grief for his platoon sergeant will come later.

LT Black learns Bowles is alert and asks if he can crawl to safety. Bowles knows by now he has taken many hits by AK-47 rounds and may be close to dying. He says he is unable to move. (Later, medics will find seven bullet wounds in Bowles who is Kentucky bred and apparently as strong as a racehorse.) Black tells Bowles to sit tight and he will get him help.

Crawling back to his previous position on the edge of the field, Black yells to Tomaszewski to re-position SP4 Tom Higgins and his M-60 machine gun to provide additional covering fire for Bowles. In the meantime, as SGT Carter's 1st Squad moves into position on the right flank, an unseen enemy bunker on their far right opens fire. SGT Carter is hit and immediately killed, another soldier is wounded. Now, all three 2nd Platoon squads are in position, engaged in a fierce close-in firefight. They are fighting an enemy in well-concealed, expertly positioned, mutually supporting bunkers with overlapping fields of fire. Advantage enemy.

LT Black is Wounded

It is 1100H. LT Black now knows he is engaged with an enemy force beyond his platoon's capability to overcome. Likely, there are more bunkers and enemy soldiers his men have not yet encountered. He calls CPT Begley to give a situation report. It is not good. Black reports his platoon is pinned down by heavy automatic weapons fire from an unknown number of concealed bunkers. He tells Begley that Rios and one of his squad leaders have been killed. Others may be dead and several are wounded. Black requests that Begley give his platoon cover so he can pull his platoon back to a better position. Begley tells Black he will move 1st Platoon up on 2nd Platoon's right to flank and put additional pressure on the enemy bunkers pinning down Black's platoon.

LT Black's next action is to get Tomaszewski and his M-60 machine gunner, Tom Higgins, into a firing position to provide cover for getting Bowles out. Black, Tomaszewski, and the machine-gun team crawl to the position. When the gun is in place, Black calls to Bowles and tells him, "We are coming to get you!" Bowles yells back, "Stay put! I am coming out!" Somehow, SP4 Bowles musters enough strength to make a short run to cover, taking himself out of the line of fire as the M-60 opens up and puts suppressive fire in the direction of the enemy bunkers. SP4 Keith Starnes, 2nd Platoon's medic, is waiting for Bowles to get clear and immediately begins to treat Bowles' many wounds. He will survive. Yes, strong as a racehorse.

LT Black's next move is to get instructions to his 3rd Squad led by SGT Robinson. They were last told to remain in place on the left flank until they receive further instructions. As Black low crawls toward Robinson's last known position using his elbow and knees, he calls out to locate Robinson. An unseen enemy bunker ten meters to his front opens fire with a short AK-47 burst. In less than a second, Black,

raised slightly on his forearms, is hit by three rounds. One penetrates Black's right boot only scraping his toes. A second slams into his chest with the force of a hard swung baseball bat hitting him just below his sternum. A third round tears into his upper left arm with such force his arm seems to be ripped off. The pain from the arm wound is intense.

Dazed for a moment by the impact of the rounds, Black realizes he has been hit. Even in combat, it always comes as a surprise. In excruciating pain, his left arm immobile beside him, Black can't move. For now, that's a good thing. He is lying exposed to the enemy who shot him and likely thinks he is dead. As he lies there, he wonders, "Is this how I will die?" Being Catholic, he makes a quick "Act of Contrition," believing his death may be near. Within seconds, the sharp shooting pain in his left arm makes Black aware he is still very much alive. He squeezes the fingers on his left hand, a rush of warm blood flows down his arm. His main concern now is to avoid bleeding to death and getting out of the enemy's field of fire.

His mind now focused by the pain, Black knows, with Rios dead, he must turn his platoon over to a squad leader. Unable to move, he risks calling out to SP4 Tomaszewski, "I'm hit! Take command!" Black's shouting draws another burst of enemy fire cracking loudly just inches from his ear, a sound he will never forget. He knows he must get to cover now or he will be killed for sure. Like Bowles before him, he somehow gathers his ebbing strength and stumbles in a low crouch to his earlier position as more bullets crack by and barely miss. Back to cover and safety, physically exhausted from shock, his wounds, and searing pain, Black collapses.

Immediately, Doc Starnes is by his side. As his arm is bandaged and immobilized, Black points to his chest and says, "I was also hit here, but it doesn't hurt like my arm." The arm bandaged and immobilized, Doc turns his attention to the Black's chest wound. Opening up his blood-stained jungle fatigues shirt, he sees the bullet hole just below his sternum. The external bleeding is not bad. The bullet does not appear to have penetrated his lung. No bubbles are obvious. Starnes seals the wound anyway just in case. He makes sure his lieutenant is in a protected position and leans him against the side of small bank providing cover from enemy fire. Black is now ready for immediate medevac just as soon as there is a break in the action. That will take some time.

