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EXCLUSIVE: PERU'S WEIRD WARRIORS



**GUATEMALA'S UNFINISHED WAR
CONVENTION '82
FINALLY, OUR DAY: VIET VET SALUTE**



BLOODY IA DRANG

Little Big Horn, Act 2

by Robert T. Oles

I drew the task of editing this story for a number of reasons, chief among them, I suppose, because I spent a lot of time with the First Cav from 1965 through 1967 as a combat correspondent and because I was present in Pleiku Province during the Plei Me siege and the ensuing battles in and around Ia Drang Valley and Chu Pong Mountain.

Occasionally, while reading and editing this, I became chilled — as if I were stepping upon the grave of an old friend — for I literally knew every person named in this series. Many remain close friends and we keep in touch to this day. But others are dead, survivors of Ia Drang/Chu Pong but fated to die on another battlefield before they left Vietnam or on a subsequent tour of duty.

My first thought was to check out as many names as possible and bring readers and myself up to date on what befell them later: whether they stayed in the Army or got out and followed civilian pursuits or were killed.

But I discarded that idea. I know those things about the men who were close to me. Others were simply acquaintances, and although I did not dislike any of them, it is impossible to maintain contact with everybody one meets in life, particularly if he is a news correspondent. Finally there were the dead. It would have been relatively easy to check out the circumstances under which they perished: those that I knew for certain had been killed, those that I suspected had been and those that I heard of from mutual acquaintances.

I opted not to do this, for my memories of those soldiers are of vital men: officers, sergeants and enlisted men with individual skin and hair colors and accents peculiar to their geographic regions. And that is the way I would prefer readers think of them, rather than as silent, slowly eroding testaments to a war which they fought heroically but futilely, simply because those who sent them there were not as courageous as they. — Bob Poos

UNTIL the fall of 1965, the fighting of U.S. troops in Vietnam had been characterized mostly by hit-and-run counterinsurgency operations against Viet Cong irregulars, but during the week before Thanksgiving, amid the scrub brush and stunted trees of the Ia Drang Valley in the western sector of Pleiku Province along the Cambodian border, the war changed dramatically. That week, for the first time, regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments, controlled by a division-sized headquarters, engaged in a conventional slugging match with U.S. forces.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, chief of staff, North Vietnamese Army and author of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, and Gen. Chu Huy Man, commander of the Western Highlands Field Front (a division-sized unit), conceived a bold plan for operations in the central highlands. The North Vietnamese plan called for an offensive against the western plateau encompassing Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh and Phu Bon Provinces. It specified the destruction of Special Forces camps at Plei Me, Dak Sut and Duc Co, annihilation of the Le Thanh Dist. headquarters and seizure of the city of Pleiku.

Assault forces would include the 32nd, 33rd and 66th North Vietnamese Army Regiments, veterans of Dien Bien Phu. This plan was part of the grand strategy for Hanoi's heralded *Dong Xuan* (winter-spring) campaign. Its primary aim was to conquer and secure the central highlands in order to sever the South and, hopefully, trigger a countrywide collapse of resistance. It was a valid plan with a good probability of success. (Indeed, that is almost precisely what would take place a decade later to win the war for Hanoi.) Giap and Man's optimism was justified.

By midsummer, Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of American Forces in South Vietnam, had good intelligence that Giap's offensive would begin in October 1965. Westmoreland felt that if, indeed, the North Vietnamese did commit to a conventional operation in the central highlands, he would soon have at his disposal a unique unit that would be the right instrument to deal the North Vietnamese a crushing defeat. That outfit was the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).



Brevet Maj. Gen. George Armstrong Custer as he appeared in 1865, at the end of his meteoric rise from second lieutenant to major general in 2½ years of Civil War. Later, as lieutenant colonel, he would lead the 7th Cavalry Regiment to its destruction at Little Big Horn. But 90 years later, when 7th Cav set forth into Ia Drang Valley, it turned the tables on a new enemy. Photo: Library of Congress



7th Cavalry unit flag, allegedly picked up by burial detail from field of battle at Little Big Horn. Photo: National Park Service

The much-publicized 1st Air Cavalry Division (Airmobile) traveled on wings and rotors rather than legs and wheels. It had 428 helicopters — five times as many as a normal infantry division. It was an infantry/artillery/cavalry organization which went to war on the wind. All hinged on the helicopter: firepower, maneuver, command and control, reconnaissance and logistics. Mountains and jungles were not obstacles to the 1st Cavalry Division; it could turn any battlefield into a three-dimensional nightmare for the enemy.

