

FOR THE MEN, AND THEIR
FAMILIES, OF THE 2ND BATTALION,
173D AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEP)

**WE TRY
HARDER!**

2/503d
VIETNAM
******newsletter*



November 2012, Issue 47

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Contact: rto173d@cfl.rr.com

http://corregidor.org/VN2-503/newsletter/issue_index.htm

OPERATION MACARTHUR, THE BATTLES AT DAK TO

Dedicated to the men who fought, survived and died during the battles at Dak To, November 1967



“On a dusty knoll near Dak To, survivors of Hill 875 stood in salute. Before them, arranged in the Army tradition, were 98 pairs of boots – one pair for each man of the Second Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade, who died on that hill and nearby ridges. In all, the month-long battle of Dak To had taken the lives of 280 Americans – and 1,641 North Vietnamese. As the battalion commander read aloud names of the dead, a sergeant who had lost four buddies collapsed and sat weeping in the red dust.”



"Courage-Devotion-Patriotism-Sacrifice"

Dak To

November 1967

~ 23rd Psalm ~

**For The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in
green pastures;
He leads me beside the still
waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of
righteousness
In His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they
comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall
follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of
the LORD
Forever.**



Rev. Jack Kelley, LTC (Ret)
Former CO, A/2/503, RVN
JackTKelley@aol.com





By direction of the President of the United States of America,
The Presidential Unit Citation (Army) for extraordinary Heroism
is awarded to:

173d AIRBORNE BRIGADE



The units of the 173d Airborne Brigade distinguished themselves by extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy during Operation MacArthur in Kontum Province, Republic of Vietnam from 6 November to 23 November 1967. The 173d Airborne Brigade and its assigned and attached units moved to Dak To in the central highlands during the period 1 to 6 November 1967 with the mission of initiating search-and-destroy operations in conjunction with elements of the United States 4th Infantry division and allied forces. Opposed by the elite 24th, 32nd, 66th and 174th North Vietnamese Infantry Regiments supported by the 40th Artillery Regiment of the 1st North Vietnamese Infantry Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade and its assigned and attached units displayed exceptional gallantry, determination, esprit de corps and professional skill in defeating a heavily armed, well-trained, well-disciplined and numerically superior enemy operating largely from well-prepared and heavily fortified positions. From the combat assault on Hill 823 on 6 November to the final victory on Hill 875 on Thanksgiving Day, the Battle of Dak To was characterized by countless displays of gallantry, relentless aggressiveness and quick reaction on the part of all United States Forces involved. During the establishment and defense of fire support bases and combat assaults into enemy strongholds, individual accounts of unhesitating courage and tenacity to achieve final victory were made a part of history. For 18 days of continuous combat at pointblank range, the friendly forces relentlessly pressed the attack against seemingly invulnerable fortified positions until they were reduced and the enemy destroyed. The separate and combined actions of the Brigade resulted in hard-fought and unprecedented victory, rendering the 174th North Vietnamese Infantry Regiment combat-ineffective. The accomplishment of the mission by the officers and troopers of the 173d Airborne Brigade and assigned and attached units was in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflects great credit upon their units and the United States Army.



~ Prelude ~

By early October, U.S. intelligence reported that the North Vietnamese were withdrawing regiments from the Pleiku area to join those in Kontum Province, thereby dramatically increasing the strength of local forces to that of a full division. In response, the 4th Infantry began moving the 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry and the 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry into Đắk Tô to launch Operation *MacArthur*. On 29 October, the 4/503 of the 173d Airborne Brigade was returned to the area as a reinforcement. The battalion was moved west of Đắk Tô to the CIDG camp at Ben Het to protect the construction of Fire Support Base 12 on 2 November.

On 3 November, Sergeant Vu Hong, an artillery specialist with the 6th PAVN Regiment, defected to the South Vietnamese and was able to provide U.S. forces with detailed information on the disposition of PAVN forces and their objectives, both at Đắk Tô and at Ben Het, 18 kilometers to the west. The North Vietnamese had fed approximately 6,000 troops into the area, most of which made up the 1st PAVN Division. The 66th PAVN Regiment was southwest of Đắk Tô preparing to launch the main attack while the 32nd PAVN Regiment was moved south to prevent any counterattacks against the 66th. The independent 24th PAVN Regiment held positions northeast of Đắk Tô to prevent reinforcement of the base from that direction. The 174th PAVN Regiment was northwest of Đắk Tô, acting as a reserve or an offensive force as the situation dictated. In addition, the 1st PAVN Division was supported by the 40th PAVN Artillery Regiment. The goal of these units was the taking of Đắk Tô and the destruction of a brigade-size American unit.



Major General William R. Peers, commander of the 4th Infantry Division and overall U.S. commander at Đắk Tô

The communist actions around Đắk Tô were part of an overall strategy devised by the Hanoi leadership, primarily that of General Nguyen Chi Thanh. The goal of operations in the area, according to a captured document from the B-3 Front Command, was "*to annihilate a major U.S. element in order to force the enemy to deploy as many additional troops to the Central Highlands as possible.*" As the Americans quickly discovered, the area had been well prepared by the North Vietnamese. The number and elaborateness of defensive preparations found by U.S. and ARVN troops indicated that some had been prepared as much as six months in advance. As General Peers noted: Nearly every key terrain feature was heavily fortified with elaborate bunker and trench complexes. He had moved quantities of supplies and ammunition into the area. He was prepared to stay.

After contact with the PAVN forces on the 4th and 5th of the month, General Schweiter received orders to move the rest of his brigade back to Đắk Tô. The immediate goal of the paratroopers was first to establish a base of operations and bolster the defenses at Ben Het. They would then begin to search for the headquarters of the 66th PAVN Regiment, which U.S. intelligence believed to be in the valley stretching south of FSB 12. Simultaneously, most of the remaining elements of the 4th Infantry Division moved into the area around Đắk Tô. They were joined by two First Air Cavalry battalions (the 1/12 and 2/8th Cavalry) and ARVN forces consisting of the four battalions of the 42nd Regiment and the 2nd and 3rd Airborne Battalions. By this time, the village and airstrip had become a major logistical base, supporting an entire U.S. division and airborne brigade and six ARVN battalions. The stage was set for a major pitched battle.



Brigadier General Leo H. Schweiter, commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade



The Battle for Hill 875 ~ Dak To

In the summer of 1967, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) initiated a series of attacks in western Kontum Province. To counter these, Major General William R. Peers commenced Operation Greeley using elements of the 4th Infantry Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade. This was designed to sweep PAVN forces from the jungle-covered mountains of the region. After a series of sharp engagements, contact with PAVN forces diminished in August leading the Americans to believe that they had withdrawn back across the border into Cambodia and Laos.

After a quiet September, US intelligence reported that PAVN forces around Pleiku were moving into Kontum in early October. This shift increased PAVN strength in the area to around division level. The PAVN plan was to utilize the 24th, 32nd, 66th, and 174th regiments to isolate and destroy a brigade-sized American force near Dak To. It was believed by the PAVN command that this would lead to the further deployment of American troops to the border regions which would leave South Vietnam's cities and lowlands vulnerable. To deal with this build-up of PAVN forces, Peers launched Operation MacArthur on November 3.

Peer's understanding of the enemy's intentions and strategy was greatly enhanced on November 3, following the defection of PAVN Sgt. Vu Hong. Alerted to each PAVN unit's location and objective, Peers' men began engaging the enemy the same day, disrupting the North Vietnamese plans for attacking Dak To. As elements of the 4th Infantry, 173rd Airborne, and the 1st Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry went into action they found that the North Vietnamese had prepared elaborate defensive positions on the hills and ridges around Dak To.

Over the ensuing three weeks, American forces developed a methodical approach to reducing PAVN positions. Once the enemy was located, massive amounts of firepower (both artillery and air strikes) were applied, followed by an infantry assault to secure to objective. In most instances, PAVN forces fought tenaciously, bloodying the Americans, before vanishing into the jungle. Key firefights in the

campaign occurred on Hills 823, 724, and 882. As these fights were taking place around Dak To, the airstrip became a target for PAVN artillery and rocket attacks. The worst of these took place on November 12, when rockets and shellfire destroyed several aircraft as well as detonated the base's ammunition and fuel depots.

In addition to the American forces, Army of Vietnam (ARVN) units also took part in the battle, seeing action around Hill 1416. The last major engagement of the Battle of Dak To began on November 19, when the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Airborne attempted to take Hill 875. After meeting initial success, the 2/503 found itself caught in an elaborate ambush. Surrounded, it was not relieved until the next day.

Resupplied and reinforced, the 503rd attacked the crest of Hill 875 on November 21. After savage, close-quarters fighting, the airborne troopers neared the top of the hill, but were forced to halt due to darkness. The following day was spent hammering the crest with artillery and air strikes, completely removing all cover.



Moving out on the 23rd, the Americans took the top of the hill after finding that the North Vietnamese had already

departed. By the end of November, the PAVN forces around Dak To were so battered that they were withdrawn back across the border ending the battle.

A victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese, the Battle of Dak To cost 376 US killed, 1,441 US wounded, and 79 ARVN killed. PAVN casualties are estimated between 1,000 to 1,445 killed. The Battle of Dak To saw US forces drive the North Vietnamese from the Kontum Province and decimated the regiments of the 1st PAVN Division. One of the "border battles" of late 1967, the Battle of Dak To did accomplish a key PAVN objective as US forces began to move out from cities and lowlands. By January 1968, half of all US combat units were operating away from these key areas.



~ Đắk Tô Airstrip ~



The build-up begins.

(Joel D. Meyerson, *Images of a Lengthy War*. Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1986)





~ AFTER ACTION REPORT ~
(Excerpts Only, Photos & Inserts Added)



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS 173D AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEPARATE)
APO San Francisco 96250

AVBE-SC

(Declassified)

30 December 1967

TO: Commanding General
4th Infantry Division
ATTN: 29th Military Historical Detachment
APO San Francisco 96262

1-503 Infantry
B Btry, 3-319th Arty
Engineer Demolition Team
3 Scout Dog Teams

The following Combat Operations After Action Report is submitted in accordance with unclassified message AVDDH-CG-MG-12-022 dated 1 December 1967.

2-503d Infantry
A Btry, 3-319th Arty
Engineer Demolition Team
4 Scout Dog Teams

General: During October 1967 increased enemy activity in the vicinity of DAK TO in KONTUM PROVINCE was noted. Intelligence sources revealed that large NVA forces were poised in the vicinity of DAK TO with the intention to conduct attacks on Special Forces and CIDG Forces in the DAK TO/DAK SEANG area. The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) minus the 3d Battalion (Airborne) 503d Infantry and Company D, 16th Armor Battalion was ordered to deploy by air to participate in Operation MACARTHUR in the DAK TO area of the CENTRAL HIGHLANDS. On 1 November 1967 the 4th Battalion (Airborne) 503d Infantry deployed to DAK TO. Increased enemy activity necessitated the deployment of the 1-503d Infantry, 2-503d Infantry, the remainder of the (?) Battalion, 319th Artillery, and E Troop, 17th Cavalry Squadron to DAK TO. The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate), in conjunction with elements fo the 4th Infantry Division, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and ARVN forces, conducted search and destroy operations in the DAK TO region through 1 December 1967.

4-503d Infantry
C Btry, 3-319th Arty
Engineer Demolition Team
4 Scout Dog Teams

OPCON to Brigade
23^d Mobile Strike Force Company
26th Mobile Strike Force Company
1st Battalion, 12th Infantry
1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry
1 Platoon, D/69th Armor
B Btry, 2-19th Arty
Brigade Control
HHC
3-319th Artillery
173d Engineer Company
E-17th Cavalry
173d Support Battalion
173d Signal Company (Prov)
335th AHC (DS)
173d MI Detachment
404th RRU Detachment
51st Chemical Detachment
46th PI Detachment
TACP (USAF)
24th MHD

Name of Operation: The Battle of DAK TO

References: Map Vietnam, etc.

