

The Battle of LZ X-Ray: Personal Experience of a Company Commander

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Editor's Note: *CPT Robert H. Edwards commanded C Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, during the Battle of LZ X-Ray. The following is an excerpt of the battle analysis he wrote while attending the Infantry Officer Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga., in February 1967. Read the complete monograph at: [www.benning.army.mil/library/content/Virtual/Donovanpapers/Vietnam/STUP4/EdwardsRobert H. CPT.pdf](http://www.benning.army.mil/library/content/Virtual/Donovanpapers/Vietnam/STUP4/EdwardsRobert%20H.%20CPT.pdf).*

Introduction

The operation portrayed in this monograph was a small but highly significant phase of a much larger operation known as the Pleiku Campaign conducted by units of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) from 23 October to 25 November 1965.

In mid-October 1965, a large North Vietnamese Army force attacked the Special Forces camp at Plei Me, located approximately 35 kilometers south of Pleiku. Subsequent intelligence identified these forces as the 32nd and 33rd North Vietnamese Regiments. It was believed that these units were newly infiltrated from North Vietnam, and that they had a twofold mission in attacking the camp:

- First, it would serve as an introduction to battle for their troops, and
- Second, they would destroy any relief force committed to assist the besieged camp.

As a result of the heavy concentration of enemy forces in the area, the South Vietnamese II Corps commander decided to commit his corps' reserve forces to the battle. This action seriously depleted the defense of the vital Pleiku airbase complex. To bolster the defenses of this important logistical installation, on 22 October the commanding general of Field Forces Vietnam ordered the commanding general of the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) to deploy elements from its base at An Khe to the Pleiku area. The mission was to assist in the defense of installations at Pleiku and to prepare to reinforce II Corps forces in the relief of the Plei Me camp.

This initially small commitment grew larger, and the role of the 1st Cavalry Division was expanded when additional intelligence concerning the size and composition of the enemy forces was developed. The operation discussed in this article occurred after the initial division mission had been changed to that of finding, fixing, and destroying enemy forces in the area of operations.

By 25 October the Plei Me camp had been relieved, and the enemy was withdrawing west to its base area located in the Chu Pong Mountain complex. The enemy forces massing in this area were later identified as the two regiments previously listed and a third regiment — the 66th, all operating under the control of a field front headquarters. This headquarters is the equivalent of a U.S. Army division headquarters. The westward movement of the 32nd and 33rd Regiments (the 66th was not committed to the Plei Me camp battle) was subjected to constant harassment by units of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, which was then operating in the area. Numerous enemy contacts were made, and the enemy suffered extensive losses of men, material, and equipment. On 9 November, the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division assumed responsibility for the conduct of operations in the area. For the next four days, search and destroy operations were conducted north, south, and east of the Plei Me camp with little enemy contact. Then came the turning point and the crucial days that followed.

The Plan

By 13 November, it was obvious that the enemy was not located in force to the north, south, or east of Plei Me. Accordingly, at approximately 1700 on 13 November, the commander of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division ordered the commander of the 1-7 CAV (LTC Harold G. Moore) to conduct a helicopter assault into the Ia Drang Valley early on 14 November to conduct search and destroy operations.

LTC Moore formulated his plan, assembled his staff, completed his coordination, and issued a warning order to the battalion. At 0830 the following morning, he issued the operations order (OPORD) at the battalion CP. During an early morning aerial reconnaissance, three potential landing zones (LZs) were identified — Tango, X-Ray, and Yankee. After further reconnaissance, Moore selected LZ X-Ray as the primary LZ and established 1030 as the time for the assault landing.

The Initial Assault, 14 November

Last minute problems caused a delay in the start of the artillery preparation, which finally began at 1017. Aerial observers reported that the rounds were well placed on the LZ, in the trees and high grass around the LZ, and on the finger and draw leading down from the high ground northwest of the LZ. The artillery fire lifted, and the UH-1B helicopters of the aerial rocket artillery battalion (ARA) made a firing pass of the LZ and then commenced an on-call orbit nearby. The gunships accompanying the lift ships preceded the landing with suppressive fire from their machine guns and rockets. The door gunners of the lift ships also contributed suppressive fire with their machine guns. The initial landing of B Company elements occurred at 1048. LTC Moore and his command group (the battalion command sergeant major, S2, two radio operators, and an interpreter) landed with the leading elements of B Company. The battalion S3, the artillery liaison officer, the helicopter liaison officer, and the Air Force forward air controller all operated from a command helicopter in orbit over the area. This group furnished aerial radio relay, coordination and control of supporting fires, and aerial observation throughout the day until darkness forced them to land at X-Ray.

