

Infantry In Action



A FOOT A DAY IN COMPANY A

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The Company A of the title is Company A, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, Task Force Oregon, III Marine Amphibious Force, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

The time period is roughly from April 1967 to November 1968. The place, Binh Son District, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of South Vietnam.

The title does not refer to the slowness of Company A's move-

ment but to the daily risk to the company's men from Viet Cong mines.

It is a story of bravery, tenacity, patience, ingenuity, generosity, compassion, and danger, but most of all, soldiering.

From few records, this story is a recollection by the brigade commander at the time.

In the spring of 1967, the North Vietnamese Army had infiltrated the northern provinces of South Vietnam (RVN) in such numbers that the U.S. Marines, the U.S. ground forces in the provinces, were hard put to defend their air and ground bases. The Marine commander, Lieutenant General Lew Walt, proposed to the overall American commander, General William Westmoreland, U.S. Army, that he (Walt) move his 1st Marine Division from the two southern provinces, Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, north to the area of Danang. Thus, the division would replace portions of the 3d Marine Division so that those units could thicken the U.S. ground forces at the border between North and South Vietnam.

Westmoreland agreed and formed a provisional "division" with the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division; the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division; and the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. Augmented by separate units of artillery, engineer, signal, and support troops, this division was named Task Force Oregon (the commander, Major General William Rosson, being from Oregon).

In April, the 196th Brigade was flown from Tay Ninh, not far from Saigon, to the Chu Lai combat base in Quang Tin Province. There, augmented by additional infantry (1st Battalion, 14th Infantry) and armored cavalry (2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry), it relieved in place the 1st and 7th Regiments of Marines. The 3d Battalion, 4th Infantry, down

from the Pleiku highlands, replaced the 5th Marines. The brigade from the 101st Airborne Division acted as a mobile strike force.

The three brigades, having dissimilar missions, acted as task forces and, though cooperating with each other and with U.S. and Korean Marines and the Army of Vietnam, each went about its own business.

The business of the 196th was to protect the Chu Lai air base and prevent the destruction of the 100 or so airplanes and another 100 helicopters positioned there; to locate and destroy hostile forces within the tactical area of operation; and to protect the Vietnamese people living in the area from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese.

Before the 196th arrived, the Marines, who had been in the area for about a year and a half, had performed these same tasks. In doing so, they had built some battalion camps and company strongpoints. In some haste, the 196th relieved the Marines throughout their tactical area of responsibility; but, because there were far fewer soldiers than Marines, the defenses of the 196th were thinner and the strongpoints more scattered. As an example, the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry (Polar Bears) with four rifle companies replaced two Marine battalions with six rifle companies. Also, the Marine rifle companies had been far larger than those of the light infantry.

The situation of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry in the latter

days of April 1967 was as shown on the map. One company (D) south of the air base protected against infiltration into the base and patrolled incessantly for VC raiding parties. The remainder of the battalion, operating from fairly comfortable company-sized strongpoints (flimsy shacks and floored tents, latrines with roofs, and mess halls with screens) also patrolled vigorously throughout their assigned areas. From April until June, Company A patrolled to its east and south, by foot, by APC (borrowed from the cavalry), and occasionally, by small helicopter lifts from point to point (called "Eagle" flights).

The terrain in the Polar Bears' area was rolling country, interspersed with many ponds and streams, heavily wooded in spots with open areas of pasture, rice paddy, and cactus. There was fairly good visibility throughout from observation points on high ground. The roads were dirt and, in the dry season (which this was), were trafficable to anything on wheels or tracks.

Unfortunately, the VC had no difficulty in planting mines at night and so, at daylight, every foot of road south of battalion headquarters had to be swept before vehicles could go over it. Many mines were missed, though, and trucks were blown up. (The Polar Bears named the road to Company B "Thunder Road.")