Type of Operation: Search and Destroy

Date of Operation: 1 Nov. – 1 Dec. 1967

Location: Northern KONTUM PROVINCE in the vicinity of DAK TO.

Command HQ: 173d Abn Bde (Sep).

Reporting Officer: BG Leo H. Schweiter

Task Force Organization:

Operation MACARTHUR

Supporting Forces:

United States Air Force:

(1) Close Air Support, 804 Sorties, Total Ordnance Delivered: 981 Tons.

(2) B-52 Missions, 20 Strikes, 135 Sorties. Total Target Area, 49 Square Kilometers. Total Ordnance Delivered, 3348 Tons.



Results and Effectiveness: Tactical Air Support was extremely effective during this operation. Bomb damage assessments reflected numerous secondary explosions as a result of strikes and mortar and rocket positions were silenced on several occasions. Heavily reinforced bunkers and trench systems were difficult to detect and destroy even with the jungle canopy removed.

Timeliness: Sorties arrived within a useable time frame and were effectively employed. Immediate strikes were provided on a continuing basis. Close coordination with support channels prevented aircraft having to hold over the target for continuous periods. At no time when troops were in combat were aircraft not available.

Other Air Support Statistics.

3,653 hours were flown in support of The Battle of DAK TO.

22,500 passengers were transported by rotary wing aircraft during the operation.

3,700 tons of cargo were flown during the operation for a daily average of 148 tons.

Artillery Support Statistics, Missions Fired:

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Missions</u>	<u>Rounds Expended</u>
A-3-319	488	12,907
B-3-319	590	14,598
C-3-319	368	18,112
B-2-19	28	812



Troopers of the 173d Support Battalion in Vietnam

Army Aviation:

<u>Missions</u>	<u>Sorties</u>
Combat Assault	943
Armed Helicopter	402
Resupply	3934
Command and Liaison	1119
Aerial Reconnaissance	98
Psychological Operations	0
Aerial Observer	126
TOTAL	6522

“E” Troop, 17th Cavalry:

E Troop force comprised Trooper Headquarters, Three (3) Reconnaissance Platoons, LRRP Platoon, 30 ½ ton vehicles, 11 ¾ ton vehicles, 4 2½ ton vehicles, and 1 1500 gallon tanker. The unit was assigned Brigade Reaction Force, command post security, convoy escort, Eagle flight and search and destroy mission within the capability of the unit. Security of FSB Eagle was excellent. The troop remained on a 30 minute “ready status.”

173d Engineer Company:

The unit consisted of three line platoons, one bridge platoon, one water point section, one maintenance section and company headquarters. A two man engineer demolition team was assigned to each line company of the three infantry battalions. Each line platoon retained a readiness posture so as to provide immediate assistance to their supported infantry battalions. The engineers operated two water purification points to supply Brigade with potable water; cleared portions of Route 512 of mines from FSB 12 to bridge #2; cleared FSB 15 and FSB 16, utilizing Bangalore torpedoes and C-4 explosives; cleared an emergency LZ on Hill 875; constructed TOC, ASP and FDC bunkers and performed other engineering tasks at various fire support bases; constructed an underground TOC at FSB Eagle; constructed brigade roads, helicopter pads and the Battalion Medical and Brigade supply areas.

(continued....)



173d Military Police Platoon:



Military Police Platoon consisted of six nine-man squads operating in three locations simultaneously (AN KHE, PHU HIEP, and DAK TO). The unit provided escort to and from fire support bases as required; conducted raids on establishments in the DAK TO area to reduce the Vice and Narcotics operations; conducted town control in the village of TAN CANH and a roving patrol from TAN CANH to DAK TO to control traffic and to assist in the movement of convoys; established, maintained and controlled the PW Collection Point; investigated and prepared incident and offense reports; provided perimeter security and controlled all traffic entering and leaving the Brigade forward area; provided internal security for the Brigade TOC and Commanding General's personal guard; provided security for the COMUSMACV, other Generals, Field Grade Officers and dignitaries on 1 December 1967.

51st Chemical Detachment:

The Brigade Chemical Section supported by the 51st Chemical Detachment (DBRE), conducted offensive chemical missions in support of the 173d Airborne Brigade during The Battle of DAK TO. Defensive defoliation missions were conducted by the



Chemical Section using UH-1D helicopter and a 55 gallon capacity homemade spray apparatus. Three missions were flown, all in support of the 2-503 Inf. The target areas were heavily vegetated and close to the battalion's fire support base which provided excellent concealment for enemy ground or mortar attacks.

<u>Date</u>	<u>FSB</u>	<u>Coordinates of Target</u>
17 November 1967	16	Hill vic BQ 813154
27 November 1967	12	Stream vic BQ 870260
30 November 1967	12	Stream vic BQ 870260

The Chemical Section assisted the Chemical Staff Specialist of the 4-503d Inf in preparing flame throwers and thickened fuel for the offensive employment of flame on HILL 875.

The tactical effectiveness of the defoliation mission near FSB 16 was not realized because 2-503d Inf moved to FSB 12 soon after the mission was flown. At FSB 12 and FSB 16 the foliage is beginning to show effects of the herbicide. The defoliation of FSB 12 will result in assisting the overall defense of the CIDG Special Forces Camp now under construction at that location.

All missions were accomplished on time and in an efficient manner.

39th Scout Dog Platoon:



Pete Peters and Prince from the 39th Scout Dog Platoon

The scout dog team is most effectively employed by utilizing them as part of the point element. In open terrain the team should be directly in front of the formation. In thick or mountainous terrain the team should work behind the point man. This allows the point man to break trail, thus the dog has more freedom of movement. The dog does not exert as much energy when a trail is prepared for him

(continued....)



The scout dog teams were employed to provide early silent warning as to the enemy's presence. In several instances the dogs also alerted on medical and food caches, tunnel networks and extensive bunker complexes. The scout dogs worked as part of the point element on all movements. During the fight for Hill 875, once contact was made, the dogs were moved to the rear for their own protection. The manner in which the scout dog teams were used during the operation was highly successful. The overall condition of the animals plus the manner in which the dogs were used added to their effectiveness. Their alerts checked and gave our forces ample time to set up and maneuver. One handler and his dog were killed on 13 Nov with B-2-503 Inf. Should a handler be killed and or separated from his dog, a muzzle should be placed on the dog and the animal should be evacuated as soon as possible to the rear area.

One team was attached to the 173d Engineer Company to assist in mine clearing operations. The team received additional training on detection of trip wires which proved very effective. Once the team was employed, no mines, booby-traps or any type contact was made.

Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol Platoon (LRRP):



173d LRRP on patrol, 1967
(Web photo)

The LRRP Platoon moved to the forward operational area at DAK TO on 4 November 1967 by C-130 aircraft. Operations began on 12 November with the insertion of two teams between 0710 and 0725 hours. Throughout the Battle of DAK TO the LRRP's conducted a total of 8 missions (6 area reconnaissance missions and 2 area reconnaissance and prisoner snatch). The LRRP's

continued Operation MACARTHUR in the DAK TO area. The LRRP's were successful in either observing or making contact with the enemy on five missions. The remainder of the missions were successful to the extent that they provided information as to whether or not the enemy had been or presently was operating in the area.

Contact was made and small arms fire exchange on 3 missions, resulting in 5 NVA KIA (BC), 3 weapons captured, with 0 friendly losses. Also, enemy sightings were made with no exchange of fire. The normal LRRP reaction time, including AO reconnaissance, briefing of helicopter pilots, gunship pilots and the issue of operations orders during the operation was approximately 12 hours.

Intelligence:

Enemy Situation Prior to the Operation:

Prior to the commencement of the operation the following enemy units were believed to be in the area of interest. 1st NVA Div, 32d NVA Regt, 66th NVA Regt; 174th NVA Regt, 24th NVA Ret, 40th NVA Arty Regt, and the 304th VC Inf Bn. The enemy had the capability to attack the DAK TO complex with three NVA Regiments supported by the indirect fires of the 40th NVA Artillery Regiment, and to defend the battalion strength when contacted by US troops.

It was doubtful if he was capable of massing a regimental defense due to US Air and Artillery. The enemy could withdraw from the area at the time and place of his choosing; reinforce the battlefield with the 174th NVA Regt which was located west of DAK TO in the vicinity of the Cambodian border.



Bad guys moving south.



Order of Battle Findings and Summary of the area of operation:

A Hoi Chanh who rallied on 2 November at DAK RI village identified himself as a sergeant from a special reconnaissance element of the 66th NVA Regt. The rallier stated he was an artillery specialist and that the mission of the reconnaissance element was to reconnoiter and to prepare rocket positions. The Hoi Chanh stated that a major for whom he worked indicated the following attack plan: Elements of the 40th Arty located NE and SW of DAK TO to SF Camp, were to attack the camp and possibly the DAK TO district headquarters. The 66th and 32d NVA Regts, located south and southwest of the SF Camp, were to attempt to overrun the camp. The 174th NVA Regiment, located approximately 10 KM west of DAK SEANG SF Camp was to be in reserve. The 24th NVA Regt was located 15 KM north of DAK TO and had the mission of blocking reinforcements to the camp and preventing friendly forces from evacuating.

The mention of the 40th Arty Regt by the Hoi Chanh was the first mention of this unit. The 40th Arty Regt includes the 200th Arty Bn which is equipped with 120mm mortars and 122mm rockets. On 20 November 2-503d Inf received 120mm mortar fire to lend credence to the report that the 40th Arty Regt was in the area. There were no prisoners or returnees who made mention of this unit. No documents were captured to confirm the presence of this unit in the area of operations.

Documents captured 6 November identified C19, the Recon Company of the 66th Regt, and also identified elements of the 7th and 8th Bns of the 66th Regt. The 66th Regt was in contact with elements of the 1-503d Inf and 4-503d Inf. The 66th Regt suffered 104 KIA (BC). On 11 November, 1-503d Inf again engaged elements of the 66th Regt, killing 142 NVA (BC). The 66th Regt moved to the west into Cambodia after these engagements.

PW's and documents captured 16 November confirmed the presence of elements of the 174th Regt. The 174th Regt fought on Hill 875 with the 2-503d Inf. This action assisted the 32d NVA Regt, 66th NVA Regt, and command elements to withdraw from the area of operations and enter Cambodia.

Nong Truong 1 – 1st NVA Division is believed to have been directing the operations in the DAK TO area. The confirmation of 174th Regt in the area confirms the fact that the 174th Regt has probably replaced the 88th Regt in the 1st Division. The 174th has previously been carried as subordinate to the B3 Front. The 88th Regt has been reported to be operating in DARLAC Province. Terrain and Weather Analysis: The area of operations fall within KONTUM Province. The western boundary was the Cambodian and Laotian borders. The southern

most boundary was designated by the YB09 Z-W grid line. The northern most boundary was designated by the Y340 E-W grid line. The eastern most boundary was the DAK PSI River. The DAK POKO and DAK PSI Rivers are the major drainage systems in the area. The relief of the area is characterized by high mountain ranges interlaced by river valleys and streams. The vegetation is characterized by dense stands of bamboo in the low areas and on the mountain sides with a continuous canopy 40-70 feet high. There are some grasslands and savannah in the area. Major routes into the area are National Highway 14 and Command Route 512.