Around 1115H, CPT Begley arrives at 2nd Platoon's position to see firsthand their deteriorating situation. They have lost their platoon leader, platoon sergeant, a squad leader, and it is not yet known who else. Begley's appearance lifts Black's spirits. Begley has done a brave thing getting to his platoon. What Begley doesn't yet know is just how close the enemy is. Fifteen meters, maybe closer. LT Black explains his entire platoon is "right up against an enemy entrenchment." He continues, "There are multiple concealed bunkers, supporting one another, we

are unable to flank them.” Black adds, “I couldn’t get to Rios. He’s too close to the enemy bunkers.”

The loss of his much-respected platoon sergeant is an additional, heavy blow to LT Black. The two had bonded and developed a close working relationship. They had become close enough to talk about family and life after Vietnam. Rios would often talk about his children and wife at home and how he was looking forward to seeing them in September, just a few months away. His death is an emotional wound to Black that will remain long after his physical wounds are healed. Black will always remember Rios’ death, wondering if he could have done more to stop him from going so quickly to help Bowles. Not likely. Rios’ care for his men was a major reason his men loved him and would follow him anywhere.

LT Black’s last recommendation to Begley is for his platoon to be pulled back to better cover and regroup before attempting any further engagement. CPT Begley assures Black he will get him and his platoon out and prepares to return to his company command post a short distance to the rear. At that very moment, a helicopter suddenly approaches to land nearby. It is a medevac chopper from the 4th Medical Battalion called in for Delta Company’s wounded. Black yells to Begley above the noise of the rotor blades, waving his good arm to send it away, “They can’t land here, the enemy’s too close!” But it is too late! The medevac chopper attempts to land on the nearby rice paddy dike immediately behind Begley and Black’s position.

Before his aircraft’s skids touch the ground, all hell breaks loose. Heavy enemy fire is coming from every direction. The chopper is taking dozens of hits, maybe hundreds. The helicopter is quickly riddled with 7.62 mm AK-47 rounds making a loud racket as the heavy metal rounds hit the thin aluminum skin and frame of the aircraft. The pilot pulls back on his controls to lift the heavy, slow-flying HU-1 Iroquois helicopter back in the air. At tree-top level, the helicopter, too damaged by enemy fire, won’t fly long or far and begins to go down. Miraculously, the pilot steers the disabled craft almost 3,000 m to the west of the fight and crash lands at BT136128. Two of the crew are wounded in the downed aircraft. Bravo Company commander CPT Gay sees the helicopter as it lifts off, trailing smoke, as it barely clears, then disappears over the trees. At 1125H, Gay reports the helicopter shot down and crashed. At 1234H, the crew is rescued by a Huey log bird pilot. More routine acts of bravery by the guys who fly.

In the meantime, SP4 “Big Mike” Tomaszewski has taken charge of 2nd Platoon. At 6 ft, 3" and 220 lbs., he has a legitimate claim to his nickname. He is also one of the most liked leaders in his platoon. He came into Vietnam as a PFC on 24 November 1968, just three days before Thanksgiving. Now one of 2nd Platoon’s most experienced soldiers, if he survives, he will likely be promoted to sergeant soon. A natural leader, his men follow him regardless of his rank. We are all getting very used to having junior-enlisted men lead in positions far above their rank and time

in the Army. We would be in a real fix without them stepping up to do whatever needs to be done. They are a special breed.

Tomaszewski heard LT Black's yell for him to take charge of the platoon, but Black was so quickly wounded he did not hear his reply. Big Mike is already acting to reposition his men to minimize further casualties. He first crawls forward with Higgins, his M-60 machine gunner. With both exposed to heavy enemy fire, he has Higgins place suppressive fire on the closest enemy bunkers. Now he and others can begin the long, difficult task of evacuating their wounded and attempting to recover their dead. Specialist Tomaszewski's courage and leadership under fire rallies the men in his platoon. Late in the day, Tomaszewski will take charge of withdrawing the platoon under fire. For his extraordinary leadership and courage under fire, SP4 Tomaszewski will be awarded the Silver Star.

With great sorrow, SP4 Keith Starnes, 2nd Platoon's medic, who has treated wounds and saved lives throughout the day, does not survive the fight. He is found dead from wounds in the heavy brush of 2nd Platoon's position. In the confusion of the fight, it is not clear how he was killed. He was in the very thick of things, often exposed to enemy fire treating the wounded. Words cannot express the admiration infantry soldiers have for medics like Starnes. They truly deserve high honor and recognition for their valor and commitment risking and often sacrificing their own lives to save the lives of the soldiers they so willingly serve and support.

At the Medevac Point

LT Black, SP4 Bowles, and others are carried in poncho litters to the medevac point, manned and guarded by Bravo Company. Soldiers carrying the litters are also carrying their M-16s for security. The medevac point is 150 m southeast from 2nd Platoon's position. Once there, all of the wounded, even those with serious wounds like Black and Bowles, will have a long wait. After the medevac aircraft was shot down coming in for Delta Company's wounded, there will be a two-and-a-half-hour hold on medevacs. LTC Singer, the 1-501st battalion commander, makes the last extraction of a wounded Recon Platoon soldier at 1130H using his command and control helicopter. That happens on the east side of the bunker complex as the enemy focuses on shooting down the medevac on the southside.