The division was commanded by Maj. Gen. Harry W.O. Kinnard, a WWII paratrooper who, as chief of staff of the famed 101st Airborne Division, had helped plan the defense of Bastogne in December 1944. A tough, barrel-chested Texan, Kinnard was one of the principal architects of the airmobile concept and had commanded this finely honed division for almost three years while it underwent experimental tests as the 11th Air Assault Division (Experimental) at Ft. Benning, Ga.

When the 1st Cavalry finally arrived in Vietnam in September 1965, it went directly to a base which its advance party had hacked out of the jungle at An Khe, midway between Pleiku and Qui Nhon astride strategic Highway 19. There, it was close enough to be supplied by sea (from Qui Nhon) and distant enough to strike out at the enemy anywhere in the central highlands.

Within days of its arrival, Gen. Kinnard started the division probing for the enemy in company strength.

Both the American and North Vietnamese commands recognized that mobility would be the key to any confrontation in the highlands: American technological mobility versus North Vietnamese foot mobility. The NVA commanders watched with great interest as the base at An Khe filled up with men, artillery and helicopters. However, in the end they determined that the 1st Cavalry Division was too far away to play a decisive role in the upcoming battle. They decided to stick with their original plan — a serious error, since they thereby gave the Americans the gift of surprise, a rare commodity in any battle and one of which the 1st Cavalry would take full advantage.

The curtain-raiser for what would officially become known as the Pleiku Campaign was to occur at the Special Forces border camp at Plei Me, some 25 miles southwest of Pleiku. While the 33rd NVA Regiment laid siege to the camp, the 32nd would set an ambush for the expected relief force from Pleiku.

During the late afternoon of 19 October, NVA gunners started to pound Plei Me. Although well dug in, the defenders' casualties began to mount. Gen. Vinh Loc, a member of the Vietnamese royal family and II Corps commander in Pleiku, immediately readied a relief column to aid the beleaguered camp, but as the hours passed and the NVA, whose strength was overwhelming, did not try to crush the tiny garrison, he became suspicious. Loc decided to delay sending the relief force. The fact was, he believed, he could not both defend Pleiku and relieve Plei Me. So he waited.

The NVA continued to pour fire into the camp, patiently waiting for the South Vietnamese relief force. Four days passed. Finally, Gen. Loc coordi-

nated with the senior American officer in the area, Lt. Gen. Stanley ("Swede") Larson, who immediately airlifted a battalion of the 1st Cavalry to cover Pleiku while Vinh Loc went to the rescue of the camp at Plei Me.

On 23 October, a strong South Vietnamese relief column, spearheaded by armor, raced toward Plei Me. As expected, it was hit hard by the 32nd NVA Regiment. In the ensuing fierce engagement, the South Vietnam Army (ARVN) troops stoutly beat off the communists and inflicted heavy losses on them. Badly hurt, the 32nd broke contact and slipped away during the night, possibly toward Cambodia. The ARVN force, also badly shaken, did not have the will to pursue.

Larson took the initiative and ordered the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry, under the command of Col. Elvy B. Roberts, a 1943 graduate of West Point, to search for the fleeing NVA. Early the next morning, helicopters placed several batteries of artillery in position to support the relief column. The following day, ARVN armor broke the week-long siege of Plei Me.

By 26 October, with their opening move checked, Front headquarters and the two NVA regiments sought to slip away westward. Gen. Westmoreland smelled a kill and quickly launched a series of spoiling attacks to throw the enemy off balance. Westmoreland's decision would pit Americans against North Vietnamese for the first time in open combat on a more or less equal basis. As the NVA division and the 1st Cavalry squared off against one another, U.S. staff officers in Saigon, aware of the high stakes and the even odds, could only hold their breath.

Gen. Westmoreland issued the order: "Find and destroy the North Vietnamese forces." Gen. Kinnard described it as a mission of "unlimited offense." His tactical area of operations (TAOR) covered more than 900 square miles of jungle-shrouded mountains, a chunk of real estate approximately the size of Rhode Island. This rugged country had long been the enemy preserve. Kinnard directed his 1st Brigade to start beating the bush for the elusive foe.