The weather during the Battle of DAK TO was characterized by little rainfall or thunderstorm activity. Cloudiness was at a minimum with ceilings from 2000 feet to 5000 feet. Low clouds, bases 3000 to 5000 feet, cover more than half the area less than 10% of the time. Temperatures ranged from 55-90+ degrees.

Mission:

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) conducts search and destroy operations in cooperation and coordination with ARVN forces within AO SPAATZ. Conduct reconnaissance with Mobile Strike Force Companies in AO, provide security for BEN HET Base complex. Establish liaison and be prepared to reinforce/relieve DAK SEANG and DAK PEK. Secure FSB.



2d Platoon, A/2/503, L-R: SSG Freeman, PFC Crank (RTO), PFC Hillishime, SP4 "Doc" Rigby
(Tom Remington photo)

(continued...)



Concept of Operation:

173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) deploy by airlift from AO BOLLING to KONTUM/DAK TO. On or about 1 November Task Force 4-503d Inf moves by air from TUY HOA to DAK TO (OPCON 4th Infantry Division) and then to BEN HET and conduct search and destroy operations. On or about 5 November Task Force 1-503d moves by air from TUY HOA to KONTUM (OPCON 4th Infantry Division) and then to BEN HET and conduct search and destroy operations. On or about 6 November Task Force 2-503d moves by air from TUY HOA to DAK TO and will become the division reaction force upon clearing DAK TO. Headquarters and support elements will move by air from TUY HOA to DAK TO. Upon closure of the Brigade in the DAK TO area units will revert to OPCON 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate).

Execution:

D+6 (31 October 1967)

Change in Task Force Organization: None. OPORD 2-67 published ordering a one battalion task force to DAK TO OPCON to the 4th Inf Div on 1 Nov 67.

D+7 (1 November 1967)

Task Force 4-503 Inf became OPCON to the 4th Infantry Division upon arrival at DAK TO.



Services at Dak To (Web photo)

D+8 (2 November 1967)

Elements of the 4-503d Inf finished the airlift to DAK TO at 1715 hours.

D+9 (3 November 1967)

Task Force 4-503d Inf at BEN HET OPCON to the 4th Inf Div.

D+10 (4 November 1967)

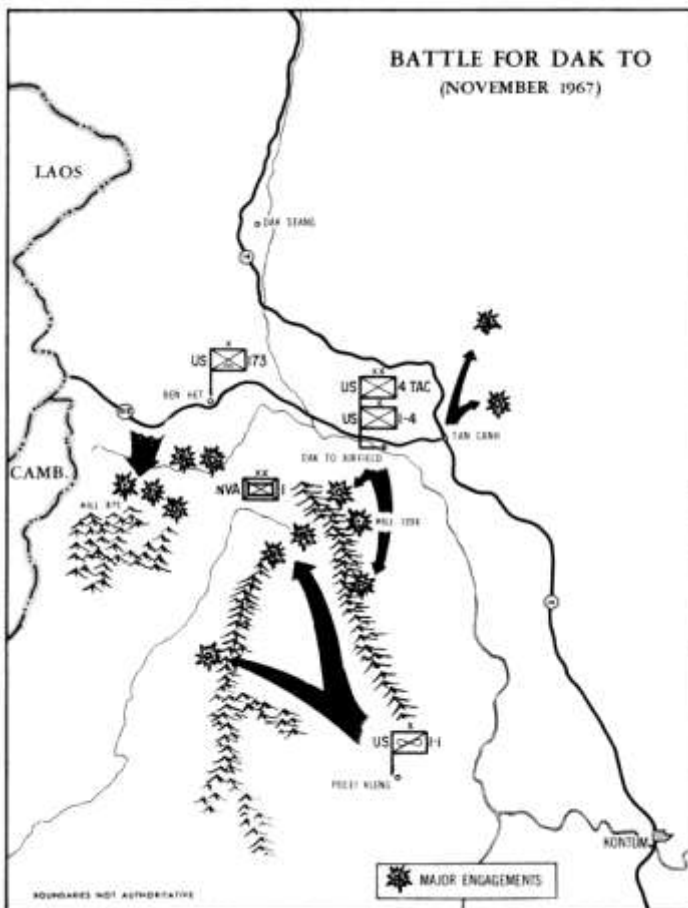
The Brigade prepared to move one company on one hour notice and Task Force 1-503d Infantry on six hours notice to DAK TO commencing at 0400 hours. FRAG ORDER 15 to OPORD 24-67 was published ordering this. Companies A, C and D/4-503d Inf initiated movement abreast by 0845 hours and continued search and destroy operations to the southwest. They had negative contact or sightings during the day and laagered at 1400 hours. Intelligence and LRRP contact reports indicate that enemy was occupying the area to the south west in strength. The unit was believed to be the 64th NVA Regiment.

D+11 (5 November 1967)

The 1-503d Infantry with E17th Cavalry OPCON and C-3-319th Artillery began a helilift to clear AO GANDER and to prepared for redeployment to DAK TO. E-17th Cavalry returned to Brigade control at PHU HIEP upon extraction from AO GANDER. The 4-503d Infantry helilifted from AO's PEAK and ARROW to PHU HIEP and prepared for the airlift to DAK TO.

The 4-503d Infantry initiated search and destroy operations to the southwest of their night laager site. At 1130 hours Company "C" discovered an enemy base camp at YB 839223. Company "A" was ordered to follow Company "D" as a reserve force as contact seemed imminent. At 1220 hours, "C" Company located another NVA/VC base camp at YB 840219 containing a large number of foxholes.

(continued....)



All elements closed into laager sites by 1630 hours and received the mission of establishing Fire Support Base 15 the following day. There was negative contact reported during the day.

D+12 (6 November 1967)

2-503d Infantry OPCON to the 4th Infantry Division. The 26th Mobile Strike Force Company OPCON to the 4-503d Infantry at 1240 hours. 1-503d Inf OPCON to the 4th Inf Div.

Upon arrival at DAK TO the 1-503d Infantry was deployed to FSB 12. Upon arrival "A" Company became the security force for FSB 12. "B" Company moved out on a road clearing operation to FSB 13 and "C" and "D" Companies initiated search and destroy operations in their assigned zones.

The 2-503d Infantry was lifted to DAK TO. Upon arrival they moved to YB 046210 where they were given responsibility of securing the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) Headquarters and were placed OPCON to the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division as the Division Reaction Force.

Companies A, C & D 4-503d Inf initiated movement to Hill 825 at 0845 hours. That morning 3 airstrikes were called in on Hill 823 beginning at 0815 hours. At 1300 hours, Company "D" received automatic weapons fire at YB 849201. At 1430 hours Company "B" made a cold LZ assault on Hill 823. Shortly afterwards they were attacked by NVA forces, and airstrikes, artillery and helicopter gunships were called in around the hill. At the same time, "D" Company was in heavy enemy contact. At 1510 hours, "A" Company was ordered to link up with "D" Company. It was established that the two companies were in contact with a reinforced enemy platoon on the hilltop. All contact was broken at 1900 hours with "C" Company laagering alone and "A" and "D" Companies laagering together at YB 849201. Contact continued on Hill 823 throughout the night. Total casualties for the battalion were 17 KIA and 37 WIA with enemy casualties unknown.

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

"D" Company deployed from Fire Support Base 12 on the morning of 6 November 1967 on an azimuth of 180 degrees. They moved by foot, shifting towards the southwest and west, approaching their objective, Hill 823. They were using map and compass navigation. At approximately 1130 hours, while heading on an azimuth of 270 degrees, the point man (SP4 Jurgesen) spotted VC Commo wire leading up a trail. Elements of "D" Company followed the wire for approximately 200 meters and returned to the company. Upon investigation, a white pith helmet was found. At this time, CPT Baird, the Company Commander, requested

permission to divert the company from its assigned mission in or to investigate the wire. The company immediately formed a perimeter and sent two squads (10 men per squad) out to cloverleaf on each side of the trail. The squads spent about an hour reconning the area and finally regrouped at 1230 hours. They then proceeded up the trail with a four man point (SP4 Jurgesen, SP4 Barnes, SP4 Hobbs and PFC Laird) with the 2d platoon, CIDG force and 1st platoon following in that order. As SGT Worley's squad started to move out of the platoon perimeter up the trail, when they received a burst of automatic fire from no more than 10 meters to their front.

At approximately 1300 hours, the point reported that the trail had begun to widen as it approached the top of the hill (75-100 meters away) and that they had come across fresh, bare footprints. The company formed a perimeter again and CPT Baird ordered the two lead squads to cloverleaf clockwise.



Calling in artillery on Hill 823 (Web photo)

LT Micheal Burton pulled them back and sent them around to the left flank as the 2d squad on the right supported with M-60 and M-79 fire.

The squad proceeded up to the edge of a small clearing when SP Moss spotted an NVA soldier in a green uniform with an AK-47 rifle. The NVA began to turn back and SP4 Moss killed him with a burst of automatic fire from his M-16.

At this point CPT Baird ordered LT Burton to pull his platoon back to form a company perimeter. LT Burton had SGT Worley's squad fall back as the 2d squad and 3d squad covered.

(continued...)



At this time, intense fire from the hilltop began coming in on the right flank into 2d squad's position. This fire wounded 3 men including 2 assistant M-60 gunners.

The scout squad from "A" Company, which (was) also moving to Hill 823, had come up from "D" Company's rear by that time and joined the perimeter. The 30 man CIDG force had originally been on the perimeter facing the direction of fire up the hill. But as the fire drew close all but MSG Ky and a medic broke and moved to the rear of the perimeter. The squad from "A" Company and the CIDG force formed the rear and the remainder of the company formed the flanks. There was an estimated NVA company with three Chicom light machine guns firing on "D" Company at this time.



173d in the fight at Dak To (Web photo)

CPT Baird diverted one of the TAC airstrikes preparing Hill 823 to their own area. The first strike came in on the high ground at the top of the hill at 1330 hours.

The 3d squad and 2d squad pulled back at this time with the platoon leader, squad leader and SP4 Hobb's machine gun covering. The perimeter was set up with the 2d squad on the right covering the trail, the 3d squad in the center and the left front, and the 1st squad on the left flank.

The First Platoon and CIDG covered the rear. The NVA firing on full automatic, rushed the right flank at the 2d squad almost immediately. At this time, SGT Shafer, the squad leader, was killed and 2 other men hit. SGT Smith took over the squad and held the perimeter

together. A few minutes later, the assault struck the left front, hitting the 3rd squad. It was a coordinated assault by an estimated NVA company heavily armed with automatic weapons.

The 3d squad with the help of fire from the 1st squad on their flank stopped the NVA and forced them back. The 2d platoon had beaten back the first assault.

An F-100 came in low and dropped an apparently short canister of napalm that hit to the left rear of "D" Company's perimeter routing the attacking NVA. CPT Baird immediately contacted TAC Air and made the necessary adjustments. It was found later, during a thorough search of the battle area, that 15 NVA had been moving in on the company's rear in order to attack. The canister of napalm left only 15 charred bodies as evidence.

During the first airstrike, three men (SGT Plank, SGT Smith and SP4 Rockwell) located themselves approximately 25 meters to the right front of SGT Smith's squad firing M-79 and M-16 fire across the trail and up the hill at an angle. Since the second attack, there had been only heavy sniper fire from the trees and heavy bamboo. The Forward Observer from the artillery was wounded almost immediately after the beginning of the battle and his RTO, SP4 Ernie Fulcher, directed all artillery fire for the remainder of the day. At 1400 hours the second airstrike came in close to the front of the perimeter. SGT Smith and

the other two men at the forward position crouched behind a log and reported they would have been killed by shrapnel had they been on the other side of the log. The company medic, SP4 Cortinas was wounded by shrapnel while covering SP4 Stone's body during the airstrike. Upon the termination of the airstrike they all three moved back to the perimeter. Smith remained at his position and found his ammunition running low. He was being fired at by snipers in the trees when SP4 Madison came running up with M-79 and M-16 ammo. After reloading from Madison's ammo, Smith fired into the trees to his right and killed a sniper tied onto the limb of a tree. At approximately 1500 hours, SGT Smith looked up to see approximately 16 NVA firing AK-47s on full automatic charging his position.