The medevac point is a sobering sight. There are two dozen soldiers lying on ponchos side by side. They take up all of the available shade offered by a few small trees and bushes. Most of the wounded have blood-stained jungles fatigues and bandages. Several are coming in and out of consciousness. Seriously wounded soldiers have been given morphine, but there are frequent groans, some barely audible, and occasional sharp cries of intense pain. A few are smoking. Several medics move about the wounded ensuring they are still breathing, checking wounds for bleeding, giving quiet words of encouragement, and sometimes a prayer.

A couple of the ambulatory wounded soldiers help medics give sips of water to the parched lips of seriously wounded and try to make them as comfortable as primitive conditions allow. Another group of ambulatory patients are half sitting and lying nearby, exhausted physically and emotionally, some with blank stares. Though glad to be on their way out, many are troubled by leaving fellow soldiers in a hard fight. More wounded soldiers continue to come in. The medevac point is backing up during the long wait.

Finally at 1355H, two medevacs arrive. LT Black and SP4 Bowles are taken out. As their helicopter lifts off, flying out at tree-top level, the crack of enemy rounds is heard passing close by. Thoughts of being shot down are on the minds of wounded soldiers and crew. Soon the helicopter is safely on its way to the 27th Surgical and 325th Medical Evacuation Hospitals in Chu Lai. Relief on board is immense. The medevac pilots will return soon for another load. They and other pilots will continue their life-saving pickups late into the night.

Delta Company's 1st Platoon Is Committed

At 1200H, CPT Begley still doesn't know the size or location of the enemy force engaging his 2nd Platoon. No one does. In a 17 June 1969 after action report of the 21–22 May enemy encounter, CPT Begley writes that when his 2nd Platoon made contact with the enemy, "It was still felt that we were engaged by a small element which had been fleeing from the area where Bravo Company had contact earlier." With 2nd Platoon unable to maneuver or pull back, Begley has already told LT Boyd to have his 1st Platoon attack from east to west to seize a slightly higher rise of high ground just northeast of 2nd Platoon.

Begley's orders are understandable. Black's platoon is continuing to take casualties. They need immediate help. Unfortunately, Delta Company's situation worsens. In its attempt to flank the bunkers firing on 2nd Platoon, 1st Platoon becomes heavily engaged by other concealed bunkers. SGT Rick Halferty in 1st Platoon is wounded in his forearm by an AK-47 round. An artery is spurting blood. Boyd uses his sweatband to apply a tourniquet and stop the bleeding. Another soldier applies a bandage and Halferty is sent to the rear where wounded soldiers are awaiting medevac.

Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon and the Recon Platoon maneuver from east to west attempting to relieve enemy pressure on Delta's 1st and 2nd Platoons. The Recon Platoon under LT Valentine Zapert makes a determined effort to support Delta's 1st Platoon. They too are soon heavily engaged and pinned down within the enemy bunker complex and are taking heavy casualties. Both Bravo's 3rd Platoon and Recon are thrown back by the heavy enemy fire. Delta's 1st Platoon will be left on its own as it attacks the enemy bunkers from the east.

Though no longer participating in the assault, Bravo Company, understrength from its losses to enemy mortar fire 18 May on Hill 187, establishes a combined

medical evacuation collection point at BT162108. This saves many lives as the evacuation point will be used by all of battalion units engaged in the fight, not only during the day, but well into the night.

As 1st Platoon advances toward the enemy bunkers, SSG Ron Sahrle, age 21, and platoon sergeant for 1st Platoon, is now Delta Company's senior NCO in the field. Sahrle was promoted just a couple of months ago in March while serving as a squad leader in 2nd Platoon. Delta Company should have nine staff sergeants, each leading one of our nine infantry squads. Instead, Sahrle is the only one and he was moved up to platoon sergeant because Delta Company was missing two of the three senior NCOs (in the rank of Sergeant First Class) who normally fill the key platoon sergeant positions. With Rios dead, our company has no senior NCOs in the field. Rios had been our only one since January 1969. They are in short supply in infantry companies throughout Vietnam.

SSG Sahrle is from Wayland, New York, in the state's Finger Lakes region. He married his hometown sweetheart before coming to Vietnam. A short time ago in February 1969, Sahrle and his wife met in Hawaii during his R&R. They are expecting their first child in October. He had been thinking about going home to his wife and their soon-to-be-born first child when the firing started this morning. He is due to rotate home in less than six weeks on 24 June. He will see a lot of heavy contact before he goes home.

As 1st Platoon answers the call to reinforce 2nd Platoon pinned down by enemy fire, SSG Sahrle now has only one thing on his mind, "Those are my guys in 2nd Platoon. They're in big trouble! We've got to help 'em!"