B Company received no enemy fire on landing and commenced operations to secure the LZ. The lift ships immediately departed to pick up the remainder of B Company and the lead elements of A Company.

Securing the LZ and Initial Enemy Contact

Immediately upon landing, B Company dispatched the rifle squads of one platoon on a quick reconnaissance of the LZ. These squads moved off the LZ in different directions for a distance of 50-100 meters. The B Company commander assembled the balance of his company as a striking force in a wooded area adjacent to the LZ. At 1120, one of the squads captured a prisoner. This individual was unarmed, carried an empty canteen, and was dressed in dirty khaki clothes with a serial number on one of his shirt epaulets. When interrogated he stated that he was a member of the North Vietnamese Army, that he had only eaten bananas for five days, and that there were three battalions on the mountain above the LZ that wanted very much to kill Americans but had been unable to find any. The prisoner was then evacuated to the 3rd Brigade CP.

Based on this information, LTC Moore ordered the B Company commander to concentrate his reconnaissance efforts in the area where the prisoner was taken and to prepare to assume the C Company mission of searching the lower portion of the mountain, particularly the finger and draw to the northwest. By about 1210, elements of A Company had landed and assumed the LZ security mission from B Company.

By approximately 1220, B Company had made scattered contact with enemy riflemen near the mountain. The company was directed to assume the C Company mission and to develop the situation. As B Company started this task, LTC Moore alerted A Company to be prepared to follow B Company when sufficient forces from C Company had arrived to assume the LZ security mission.

At approximately 1245, the leading elements of B Company engaged in a firefight of moderate intensity. By 1330, the B Company commander reported that he was being heavily attacked by two enemy companies and that his right (north) platoon was in danger of being surrounded and cut off from the remainder of the company. As the fight in the B Company sector developed, a few rounds of mortar fire struck the LZ and portions of B Company.

The remaining elements of A Company and the lead elements of C Company landed about the time B Company reported the presence of two enemy companies. A Company was ordered to move up on the left (south) flank of B Company, establish physical contact with this flank, and protect it. Additionally, A Company was directed to send one platoon to B Company to assist in preventing the B Company right flank platoon from being cut off.

C Company was directed to establish a blocking position off the LZ to the south and southwest. From this position, the unit could prevent the LZ from being attacked and protect the A Company left flank.

LTC Moore then contacted the command helicopter and issued instructions to his fire support liaison officers. Air strikes were requested in the following priority: on the lower portion of the mountain, on the mountain itself, and on enemy approaches into the LZ from the west and south. Similar target areas were designated for the artillery and ARA. Priority of fires went to requests from the rifle companies. In the absence of such requests, fire was to be placed on suspected enemy locations in the target areas outlined above. Accurate placement of supporting fires was a serious problem for everyone. The terrain and heavy vegetation prevented pinpoint location of friendly units. B Company experienced the most problems as the right flank platoon became separated from the rest of the company and could not precisely locate itself to benefit from the available fire support.

This platoon fought a moving battle against an estimated 75-100 enemy. A and B Companies, unsure of the location of the separated platoon, were unable to bring artillery fire in front of their units to assist their movement. Instead, the artillery fire was placed well up on the mountain to the west and south, and then gradually “walked” down until it gave some support to these companies, especially A Company. Air strikes were delivered northwest of the LZ and on the suspected location of an enemy battalion reported by higher headquarters the previous day.

First Attack to Reach Surrounded Platoon and Defense of the LZ

The A Company platoon sent to assist B Company engaged the enemy prior to reaching its destination, and when it finally made contact with B Company, found itself on the unit’s right flank rather than the left as directed by the A Company commander. This situation caused some confusion until the exact location of this platoon was determined. B Company, with the platoon from A Company, pushed forward in an attempt to reach the separated B Company platoon. This attack managed to get within 75-100 meters of the separated platoon, but the enemy — positioned in force between the attacking units and the B Company platoon — inflicted moderate casualties and stopped the attack short of its objective.

Meanwhile, A Company (-) moved toward the left flank of B Company when it made contact with an estimated enemy company that was moving along a dry creek bed parallel to the western edge of the LZ. This route led directly into the left rear elements of B Company. A Company engaged the enemy and was able to inflict heavy casualties with only light casualties on the friendly side. For some unknown reason, the enemy — apparently determined to maintain its movement toward the rear of B Company — kept moving into the massed fires of A Company. A Company took two prisoners, who were later evacuated.