(continued...)



PFC Rothwell had rejoined Smith and Madison and the three of them killed at least four of the charging NVA. They also reported movement to their right and occasional fire from that vicinity.

At 1510 hours, the CIDG force on the right rear of the perimeter spotted approximately a squad (15 men) of NVA moving through the bamboo towards the perimeter. MSG Ky, an LLDB advisor with several of the CIDG's and the squad from "A" Company drove them off apparently inflicting several casualties. Artillery support continued on top of the hill. The Company RTO and the Commanding Officer were wounded at the time of the third attack. CPT Baird remained in control of "D" Company after being wounded.

At approximately 1530 hours, helicopter gunships made one pass. The smoke marking "D" Company's perimeter was unable to get through the high tree canopy and there was one US WIA from the gunships.

Fighting died down after this and at 1730 hours, "A" Company moved up and reinforced "D" Company. The perimeter was marked by yellow smoke from "A" Company and the third and final airstrike was brought in. The strike was very close to the perimeter and quieted all movement in the vicinity. Up until that time, the casualties had been 4 US KIA and 16 WIA. The squad from "A" Company got up from their positions and walked standing up to join their parent unit as they reinforced a segment of the perimeter. Troopers from "D" Company yelled for them to get down but several AK-47's and a machine gun opened up at that moment resulting in 1 KIA and 2 WIA for "A" Company and 1 KIA and 1 WIA for "D" Company.

At 1800 hours, the artillery RTO, SP4 Fulcher called in defensive concentrations around the position and "A" and "D" Companies under command of the "A" Company Commanding Officer, CPT Muldoon, dug in for the night.

As estimated NVA company was moving up on "D" Company's rear when they were taken under fire by the 1st platoon. At this time the NVA hearing the fire in the rear, rushed the 2d platoon again. The 2d platoon beat back the assault which hit the 2d and 3d squads on the right and left front.

The 2d platoon with SGT English and several men from 1st platoon helped by "A" Company's medics

pulled back all the wounded to the LZ which was being cut. 1st platoon and "A" Company set up a perimeter as 2d platoon brought their wounded and dead back. The most critically wounded were lifted out that night and the remainder at first light on the 7th. There was no further major contact reported during the night.

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

At 2100 hours, 5 November 1967, Captain George T. Baldrige, Company Commander B/4-503d Infantry conducted a briefing of all Platoon Leaders concerning the combat assault on 6 November. Maps of the area were studied and all personnel were advised of the possibility of the LZ being "hot". Two NVA regiments, the 32d and 66th, had been reported in the vicinity. The company mission was to clear Hill 823 for a fire support base and the unit was to be prepared to stay for several days. The assault was completed without incident at 1430 hours with a perimeter being formed at the top of the hill. All platoons put out listening posts approximately 75 meters in front of their positions. The 3d Platoon was on the western edge of the perimeter with PFC Louis Miller and PFC Bickel on the listening post. Shortly afterward the 3d Platoon's outpost came under attack with Miller being killed and Bickel severely wounded.



Sky Soldiers hunkering down at Dak To (Web photo)

1LT Darling, 3d Platoon Leader, took his RTO (SP4 Ellis), SP4 Corbett, PFC Dowdy and PFC Clarence Miller down the hill to the aid of Miller and Bickel and they were all killed by approximately 30 NVA attacking up the slope...

(continued...)



...PFC Bickel managed to crawl part way back up the slope but his cries were heard by an NVA soldier who shot and killed him. SGT Alfred McQuerter, 1st Squad Leader, 3d Platoon, took two men and directed their fire until they killed the NVA.

About 15 NVA reached the top of the hill at the edge of the 3d Platoon's perimeter. They were killed by heavy fire from the 2d Platoon. Approximately 30 to 50 NVA could be seen down the hill in the broken heavy bamboo. One man's M-79 failed to fire and he was killed by an NVA soldier charging up the hill. The attack lasted for about 20 minutes and then quieted down.

The 1st and 2d Platoon Leaders moved men over into the 3d Platoon's perimeter to fill the gaps left from the NVA charge. SFC Ponting, Platoon SGT from the 1st Platoon left his position and took command of the 3rd Platoon. At approximately 1515 hours, the western portion of the perimeter came under attack again. The second attack was brief and resulted in unknown casualties.

At the junction between the 2d and 3d Platoon there was a large B-52 bomb crater. At the beginning of the second attack there was a machine gun position and a 90mm recoilless rifle position set up on the outside of the rim. During the assault they moved both positions to the inside of the crater. The NVA immediately moved up to the outside of the crater and began harassing the position with grenades. This harassment continued through the night.

Casualties up to this point were very light. After the first hour of contact, "B" Company had sustained 7 KIA and 13 WIA. All the wounded were evacuated within the first hour.

SGT Riley, the company mortar NCO, began firing within the first hour and continued his effective fire throughout the three days. He had two 81mm tubes, one always firing while the other was swabbed and cooled. The mortars were located 12 and 14 feet down in a bomb crater in the middle of the perimeter and most of the rounds were fired to the west. The mortar crews used only one aiming stake and had no M-16 Plotting Boards. The fire was adjusted from 100 meters out to within 5-10 meters from the perimeter. A total of 639 rounds were fired during the three days.



Young soldiers at war, Dak To.
(Web photo)

At approximately 1400 hours, a chopper brought in Major Scott, CPT Leonard, 1SG Okendo, SGT Kennedy and SP4 Thomas. They dug in behind the 3d Platoon and MAJ Scott proceeded to direct all TAC Air Strikes. At 1430 hours, CPT Leonard took command of "B" Company from CPT Baldrige who had been wounded. All wounded were evacuated by 1430 hours.

There was little action in the late afternoon other than sniper fire and harassment from hand grenades thrown over the bomb crater. Artillery and mortar fire was brought in close all round the perimeter, but the NVA was apparently able to retreat to fortified positions as the grenade attacks continued throughout the night.

Just prior to darkness (1830 hours), "B" Company was resupplied with mortar rounds and grenades. Staring at 1950 hours, several positions reported movement to their fronts. The men at the bomb crater could hear people moving through the bamboo up the finger to their front. One man looked up over the edge of the crater to see an NVA within 5 meters of the other side. He blew the man's head off with an M-79 canister round. An all-night hand grenade duel was fought at the bomb crater...

(continued....)



(Insert): November 6, 1967. "As part of the Battle of Dak To, the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry of the 173d Airborne Brigade makes heavy contact south of the Ben Het CIDG Camp on Ngok Kom Leat ridge and Hill 823. The distance between the companies and their Ben Het base was lengthening. Col. Richard H. Johnson, commanding the 1st Brigade, directed Lt. Col. James H. Johnson (the battalion commander) to establish a new fire support base closer to the anticipated area of combat. After making an aerial reconnaissance together, they selected Hill 823 because it dominated the terrain and would be mutually supporting with Ben Het. Relieved of the mission of providing security for Ben Het, Company B was to conduct an air assault onto the hill at 0900 on the following day, 6 November. Companies A, C and D were directed to link up at the new base. On 6 November the airborne soldiers' march to combat gathered momentum. For the men trudging through tangled Kontum forests, it was the fourth day on the trail."



"Sky Soldiers of B-4/503 under fire at Dak To"

The NVA were located on the opposite side of the crater from the machine gun and recoilless rifle position within 5 meters from "B" Company's position there. When men from "B" Company threw grenades they would hear the sound of footsteps running away but the NVA would always return to throw more grenades. There were no friendly casualties at this position. There was no fire other than M-79 and hand grenades for fear of giving away the position.

There was also heavy movement in front of the 3d Platoon's part of the perimeter, and they received heavy

grenade harassment from there also. At 2000 hours, SPOOKY began flare support which continued throughout the night. A flare was dropped every 15 minutes. The troops stated later that they would have preferred continuous, low illumination on top of the hill rather than to the sides. Overall support by SPOOKY was excellent and the mini-gun suppressive fire was very effective. Every position had claymore mines out to their front. The NVA apparently sent several teams up to cut the wires but all mines were accounted for the next morning.

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

The NVA pressed their hand grenade attacks very heavily, after throwing clumps of dirt to try and get B Co troops to expose their exact location by returning fire. The NVA also had good fire discipline. At 0400 hours, SFC Ponting was made aware of approximately two squads (12-15 men) of NVA to the right front of the 3d Platoon. There was also extremely heavy movement to their front. Suspecting that the enemy was massing for a

heavy attack, SFC Ponting contacted SGT McClain, Forward Observer from B/3/-319th Artillery, who directed artillery fire into the area and broke up the movement. The NVA were aggressive and determined; one NVA soldier had his leg blown off by a hand grenade but crawled into the bamboo, bandaged it and returned to throw grenades at the Americans' positions until killed. The paratroopers were ever more determined, and repulsed and smashed the attacking NVA troops.

At 0500 hours, SGT Cabrera, Platoon Sergeant, 1st Platoon, was checking the perimeter when he was killed by a rocket fired by two NVA. They were killed with M-79 and hand grenade fire.

At 0615 hours, 7 November, "B" Company marked its perimeter with smoke grenades and helicopter gunships made several strikes. TAC airstrikes followed immediately and came within 200 meters of the perimeter. Napalm was dropped further down the ridge and the right side of the finger in front of the bomb crater where the two NVA squads had been the night before.

(continued...)



Robert John Bickel, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Charles George Bowersmith, A/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 David Frank Burney, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Joaquin Palacios Cabrera, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Linwood Calvin Corbett, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Robert Harry Darling, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Rufus John Dowdy, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Dewain V. Dubb, C/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 James LeRoy Ellis, Jr., B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Sherman Lawrence Jones, C/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Emory Lee Jorgensen, D/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Richard Francis Laird, HHC/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Clarence Alvie Miller, Jr., B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Louis Charles Miller, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67

James Dudley Shafer, B/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Gone from our lives but still alive in our hearts. Jean
 and sons Jeffery and Jim

Edrick Kenneth Stevens, C/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Richard Arlan Stone, D/4/503, KIA 11/6/67
 Willie Alfred Wright, C/4/503, KIA 11/6/67



Resupply or Dust Off at Dak To (Web photo)

D+13 (7 November 1967)

1-503d Infantry and 4-503d Infantry returned to OPCON of the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate). C-1-503d Infantry OPCON to Task Force 4-503d Infantry.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) commenced Operation MACARTHUR.

At 1000 hours the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry initiated search and destroy operations in AO FALCON. "D" Company returned OPCON to the 1-503d Infantry.

At 1300 hours, C-1-503d Infantry was helilifted from FSB 12 to an LZ vicinity of YB 849941, closing at 1345 hours and becoming OPCON to the 4-503d Infantry.

The 2-503d Infantry initiated search and destroy operations in a small AO in the vicinity of the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) base. "C" Company received a burst of automatic weapons fire from the west while laagering at a position near FSB 5. They returned fire with negative results or casualties.

The 4-503rd Infantry's "B" Company remained in contact on Hill 823 with sporadic rocket and mortar fire continuing throughout the night and into the day. At 0712 hours, "B" Company captured one (1) NVA who was evacuated for interrogation.