After four days of searching, elements of Lt. Col. John B. Stockton's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, made contact with the NVA along the Tae River near an enemy hospital. After a brisk fire fight they drove the enemy back into the jungle. A prize from that encounter was a map found on a dead NVA officer, showing unit locations and routes designated for use by both enemy regiments. Based on this intelligence coup, Kinnard redirected his search pattern to intercept the retreating foe.

On 9 November, the 1st Brigade was relieved by the 3rd — the Gary Owen Brigade. Its name was a matter of pride to 3rd Brigade troopers. Originally a



Gaelic song sung by the Irish Lancers, "Gary Owen" was adopted by the 7th Cavalry Regiment of Lt. Col. George A. Custer when he took command after the Civil War. A mark of 7th Cavalry *esprit*, the name and new words to the song came to Vietnam with the Brigade. The 3rd's forces consisted of the 1st and 2nd Bns., 7th Cavalry, joined for this operation by the 2nd Bn., 5th Cavalry.

Concerned that the North Vietnamese might get away entirely, Kinnard directed Col. Thomas W. Brown, the 3rd Brigade commander, to employ his units south and southeast of Plei Me. Brown, a tall, lean officer, well-schooled in airborne techniques and experienced in infantry tactics, began on 10 November to press the search vigorously with squad and platoon saturation patrolling.

For three days, it proved fruitless for the air-cavalrymen. Kinnard ordered Brown to search westward toward the

Cambodian border. Brown focused his attention on the densely wooded area south of the Ia Drang River at the base of the Chu Pong Massif, a rugged mountain range straddling the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

On 10 November, the NVA also set a new strategy into motion. Gen. Man, undismayed by heavy losses thus far at Plei Me, decided to try again. The attack was set for 16 November. The staging area his headquarters selected in preparation for the new attack included the same terrain Col. Brown had chosen to search.

The 33rd NVA Regiment, originally a 2,200-man fighting force, had lost 890 killed, 100 missing and 500 wounded during the Plei Me debacle. The regiment was now reorganizing in the valley between the Ia Drang River and Hill 542, the most prominent peak of the Chu Pong in this area. Thirteen kilometers



Members of crack "Blue Platoon" (Aero Rifle Platoon) provided recon for 1st of the 9th Cav. PFC Gary Davis secures rear with M60 MG while Sp/4 Kent Zerr checks out bunker with .45 at the ready. "Blues" would be quickly inserted to check spottings by aerial observers and assess damage inflicted by helicopter gun ships, B-52 strikes and pursue enemy elements. Bravo troop scouts made first contact with NVA troops in October 1965 to kick off Pleiku campaign. Photo: U.S. Army

westward on the northern bank of the Ia Drang was the 32nd NVA Regiment, still a formidable fighting force despite its recent battle losses

The newly arrived 66th NVA Regiment would lead the second attack. By 11 November, its three battalions were in place along both banks of the Ia Drang, a few kilometers west of the 33rd. Although Gen. Man intended to reinforce the three regiments with a bat-

alion each of 120mm mortars and 14.5mm twin-barrel anti-aircraft guns, both units were still on the trail in Cambodia, en route to the staging area.

However, once Col. Brown shifted the 3rd Brigade's search westward toward the Chu Pong, Gen. Man's plan for Plei Me was no longer viable. But the new situation opened up the tantalizing possibility of trapping and destroying one of the American battalions. Man cloistered his troops in the crevices of the Chu Pong, waiting to spring his trap.

On 13 November, Col. Brown ordered Lt. Col. Harold G. (Hal) Moore, Jr., the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry commander, to execute an airmobile assault into the Ia Drang Valley north of the Chu Pong peak early the next morning and to conduct search-and-destroy operations through 15 November.

Often called flamboyant by other officers, Hal Moore was in fact a very con-

trolled man, capable of fierce concentration one minute and extroverted affability the next. As a result, he was impatient with the shortcomings of others. Born in Bardstown, Ky., on 13 February 1922, the son of an insurance salesman, he went to work at 17 for Sen. Happy Chandler, later the commissioner of baseball. After a year, Moore received an appointment to West Point, graduating in 1945. He served as a company commander during the Korean War, 1952-53, and later with NATO forces in Norway for three years, learning Norwegian and becoming an expert in cross-country skiing.