Except for the mountain to the east, the entire area was full of hamlets, which in Vietnam could be one or two thousand people. The great majority of these people wished only to be left alone. But the VC's attitude toward the villagers was: "If

you're not with us, you're agin' us," so the people had little choice but to support the VC.

The Polar Bears thus lived and soldiered among thousands of people, all dressed alike, most looking alike, and none of whom could be identified as friendly or enemy. Most of these people farmed and some had small businesses. (A patrol in the middle of nowhere in a chow break might be approached by little kids or old ladies selling ice cold Cokes.)

The closest friendly forces, the Korean Marines, were not actively patrolling and, at night, buttoned themselves into their heavily bunkered perimeters and fired flares.

By June, the Viet Cong night raiders had made the corridor between the Koreans and Company B a regular route to the river. Being on the glidepath into the Chu Lai air base, they could shoot at U.S. aircraft at will and go up and down the river banks.

The commander of 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Smith, prodded by the brigade commander to take this country back from the Viet Cong, asked for Company D from the north side of Tra Bong River. He got it. The Gimlets of the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry took over from Company D, which moved south of the river, and Company A prepared to move to "Alpha Hill."

Some time in June, Company A was lifted onto Alpha Hill by Hueys and "Hooks" (CH-47As). Captain Edward F. Hill had planned the organization of the strongpoint in detail. By nightfall, he had some strong bunkers under construction, his mortars and recoilless rifles were sited in, and the soldiers were enjoying a hot supper.

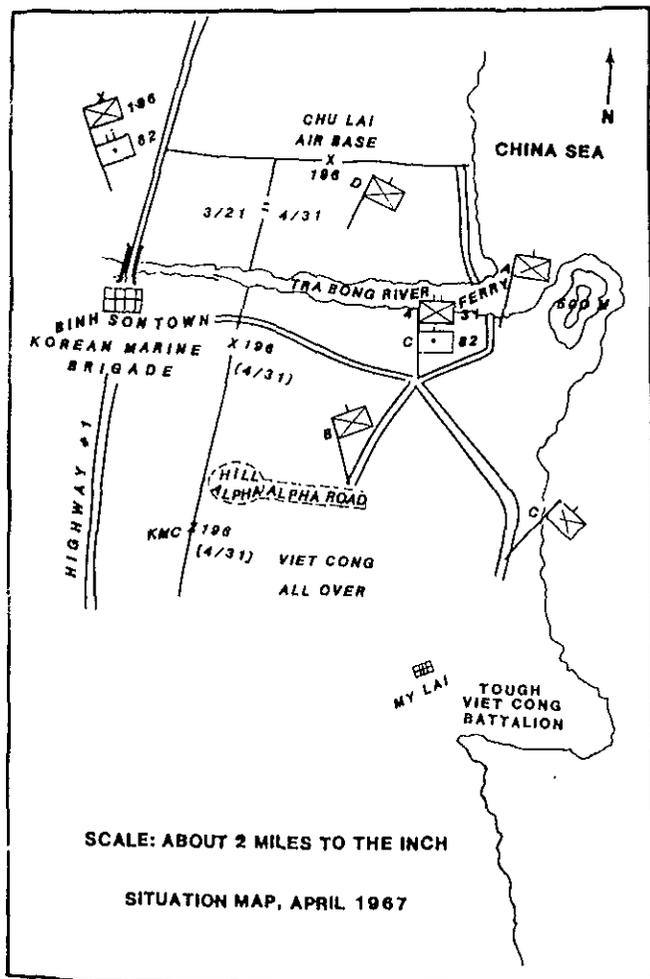
The Polar Bears, though, had sat right down on the Viet Cong's main line into downtown Binh Son. The VC, realizing that they would have no base of operations if the U.S. companies kept on leap-frogging to the south, decided to fight for Alpha Hill.