At 1330 hours, C-1-503d Infantry was helilifted into Hill 823 to support Company "B" and became OPCON to the 4-503d Infantry. During the day a police of the battlefield showed over 50 NVA KIA (BC) and a large amount of enemy weapons and equipment captured. During the day Companies "C" and "D" linked up with Company "A" and completed a thorough search of the

battle area from the previous day.

A-3-319th Artillery moved by helilift from YB 953238 to FSB 12, closing at 1245 hours. E-17th Cavalry closed FSB EAGLE at 1500 hours and assumed the mission of the Brigade Reaction Force.

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

Also around first light, 1SG Okendo was at the bomb crater when 6 NVA with a rocket launcher jumped into the crater and tried to make it up the other side to fire into the perimeter. The NVA with the launcher

was killed and the rest fled. 1SG Okendo and PFC Wilbanks pursued the NVA as far as the outer lip of the crater and threw grenades toward the sound of their movement in the bamboo.

(continued...)



After the airstrike, LT Profitt took out the 2d Platoon and moved down the finger toward the west and northwest. They were to secure enemy weapons and bodies. Within 50 meters they had located 15-20 NVA bodies, dead mostly from grenade fragments. As they first moved out the platoon received a burst of small arms fire. SGT Riley fired 10 rounds of mortar fire and then 5 more. Then the platoon moved out, moving from cover to cover until they cleared the outside perimeter. They pushed 75-100 meters into the bamboo and began their sweep up the side of the finger. They located many foxholes and bunkers with overhead cover. They also found rucksacks and entrenching tools and one tall tree that had a rope ladder running up the side. From the top FSB Savage was easily visible.

protective masks and a decontamination kit. One man saw a CS gas grenade and another said he examined a bottle with a pull string that was identified as CS gas.

At 1140 hours, B & C/4-503d Inf and C-1-503d found an NVA Base Camp. There were US claymores set up around the perimeter. The 2d Platoon returned to the perimeter by 1506 hours and began digging in and preparing overhead cover for their shelter. They used bamboo for support and used sandbags as fast as they could be brought in by helicopters resupplying the position. Helicopters were able to resupply freely with only occasional fire directed at the choppers. At 1850 hours, just prior to dark, the position received 25-50 rounds of 32mm mortar fire. SGT Riley estimated they were firing from 400-450 meters out and began directing counter-mortar fire. He directed from 300 meters out. A total of 100 rounds were fired with unknown results. Friendly casualties were 2 WIA.



Troopers of the 1/503d capture enemy soldier.
(Photo by Tony Bolivar, Caspers)

At 0800 hours, they located a bunker with a man who appeared dead laying at the opening. He was holding a pistol in his hand. SSG Wiggons, the 2d platoon Sergeant, looked in and the man raised his hand and fired at him. SSG Wiggons jumped back and the NVA, an officer, ducked back in the bunker. A hand grenade was thrown in and when the smoke cleared another one was thrown. SGT Okendo looked in and another shot was fired at him. Then a WP grenade was thrown in and the NVA officer came out shooting. He was killed immediately by several members of the platoon.

The platoon continued the sweep picking up enemy weapons. Total NVA equipment picked up during the sweep: 1 NVA POW, 22 AK-47 rifles, 1 RPD Light MG, 3 RPG Rocket Launchers, 4 SKS Carbines, 200 hand grenades, 9 rockets, 1 7.6mm pistol, a large number of crimped cartridges for rifle grenades, some papers and a map, several new

During the night of 7 November There was little contact other than several incidents of hand grenade harassment. At 0024 hours, B Co received 82mm mortar fire resulting in 1 WIA. Artillery supported with unknown results. SPOOKY supported from 2000 hours until daylight. An emergency ammo resupply mission was brought in at 0245 hours.

D+14 (8 November 1967)

C-1503d Infantry returned to OPCON of 1-503d Infantry. 23d Mobile Strike Force element OPCON to 4-503rd Infantry.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. The 1st Bn 503d Infantry continued search and destroy operation in AO FALCON. At 1445 hours, C-1-503d Infantry engaged 8 NVA resulting in 1 US WIA, 1 US KIA, and 1 NVA KIA. At 1840 hours, C-1-503d Infantry received 10-20 mortar rounds vicinity of YB 853187 resulting in 1 US KIA. D-1-503d Infantry, while on a road clearing mission, received one B-40 rocket launcher round resulting in one Bulldozer destroyed. At 1730 hours "D" Company was helilifted from FSB 12 to an LZ vicinity YB 853127 closing at 1806 hours.

(continued....)

The 2-503d Infantry continued its base security, search and destroy operations and mission as the Division Reaction Force for the 4th Infantry Division. At 0955 hours, 2-503d Infantry received word that it was on 6 hour alert as the 4th Infantry Division Reaction Force. The 2-503d Infantry was further given a warning order concerning an air mobile assault on 10 November.

The 4-503d Infantry continued its operations preparing Companies "A", "C" and "D" for extraction to FSB 12. Company "D" initiated search and destroy operations around Hill 823 this morning, discovering an NVA base camp and a large amount of NVA equipment and several NVA bodies. Extraction of "D" Company from Hill 823 was begun at 1540 hours but was delayed due to incoming mortar and small arms fire. Movement to FSB 13 was completed by 1830 hours.

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

At 1710 hours, 8 November while "C" Company and C-1-503d Inf remained in position, "B" Company extracted from Hill 823 into FSB 13. Earlier at 1300 hours, "B" Company located 3 NVA bodies outside the perimeter bringing the total enemy body count to 89 NVA KIA (BC)

John Michael Kapeluck, C/1/503, KIA 11/8/67



Under fire at Dak To. (Web photo)

D+15 (9 November 1967)

23rd Mobile Strike Force Company released from OPCON to the 4-503d Infantry.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. The 1st Battalion, 503d

Inf, at 1200 hours, was helilifted from FSB 12 to FSB 15, closing at 1624 hours. Upon closure, the 1-503d Infantry assumed responsibility for AO CONDOR. At 0750 hours, C-1-503d Infantry found an NVA body at YB 853187. Body was assumed to be KIA by artillery fired the night before. At 1220 hours, C-3-319th Artillery was helilifted from FSB 13 to FSB 15 closing at 1440 hours.

The 2-503d Infantry continued its assigned mission. "A" and "B" Companies conducted a road clearing mission. At 1725 hours, the DAK TO airstrip received 6 mortar rounds. At 1840 hours, "C" Company was inserted into an LZ in an attempt to knock out the mortar position. They had negative results. B-52 strikes were scheduled in support of the air assault which still remained in the planning stages having been postponed until the 11th.

The 4-503d Infantry continued operations with all elements of "A", "C" and "D" Companies being extracted from a LZ at YB 844192 by 1223 hours. Small arms fire was received in the area on several occasions with negative results. Company "D" assumed a road clearing mission from FSB 13 to FSB 12. The 23d Mobile Strike Force Company was released from OPCON of 4-503d Infantry to the 4th Infantry Division at 1000 hours. E-17 Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force at FSB EAGLE. Mobile Strike Force elements from PLEIKU continued patrolling activities in AO's CONDOR and FALCON without contact.

D+16 (10 November 1967)

The 2-503d Infantry returned to the OPCON of the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate).

The 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1330 hours, "A" Company found 6 NVA bodies in a base camp. The NVA had been dead 24 hours from 81mm mortar fire.

The 2-503d Infantry was replaced in their AO by elements of the 1-8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division. The 2-503d Infantry consolidated, received their operations order and prepared for an air assault and

subsequent search and destroy operations on 11 November 1967.

(continued....)



Early in the morning "C" Company has accidentally shot and killed one of their men who had wandered outside the perimeter and failed to respond to a challenge.

The 4-503d Infantry continued operations with Company "D" on a road clearing operation. They were fired on during the day by an unknown number of NVA or VC. Fire was returned with small arms and tanks with unknown results. On investigation a blood pool was found. Company "C" discovered footprints at YB 857254 but could not follow them. E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force at FSB EAGLE. Mobile Strike Force elements continued patrolling activities in AO CONDOR and AO FALCON without contact.

Luis Barreto, Jr., C/2/503, KIA 11/10/67



1/503d one-ship LZ west of Dak To.

(Photo by Tony Bolivar, Caspers)

D+17 (11 November 1967)

C-4-503d Infantry OPCON to Task Force 1-503d Infantry.

The 1-503d Infantry continues search and destroy operation in AO CONDOR utilizing Task Force BLUE (A-1-503d Infantry and one platoon of D-1-503d Infantry). At 0828 hours, Task Force BLUE came into contact with 50 NVA in bunkers and came under ground and mortar attack. TF BLUE withdrew and called in artillery and mortar fire. During this time two 4.2" mortar rounds fell short causing one US KIA, and 2 US WIA. TF BLUE moved back into the contact area at 1134 hours and found many squad size bunkers and

trench systems. At 1540 hours, TF BLUE made contact with an enemy OP and again called in artillery.

At 0950 hours, "C" Company engaged an estimated battalion size enemy force, and at 1002 hours began receiving incoming mortar fire. At 1012 hours, "D" Company, as a part of Task Force BLACK, moved to link up with "C" Company and formed a perimeter, receiving grenade fire. By 1020 hours, "D" Company was receiving fire from 3 sides and "D" Company had linked up with them. At 1112 hours, "C" Company reported that their perimeter had been breached. At 1116 hours, a decision was made to insert C-4-503d Infantry into an LZ at YB 824189. All firing stopped at 1120 hours.

At 1224 hours, TF BLACK was under attack again until 1253 hours. At 1324 hours the Task Force was

again receiving small arms and mortar fire. Still under fire at 1437 hours, C-4-503d Infantry and TF BLACK linked up. By 1558 hours all incoming fire had stopped. A sling load of ammo was dropped too far outside the perimeter to be recovered at approximately 1130 hours.

Resupply was finally made at approximately 1545 hours. During the contact all airstrikes were diverted in support of the two Task Forces in contact.

Results, Friendly: 20 KIA, 154 WIA, 2 MIA. Enemy: 116 NVA KIA (BC), 2 NVA POW's.

Elements of the 2-503d Infantry assaulted a hilltop 3 miles from the Cambodian

border with negative enemy contact.

4-503d Infantry elements continued operations in their assigned AO's. "D" Company conducted road security operations after a ¾ ton truck hit a mine. At 1115 hours "C" Company was alerted to prepare to conduct an air assault in support of 1-503d Infantry contact. Company "C" was airlifted into an LZ at 1150 hours. Upon landing they became OPCON to the 1-503d Infantry. At 1920 hours FSB 12 received 6-10 rounds of rocket fire from the west. During the night other fire was received and movement noted. Fire was initiated with unknown results.

(continued....)



E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force elements from PLEIKU and CIDG elements from DAK TO continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON. At 0825 hours, the MIKE Force OPCON to the 2-503d Infantry engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 1 MSF WIA.



Troopers of E-17th Cav bringing on the hurt. (173d Web)

Execution:

On 11 November, elements of 2/503d, TAC CO, B and D Co's, an 81mm mortar section and an attached 173d Engineer platoon, air assaulted onto a hilltop 3 miles from the Cambodian border. They had negative enemy contact.