While preparing for his assignment in Vietnam, Lt. Col. Moore earned an MA in international affairs at George Washington University; he wrote his thesis on Laos and immersed himself in the writings of Mao Tse-Tung. After his arrival in Vietnam, the 43-year-old Moore took a copy of Bernard Fall's classic, *Street Without Joy*, an account of the French defeat along Highway 1, to the site of the ambush by the Viet-Minh of *Groupe Mobile* 100 near An Khe. He read Fall's description of the French unit's fate while sitting by the roadside, picking out terrain features as he read.

If Moore had a weakness, it was involving himself in the most minute details of his command instead of leaving them to his staff so that he could concentrate on the bigger picture. The North Vietnamese would soon begin to test the innermost resources of this officer who would become known to his men as "Yellow Hair."

In response to Col. Brown's orders, Moore returned to his command at Plei Me and ordered a reconnaissance flight over the Ia Drang to select a primary landing zone (LZ) and secondary support zones for his ready-reserve and artillery support bases. From the air, the terrain looked moderately open: tall, brown elephant grass under 100-foot trees. On the ground, however, the undulating terrain was pocked with giant eight-foot-high anthills. The jungle grew denser toward Chu Pong and a dry creek bed ran along the western edge of what would become LZ X-Ray.

When a second helicopter reported seeing communication wire in the area of X-Ray, Moore told his battalion to saddle up. The 1st Bn., 7th Cavalry, would land on X-Ray with only 68 percent of its strength, 20 officers and 411 men of an authorized 23 and 610. The 1st Bn., 7th Cav, would hit X-Ray loaded for bear. Each rifleman carried at least 300 rounds of M16 ammunition and each grenadier was ordered to bring three dozen high-explosive shells for his 40mm grenade launcher. Machine-gun crews were to transport 800 rounds of linked 7.62mm ammunition for their M60s, and every man was to have two M26 fragmentation grenades. There were to be at least two 66mm M72 light

assault weapons per squad and six 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 chop-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

was loaded, cocked, round in the chamber and off-safe, damn the accidental discharges.

When the ambush exploded, so did the column, ambushees stunning — for just long enough — the ambushers, and, although relatively undrilled in such a procedure, moving their armored vehicles into a circle, just like wagon trains of the old American West are supposed to have done when attacked by Indians.

Recollections of that night — darkness fell shortly after the attack — are unclear, mostly ear-shattering explosions from large-bore weapons and pounding of heavy and medium machine guns from both sides, vivid flashes briefly illuminating the scene. Soldiers riding on or in the vehicles, taking cover behind and around them.

Soon after daylight, the firing dwindled as the North Vietnamese skillfully began slipping away, rear elements remaining behind long enough to ensure a successful disengagement, one of the most difficult maneuvers in warfare.

Most troops in the column found to their surprise that they were alive and unhurt. Casualties as measured in those days were termed light to moderate.

The young major, looking calm and relatively fresh and clean, moved about among his men.

Analysts later concluded that this was almost a classic stalemate: The column did not reach Plei Me and relieve it on schedule, but neither was it wiped out nor terribly mangled as the North Vietnamese planned. Some American officers who despised the French and had not much more regard for the ARVN allies, said it *had* to be the first time in history a Viet Minh or Viet Cong ambush did not prove totally successful — they ascribed this to American influence.

And the column had succeeded both in remaining intact and in keeping the North Vietnamese occupied, unable to hit, win and dash off immediately to rejoin their colleagues in the Plei Me attack.

Plei Me did get relief — with a vengeance — from the 1st Cavalry Division. Through a strange coincidence, the camp commander, Capt. Harold Moore, learned later that much of the relief force was commanded by a namesake, Lt. Col. Hal Moore, CO of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, a key maneuver element in the Ia Drang/Chu Pong fighting.

When Hal Moore and the 7th and the 5th Cavalry had done with Chu Pong/Ia Drang, any doubts as to the efficacy of airmobility or the Cavalry Division's skill and courage became forever resolved.

had a clear and eerie sensation that a real fight was in the making.

By midday, most of the battalion had arrived. By then, also, the North Vietnamese had worked their way forward into assaulting positions.