As A Company engaged the enemy, the remaining platoons of C Company and the lead elements of D Company landed. The helicopters landed under enemy fire. Although several personnel were killed and

wounded, no helicopters were shot down. Hearing this, LTC Moore stopped the lift of additional battalion elements until a later time.

The C Company commander positioned his platoons alongside the elements that had landed earlier. C Company had no sooner completed its hasty organization of the blocking position to the south and southwest when a force of 175-200 enemy, headed for the LZ, struck this area. For the next hour and a half, C Company fought the enemy in this sector, and with the assistance of artillery and ARA fire, defeated the attack and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. It captured and evacuated one prisoner during this battle.

The elements of D Company that landed with C Company included the company commander, his command group, the antitank platoon (organized as a rifle platoon), and part of the mortar platoon. Upon landing, this force headed for the fighting in the A Company area. As they reached the dry creek bed, D Company ran into 25-30 enemy. D Company fought this enemy force, and assisted by elements of A Company, killed most of the enemy. During the fight, the D Company commander and the mortar platoon leader were seriously wounded but continued fighting until the enemy withdrew. The D Company commander relinquished command to the antitank platoon sergeant (the senior man present) and was then evacuated.

The C Company commander, at the conclusion of the D Company fight, contacted the NCO commanding D Company personnel, and with LTC Moore's permission, positioned them on the left (southeast) flank of C Company to provide added protection to the LZ.

At this time LTC Moore estimated that the battalion was fighting a force of 500-600 enemy, with others probably nearby. This fact, together with the numerous casualties suffered by the battalion, prompted Moore to request an additional rifle company from the 3rd Brigade commander. The request was approved; in fact, the brigade commander had anticipated the need for reinforcements and had already alerted B Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry for possible commitment to the area.

By approximately 1500, as a result of the fighting by C and D Companies, leaders determined the remainder of the battalion elements — which had been previously diverted from landing — could be brought in with a minimum of danger. These forces — three UH-1D loads of C Company personnel and several loads of D Company personnel — landed without incident. The D Company executive officer arrived with these ships and assumed command of D Company. He positioned the battalion reconnaissance platoon on the eastern edge of the LZ. He then assumed control of the rifle company mortars (previously consolidated on the eastern side of the LZ by the C Company commander) and formed a composite mortar platoon by adding the mortars from D Company. The mortars were oriented toward the A and B Company sectors, with the mortarmen also responsible for the defense of a portion of the LZ near their positions.

2nd Attack to Reach Surrounded Platoon

It was now approximately 1545. The surrounded platoon had moved with its dead and wounded to a small rise of ground and established a 25-meter wide perimeter. The platoon had fought off all enemy attempts to defeat it.

A and B Companies, under cover of heavy artillery fire, withdrew slightly, evacuated their casualties, and prepared for a coordinated attack to reach the surrounded platoon. The battle in the C Company area was in its closing stages.

At 1620, A and B Companies launched the second attack to reach the surrounded platoon. This attack was supported by massed artillery and ARA fire. The enemy — despite constant bombardment by artillery, air strikes, and ARA — had become well entrenched in the area between the attacking companies and the

surrounded platoon. The enemy made maximum use of the terrain and vegetation to provide cover and concealment for its positions. Snipers occupied the trees and numerous automatic weapons were emplaced behind the ant hills in the area.

A and B Companies made only slight progress in the direction of the surrounded platoon. A Company gained at most 150 meters while B Company advanced only 75-100 meters. The enemy inflicted numerous casualties on the attacking friendly units. A Company lost all three rifle platoon leaders, either killed or wounded in action (KIA/WIA), plus its artillery forward observer. The enemy almost succeeded in drawing one of A Company's rifle platoons into a trap. By falling back in front of this platoon and holding in front of others, the enemy soon had this platoon in front of the other advancing elements. Then the enemy attempted to maneuver a force behind this leading platoon. The platoon detected the enemy movement though, and under cover of white phosphorous artillery fire that seemed to disorganize the enemy, the platoon fell back and rejoined A Company. This ended the second attempt to reach the B Company platoon.

Establishing the Perimeter

At 1740 hours with an estimated 200 enemy fighting against A and B Companies, LTC Moore ordered these companies back to the LZ to establish a defensive perimeter for the night that was fast approaching. The surrounded platoon remained in radio contact with B Company and held firm against the enemy. Surprisingly, this platoon suffered no additional casualties before being reached the next day. The radio link enabled friendly artillery to establish a ring of protective fire around the platoon whenever the need arose.