- George Bruce Gunn, D/1/503, KIA 11/11/67
- Glenn Dirk Kerns, B/2/503, KIA 11/11/67
- Larry Martin, D/1/503, KIA 11/11/67
- Edwin J. Martinez-Mercado, C/1/503, KIA 11/11/67
- Charles Franklin Riley, A/1/503, KIA 11/11/67

Gary Francis Shaw, A/3/319, KIA 11/11/67

The battle of Dak To was the longest and most violent in the highlands since the battle of the Ia Drang in 1965. Enemy casualties numbered in the thousands, with an estimated 1,400 killed. Americans had suffered too. Approximately one-fifth of the 173d Airborne Brigade had

become casualties, with 174 killed, 642 wounded, and 17 missing in action. As the battle built toward its climax, the 173rd Airborne Brigade conducted aggressive sweeps of the area around Dak To. On one of these sweeps, on 11 November, troops from C Co, 1/503 Infantry, were engaged by North Vietnamese regulars. Four men – PFC Edwin Martinez-Mercado, PFC Gary Shaw, PVT John Stuckey and SP4 Robert Staton – were seen to have been shot during the engagement but they could not be recovered. When the area later was searched for casualties, their bodies were not found. They were classed as “Missing in Action, Body not Recovered”. Shaw’s actions on 11 November were sufficient for him to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, but it would be nearly 30 years before his death on the battlefield could be positively confirmed. In 1996, it was reported that a DoD investigation of Shaw’s case uncovered new evidence: Officials were able to find two medics who were in a battle with Pfc. Gary Shaw near Dak To on Nov. 11, 1967. There, while trying to help fellow soldiers who were shot, the young soldier was hit by a hail of enemy gunfire, according to the letter from the U.S. Department of Defense. Investigators were able to find records showing Private Shaw took part in the Battle of Dak To. During the battle, several soldiers who were hit by enemy gunfire say the young private was a hero, carrying them safely from enemy fire. For those deeds, Gary Shaw was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry, with his family members accepting the award for him in 1968 at the University of Toledo. A year ago, the defense department went to work on the case. They talked to some of the servicemen who said they were rescued by Private Shaw. But then they got a break: A medic, who apparently was not interviewed before, said he remembered Private Shaw. “The medic also recalled the young private was hit numerous times. A former sergeant remembered Private Shaw being hit by enemy AK-47 assault rifles in the chest and back. A senior aide then checked Private Shaw for any signs of life, said the letter. The aide said that ‘Private Shaw was unmistakably dead.’”

From the Toledo Blade
by Staff Writer Michael D. Sallah, 1996

Robert Milton Staton, Jr., 173d Eng. Co., KIA 11/11/67
John Steiner Stuckey, D/1/503, KIA 11/11/67

D+18 (12 November 1967)

Mobile Strike Force element OPCON to 1-503d Infantry made OPCON to 2-503d Infantry. MIKE Force Company from DAK TO OPCON to 4-503d Infantry.

Task Force 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operation in AO CONDOR and policed the battlefield. At 1105 hours, TF BLUE engaged an unknown size NVA force in bunkers resulting in 3 US KIA, and 6 NVA KIA.

(continued...)





Dak To, November 1967 (Giles Caron photo from web)

The 2-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO HAWK. At 0755 hours, A-2-503d Infantry, C-2-503d Infantry and the 2-503d Infantry 4.2 Mortar Platoon were helilifted from FSB 5 to FSB 16, closing at 1115 hours. At 1020 hours, A-2-503d Infantry engaged 6-8 NVA resulting in 1 NVA KIA. At 1130 hours, A-2-503d Infantry engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 19 US WIA. Contact was broken at 1430 hours. At 1300 hours, B-2-503d Infantry engaged an unknown size enemy force while attempting to reinforce A-2-503d Infantry resulting in 1 US KIA and 11 US WIA. At 1300 hours, C-2-503d Infantry engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 6 US WIA. At 1640 hours, C-2-503d Infantry engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 3 NVA KIA. 5 small arms, 1 rocket launcher and 10 grenades captured. At 1640 hours, A-2-503d Infantry captured one NVA.

At 1800 hours, one platoon of A-3-319th Artillery was helilifted from FSB 12 to FSB 16 closing at 1910 hours. E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. At 1700 hours, LRRP Team "D" engaged 21 NVA resulting in 2 NVA KIA.

MIKE Special Forces elements from PLEIKU continued patrolling activities in AO's FALCON and CONDOR without contact. Company "B" 4-503d Infantry continued road clearing operations while Company "D" conducted local security operations. The battalion received road clearing responsibility east to a bridge at YB 952248.

Execution:

On 12 November, the remainder of the 2/503d Inf combat elements: A, C Co's and the 4 2" mortar platoon, airlifted in. B and C Co's, with the engineer platoon, moved to a western knoll and prepared to receive A Battery 3/319th Arty. D Co and the TAC CP remained at YB818152. A Co moved out on S&D operations to clear the ridge west of B and C Co's.

At approximately 0930 hours as A Co's recon commenced to ascent the ridge, the scout dog alerted. SGT Lance D. Peeples, the squad leader, ordered the dog to be released, as this was being done they received heavy AW and SA fire from approximately 20 meters to

their left flank. The recon squad dispersed and took cover. SGT Peeples called LT Mathew Harrison in the lead platoon for assistance. LT Harrison brought up his platoon deploying them on the left flank of the ridge where the enemy was coming from, linking up with the recon squad who was deployed in the center of the ridge. LT Harrison then had the recon squad move forward cautiously in an attempt to get the high ground. They proceeded forward for only a short distance and came under heavy fire from the right flank with SGT Peeples being wounded. Simultaneous to this action CPT Michael J. Kiley, A Co CO, brought the 2d Platoon up on the right hand side to link up with the recon squad, and the 3d Platoon up in the rear to complete the company perimeter. The Weapons Platoon and the Co CP formed an inner perimeter. The recon squad pulled back five to ten meters as the 1st and 2nd platoon laid down a heavy base of fire. Enemy fire slackened, and became sporadic after A Co's counter fire. CPT Kiley then had 3d Platoon move forward through the company and attempt to push forward on the left-hand side of the ridge. They had only progressed a few meters beyond the perimeter when they were subjected to RR fire, grenades, AW and SA fire. At the same time A Co's entire forward perimeter came under the same fire as the NVA apparently had bunkers in depth stretched across the ridge line. Two men from 3d Platoon were killed by RR fire. The 3d Platoon pulled back on order with LT Joseph Sheridan going forward to carry back several of the wounded.

(continued....)



During this time, B Co had sent its 2d Platoon forward from its location at the western knoll to help secure and extract A Co's wounded. PSG Jackie Siggers with a security force went back down the ridge to guide them in. 1SGT Troy L. Dickens then directed them to secure the wounded and fill in the perimeter where 3d platoon had left. As A Co consolidated, they detected movement on both flanks down off the ridge as the NVA were apparently attempting to encircle them. Using fire and maneuver CPT Kiley moved his Co and the attached platoon back down the ridge approximately 150 meters out of close range of the bunkers and at a site more suitable for an LZ. At this time, 1112 hours, indirect fires and air strikes were directed on suspected enemy locations.

As A Co was withdrawing and consolidating at their new location, the 1st platoon of B Co back on the hill opened fire on some NVA who had crawled through the thick bamboo to within 20 meters of their perimeter. CPT James Rogan, B Co Commander, initially had his map check fire to insure that he wasn't firing onto his own people, since some of the NVA had gotten in between A and B Co elements.

The NVA pushed to within 15 meters of B Co's perimeter using AW, SA and B-40 rockets. C Co reinforced the 1st and 3d platoons of B Co as the firefight continued for about 45 minutes with an estimated platoon of NVA pressing the attack. B and C Cos fired their 81mm mortars and 90mm RR in repulsing the enemy. One B Co M-60 MG was destroyed by enemy rocket fire.

The NVA 60mm mortars were fired into the perimeter during the fight. Light sniper fire continued to be directed at A, B and C Cos throughout the early afternoon as artillery, mortar and supporting airstrikes were adjusted in on suspected enemy locations. At approximately 1430 hours, all contact was broke, and B Co per instructions from battalion moved out to link up with A Co. The two Cos attempted to cut an LZ but the vegetation proved too difficult. They had one chain saw, a few axes and some machetes. At 1730 hours the 2d platoon of B Co returned with the wounded to C Co's location at the western knoll where the wounded were dusted off. The total casualties for the day were A Co – 3 KIA, 21 WIA (evacuated), 3 WIA (not needing Dustoff). B Co – 1 KIA, 11 WIA, C Co – 8 WIA, and D Co – 1 WIA. In the late afternoon, C Co swept the battlefield where they and B Co had come under attack. They found 4 NVA by body count, 3 AK-47s, 1 RPD LMG, 1 SKS, 1 Chicom RR, 10 hand grenades, one gas mask and assorted SA rounds. At 1555 hours, B Co captured an NVA who had been separated from his unit and going for water. He was brought back to C Co's location along with the wounded to be extracted. CPT Kaufman, C Co's CO, learned from the NVA captive,

that he was a member of one of two NVA Co's involved in the day's contact. He belonged to the 4th Bn, 174th NVA Ret. A and B Cos had water and ammunition dropped into them at 1930 hours. There was no other contact that night.

**John Henry Barnes, B/1/503,
KIA 11/12/67**

To my brother-in-law John. I never got the chance to meet you, but I heard a lot of stories about you from your siblings. And I've met your son Rick, who is a great guy. I know someday I'll meet you and get to give you a hug, and thank you for fighting for all of our freedom. I know you're with your dad now, telling war stories together. Until we meet someday, your sister in law, Patty



Dan S. Allen, III, D/1/503, KIA 11/12/67

**John Andrew Barnes, III,
C/1/503, KIA 11/12/67**



Medal of Honor recipient



**Harold Eugene Couch,
C/1/503, KIA 11/12/67**



(continued...)



Hubert Croom, C/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
Aldon James Dedeaux, A/2/503, KIA 11/12/67



Armando Leo Escareno,
A/1/503, KIA 11/12/67

Charles Favroth, D/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
Daniel William Foster, HHC/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
Wiley Guerrero, A/2/503, KIA 11/12/67
Abraham Lincoln Hardy, HHC/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
James Earl Jenkins, A/2/503, KIA 11/12/67
Jerry Conrad Kelley, C/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
Charles Henry Morris, Jr., D/1/503, KIA 11/12/67
Leonard Alan Thomas, D/1/503, KIA 11/12/67

D+19 (13 November 1967)

C-4-503d Infantry released from OPCON to 1-503d Infantry.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. Task Force 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1010 hours, TF 1-503d Infantry released C-4-503d Infantry from OPCON to its parent unit. 1-503d Infantry reported 4 more US MIA's as a result of the contact on 11 November. FSB 15 received 72 82mm mortar rounds from 1900 to 1932 hours. By 1730 hours, C-1-503rd Infantry had found 51 NVA bodies, 1 B-40 rocket launcher, 1 rifle, 11 AK-47's, 4 RPG machine guns and 5 SKS rifles, resulting from the 11 November contact.

The 2-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO HAWK. At 1658 hours, elements of A-2-503d Infantry found 5 NVA bodies vic FSB 16.

Companies "A" and "D", 4-503d Infantry assaulted an LZ at 1530 hours. They then initiated search and destroy operations to the north. Company "B" continued security mission of FSB 15. Company "C" assumed security mission of FSB 12 after returning to the operational control of 4th Battalion at 1640 hours.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. MIKE Special Forces elements engaged an unknown size enemy force resulting in 1 NVA KIA.

Execution (continued):

At 130430 hours, 13 Nov, A and B Cos who were laagered together (approximately 200 meters west of where C and D were constructing FSB 16) received 12 incoming mortar rounds, however, they all landed outside of the perimeter and produced no casualties. C Co also reported incoming round at this time, however, they fell short of the perimeter. A and C Cos sent out clearing patrols from their locations in the early morning. C Co CP found 4 additional NVA bodies from B and C Co's contact on the 12th (total of 8 NVA KIA (BC) from the contact). A Co CP had negative findings.