While checking the LZ, one squad flushed out an NVA prisoner. He was immediately taken to Col. Moore's intelligence officer, Capt. Thomas Metsker, and Mr. Nik, a civilian interpreter, for questioning. The North Vietnamese was unarmed when found and dressed in dirty khaki trousers and shirt with a serial number on one of its epaulets; he carried an empty canteen. He declared he was a lieutenant in the North Vietnamese Army and that there were three NVA battalions on the mountain above the landing zone which wanted very much to kill Americans but had been unable to make contact with them. This suited the feisty Moore just fine.

Based on information received from the prisoner, Moore told Capt. Herren to intensify his search and prepare to assume Co. C's mission of exploring the ground at the foot of Chu Pong, giving special attention to the finger and a draw to the northwest. For the move northwest, Capt. Herren directed Lt. Deveny's 1st Plt. to move toward the finger and 2nd Lt. Henry T. Herrick's 2nd Plt. to the right. He told both officers to advance abreast. Positioning 2nd Lt. Dennis J. Deal's 3rd Plt. behind the first as a reserve, Capt. Herren and his company moved out.

Deveny drew ahead of Herrick's platoon after crossing the dry creek bed and at 1245 hours, his platoon encountered an NVA force of about platoon size. The inexperienced Deveny was quickly flanked, taking heavy small-arms fire.

First Air Cav 81mm mortar crew in action in Plei Me campaign, fall 1965. Photo: Harry W.O. Kinnard



His platoon was pinned down and taking casualties. Herren, in an attempt to relieve the pressure, radioed Lt. Herrick to establish contact with the 1st Plt.'s right flank.

A few minutes after Herren's order, the pointman of Herrick's 2nd Plt. bumped into a squad of NVA soldiers moving toward X-Ray. The startled enemy turned and scurried back along the trail. Firing, the 2nd Plt. followed in hot pursuit. They soon began to receive sporadic, ineffective enfilade fire. The lead squads were now at the crest of the finger, about 100 meters from the dry creek bed.

Lt. Herrick was determined to continue the sweep with all three squads on line and machine guns on the flanks. As he was about to move forward, his men spotted about 20 NVA soldiers scrambling toward two large anthills. Third Squad opened fire. A grenadier found the range, and in less than a minute was pumping round after round into the NVA ranks. Screams mingled with the sound of explosions.

Suddenly, without warning, a blistering volley of enemy fire erupted from the right flank. The opening fusillade killed the grenadier and pinned down the rest of the squad. Herrick quickly deployed his two M60 machine guns against the attacking force and yelled to 3rd Squad leader, S.Sgt. Clyde E. Savage, to pull back under covering fire of the machine guns.

Within minutes, fire lashed the 3rd Platoon from all sides. Covered by the blazing M60s, Sgt. Savage managed to withdraw his squad toward the platoon, carrying the M79 of the dead grenadier, who lay sprawled where he had fallen, .45 pistol clutched in his right hand.

The tempo of enemy fire picked up; mortars and B-40 rockets rained down on the cavalymen. The squad reached the main body of the platoon and joined

the others in a hastily formed 25-meter defensive perimeter.

The machine-gunners were still struggling toward the perimeter. One team managed to crawl into the small circle of prone cavalymen, but enemy fire cut down all four in the other team. Seizing the M60 of the fallen team, the North Vietnamese turned it against the American positions.

Capt. Herren radioed Col. Moore, reporting he was under attack by at least two enemy companies, had a squad and a platoon in deep trouble and had expended his 40 rounds of 81mm high-explosive ammo. Moore now realized that his battalion's baptism of fire would be "a fight to the finish."

On hearing the exchange of infantry fire, NVA gunners, with their usual accuracy, brought a barrage of rocket and mortar fire crashing down on X-Ray. Startled cavalymen hit the ground. The scattered anthills, which absorbed some of the whistling shrapnel, suddenly looked more friendly.

Col. Moore immediately turned to the commander of Co. A, Capt. Ramon A. (Tony) Nadal II, a former Special Forces

officer on a second Vietnam tour, and ordered him to rush a platoon to Herren to be used to get through to Herrick. Nadal was to follow with his remaining two platoons and link up with Co. B's left flank. Moore then turned to Capt. Robert H. Edwards, who had just landed with some of his troops, and directed him to set up a blocking position southwest of X-Ray, just inside the tree line, where he could cover Co. A's exposed left flank. Moore knew this was a gamble, since he had only Co. D left as a reaction force, and he still had to defend an entire landing zone in all directions. By thus positioning Edwards' company, Moore was exposing his rear, but in light of the rapidly developing situation, which bore out what the prisoner had told him, it seemed his only alternative.