Activity now concentrated on the establishment of a strong defensive perimeter in addition to water and ammunition resupply. A and B Companies had suffered numerous casualties which needed evacuation. Both companies required reorganization because of the high number of leader casualties suffered during the day. C Company, in fighting from a hasty defensive position, had not suffered excessive casualties. The enemy had ceased his attacks in this sector but maintained contact with snipers and harassing fire. D Company, after its initial losses, had not sustained further casualties.

Between 1705 and 1800, B Company, 2-7 CAV arrived on the LZ and occupied a position on the perimeter to the northeast. One platoon was attached to C Company, 1-7 CAV since C Company had a relatively wide sector to defend. This platoon was positioned on the right flank.

The battalion reconnaissance platoon was placed in battalion reserve near the battalion CP. The perimeter was complete by 1900, and defensive fires were registered.

Activities During the Night of 14-15 November

With the perimeter established, the battalion commenced activities designed to defend the LZ and prepare for the next day's actions. Artillery concentrations were adjusted on all sides of the perimeter. Resupply was accomplished, and units reorganized their chains of command to counteract the loss of leaders and other key personnel. Morale was high; the men knew they had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. For most personnel, this was their first experience in heavy combat, and they were pleased to know that they could and did perform well.

The enemy conducted several small probes of the perimeter during the night, but all were quickly detected and defeated. The groups of five to 10 enemy conducted the probes in apparent attempts to detect the location of the battalion's automatic weapons. The Soldiers maintained strict fire discipline and used only M-16 rifles and M79 grenade launchers to fire against the probes. The artillery continued to fire throughout the night on suspected enemy locations around the perimeter and on the mountain above the perimeter.

The rapid pace of battle during the day prevented the construction of proper individual shelters. With the establishment of the perimeter came an attempt to dig some type of positions. Soldiers hastily constructed prone shelters but did not dig extensively for several reasons. First, it was not known if the enemy had the capability of launching a night attack; therefore, strict noise discipline was maintained to assist in detecting enemy movement toward the perimeter. Second, the tall grass in the area partially blocked observation, and deep foxholes would have increased the observation problem. Other than close-in local security, no listening posts or other security positions were established. The heavy vegetation and the threat of immediate enemy attack made the establishment of distant outposts impossible. In addition, protective artillery concentrations were fired within 100-150 meters of the perimeter, and this fire would have endangered friendly security positions.

The surrounded platoon of B Company held on despite enemy attempts to overrun it. Priority of fires was given to B Company; any call for fire to assist the isolated platoon was immediately answered. The enemy could be heard moving around the surrounded platoon, and each time the enemy seemed to be massing for an attack the platoon called for artillery fire. On several occasions screams and shouts from the enemy attested to the effect of this supporting fire.

An Air Force flare ship remained in the vicinity throughout the night awaiting illumination missions. On one occasion, an air strike on the mountain was conducted using the flare ship illumination for control. The strike was right on target. Illumination was not used since the light seemed to expose the men in the perimeter of the surrounded platoon as well as the positions within the battalion perimeter.

With the appearance of dawn at about 0630, plans were made to launch an attack to reach the surrounded platoon. LTC Moore called for the company commanders to meet him at the C Company CP (the best vantage point to observe the area) to finalize plans for the attack. Moore first directed that each company patrol forward of its positions in a search for infiltrators and snipers.

Enemy Attacks in 15 November

The violence that characterized the fighting on the first day erupted anew at 0650 of the second day, 15 November. The patrols from the 2nd and 1st Platoons of C Company (the left or southeastern two platoons) each consisted of one rifle squad accompanied by the platoon leader. These patrols had moved about 150-200 meters in front of their positions in the search for enemy snipers and infiltrators when both patrols received heavy small arms fire. They returned fire and started back for their positions. At this time, the enemy launched a vicious attack at the C Company sector with a force of two to three companies. The patrols from the other two platoons of C Company (the 3rd Platoon and the attached 2nd Platoon from B Company, 2-7 CAV) received some enemy fire, probably an overlap from the firing to their left. They, too, started back for the company sector. The patrols from the 2nd and 1st Platoons suffered numerous casualties before they reached their defensive positions.

This seriously depleted the strength of the platoons defending the left portion of the C Company area, and this was where the brunt of the enemy attack struck.