At 0830 hours, A and B Cos returned to FSB 16 to resupply for a 3 day operation. At 130319 hours Nov, and airstrike with 500 lb bombs and napalm was conducted; another strike was conducted at 131100 hours, and a third strike at 131130 hours. Also throughout the morning a heavy artillery and mortar preparation was fired and on the approaching ridgelines. The high ground to the west had been well covered with artillery and bomb strikes.



Getting low at Dak To. (Photo source, Giles Caron web)

The concept of the operation for 13 November was to move two companies north out of FSB 16, down the valley and up the next ridge. The Cos were then to turn westward and follow the ridgeline which led to the hill which A Co had been approaching on 12 November, thus hitting the NVA from a different direction.

(continued...)



Riflemen moved out with full rucksacks and 400 rds of ammunition. Grenadiers carried 30 HE rounds and 40 shotgun rounds (no 45's were carried by grenadiers, machine-gunners or 90mm men – Bde SOP)...



C-130 ablaze on Dak To airstrip, November '67
(Web photo)

...Twelve hundred rounds were carried for each M-60 MG. All men carried at least 2 frag grenades and each carried 1 smoke grenade any color except red (red is used to mark enemy positions). Each man carried 1 trip flare, and there were 12 claymores per platoon. B Co's weapons platoon remained at FSB 16, but the 2d platoon carried a 90mm RR with 20 rounds of canister and 2 rounds of HE. From FSB 16, the 50 Cal MGs and several M-60s were available to support by direct fire. In addition, FSB 16 had five 81mm Mortars and a 4 2" mortar platoon (4 guns), the range was too close for A/3/319th to support, however, they did attempt to support by direct fire later in the day. TAC Air, 175mm guns, 8" howitzers, 155 SP artillery and 105mm artillery were on call.

B Co moved out at 1300 hours with 3 platoon in column, the platoon moving in two files. The order of march was 2d platoon, CP group, 3d platoon and 1st platoon. As the terrain permitted, flank security was put out including a MG team on each side of the column. A Co moved out behind B Co providing rear security.

B Co moved north across the valley until they hit the next ridgeline, then they turned westward and moved 300 meters along the top of the ridgeline until the lead platoon ran into a small area where 5 gallon cans of CS powder had been dumped and 5 CBU's which had not gone off. The CS was of US manufacture. The Bn CO instructed B Co to mask and to pour out the powder to

prevent the NVA from using it, the time was approximately 1500 hours.

The company continued to move up the ridge. About 150 peters past the CS cans, CPT Rogan, B Co CO, halted the Co to confirm his location to select a laager site and to allow A Co to close. The area was found not suitable for a two Co laager site because of the narrowness of the ridge and the high ground to the west.

CPT Rogan instructed LT Phillip Bodine, 2d platoon leader, to move his platoon with the scout dog 200 meters westward up the ridge to locate a better laager site. LT Bodine complied and found a good laager site. As he was checking out the site his point man spotted 2 bunkers slightly down the northern slope of the ridge. LT Bodine notified CPT Rogan of his find and that he was checking the area. At this time

A Co closed on the rear of B Co. As the point man moved down towards the bunker, 2 sniper rds were fired. LT Bodine radioed back that he had received a couple rds of sniper fire from the NW and that he was going to attempt to get him. The time was 1557H. Hearing this report, CPT Rogan began to move the rest of his Co forward, instructing A Co to keep closed on their rear.

LT Bodine then called and requested permission to fire the 90mm RR at the bunkers. CPT Rogan granted permission and told him to secure the right flank, that he was sending the 3d platoon to secure the left. The 1st platoon would cover the rear and A Co would move close to the 1st platoon so as not to present an opening for the NVA to cut off and separate the two units.

When PFC Charles A. Marshall fired the 90mm canister rd at the NVA bunker heavy hostile fire broke loose. SP4 Jimmy Tice, the assistant gunner, reloaded the 90mm and yelled at SP4 Robert L. Ross to check the back blast area before giving Marshall an "Up". SP4 Ross fell off the rucksack that he was sitting on and (was) shot through the head. The heavy fire wounded LT Bodine twice and killed his RTO. There was no further radio transmission from 2d platoon, both radios were damaged...

(continued....)



...Before Marshall could fire the 90 again, incoming Chicom grenades exploded around them. The 90 crew turned their gun in the direction of incoming fire and discharged their last canister rd. (The assistant gunner only carried two rounds and the rest of the 90mm ammunition was scattered throughout the platoon).

His ammunition expended, PFC Marshall crawled back and secured SP4 Ross's M-16 and ammunition since he had no side-arm (.45 Cal pistol). SP4 Marshall laid behind Ross's body and began firing when AK-47 rds began hitting near him from the rear, so he turned around and continued firing. The situation had become very confusing to PFC Marshall and the men around him did not know what was happening.

SP4 Wayne Murray and his assistant machine gunner began to lay a heavy base of fire from the left towards the NVA position. LT Bodine yelled for everyone to get into a tight perimeter. Marshall, Tice and the others around them crawled back into some logs. SP4 Tice saw they had left the 90mm RR so Marshall crawled back out and dragged it back into their position. The 90mm had been damaged by SA fire.

The firing continued to grow even heavier as the NVA worked up to within 10 to 15 meters of the log pile which was now in a crossfire. PFC Willie J. Simmons spotted one NVA, fired and missed, he then threw a grenade and when he raised to fire again he was shot between the eyes. Murray was hit in the chest and died while Marshall tried to administer first aid.

Meanwhile a B-40 rocket exploded nearby. The NVA began to move up closer, evidently thinking that the rocket had wiped the paratroopers out. When the NVA exposed themselves, LT Bodine, SP4 Tice and PFC Marshall opened fire, killing several and pushing the others back. By this time CPT Rogan had moved his CP group just 20 meters to the right rear of their position and the arrival of the 3d platoon on the left took some of the pressure off. LT Bodine yelled for the wounded to move back.

The terrain that the 2d platoon was fighting in was thick bamboo and shrub brush with occasional open spots where most of the casualties were taken. There were tall trees encircling the hilltop. Visibility was restricted to about 5 meters and firing was at point-blank range. Since B Co was unable to contact his 2d platoon on the radio he yelled forward for them to get on the horn. The platoon responded by sending back a runner. The firing now was extremely heavy, and it was very difficult to assess the situation since there had not been continuous communications. The 2d platoon was taking heavy losses and the NVA were beginning to roll up the right flank of B Co's position. LT Bodine moved back to the CO's position to receive further instructions even

though he had been wounded twice earlier. CPT Rogan asked him if he could pull back bringing his dead and wounded. LT Bodine answered yes and the 3d platoon leaders, LT McDevitt on the left concurred, the same for his platoon.

CPT Rogan then ordered both platoons to withdraw at his command and alerted the 1st platoon that they would be passing through them and for 1st platoon to cover the withdrawal. A Co CO was notified to prepare a perimeter for B Co to withdraw into.

By this time the NVA had rolled up to B Co's right flank. They killed the CO's two RTO's, senior medic and wounded LT Bodine again. Having instructed his lead platoons to withdraw, CPT Rogan ordered the CP group to withdraw, taking their wounded. The artillery FO had become separated from the CO at this time.

CPT Rogan grabbed one of the radios in order to control the withdrawal and moved back 10 meters. It then became evident that neither the 2d or 3d platoon could withdraw because of the close contact with the NVA. The fighting was a point-blank range. The 2d platoon could not recover its wounded. SSG Williams had taken command of the 2d platoon but for all intents and purposes it was out of action. The CO confirmed that the 3d platoon could not extract itself and that most of the 2d platoon were either dead or wounded. Seeing that he was unable to withdraw, CPT Rogan ordered the 1st platoon to counterattack to the right to restore the flank and secure the 2d platoon's wounded and dead. The CO then switched his one radio to Bn frequency and instructed A Co to close up on the rear, to send one platoon forward to reinforce the 1st platoon of B Co, and to secure the eastern end of the perimeter with its remaining two platoons. In addition, A Co was to send their artillery FO, LT Busenlehner, to B Co CO's location.



On The Hill (web photo)

(continued...)



A Co complied, linking up at approximately 1655H. B Co 1st platoon's counterattack helped restore the perimeter and recover many of the wounded and dead. A Co gave a big assist as their 2d platoon, under LT Thomas Remington moved through to help bolster the 1st and 3d platoon of B Co. In the course of the counterattack, LT Paul Gillenwater, B Co 1st platoon leader, and his RTO, PFC Jones, found themselves out in front of the perimeter but were able to get back without injury. While still on the Bn frequency, CPT Rogan requested the Bn TOC to place blocking fires 500 meters west and north of his position to prevent enemy reinforcement.

towards the perimeter. The wounded and dead were drawn in. No air or gunships were in support at this time. The fighting was too close and artillery and air could only help indirectly. The fighting had become man-to-man with bursts of AW fire at point-blank range. The bamboo was so thick that some of the paratroopers thought that their M-16 rds weren't penetrating. To illustrate the closeness of the fighting, the next day on the outer edge of the perimeter 6 American bodies were found on the eastern side of a log and 4 NVA bodies on the western side. Two other NVA bodies lay to the left of the log, one an NVA officer still holding an M-16 he had snatched from the other side of the log.



U.S. 105mm artillery battery in action in the Central Highlands (Web photo)

Survivor of Hill 875.
"Late June 1967, I had just arrived Dak To base camp as a replacement for A Company 2/503 as a result of No Deros Alpha being wiped out in The Battle of the Slopes." Tom Remington



Sky Soldier Judge, Hon. Tom Remington

Note: Tom would go on with his life and become a Circuit Court Judge in Florida. He retired from his judicial duties on December 31, 2012. Thanks to Tom for providing the After Action Report and many of the newspaper articles for this newsletter. Ed

The company commander's main concern at this time was to establish a firm perimeter and establish effective artillery fires. A Co's artillery FO had joined CPT Rogan and had begun walking 4 2" mortar fires in

As darkness approached, the NVA continued to keep up a heavy volume of fire attempting to cut off or penetrate a section of the perimeter. At 1730H CPT Rogan requested an emergency ammunition resupply. Two LOC ships arrived at 1845H. A bomb crater near the center of the two Cos perimeter was selected as the DZ. It was dark by this time but the sky was clear and the moon full. The B Co CO guided the first ship in with a flashlight and even though the ship received several hits while it hovered, it dropped the ammunition on target. The second ship left its load at FSB 16 and escorted the damaged helicopter back to Dak To. B Co requested medical evacuation by basket and hoist for 8 of their more serious WIA's. A Medevac ship arrived at 2000H but was driven off by AW fire as soon as he hovered, with two of the crew being wounded. CPT Rogan then cancelled the Dustoff request since the area was not secure.

No flare ships were requested since this would give away and silhouette the American positions. SNOOPY came on station for an hour and a half working the ridge lines running north and west...

(continued....)

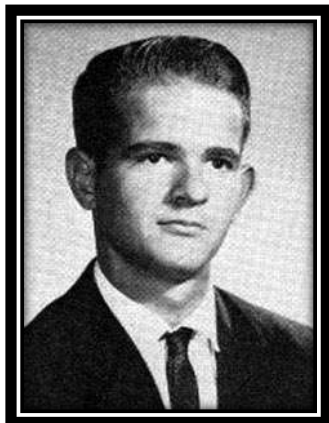


...The Cos marked their position with HC white smoke which was clearly visible at night. SPOOKY, a FAC and fighters were on call throughout the night.