The battalion operations officer, S-3 Capt. Gregory P. (Matt) Dillon, was hovering above X-Ray, trying to relay the course of the battle to Col. Brown at Brigade headquarters. Col. Moore had established his command post (CP) near a large anthill in the center of X-Ray. He radioed Dillon to request air strikes, artillery and aerial rocket fire, starting on

the lower fringes of Chu Pong's slopes, then working first over the western, and next the southern enemy approaches to X-Ray. Secondary targets would be the draws leading down from the mountain and any suspected or sighted enemy mortar positions. Priority was to be given to requests for fire support from the embattled companies.

Within minutes after Dillon relayed the request, Pleiku-based Air Force F-100s and Huey aerial rocket ships began blasting the target areas.

Although the 21st Artillery batteries at LZ Falcon responded quickly, their fire was ineffective. Dust and smoke made it difficult for artillery spotters to pinpoint locations for close-in support. Col. Moore radioed the spotter to "walk" the fire down the mountain toward the landing zone from the south and the west; soon they were close enough to take their toll of the NVA infantry battling the Americans.

Anxious to assist Co. B, Capt. Nadal radioed his 2nd Plt. leader, 2nd Lt. Walter J. Marm, forward. Marm immediately formed a skirmish line and moved from the landing zone toward the



Determined Col. Hal Moore was one of most effective commanders to serve in Vietnam. He had a nose for locating elusive NVA and VC. Moore retired in 1977 as a lieutenant general and now helps manage a ski resort in Colorado. Photo: U.S. Army

sound of the guns. He planned to join Co. B's left flank and push through to Lt. Herrick's perimeter. A few moments later, just as he reached 2nd Lt. Deal's 3rd Plt., he spotted a force of khaki-clad enemy soldiers crossing their front.

Both Deal and Marm had apparently met the left enveloping pincer which had initially flanked Herrick and was now attempting to surround Co. B. A fierce fire fight ensued, both sides taking casualties. The enemy suddenly broke contact and tried to maneuver behind Marm through the creek bed, although Marm was unaware of this.

When the North Vietnamese of the flanking force, estimated at company size, entered the dry creek bed, they ran headlong into the rest of Co. A. Tony Nadal, eager to join the fight, had moved his remaining two platoons forward. The 3rd Plt. met the enemy first in the creek bed. Firing was so close that it was almost impossible for each side to miss its targets.

In the savage fighting that followed, Plt. leader 2nd Lt. Robert E. Taft was hit in the throat and died instantly. He was moving to help a downed squad

leader and never learned that the trooper was already dead. Recoiling from the first shock, the men of the left half of 3rd Plt. climbed onto the creek bank where, with men of the 1st Plt., they poured murderous fire into the enemy.

As the fire fight erupted in the dry creek bed, more elements of Co. C and the lead troopers of Co. D landed at X-Ray in the first eight Hueys of the fifth airlift. They touched down in a hail of automatic-weapon and B40 rocket fire.

All hell seemed concentrated on the LZ as NVA gunners tried desperately to destroy the choppers, which took numerous hits. None were shot down, but two were disabled on the ground.

Capt. Louis R. LeFebvre, the Co. D commander, in the lead helicopter, could see the air strikes and artillery fire slamming into the ground around X-Ray. Leaning forward to unhook his seat belt as the aircraft touched down, he felt a bullet crease his neck. Instinctively, he turned to his right — and saw his radio operator slump forward, still buckled in, blood oozing from a bullet hole in the left side of his head. Grab-

bing the dead man's radio, LeFebvre jumped from the helicopter and rushed with four other men toward the relative safety of the dry creek bed, some 35 meters short of the tree line.

Fire was so heavy that Col. Moore radioed the remaining eight choppers off. Rocket and mortar fire, the crash of artillery volleys and the thunderclap of air strikes ringing the small clearing blended into a continuous roar.

Meanwhile, Capt. LeFebvre and his small group hooked up with Co. A's two platoons and quickly joined the firing from their position in the creek bed. The captain recognized the need for more firepower. He called for his antitank platoon, which had come in with him on the last flight and was waiting on the LZ for instructions. Acting platoon leader S.Sgt. George Gonzales replied, "On the way." LeFebvre then yelled to his mortar-platoon leader, 1st Lt. Raul E. Requena-Taboada, to send his radio-telephone operator (RTO) forward as a replacement for the dead man.