1st Platoon Continues Its Advance

LT Boyd's 1st Platoon successfully knocks out the first two enemy bunkers they encounter. As they move forward and deeper into the enemy bunker complex, they are engaged with RPGs, machine guns, AK-47s, and enemy M-16 rifles. PFC Michael Hatzell, good friend of Scott and Stephens, is killed early in the assault. During today's fight, ten other 1st Platoon soldiers are wounded including SP4 Byron "Benny" Bennett, LT Boyd's RTO. Most are wounded by shrapnel from RPGs and grenades. Several are hit by small arms fire. "Small arms" is a real misnomer when the extent of the wounds is seen. The small arms the enemy are using could kill an elephant. No, a herd of elephants.

PFC Philip Cravens is the M-60 machine gunner in 1st Platoon's second squad. His squad has become separated from the rest of 1st Platoon by 40–50 m. He sees PFC Hatzell get hit and calls for Doc Winka (SP4 Gerald Winka), the platoon medic. But it is too late. Later, when Boyd asks for volunteers to go forward with him to link up the rest of the platoon, Cravens volunteers. SGT Robert Morehouse, known as "SGT Rock" by his platoon, also goes forward and brings along one of

the platoon's new guys. They move up to the stone retaining wall which marks 1st Platoon's most forward advance in its attempt to reach 2nd Platoon.

Taking up positions behind the stone wall with a steady hailstorm of rounds zinging overhead and hitting and ricocheting off the wall, Boyd and Sahrle decide a further assault is not worth the risk of more casualties. The platoon's exposed position and ability to see enemy locations is severely limited by tall grass, bushes, and trees. Boyd decides to pull his platoon back to a "safer" position where they can tend to their wounded and regroup. That is easier said than done. The enemy bunkers are everywhere and seem to cover every inch of ground with their fire.

SSG Sahrle is able to locate a depression in the ground about 30 m to the rear of the platoon's forward position. A few small trees offer a little shade. More important, the low ground makes a good collection point for the wounded as enemy automatic weapons fire sends a steady hail of bullets just over their heads. Sahrle makes several trips forward to help recover the wounded.

As 1st Platoon pulls back, they're unable to recover Hatzell's body. He lies near the front firing portal of an enemy bunker. Attempts to recover him would result in many more deaths. His position is marked and he will be recovered as soon as the enemy situation permits. Cravens also comes upon the Recon Platoon Sergeant, SSG Jerry Austin. He is badly wounded in his right leg. Cravens helps him get to the rear for medevac.

A Courageous Volunteer

SP4 Stephens and PFCs Scott and Hatzell, who enjoyed an earlier morning celebration of completing half of their year-long Vietnam tours, have been separated as 1st Platoon advanced, stopped, advanced, and stopped again. Stephens has moved forward across an old trail along the retaining wall in position to cover the advance of his squad. Scotty is holding his position to Stephens' rear some 30 or so meters.

As Scotty waits to advance, an unrecognized soldier from an unknown unit staggers toward him from out of the brush. He is wounded in the chest. SP4 Jerry Winka, 1st Platoon medic, is close by and immediately moves to render aid to the soldier. The exhausted soldier falls to the ground, relieved to be among friendly soldiers. He is suffering shock from his wounds, heat, stress of battle, and the physical exertion of getting himself to safety.

Doing what he can to stop the bleeding and ease his pain with morphine, Doc Winka decides the soldier needs to be moved immediately to the medical evacuation point some one hundred meters away and across an open, dried rice paddy Winka asks for a volunteer and looks directly at Scotty. Winka and Scotty are close friends so Scotty volunteers. He will soon regret it. Many years later, Scotty will say with a wry smile, "It is the last time I volunteered for anything in the Army!"

Doc Winka quickly constructs a hasty litter with a poncho and two bamboo poles cut with a machete. With difficulty, Doc and Scotty place the heavy wounded soldier on the stretcher. He is tall and weighs over 200 lbs. He is still wearing his web gear with its full ammunition pouches and canteen of water. Doc Winka and Scotty pick up the litter and begin to cross the rice paddy. The soldier is even heavier than expected. Halfway across, an enemy soldier takes them under fire from the enemy bunkers behind them as they move to the medevac point. Dozens of AK-47 rounds kick up dirt all around them as they continue to move. They struggle with their heavy load, tripping and falling several times along the way. The only complaint from their near unconscious patient is an occasional loud groan. Finally arriving safely at the medevac point (BT162108), they leave their wounded soldier in the care of a medic tending the wounded. They never learn the wounded soldier's name. Likely, he will never know the names of the two soldiers who saved his life at risk to their own.

With their mission complete, Winka and Scotty, separated by several feet, crouch low in a fast run back across the open field to their platoon. Almost to the other side and safety, a burst of enemy fire hits Doc Winka in his chest, spins him around, and slams him to the ground. Scotty hears Winka's loud gasp as the high velocity bullets find their mark with always surprising force. Scotty flattens himself on the ground by Doc and calls out to anyone in the nearby tree line for a medic. Seemingly, out of nowhere, a medic suddenly appears, as if an angel of mercy is already hovering close by.