The patrols from the other two platoons reached their positions without casualties. A heavy fight quickly developed in the C Company sector, with the bulk of the struggle centering in the area of 2nd, 1st, and 3rd Platoons (from left to right), and in front of the company CP. The enemy pressed his attack, and despite intense fire from artillery, ARA, TAC air, and small arms, reached the perimeter positions in the C Company area. The men of C Company stood their ground and limited the enemy's advance. Close range, at times hand-to-hand fighting, continued to rage in the C Company sector for more than two hours.

The enemy also attacked the battalion perimeter in the D Company area (at about 0715) and the A Company area (at about 0800). These attacks used smaller forces than that thrown against C Company

and were repulsed by the defenders in the respective company areas. The attack in the D Company area forced LTC Moore to commit the battalion reserve (battalion recon platoon) to ensure the safety of the LZ. The reserve joined the fight, and after defeating the enemy attack, occupied a position in that area. These additional enemy attacks limited the landing of helicopters until approximately 0910.

At 0715, the C Company commander (who had been wounded early in the fighting but continued to command for three hours) requested reinforcements from LTC Moore after the enemy penetrated to within hand-grenade distance of the company CP. Moore ordered a platoon from A Company to move to the C Company area at about 0745. Due to the heavy fighting, this platoon did not reach C Company for approximately one hour.

Having committed his reserve and in light of the heavy enemy attacks and the losses being inflicted on the battalion, LTC Moore requested another rifle company from 3rd Brigade. This reinforcement (A Company, 2-7 CAV) was already standing by but could not be moved until the LZ was determined safe for landing.

C Company (with attachments) continued to battle the enemy in a series of savage encounters. The intensity of the fighting in their sector is reflected in the following examples:

- The platoon leader of 1st Platoon was found KIA with five dead enemy in and around his position.
- One man was found KIA with his hands around the throat of a dead enemy soldier.
- All C Company officers were casualties by 0800, two KIA and three WIA.
- In the vicinity of the company CP, some 50 meters inside the perimeter, the company command group killed 15-20 enemy.

At approximately 0910, the leading elements of A Co, 2-7 CAV arrived on the LZ. After becoming oriented on the situation and terrain, the A Company commander took over positions previously held by B Company (-), 2-7 CAV. B Company (-), 2-7 CAV moved to the C Company, 1-7 CAV area, assumed control of the remaining C Company forces, and continued the defense of the sector.

By 1000 the enemy attack had been defeated, and units completed reorganization, resupply, and evacuation activities. At 1300 the units on the perimeter swept the area out to a distance of 300 meters. Evidence of the destruction dealt the enemy was everywhere. Dead enemy were scattered throughout the area; weapons, equipment, bandages, and bloody trails littered the ground. Two enemy prisoners were also captured.

C Company, 1-7 CAV was then positioned as battalion reserve near the battalion CP.

The Rescue of the Surrounded Platoon

With the perimeter re-established and the enemy withdrawn, attention turned to the task of reaching the surrounded platoon. The 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, which the 3rd Brigade commander positioned on LZ Victor late on 14 November, commenced a foot movement toward X-Ray at 0800, 15 November, and succeeded in reaching X-Ray at about 1205. The battalion commanders conferred and decided on a plan. A and C Companies, 2-5 CAV, with B Company, 1-7 CAV (under control of the commander of 2-5 CAV), would conduct a coordinated attack to reach the surrounded platoon. LTC Moore assumed control of B Company, 2-5 CAV and was responsible for the defense of the LZ during the rescue operation.

The attack to reach the surrounded platoon launched at 1315 after a heavy fire-support preparation. The enemy offered little resistance, and the rescue force reached the platoon at 1510. They had suffered 8 KIA, 12 WIA, and 7 were unwounded. There was still ammunition available, and the men were in good spirits.

The Soldiers moved back to X-Ray and established the perimeter for the second night.

The Second Night, 15-16 November

During a relatively quiet afternoon, the troops occupying the perimeter made extensive improvements in their individual positions. This effort paid dividends as the enemy was not finished with the American force at X-Ray.

The perimeter remained quiet until 0100 when the enemy launched a five-man probe at the sector held by B Company, 1-7 CAV. Soldiers detected the enemy threat, however, and killed two enemy. Fire discipline remained excellent on the second night, and artillery fire continued to protect the perimeter as it did on the first night.

