



Project Delta's Executive Officer fields two handsets at once while directing air and artillery strikes around besieged Plei Me Special Forces camp.

rounding the triangular camp. Surprised defenders poured fire on the attackers, blunted attempts to penetrate the wire and held firm until daybreak on the 20th when air support from Pleiku and Da Nang could be called down on the surrounding brushy hills.

The first helicopter to try and make it into Plei Me that morning was ripped apart by heavy anti-aircraft fire from tripod-mounted Chinese versions of the .50-caliber machine gun. Their sights were crude but they closed Plei Me to all but the most daring chopper pilots. This was to be no hit-and-run affair.

As tac air plastered the hills with napalm and high explosives (HE), PAVN gunners made the planes fly through a curtain of fire and downed several A1E Skyraiders and one B-57 Canberra bomber.

Ammo, food and water were being parachuted in — but the camp was small, the fire intense and more often than not the defenders stood helplessly as bundles of goodies dropped into enemy laps.

II Corps commander, Gen. Vinh Loc, was persuaded — with difficulty — to dispatch an armored relief column large

enough to bull through the inevitable ambush — only after his American counterparts, Gen. Stanley (Swede) Larson of Field Force Victor (FFV) at Qui Nhon and Gen. Harry W. O. Kinnard, CO of the 1st Air Cav, guaranteed him that the Cav would also dispatch forces to reinforce and secure Pleiku. By 23 October, the ARVN armored column — 16 tanks, 15 APCs and 1,200 men — moved cautiously down Route 6C toward Plei Me and a Cav Brigade task force was on its way to Pleiku.

Ten miles down the road, the 32nd PAVN Regiment sprang its expected ambush on Vinh Loc's relief column. With artillery support, the ARVN circled with the wagons and hunkered down for a tough fight that night and most of the next day. With American encouragement and support, the ARVN column did not break and run as usual. The 32nd PAVN wasn't finding it as easy as they expected.

Meanwhile, Plei Me camp was getting a new commander and some stiffening of its own. Maj. Charles Beckwith — who commanded the Special Forces Delta Teams —

and a hand-picked squad were helilifted into the vicinity of Plei Me at night and then crawled through the rings of PAVN troops. Just before dawn they dashed through the wire in a hail of automatic-weapons fire.

We had drawn straws for the few places on Beckwith's mission and I had lost. I stood on the tarmac at Holloway so goddam mad I couldn't talk. As I stalked the flight line I ran into one of my fellow Texans and explained my problem. He commiserated and allowed as how he was sort of interested in getting a look at the action.

The next morning he said words to the effect of "Screw the Army and those sitreps that say you can't fly into Plei Me. Let's go." We went.

(When then-Col. Charlie Beckwith led the raid into Iran [see "Who Dares Wins," SOF, June '79], I pulled my photo file to find some snaps of him, and ran across the first sight I had of Plei Me camp. I shot the picture and even today it scares me. The chopper was laid over on its side, diving through PAVN machine-gun fire. Its open door frames the besieged camp. Mortar bursts are raising clouds of choking red dirt. Smoke from napalm and artillery bursts rises from the jungle.)

My buddy dropped the chopper into Plei Me. I jumped out before the skids hit. It was the first chopper they had had on the ground in a long time and in seconds it was stacked full of wounded and old Tex was pulling pitch like a madman and making obscene gestures at me. Seconds later a Special Forces sergeant tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Son, Maj. Beckwith wants to see you and he sure is mad. He's the fellow over there jumping up and down on his hat."

The Beckwith tirade began: "I need ammo, water, food, medevac, reinforcements. I need everything. And the Army, in its wisdom, sends me a fucking reporter. Well, you ain't a reporter no more. You are a corner machine-gunner."

Then Charlie stopped, grinned, drew a breath and asked who was that crazy SOB that flew me in on that chopper. "I need more pilots like him."

Two sleepless nights later, the ARVN relief column arrived to break the siege of Plei Me. With it came the inimitable Bob Poos, my friendly competitor from the Associated Press. I asked what took him so long and got the standard two-word reply.

Late on 25 October, Gen. Man pulled back his two regiments, leaving behind a reinforced battalion to maintain some pressure on Plei Me. Suddenly the sky filled with more helicopters than I had ever seen at one time. The First Air Cav had arrived. I said my goodbyes to Charlie Beckwith, accepted his offer of an M16 and ammo, then joined a column of troops marching through the moonscape around the battered camp. The bombing left trees stripped and twisted. Your nose told you the enemy had died by the hundreds. The stink of death filled the air.

One more strange image lingers from the Plei Me defense. Maj. Beckwith's execu-

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