Unconcerned about his own safety, the unidentified medic begins treating Winka in the open field with little protection from enemy fire. Scotty quickly tells him they must move to cover and helps drag Winka into the nearby trees. Winka is still conscious. He looks down at his sucking chest wound and sees bloody air bubbles each time he exhales. Winka calmly tells his fellow medic to make sure the plastic side of the bandage is placed on the wound. This seals the hole in his chest and ensures his lungs continue to work.

Scotty and the unidentified medic put Doc on another hastily made stretcher and all three begin the dangerous run to the medevac site. Scotty wonders if crossing the field the third time his luck will run out. He can't get that thought out of his head, but his friend's life is at stake. He will gladly sacrifice his own safety for his buddy. Winka would do the same for him. In battle, that is often what gives soldiers the courage under fire to overcome their fear of death. It is why lifelong bonds form between soldiers in combat. As Shakespeare wrote centuries ago, "For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother" (*Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3).

Thankfully, Scotty's third run across the field draws fire, but no one is hit. The medevac site is now still backed up with wounded soldiers. Scotty makes sure to put Winka in a shady spot. The blazing morning sun is already pushing temperatures past 100 degrees. Scotty knows his friend is in bad shape. He says a quick good-bye

with a forced smile and a short prayer, uncertain Winka will survive his wounds. He takes a last look at his friend's face, thinking he may never see him again. (Years later, long after the war, Scotty will reconnect with Winka and discover he not only survived, but has a family and a successful career as a pharmacist.) Once again, Scotty and his new medic friend set out across the open field. Scotty's fourth crossing. He varies the route back and both make it to his platoon safely without drawing enemy fire. It is the end of a tough morning. A very tough day still lies ahead.

Photographing the Battle

There is no civilian news media covering the battle action at Tam Ky. That is intentional due to Hamburger Hill already causing a backlash against the Nixon administration in the US. The 221st Signal Company out of Phu Bai is supporting 1st Brigade at Tam Ky. They have decided to send one of their combat photographers to the battle. SP5 Steve Klubock is the "lucky" man who gets the assignment.

Learning he would be returning to Delta Company, he is actually glad. Klubock had spent a number of days with our 2nd Platoon recently while we were in the A Shau. Now inbound to Delta Company's location, he soon regrets his enthusiasm. Klubock's helicopter is fired on as it approaches the drop-off point near Bravo and Delta Company's casualty collection point. One of the two door gunners returns fire with his swivel-mounted M-60 machine gun. The muzzle flashes, deafening staccato, and concussion of the gun is disturbingly loud in the confines of the helicopter. Hot brass from expended rounds is clattering and bouncing around the copter's floor. The pilot is coming in fast and low for the drop off, an attractive target for enemy gunners.

The door gunner motions for Klubock to slide over to the helicopter's open door. Klubock sits in the door, holding on, nervously waiting for the aircraft to get closer to the ground. The heavy gunfire from the nearby battle adds to his discomfort. He has never been this scared on other assignments. He thinks, "I ought to be getting out of here not coming in. It can't get much worse than this!" It soon will.

Klubock is told to jump. The helicopter, still 6 ft in the air, looks to Klubock like 20. He holds on to his rucksack, weapon, and large camera bag and jumps. He lands hard, so hard a shooting pain goes up his spine. His first thought is, "I've been shot in the back." He lies still on the ground, unable to move. After a few moments, he discovers he is neither bleeding nor paralyzed.

Klubock thinks, "What am I doing here? I'm not an infantryman. I don't have the combat training to be here." Klubock again hears AK-47 and M-16 rifle fire not far away. Sitting up and getting his bearings, he decides to run to safety toward what he hopes is a group of Delta Company soldiers. Amazingly, like other soldiers, Klubock is ready to do his job despite his fear. He is a good example of what General Omar

Bradley said about soldiers in World War II, “Bravery is the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death.” Those soldiers became known as “the greatest generation.” Our soldiers are the sons of those men. They have their father’s legacy to uphold and are doing so quite well.

In the late afternoon, Klubock will link up with PFC Harvey Sullivan and other 2nd Platoon members whom he had met weeks earlier at Firebase Pike in the A Shau. Some of those he knew are now dead, others are wounded. In the days ahead, Klubock will do his job. He will document Delta Company’s battle action at Tam Ky from 21 May to 7 June. He will take some of the only combat photographs of the fight at Tam Ky. He will also gain the respect of the infantry soldiers he photographs. He is there with us facing the same dangers, suffering the same hardships. (Stephen Klubock died in 2020 of cancer he believed to be the result of Agent Orange. Many of his official Army photographs are used in this book.)

Delta Company’s 3rd Platoon Enters the Fight

As the fighting gets more intense, I radio CPT Begley for instructions, expecting my 3rd Platoon to join the action. He tells me to continue protecting the company rear from enemy attack and securing the rucksacks dropped by the 1st and 2nd Platoons as they “lightened up” to fight. My three squads are spread out about 100 m south of the enemy bunker complex. We are not visible to the enemy in the bunkers and not taking any stray rounds from enemy fire. We can hear the continuous gunfire and explosions.