The enemy commenced a small probing action against the area defended by B Company, 2-7 CAV at 0400. At 0422 an enemy force of 250-300 troops attacked this area, the same area that had been struck on the morning of the 15th. B Company discovered the attack but didn't return fire until the enemy was clearly within small arms range. The company then retaliated with small arms, automatic weapons, and massed artillery fire from the four batteries now supporting the LZ. At 0430, the enemy launched another attack against the same area, which was quickly defeated. At 0500 the enemy tried again with 100 men from a more southwesterly direction. This attack also failed to penetrate the perimeter. At 0630 the enemy made a final unsuccessful attack, striking again from a southerly direction. B Company, 2-7 CAV had conducted a magnificent defense. Constant illumination from an Air Force flare ship and later from mortar and artillery shells seemed to confuse the enemy, for each time a flare illuminated the area the enemy would hit the ground or attempt to hide in the grass and trees, thus disrupting the momentum of his attack.

The Final Day

At 0655, all units on LZ X-Ray fired a coordinated "mad minute." This consisted of all personnel firing small arms and automatic weapons into the trees and possible enemy hiding places in front of their positions. This intended to prevent a recurrence of the previous morning's enemy assault at the perimeter. As soon as the firing began, an enemy force of 30-50 men jumped to their feet 150 meters in front of A Company, 2-7 CAV and fired their weapons. Artillery fire drove off the enemy.

Next, all units conducted a sweep of the area out to a distance of 500 meters. Executed at 0955, B Company, 2-7 CAV received enemy fire after moving only 50-75 meters. All units pulled back to the perimeter, and artillery and TAC air were again called on the area surrounding the perimeter. At the completion of this strike, the units continued the sweep, killing 27 enemy in the process. Like the sweep after the battle the previous morning, Soldiers discovered grim evidence of the heavy casualties suffered by the enemy force.

By 1200, the remainder of the 2-7 CAV landed at X-Ray and prepared to relieve 1-7 CAV. The 3rd Brigade commander ordered LTC Moore to move his battalion (plus B Company, 2-7 CAV and 3rd Platoon, A Company, 2-7 CAV) to LZ Falcon by UH-1D.

The Extraction from LZ X-RAY

The remaining units at LZ X-Ray manned the perimeter while 1-7 CAV with attachments was extracted by helicopter. Additionally, artillery fire and TAC air strikes on the mountain above X-Ray kept the enemy from interfering with the movement. By 1500, the battalion had completed the movement to LZ Falcon. By 1830, all elements of the battalion with attachments had been further moved by air from Falcon to Camp Holloway near Pleiku airbase for two days of rest and reorganization.

Summary

The examination of any military operation would be incomplete if an effort were not made to show how the particular operation contributed to the overall military effort. In this regard, there are several factors that should be considered to fully appreciate the significance of the three-day battle on LZ X-Ray:

(1) At that stage of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, the operations of 1-7 CAV at LZ X-Ray represented the first major engagement between a large U.S. force and units of the North Vietnamese Regular Army (NVA).

(2) The ability of the individual American Soldier to fight and defeat the NVA enemy was vividly demonstrated in a series of savage encounters.

(3) The techniques and tactics of Army air mobility, as developed and practiced by units of the 1st Cavalry Division, were subjected to the test of sustained combat and passed with flying colors. Relying entirely upon aerial resources, 1-7 CAV entered a hostile area, rapidly massed men and fire support to defeat a numerically superior enemy on his own ground, and conducted all logistical activities necessary to support the combat effort.

(4) The 1-7 CAV, with the support of massed artillery and close air support, was credited with the near annihilation of the 7th and 9th Battalions of the North Vietnamese 66th Regiment, plus the remnants of the 33rd Regiment. It is certain that these staggering losses, combined with the casualties inflicted on the enemy by other units of the 1st Cavalry Division, seriously disrupted the enemy's long range plans for the conquest of the vital Central Highland area of South Vietnam.

Analysis and Criticism

The principles of war as outlined in FM 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations*, provide a valuable aid in the analysis of this operation.

The ultimate objective of war — the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to resist — was the sole objective of the operation. The battalion searched for the enemy and intended to inflict maximum punishment on him when he was discovered. The high number of enemy casualties is ample evidence of the successful accomplishment of this mission by the battalion.

Offensive action was achieved by initiating an attack in an area long recognized as an enemy base. The offensive thrust disrupted the enemy's attack plans and caused him to destroy much of his fighting strength in a series of futile attempts to dislodge the battalion from its positions in the landing zone.