Just as the radio operator joined him,



CH-47 Chinooks were part of extensive program during 11th Air Assault Division tests to slingload all types of equipment to support grunts. One of the 11th's mottos was, "If you can't slingload it on a hook, you're better off without it." Photo: *Army Aviation Digest*

Capt. LeFebvre looked up and saw Capt. Herren, who told him there were enemy soldiers south in the direction from which he had come. The three men took positions beside one another and joined the line of fire. In rapid succession, the RTO was killed and LeFebvre's right arm shattered by a fusillade of enemy small-arms fire; Taboada received a severe leg wound. Herren quickly applied a tourniquet to LeFebvre's arm, before grabbing his M16 and resuming fire.

With half the fifth lift landed, Co. C had all but three Huey loads. While the Co. A fight raged, Capt. Edwards, following Col. Moore's instructions, quickly moved his platoons into a blocking position adjacent to Nadal's right flank. His move came none too soon. Scant minutes later, a strong enemy force hit Co. C from the southwest and west.

Lying prone, the Americans put out a withering volley of M16 fire. The NVA troops, an estimated reinforced company, wore helmets and web equipment and, like those who had hit Cos. A and B, were well-camouflaged. With the help of well-placed air strikes and artillery fire, however, Co. C beat them off, inflicting heavy casualties. The cavalrymen's fire support was becoming the primary difference between the North Vietnamese and the Americans.

Col. Moore's gamble in positioning Edwards' force south rather than north of Nadal's paid dividends; by the timely commitment of Cos. A and C, he had so far frustrated enemy attempts to overrun the LZ. But his rear was still exposed. He directed Edwards to tie in and coordinate with Co. D to his left, extending the perimeter south and southeast into the brush.

The fighting intensified and the noise, smoke and confusion that reign on every battlefield increased. Hit by heavy enemy ground fire while making a low-level firing pass over X-Ray, an A-1E Skyraider, trailing smoke and flames, crashed two kilometers from the LZ, killing the pilot. When enemy soldiers tried to reach the wreckage, helicopter gunships destroyed it with rocket fire.

At Brigade headquarters, Col. Brown anxiously monitored the battle by radio. After the report of Co. B's contact and its aftermath, he decided to check out the situation by helicopter. As the battle raged below him, he realized that the NVA were hell-bent on annihilating Moore's command and that he would soon need help. As soon as he returned to Plei Me, he started to make contingency plans. Then Moore called, asking for another rifle company. The only one available at Brigade headquarters was Co. B, 2nd Bn., 7th Cavalry, which Brown immediately attached to the 1st Bn., 7th Cavalry. He then notified the hard-working 229th Assault Helicopter Bn. (Winged Assault), commanded by Lt. Col. Robert S. Keller, to prepare the



Keeping an eye on the division, Maj. Gen. Harry W.O. Kinnard, commander of experimental 11th Air Assault Division and first commander of the 1st Air Cavalry, infused division with his own style and elan. After slight eye injury, Kinnard added division insignia to his eye patch. Photo: Harry W.O. Kinnard

THE FIRST TEAM PATCH

by Robert T. Oles

The 1st Cavalry Division patch is officially the largest in the U.S. Army. Its size and design come from the history and tradition of the Division and the United States Cavalry.

In 1921, when the 1st Cavalry Division was formed at Camp Bliss, Texas, Col. Ben H. Dorcy, commanding officer of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, and his wife, Gladys, affectionately known to Division troopers and officers as "Mother Dorcy," designed the unit's shoulder sleeve insignia.

The patch was designed to meet the War Department's three main requirements for official approval of a division insignia in 1921: 1) It must bind men together in a common devotion; 2) it must be an easily recognizable sign by which men could reassemble after battle; 3) it must be a word picture that would inspire men of the division.

"The patch is big, worn by big men who go places and do things," said Mother Dorcy prior to her death in 1974. A more pragmatic reason for its size was the War Department's requirement that it had to be large enough to be seen through the dust at Camp Bliss.

The shield shape represents the chivalry and valor of the medieval knight. The bar, always shown on a coat of arms ascending from right to left, represents a scaling ladder used to breach castle walls.