It is really tough listening over the radio as our two platoons are pinned down taking heavy casualties. I keep expecting 3rd Platoon to be put into the fight, but the call never comes. By now, Begley is more concerned with getting his two platoons out of the enemy bunker complex rather than sending another platoon in. SGT Jim Littleton, my most experienced squad leader, has his squad close enough to the fighting to hear shouting coming from men in the 2nd Platoon.

Unknown to me at the time, Littleton and several of his squad members creep forward on their own initiative to see what assistance they can render. It is best I don’t know they are going forward. Despite their courageous intent, I likely would have stopped them based on our orders. Once close to the fighting, Littleton lets me know where he is and that he thinks his squad can give needed assistance to 2nd Platoon. I give him the okay.

Littleton’s battlefield instincts will once again prove right. He and his men are nearing the edge of the fighting. PFC Rob Sitek, a rifleman in Littleton’s squad from New York, joined Delta Company in April. He is out front on point. Sitek is a rarity in Littleton’s squad. Littleton, being from the swamps in Louisiana, likes to get replacements for his squad who grew up hunting, fishing, and spending time

in the woods. Guys mostly from the South. But Littleton is glad to have Sitek. He grew up in a tough city neighborhood and is “street smart.” After the Army, Sitek will become a New York City police officer. As they say in New York, he’s got “moxie.” (Moxie is a former Maine soft drink that tastes like cough medicine and is advertised to “build up your nerve.”)

Sitek sees SP4 Tomaszewski on a rice paddy dike exposing his 6 ft, 3" frame to enemy fire. He and a couple of others from 2nd Platoon are trying to recover their wounded. Big Mike yells to Sitek, “We’ve lost a lot of guys! There’re hidden bunkers everywhere. All over the place. Snipers are in trees! In holes! Everywhere! We can’t get to the rest of our guys!” For two hours, Big Mike has been returning fire to help free his pinned-down platoon. He carried six 20 round magazines into the fight, quickly expending those, he then took another three magazines from one of his wounded 2nd Platoon soldiers. He is now on his third set of magazines.

When our two platoons dropped their rucksacks, their extra water and magazines were left behind. In hindsight, I and everyone else should have thought to move their water and ammunition forward. There’s little shade in the enemy bunker complex. Maneuvering or even laying in the hot sun in over 100° heat and high humidity for hours is beginning to take its toll. In the early afternoon, Big Mike sees a soldier using his boot to take water from a rain puddle on the edge of the dry rice paddy. He drains the water into his canteen and throws it up to others for a sip. It takes a while for water purification tablets to work, so they risk only a sip. Some just wet their lips. Surprisingly, no one is sick later. Dysentery is the usual result of drinking untreated water with bacteria and parasites.

Littleton takes a cue from Big Mike and has his squad follow a trail along the right side of the dike to flank the bunkers. The squad moves cautiously up the trail and comes to a stand of trees on the right of the trail. Sitek, still in the lead, sees a dead NVA laying on the trail. The squad continues to move forward, bypassing the dead enemy soldier. They come upon PFC Harvey Sullivan from 2nd Platoon. He is agitated and deeply upset. With anguish in his voice, he calls out, “Hatzell and Hogan are dead!” PFCs Michael Hatzell, Edward Hogan, and Harry Sullivan were also close buddies. Only Sullivan survives today’s fighting.

Before Littleton’s squad moves forward again, there is a hurried discussion on whose turn it is to take the lead and go first. No one volunteers. Someone says, “It’s everyone’s turn!” They smile grimly in typical infantry gallows humor and begin moving together headed east along the stone retaining wall on their left. Sitek is still in front. The trail leads toward a hedgerow a short way to their front, a perfect place for an enemy bunker.

They go a few feet further and come across field telephone commo wire running along the side of the trail. It is obviously laid by the enemy. We use radios. One of Littleton’s men cuts the telephone wire. Immediately, an enemy bunker opens

fire from the hedgerow not 20 m away with a RPD machine gun and AK-47. The squad dives for cover in the weed-covered ditch on the left side of the trail. No one is hit, but the enemy grazing fire just inches off the ground has them pinned down. Littleton's squad returns fire. An M-60 machine gunner, likely from 1st Platoon, unexpectedly returns fire and suppresses the firing from the bunker. The assistant machine gunner takes a hit in the front of his helmet. The round spins around the inside of his steel pot nicking him in the neck. He is wounded, but still able to fight.

Littleton tells PFC Johnny Mack Pilsner, our platoon sniper, to cover the squad's rear. He knows the enemy tactic. They hit you from the front, then hit you from behind. The enemy may already be in the squad's rear. The bunker is no longer firing on Littleton's squad. Perhaps the M-60 gunner took them out. Finally able to advance, Littleton's squad comes across LT Zapert, the Recon Platoon leader whose unit is pinned down by an unremitting volume of machine-gun fire. He is trying to maneuver his platoon to the west toward 2nd Platoon. They have tried several times, but are forced back each time by the enemy's stiff resistance. Zapert has been lightly wounded by an enemy hand grenade, but continues to direct fire on the enemy and evacuate his wounded.