The principles of mass and economy of force will be discussed simultaneously since they are so closely related. The battalion initially constituted a relatively small force searching for the enemy. When contact was made and it became apparent that a degree of massing was required, additional units were moved to the area. The helicopter must be recognized as the most important factor in the battalion's success in applying the principles of mass and economy of force. Using the helicopter, a small force can cover a large area. Upon making contact with the enemy, mass can quickly be achieved through the use of the helicopter to move units to the critical point.

Maneuver is evident in several instances. First, the sudden appearance of the battalion on the enemy's home ground forced the enemy into the position of defending its base from a potential threat. This gave the battalion a tactical advantage by requiring the enemy to fight under unfavorable circumstances. Second, the ability of the individual companies to rapidly change from their original missions once the situation developed, proved an important factor in the final outcome of the battle.

Unity of command was established from the beginning of the operation. The battalion commander was solely responsible for the actions of all units in the landing zone. Additional resources that were put into

the area came under his control. The battalion commander reported to and responded to orders from one superior headquarters — the 3rd Brigade.

A constant flow of information on the enemy's movements and activities was supplied by the pilots of the numerous aircraft flying over the area. In this manner, a high degree of security was achieved. Likewise, positioning forces in a complete perimeter around the LZ prevented the enemy from gaining a tactical advantage and thus maintained the battalion's vital link with outside assistance.

Surprise was definitely another factor that contributed to the success of the operation. Before the enemy knew what was happening, a strong American force had landed and established a position from which it could not be moved. By the time the enemy had reacted in sufficient strength to make the landing of additional troops impossible, there were enough friendly forces on the ground to protect the landing zone. Then, with the support of almost unlimited fire power, the friendly force commenced inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy.

Any airmobile operation is, by its very nature, a complex combat operation. Simplicity must be gained through the utilization of a ground tactical plan that does not involve complex maneuvers. The battalion attempted to do this in formulating its tactical plan. An additional consideration in applying the principle of simplicity is the status of training of the unit and the familiarity of personnel with airmobile operations. Fortunately, Soldiers of the battalion had been working with the airmobile concept since July 1964 and were completely familiar with the techniques and tactics.

In the analysis of this operation, there are two important points that, above all others, contributed to the successful accomplishment of the battalion's mission:

(1) The coordinated utilization of all available means of fire support turned the tide of battle in favor of the battalion in the conduct of this operation against a numerically superior enemy force. The fact that the battalion S3, artillery liaison officer, and forward air controller were co-located in the command helicopter was a principle factor in the success of the fire-support effort. These individuals were in a position to closely supervise and coordinate all fire-support means. This close association was maintained on the ground when these officers landed in the objective area.

(2) The ability of the companies to rapidly execute tactical maneuvers on the battlefield retained the initiative for the battalion, and B Company's initial thrust toward the enemy when contact was established, placed the battalion on the offensive. Had B Company delayed in this movement, the battalion could well have been trapped on the LZ from the very start. The swift movement of A Company to assist B Company certainly prevented a potential disaster by intercepting the enemy force driving into the rear of B Company. C Company, in quickly establishing a blocking position and repelling the enemy attack from the southwest, prevented the enemy from capturing the landing zone.

In a more critical sense, there are two areas that should be examined.

(1) The failure of the intelligence agencies to more accurately estimate the potential enemy threat in the area is important. The enemy strength was such that, had he been able to react more rapidly to the landing, he could have easily overwhelmed the friendly force on the LZ before sufficient troop strength was available to defend against his attack.

(2) The failure on the first night to sacrifice noise discipline in order to dig better shelters and clear fields of fire was the cause of a number of additional casualties on the morning of the 15th when the enemy attacked in strength.

The enemy must also be credited with some favorable achievements. The enemy made excellent use of the available cover and concealment by positioning his snipers in well-concealed areas and digging his

automatic weapons into the bases of the ant hills. In this manner, the enemy was able to make the terrain work to his advantage. The accuracy of the enemy marksmen was excellent. A high percentage of friendly casualties were officers, other leaders, and radio operators. All were apparently especially selected sniper targets because of their important function of command and control.

One unfavorable aspect of the enemy should be noted. The enemy continued to use a mass attack formation against the same area of the perimeter after repeatedly being turned back.