The love of the cavalryman for his mount is represented by the horse's

head, which was designed to face forward, symbolic of the charge. At the time of its design, there was no reason to know that the patch would ever be worn on the right sleeve, as is now the custom for those who have served in combat with the Division.

During the Vietnam War, special patches were manufactured in the RVN with the horse's head reversed so that when worn on the right sleeve the steed would still face forward. Although it was an unauthorized modification of an official insignia, the change was tacitly accepted.

The original colors of the patch were yellow and blue. According to Mother Dorcy, the bright yellow liner of Col. Dorcy's old dress-cape was the cloth on which the first design was drawn. She believed that a "golden sunset" on the Texas prairie was as influential as the traditional cavalry yellow. The blue was later changed to black, for "iron," emblematic of the transition from horse to tank and armor. The yellow has remained, since it is also the official color of armor.

Troopers of the First Team call their patch "the horse blanket," and many who are transferred to another division complain that no other patch can cover the shadow when the 1st Cavalry Division's is removed.

The only time its size was appropriate came when the 2d Brigade (Air Cavalry Combat Brigade) separated from the 1st Cavalry Division to become the 6th Cavalry Brigade (Air Combat). Its design for the new patch was the same shape as the First Team's because of their mutual heritage.

Brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Charles Canedy, tried to get the new 6th Cavalry patch approved in the same size as the 1st Cavalry Division's, but the Department of the Army denied the request, saying that the size of the First Team patch had become too significant historically.



In jungle devastated from three days of continuous shelling, troops of B Co., 2nd Bn., 7th Cavalry charge forward on patrol beyond perimeter of American positions in Ia Drang Valley. This unit took several wounded from sniper fire shortly after photo was taken. Photo: H.W.O. Kinnard

airlift for Co. B.

After seeing X-Ray, Col. Brown knew that Moore needed more than one rifle company to save his battalion. He called Lt. Col. Robert B. Tully, who commanded the 2nd Bn., 5th Cavalry (The

NVA prisoners — young, wounded and scared — were captured during fight for LZ X-Ray by the 1st Bn., 7th Cav. After treatment by battalion medics, prisoners were transferred to Brigade HQ for interrogation that would provide valuable information to Col. Moore at X-Ray. Photo: Hal Moore



Black Knights), and ordered the quick assembly of Tully's unit at LZ Victor, three kilometers southeast. Since he did not relish the idea of sending a steady stream of helicopters into what might still be a hot LZ, Brown told Tully to move by foot to reinforce Moore's battalion at X-Ray the next morning. He then directed the remainder of the 2nd Bn., 7th Cavalry, to move to LZ Macon, a few kilometers north of X-Ray, where it would be closer to the fight and available if necessary.

Col. Moore, in trying to minimize helicopter exposure to enemy fire, personally directed the air traffic into X-Ray. Two choppers were disabled while landing. Both crews escaped injury, and were evacuated almost immediately; the choppers were secured by Co. D troopers, waiting later lift-out.

On the ground, the pile-up of wounded concerned Col. Moore, as did

the heat, dust and lack of water. The problem was alleviated somewhat by the arrival of medical supplies, four fresh aidmen and the battalion surgeon. They immediately established an emergency aid station near Moore's CP. Not wanting to expose medical evacuation helicopters to enemy fire, Moore and the helicopter-lift company commander, Maj. Crandall, arranged to have casualties evacuated to LZ Falcon on departing lift ships. Thanks to the help of a pathfinder team, which arrived at 1600 hours, this system worked well.

The helicopter pilots came into X-Ray time and again, ignoring enemy fire. Col. Moore would later say of his helicopter support, "I have the highest respect and admiration for the courage of the young UH pilots and crews who ran a gauntlet of enemy fire to help us. They never refused to come in." The Vietnam War belonged, in great measure, to the helicopter pilot; he was young, brash, and even though casualties were high among his breed, he felt nearly indestructible. He was the hot-shot P-51 fighter pilot reincarnated.

It became clearer as time passed that the 1st Bn., 7th Cavalry of the Gary Owen Brigade faced an aggressive, well-trained, expertly camouflaged, well-armed enemy that knew how to shoot and was willing to sacrifice life. It looked as if the 1st Bn., 7th Cavalry at Ia Drang might suffer the same fate as its regimental predecessor at Little Big Horn, some 90 years earlier. 突

(To be continued.)

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