Littleton's men have crawled up behind a well. Things go quiet for a few moments. Seconds later, a concealed enemy bunker 20 m away on the left of the trail opens fire. Two US soldiers from an unidentified unit are in a nearby position. One of them is wounded by the strike of enemy rounds kicking up gravel like shrapnel. Soon enough, the soldier will be wounded again, next time by an AK-47 round. A 90 mm gunner appears crawling out from the bushes. On his back, he's lugging his 4 ½ ft, 37.5 lb. M67 90-mm recoilless rifle. Designed as a tank killer, the 90 mm is highly effective against bunkers. The gunner is also dragging several 90 mm rounds each 28" long and weighing 9 ¼ lbs. The gunner sets up to fire on the bunker, yelling for Sitek to act as loader. They fire several rounds, knocking the bunker out. For a few minutes all is quiet.

During the lull, those not injured apply tourniquets and bandages to the wounded. Sitek tells PFC Solomon to go back to the well and bring up some water. Everyone is thirsty. The sun now high overhead is beating down without mercy on the exhausted men. The humidity is intolerable. Water is critical. Solomon looks in the well and sees two dead NVA soldiers. Perhaps they were put there intentionally. They must fight on without water. Littleton's squad remains in position on the east side of the bunker complex the remainder of the day. They are fortunate not to have had any casualties being in the middle of the fight.

By early afternoon, CPT Begley has long since realized the enemy is much larger than he originally thought. They are also occupying an "extremely well-defended strong point."²⁰ Begley attempts to have his two platoons break contact so he can use artillery and air strikes to soften the enemy position. That can't happen until

the two platoons are able to get their wounded out. Many of the wounded are still pinned down by enemy fire. It will take the rest of the afternoon and an assault from the west by Charlie Company to get the wounded from Delta Company out. There will be no air strikes or artillery put on the enemy's position today.

Charlie Company Attacks

At approximately 1600H in the afternoon, Charlie Company, led by CPT David Gibson, attacks across open rice paddies from the northwest in a valiant effort to relieve pressure on Delta Company. They attack with two platoons up and on line and one back. The enemy opens fire on the exposed soldiers and they quickly take cover along a rice paddy dike, reluctant to advance in the face of intense enemy fire.

The two lead platoon leaders, LT Dan O'Neill and LT Don Gourley, leave their covered positions behind the dike, exposing themselves to heavy enemy fire. They move among their men and by their personal example encourage them to continue the attack. "Follow me!" is the best battlefield command a leader can give.

SSG Kenneth Buesing and SGT Elmer Neises personally knock out enemy bunkers under heavy fire enabling Charlie Company to penetrate further into the enemy position. Another soldier, SP4 James Glemser risks his life under fire to save his wounded platoon sergeant. O'Neill receives the Distinguished Service Cross, the others including CPT Gibson all receive well-deserved Silver Stars.

Another of Charlie Company's men, 23-year-old SP4 Santiago Erevia, single-handedly destroys four enemy bunkers saving the lives of many of his fellow soldiers and enabling Charlie Company to move deep into the bunker complex. (On 18 March 2014, at age 68, Erevia from Corpus Christi, Texas is awarded the Medal of Honor. His personal valor and unselfish risk of his own life in close combat 45 years ago is finally recognized. Erevia dies two years later at age 70 on 22 March 2016.)

Charlie Company's strong push into the enemy bunkers gains the high ground Delta Company's 1st Platoon had earlier attempted to reach. By directing fire from their position on the rise, both of Delta's platoons are at last able to begin breaking contact. Delta Company takes the next two hours to extricate themselves and their wounded to safety. Unfortunately, many of Delta's dead cannot be recovered. They lie too close to still-occupied enemy positions. They will be recovered as soon as the enemy situation permits. Every soldier knows, understands, and supports the decision.

At 1620H, a log bird bringing in emergency supplies of ammunition and other ordinance, rations, and water is hit by an RPG and crashes in flames. The pilot and copilot are courageously extracted under fire with only slight injuries by a second helicopter. At 1630H, Bravo Company and Recon have enemy contact at BT165110 still at the enemy bunkers. They have four wounded. At 1815H a

medevac takes the four soldiers out. Several incoming mortar rounds fall nearby during the medevac, but there are no casualties.

With the sun set and darkness not far behind, further combat in the bunkers is too risky. CPT Gibson is ordered to withdraw his company from the bunker complex. He withdraws Charlie Company out of the west end of the bunkers recovering their wounded as they pull back. At 1925H, they are hit with two RPGs as they continue to withdraw. Charlie Company suffers four killed and 16 soldiers wounded during the day's battle.

