

ity into the war — heroically holding out against desperately overwhelming odds. There was an American newsman inside, Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams, caught while paying a routine visit.

Several efforts were being mounted to relieve Plei Me. Special Forces

smoke grenades in each platoon.

Every cavalryman was to carry one C-ration meal and two canteens of water as well as an ample supply of entrenching tools and machetes. Col. Moore also directed each rifle company to bring one 81mm mortar tube and a maximum ammunition load, and Company D to bring its three tubes.

On 14 November, at 1017 hours, after a brief delay, the 21st Artillery Battalion's 105mm howitzers at LZ Falcon began preparatory fire. Exactly 13 minutes later, with a thunderous roar, the leading elements of Company B, commanded by Capt. John D. Herren, lifted off the Plei Me airstrip in a storm of red dust. As volleys of artillery fire slammed into the objective area, the 16 Hueys — four platoons of four each — filed southwestward across a bright midmorning sky at 2,000 feet.

Two kilometers out, they dropped to tree level. Meanwhile, the gunships of the 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery (Aerial Rocket), nicknamed "The Blue Max," and commanded by Lt. Col. Nelson A. Mahone, Jr., worked X-Ray over with 2.75-inch rockets for 30 seconds, expending half their loads, then circled nearby, available on call.

The 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion's escort gunships came next, immediately ahead of the lift ships, rockets and machine guns blazing. As the lead choppers braked for the assault landing, their doorgunners sprayed the tree line with machine-gun fire.

Standing at the door of the lead helicopter, Moore thought, "Everything's in sync; now if only we can make contact with the damned elusive North Vietnamese." Gen. Chu Huy Man would make sure he was not disappointed.

Moore lunged from his chopper with the lead elements of Co. B, snap-firing his M16 at likely enemy positions. The colonel quickly gathered his command around him and ordered Capt. Herren to secure the LZ. In line with previous instructions, Herren would use a new technique. Rather than attempt the usual 360-degree perimeter coverage of the entire area, he concealed most of his force in a clump of trees and tall grass near the center of the landing zone as a reaction strike force, while his 1st Plt. under 2nd Lt. Alan E. Deveny struck out in different directions, reconnoitering the terrain 50 to 100 meters from the western side of X-Ray. This sound technique allowed Capt. Herren to conserve his forces while he retained flexibility.

Col. Moore quickly set out to inspect the tiny clearing for fighting positions, glancing with distaste at the huge anthills aswarm with red ants; soldiers hated to dig foxholes near the ferocious insects. Peering into the quiet, sparse tree lines surrounding him, Moore had no inkling that he was about to trigger the biggest battle yet in the Vietnam War, but he



Maj. Gen. Harry W.O. Kinnard, CO, 1st Cavalry Division, escorts South Vietnamese Air Vice Marshal, Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky (center), and Gen. Vinh Loc, South

Vietnamese CO of II Corps (left) on tour of 1st Cavalry Division base at An Khe following successful completion of Pleiku campaign. Photo: H.W.O. Kinnard

ARVN AMBUSH by Bob Poos

The young major clad in ironed Vietnamese Airborne camouflage pointed at a spot on a folded, acetate-covered map, indicating a U-turn in a road. "There," he said matter-of-factly, "is where we're going to be ambushed."

We rode on the rear deck of an M48 tank, he seemingly without effort, I clinging to the armor with my fingernails.

The tank was part of a column of other armored vehicles that had left Pleiku City, capital of the South Vietnamese province of the same name, some time earlier, bound for a little place called Plei Me: an earthen-walled, triangular-shaped fort containing crude frame buildings, mortar pits, and a population of 12 American Special Forces officers and non-coms and perhaps 200 Montagnard mercenary soldiers.

Anyone who read, heard or watched the news at the time should remember Plei Me. It was the big story then. Under siege by a couple of regiments or so of North Vietnamese regulars — their first spectacular entry into the war — heroically holding out against desperately overwhelming odds. There was an American newsman inside, Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams, caught while paying a routine visit.

Several efforts were being mounted to relieve Plei Me. Special Forces reaction units called Mike Forces were arming and preparing themselves. Elements of the 1st Cavalry Division were gearing up, rotors already whining and blades chopping the air from their almost 300 helicopters. And this column of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) rumbled and clanked its way

toward Plei Me, certain of contact with its communist enemy and, hopefully, relief of the camp.

Gen. Vinh Loc, Vietnamese commander of the Second Military Corps (II Corps), had hesitated in dispatching it: partly because it represented virtually all the armor available in II Corps, partly because its armored and airborne troops composed by far the most reliable forces around, more or less his Praetorian Guard, and partly because he was inherently timid — some said cowardly.

But senior American officers prevailed upon him and now the column clattered along somewhere between the city and the camp.

Neither memory nor consultation of filing-cabinet-drawers full of old, stained, wrinkled notebooks yields the major's name. He spoke fluent English and said he was North Vietnamese, veteran (as a boy) of the Viet Minh forces which defeated the French. He was also a Catholic and youthful enthusiasm about throwing out the colonial occupiers of his country soon faded into disillusion upon witnessing Marxist excesses. So he fled south, one of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who "voted with their feet" against communism and in favor of what they hoped would be something better in the partitioned South.

Neither family nor political connections guaranteed him a quick, easy commission here: He had won it through skill and expertise gained in the field. His observation as to the possible ambush site seemed thoroughly believable — too much so.

And he was right. Shortly before dark, the ambush erupted. But this column operated differently than those of the earlier French and colonial Vietnamese forces. Every weapon from 90mm tank cannons to APC .50-caliber machine guns to .45 ACPs



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