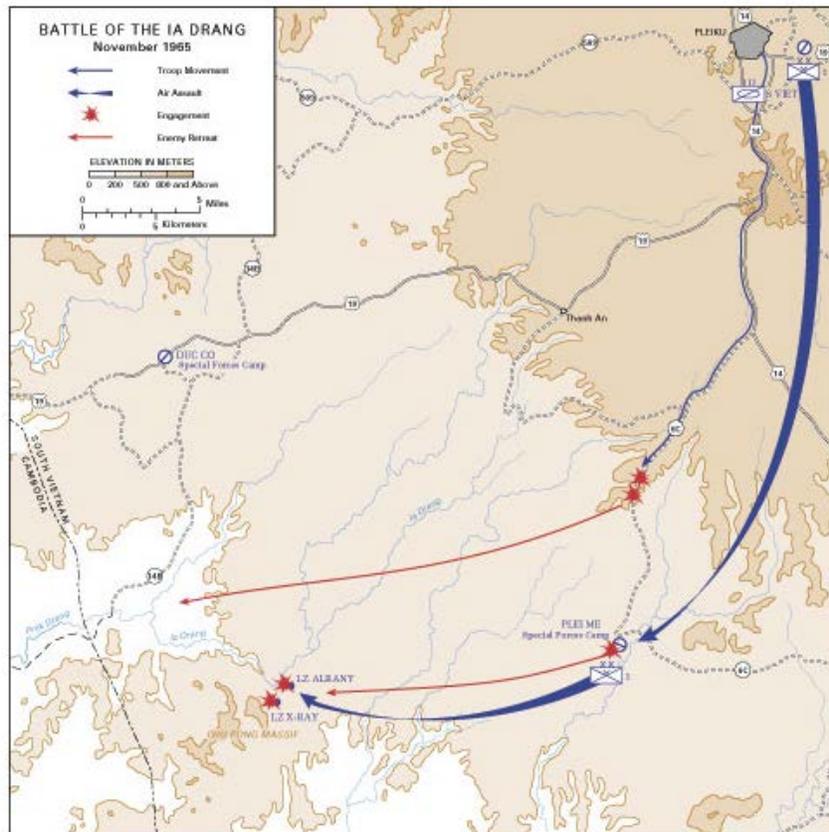
It would appear, the enemy lacked either the flexibility to divert units from a previously selected course of action, or the command and control facilities to influence the action once it had commenced.

Lessons Learned

- 1) Units must be cautious in their pursuit of enemy forces. An often used enemy tactic is to fall back in front of an advancing friendly unit in order to lure it into a position where a second, concealed enemy force can move behind the friendly force and cut it off from its parent organization. "Walking" artillery fire in front of a pursuing friendly force is of assistance in preventing such a trap.
- 2) There exists a need for units occupying a perimeter to be able to mark the trace of the perimeter at night with some sort of illumination device that will permit aircraft to fire in support of the perimeter.
- 3) A carefully controlled "mad minute" (a form of reconnaissance by fire) is a successful method of triggering an enemy attack by causing the enemy to expose himself prematurely.
- 4) The security of a unit's flanks must be a continuous process, particularly in an area where there are no fixed battle lines.
- 5) Leaders at all levels must be made aware of the value of close defensive artillery fire. Too often leaders were reluctant to use close-in artillery fire in fear of friendly casualties. This misconception must be removed from the minds of combat leaders. Artillery fire is the Infantryman's most available and powerful means of influencing the action.
- 6) A unit conducting an air assault operation must first concern itself with holding the LZ that links it with outside assistance. The higher headquarters of the unit making the assault must retain the ability to rapidly reinforce the committed unit should it require assistance. It is highly unlikely that a unit in heavy contact with the enemy would be able to execute an extraction from an LZ.
- 7) Units preparing defensive perimeters during the hours of darkness must sacrifice noise discipline to dig proper individual shelters and clear fields of fire.
- 8) Pathfinder teams should always accompany battalion-size units on air assault operations. These teams provide aircraft control, and thereby free the battalion CP of the requirement to handle this important task. This permits the battalion CP to concentrate on tactical operations.
- 9) Personnel must be trained to exercise caution when going to the assistance of wounded men. In many cases, additional casualties were suffered when personnel were too anxious to assist wounded personnel. Taking time to analyze the situation, eliminate enemy positions in the area, or at a minimum having other personnel provide covering fire would greatly reduce this danger.
- 10) Co-locating all personnel connected with obtaining and directing the various fire-support means ensures close, continuous fire support from all available agencies.

Additional Resources

Read LTC Moore's after action report at: www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/vietnam/ia_drang.pdf.



Map 1 – Battle of Ia Drang

(Map courtesy of The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Vietnam War, Buying Time 1965-1966)



MAJ Bruce Crandall's UH-1D helicopter climbs skyward after discharging a load of Infantrymen on a search and destroy mission. (U.S. Army photo)