An American rifle company, reinforced by all the fires available from battalion and brigade artillery and from gunships (Huey Bs and Cs) could hold out against any amount of lightly armed infantry. But at night, especially on moonless nights, the Viet Cong could approach close enough with recoilless rifles, rocket launchers, and light mortars to harass the defense and cause casualties. If they wanted to shoot back at the VC, all of the defenders obviously could not go to ground in bunkers. So there *would* be casualties.

As with all other company commanders on their own in this type of situation, Captain Hill could not sit back and be shot at every night. He decided to patrol vigorously in the daytime to catch infiltrators "laying up" and to set out ambushes at night for the VC working around his perimeter. The local enemy were numerous and bold, and they were expert demolition men.

The tactical area of responsibility of Company A was so large that the VC could move fairly freely and did so, planting mines of all types in every place an American patrol might conceivably venture.

Every day, in every direction, squad and platoon patrols searched out the ground yard by yard. They caught, captured, or shot some Viet Cong almost every day but unfortunately had continuing casualties from antipersonnel mines. Most were



trip-wire-operated U.S. grenades that had been either lost, abandoned, or stolen. So the temper of this little war flared. The VC got Company A by day, and Company A got the VC by night, but not enough of them.

The brigade sent two searchlights to the company. Aligned with a machinegun, the searchlights could cover concealed routes to Alpha Hill. The defense of the hill was made more difficult by homeless, burned-out Vietnamese who built shelters as close to Company A's wire as they could (for protection against their own countrymen).

Battalion headquarters helped Company A move these waifs and strays out of the line of fire, but they were never wholly out of it and suffered their casualties from "overs" and "shorts." The company medics did the best they could for these innocent bystanders and evacuated the seriously wounded out with the wounded soldiers.

Experience throughout the rest of the brigade had shown that the sooner these company "forts" were connected by roads, the more secure each company would be. Armored vehicles could patrol and ambush, even at night; vehicles using lights could surprise infiltrators (even mine planters); and trucks could take over supply and evacuation tasks from helicopters.

So Colonel Smith, with some brigade engineers, built a road from Bravo to Alpha and used it day and night. A "deuce and a half," well sand-bagged, could stand a large explosion and still make it on in. So the fight changed from a fight for Alpha Hill to a day and night skirmish for Alpha Road.

Since Alpha Hill was a secure base and Alpha Road was used around the clock, the Viet Cong could no longer operate in that area.

In the middle of August, the brigade commander spent a morning with the men of Company A and wrote a few words about it in a letter to his wife:

This morning I spent with A/4/31 on what's known as "a

detailed sweep." We found all kinds of things, including three grown-up men who, carrying grenades, ran away and were shot. Two killed, one wounded—he was a VC hamlet chief.

A few days later—noting that the enemy was "almost completely stocking his arsenal of mines and booby traps from U.S. sources"—he put out a letter to the brigade listing ways to prevent this:

- *Strict control of the issue and turn-in of ammunition to individual soldiers, vehicles, and bunkers.*
- *Disciplined destruction, salvage, or turn-in of used materials that can be used in any way to fabricate explosives.*
- *The crushing of every tin can that can be used to fabricate explosives—beer, pop, food—every can.*
- *The reporting of time and location of every high explosive dud—air-dropped or otherwise.*
- *Strict and thorough police of every battlefield, camp, and bivouac area.*

By the end of August, although Company A's private war was not over, it had died down to the level where the soldiers no longer counted on losing "a foot a day."

During this entire operation, many men of Company A were wounded or killed by mines and booby traps—60, more or less. Some others felt the sting of small arms or rocket-propelled grenades, but their main hazard was the antipersonnel mine.

Yet, day and night, for more than 60 days, these good soldiers still humped it through the woods and fields, *knowing* that the next step might be their last. Brave men!

Brigadier General Frank H. Linnell, USA Retired, is a 1941 graduate of the United States Military Academy. During his career, he served in New Guinea, Luzon, Japan, Panama, Korea, Santo Domingo, Vietnam, and Germany in a variety of jobs from platoon leader on up. He was commanding general of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam.