Charlie Company's attack and the courage shown by its men saved the day for Delta Company. Without their attack, it would have been impossible to get our guys out without taking many significantly more soldiers killed. Delta Company sustains the most casualties today, six KIA and 17 wounded. Charlie Company is a close second. Everyone, including Bravo Company and the Recon Platoon, gave their best effort, but the enemy fortification was just too strong to be taken by ground attacks alone. The day's battle draws to an end as neither a victory nor a defeat, just a brutal day. Much like the Vietnam War itself. But the day is not over.

By 1905H, Charlie Company completes its sweep of the enemy bunker complex pulling out under sporadic enemy fire. They withdraw to the west of the bunker complex and then south and east to set up their NDP near Bravo Company's medevac point. The sun has set, but the heat and humidity linger. So do soldiers' thoughts about the heavy fighting just completed. At 1926H, as Charlie Company moves with their casualties in the evening twilight, the rear of their column receives RPG fire from NVA soldiers observing their withdrawal. Their NDP is between Bravo and Delta Company in case the enemy makes a night attack.

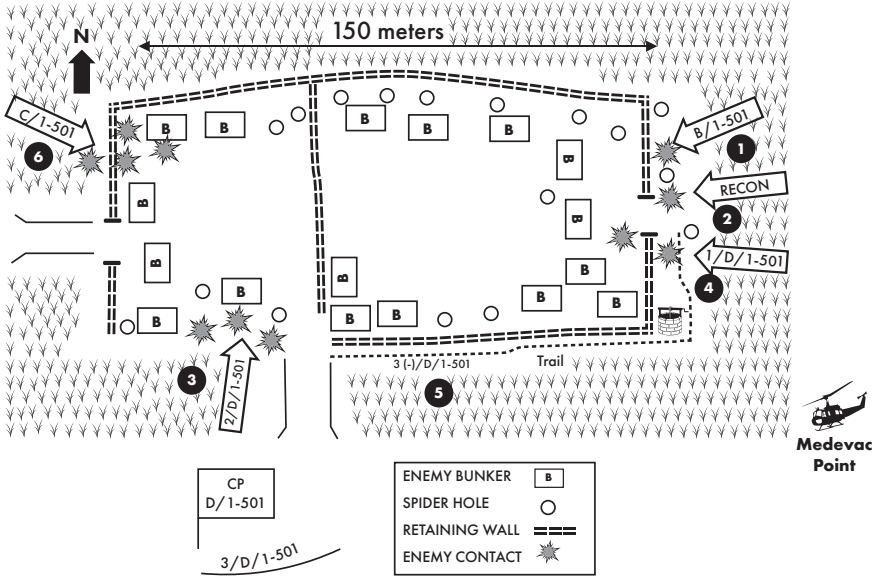
Casualties and Awards

Total battalion casualties for today are 12 KIA and 49 WIA for a total of 61. Eleven of those killed are not yet recovered and presumed dead. Losses by unit follows:

Delta Company has 23 casualties. There are six dead and 17 wounded, all from 1st and 2nd Platoons. Delta's six dead are SFC Pedro Rios (platoon sergeant 2nd Platoon), SGT L. C. Carter, PFC Michael Hatzell, PFC Charles Hawkins (our youngest soldier KIA today), PFC Edward Hogan, and PFC James Sanford.

Delta Company's 17 wounded include: LT Ronald Black (platoon leader, 2nd Platoon); SGT Rick Haferty; SP4s Byron Bennett, Kenneth Bowles, Gary Elliot, Ronald Jones, Robert Ross, Walden Sumrow, Carl White, and Rollins Young; and PFCs Paul DiGirolamo, Robert Johnson, Charles Myers, Lowell Powers, Gary Silman, Thomas Smith, and Raymond Walker.

Map 2: 21 May Engagement



SEQUENCE OF ENEMY CONTACT

(Times are approximate)

- 1—0900—0915H** Bravo Company and Recon Platoon make initial enemy contact
- 2—1000H** 1st Platoon, Delta Company supports Bravo Company/Recon Platoon assault
- 3—1040H** 2nd Platoon, Delta Company makes enemy contact
- 4—1115—1130H** 1st Platoon, Delta Company attacks to support Delta's 2nd Platoon
- 5—1130H** 1st Squad/3rd Platoon supports Delta's 1st Platoon/Recon Platoon
- 6—1600H** Charley Company attacks to support withdrawal of Delta Company

position. Many were also connected by tunnels to the bunkers. Some snipers were placed in trees for better observation of advancing US soldiers. Indications are the NVA also had capability to monitor our FM radio communications during the fight. The enemy force that occupied the fortification were tough soldiers who knew their infantry tactics. We now know what we are up against.

Enemy dead is estimated at 26. The number is not confirmed because the NVA are well practiced in taking their dead with them as they withdraw from a position. They too have high regard for their dead soldiers. Three dead NVA were left behind. Their bodies are left for the NVA to recover later. The number of enemy wounded is unknown and too difficult to guess. No enemy soldiers are captured. Despite

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