While the NVA continued probing during the night, B and A Companies attempted to recover their wounded. Grenades and SA fire was swapped between the NVA and Americans, with contact not being broken until 140630 hours. At 0500 hours SSG Funderburk, SP4 Stokes and several others were dragging the last WIA inside the perimeter under enemy fire. The entire effort to recover the WIAs was carried on under the most dangerous conditions. At one time an NVA soldier was shot while rifling the body of one of the wounded.

Earlier in the evening of the 13th, at 1608 hours, 2015 hours and at 2115 hours, C Company at FSB 16 had several small skirmishes with NVA forces up to a squad with negative casualties or results.

- James Craig Berry, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- David Elvin Bunker, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Nathaniel Chatman, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Horace W. Cowdrick, Jr., B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Gregory Lynn Dunn, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Lamont George Epps, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67



**Robert Samuel Ferrulla,
B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67**

- La Francis Hardiman, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Zan Hess, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Vanester Lamar Hester, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Milford Jones, HHC/1/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Ray Morgan Keith Jones, B/2/503, 11/13/67
- Francis Leroy Maples, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67



**William Othello McKoy,
B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67**

- Vernon Means, B/2/503, 11/13/67
- Wayne Paul Murray, B/2/503, 11/13/67



**Richard Vaughn Myers,
39TH Scout Dog Plt.,
KIA 11/13/67**

- James E. Raffensperger, Jr., B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Robert Lee Ross, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Leroy Alphus Rost, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Richard Alan Scheiber, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Edward Anthony Scully, 173d Eng. Co., KIA 11/13/67
- Willie James Simmons, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Vernon Patrick Sprinkle, B/2/503, KIA 11/13/67
- Larry Keith Williams, C/1/503, KIA 11/13/67

D+20 (14 November 1967)

A-1-12th Cavalry OPCON to 2-503d Infantry.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry continued search and destroy operation in AO CONDOR. At 1428 hours A-1-503d Infantry found 9 NVA KIA, 1 D-40 rocket launcher and 2 SKS rifles resulting from the 11 November contact. At 1005 hours, B-1-503d Infantry found 4 NVA KIA killed by 81mm mortar fire.

2-503d Infantry withdrew eastward carrying their WIA's with them. They set up a new perimeter around a bomb crater and DUSTOFF took out their casualties. The total casualties for the contact of the 13th and 14th was: "B" Company – 21 KIA, 17 WIA; "A" Company – 3 WIA. Throughout the morning airstrikes, artillery and mortar fire was adjusted on the NVA positions. At 1300 hours "B" Company from FSB 16 joined with "A" and "D" Companies and the three companies swept up the ridge right through the battle area and several hundred meters beyond with negative enemy contact. The three companies laagered for the night. The results of the sweep were 84 NVA KIA (BC), 20 small arms weapons, two 82mm mortars minus one tube and numerous blood trails found. All MIA's were found dead and the 90mm recoilless rifle and other US equipment recovered.

(continued...)



Companies "A" and "D" 4-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations with negative contact. Company "D" moved to FSB 13 and, Company "C" to FSB 12 to assume security responsibilities.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force.

Execution (continued):

At 140800 hours, November 14, A and B Companies withdrew eastward 400 meters taking their WIAs and dead with them. At the vicinity of YB813154 they set up a new perimeter around a large bomb crater and Dusted Off their casualties. The total casualties for the contact of the 13th and 14th were B Company – 21 KIA, 17 WIA, A Company – 3 WIA.

Throughout the morning airstrikes, artillery and mortar fire were adjusted in on the NVA positions. At 1300 hours, D Company from FSB 16 joined up with A and B and the 3 Companies swept up the ridge with B Company in the center, A Company on the left, and C Company on the right, through the battle area and several hundred meters beyond with negative enemy contact. The 3 companies laagered for the night at the location where A and B Companies had spent the night before. Results of the sweep were 34 NVA KIA (BC), 20 SA weapons, two 82mm mortars minus one tube and numerous blood trails. All of the MIA's were found dead, the 90mm RR and other US equipment were recovered.



"Members of Co. C, 1st Bn, 8th Inf, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, descend the side of Hill 742, located five miles northwest of Dak To, 14–17 November 1967." (Web photo)

D+21 (15 November 1967)

A-1-12th Cavalry released from OPCON to 2-503d Infantry.

The 173d Infantry Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1700 hours A-1-503d Infantry found 4 NVA KIA resulting from airstrikes placed in the area.

"A" and "D" Companies, 2-503d Infantry continued a search of the hill and the approaching ridge lines where the contact of the 12th and 13th occurred. "D" Company secured the LZ and equipment. "A" Company engaged two groups of three NVA at different times and locations killing one, wounding two and capturing one. "B" Company also captured one NVA. "A" Company found an estimated 13 NVA KIA from air and artillery and 1 NVA KIA from small arms fire as a result of the 12 November contact. The three companies laagered together on the hill.

D-4-503d Infantry moved to FSB 13 at 0715 hours. Companies "A" and "D" began search and destroy operations to the west and laagered at 1600 hours with negative contact or incident.

At 1155 hours, MIKE Special Forces Company OPCON to 2-503d Infantry engaged 5 NVA resulting 1 NVA KIA and 1 AK-47 captured.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force.

MIKE Special Forces elements from KONTUM continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

Execution:

On the morning of 15 November, A and B Companies continued a search of the hill and the approaching ridge lines where the contacts of the 12th and 13th occurred, while D Company secured the LZ and the Company's equipment. A Company engaged two groups of 3 NVA at different times and locations killing one, wounding two and capturing one. D Company also capture one NVA....

(continued....)



(Note: A total of 3 POWs since 11 November for 2/503d. A Company found an estimated 13 NVA KIA (BC) from air and artillery and 1 NVA KIA (BC) from SA fire as a result of their 12 November contact. The 3 companies laagered together on the hill.

D+22 (16 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry continued search and destroy operation in AO CONDOR. At 1145 hours "A" Company engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 1 NVA KIA. At 1525 hours, "A" Company found one 12.7mm weapon with 50 rounds of ammo and 12 CHICOM grenades.

B-2-503d Inf returned to FSB 16 replacing "C" Co who moved out to "A" and "D" Co's on search and destroy operations. An "A" Co clearing patrol found 5 NVA bodies and 3 AK-47's. They were credited to their 12 November contact -- total of 19 NVA KIA (BC). "C" Co captured one seriously wounded NVA and an AK-47 enroute to "A" and "B" Co's. The captive was evacuated. The 3 companies laagered at YB 800145.

Companies "A" and B-4-503d Inf initiated continued search and destroy operations at 0830 hours. Several old trails were found and the companies laagered with negative contact on Hill 990. Co "C's" mine sweep found one CHICOM mine at YB 894171.

E-17TH Cav continued as Brigade reaction force. MSF elements and CSP elements continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

D+23 (17 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. 1st Battalion 503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1500 hours the battalion called for an air strike resulting in 4 NVA KIA.



Hill 742 located five miles northwest of Dak To, 17 November 1967. (Web photo)



"16 November 1967, Dak To, South Vietnam, members of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry waste no time in leaving their helicopters on an assault operation 15 miles north of Dak To. In South Vietnam's Central Highlands where about 10,000 GI's faced some 6,000 North Vietnamese troops in one of the war's longest and bitterest struggles, Communist mortars pounded the key allied base of Dak To for the sixth time in three days." (Web photo)

The 2-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO HAWK. The 4-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO FALCON.

E-17th Cavalry continued as Brigade Reaction Force. At 1620 hours, E-17th Cav engaged an unknown size NVA force in the vicinity of ZB 057223 resulting in 2 US WIA.

MSF element and CSF element continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON. At 1540 hours an MSF element under the OPCON of the 4-503d Inf engaged a platoon size NVA force resulting in 1 US SF WIA and captured 1 AK-47, 40 rounds of small arms ammo. 4 MSFWIA and 2 CHICOM type grenades.

(continued...)



D+24 (18 November 1967)

CSF company from DAK TO was released from the OPCON of the 4-503d Inf.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR today in AO SPAATZ in conjunction with elements of the 4th Inf Div. The 1-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1440 hours, A Co engaged an unknown size NVA force. At 1715 hours, A Co received B-40 RL fire from enemy positions. Artillery was called into the area with unknown results. At 1805 hours, A Co received incoming 60mm rounds with negative friendly casualties. At 1530 hours, B Co found 4 NVA KIA. The graves were about 3 days old and cause of death could not be determined. At 1905 hours, A Co received an emergency resupply. At 1931 hours, A Co engaged 1 NVA resulting in 1 NVA KIA. Contact was broken at 1925 hours.

WIA and 8 CIDG WIA. At 1105 hours, the CSF Co under the OPCON OF 4-503d Inf was released to its parent unit.



Dodging rounds at Dak To. (Web photo)

Concept of the Operation and Execution:

A-1-503d Inf had laagered the night of the 17th in a former NVA bunker and trench system and had been resupplied by helicopter. The next morning at 0730 hours, A Co moved out towards YB796123. Captain David A. Jesner was company commander. 2LT Robinson was the 1st platoon leader, 2LT Ed Robertson was the 2d platoon leader, 1LT Larry Kennaner had the 3d platoon and 1LT David Holland led the weapons platoon. Sammual Duckett was the 1st SGT.

The 1st platoon lead with its point screening forward about 150 meters then clover leafing. Once the area looked clear the point posted security and motioned the main body forward. This type of movement was slow but the company had been saved from walking into ambush by it. The point men had always either spotted the NVA first or they had spotted each other at the same time.

The leading 1st platoon found an NVA trench system filled with Chinese field dressing that was still damp with blood. The dressings were estimated to be only two hours old and the men became eager to press on, displaying exceptionally high morale for having been on such a continuous operation. The company continued moving southwest towards Hill 882 with the 1st platoon still in the lead.

(continued....)



Dak To. Medic on the move? (Web photo)

The 2-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO HAWK. At 1440 hours, a CHIEU HOI walked into FSB 16. He carried AK-47 ammo, clothes and a homemade protective mask.

Companies A and B-4-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations with negative results. D Co was dispatched to link-up with the 23d MSF Co at 1035 hours. At 1310 hours, an artillery round fell into D Co's CP and the 23d MSF perimeter killing 6 US and 3 CIDG and wounding 14 US and 13 CIDG personnel.

E-17th Cav continued as Brigade Reaction Force.

MSF elements and CSF elements continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON. At 1045 hours, the 23d MSF Co under the OPCON of 2-503d Inf, engaged an unknown size NVA force. The MSF Co received heavy AW fire resulting in 1 VN SF



When the company arrived in the vicinity of YB805161, a little after noon, CPT Jesner held the company up and sent the 1st platoon forward to recon Hill 882. The company formed a perimeter to provide a strong position for the 1st platoon to fall back to in case they ran into heavy enemy fire. The company had received reports that there were suspected enemy on the hill.

The 1st platoon began advancing up the eastern finger of Hill 882 about 1315 hours and closed the top at 1400 hours. The progress up the hill had been difficult since the men had to work their way through a lot of deadfall and thick bamboo. Once on top, LT Robinson set up a platoon perimeter in a circle for quick security.

Almost immediately PFC's Brown, Suth and Hale spotted one (1) NVA to their south along the trail. PFC Brown fired a long burst from his M-16 but the NVA stepped behind a large clump of trees. PFC Suth jumped into the trail with a M-60 machine gun and fired. The NVA fell down into a small ravine and disappeared.

As soon as the platoon fired on the single NVA, the company commander started moving his men forward. PFC's Powers, Hughs and Brown went on a scouting patrol to find the body across the south side of the hill. To the south they found a partly completed bunker with commo wire leading back west to another bunker. The patrol immediately returned and then went on a scouting patrol to the west where they spotted a squad of NVA.

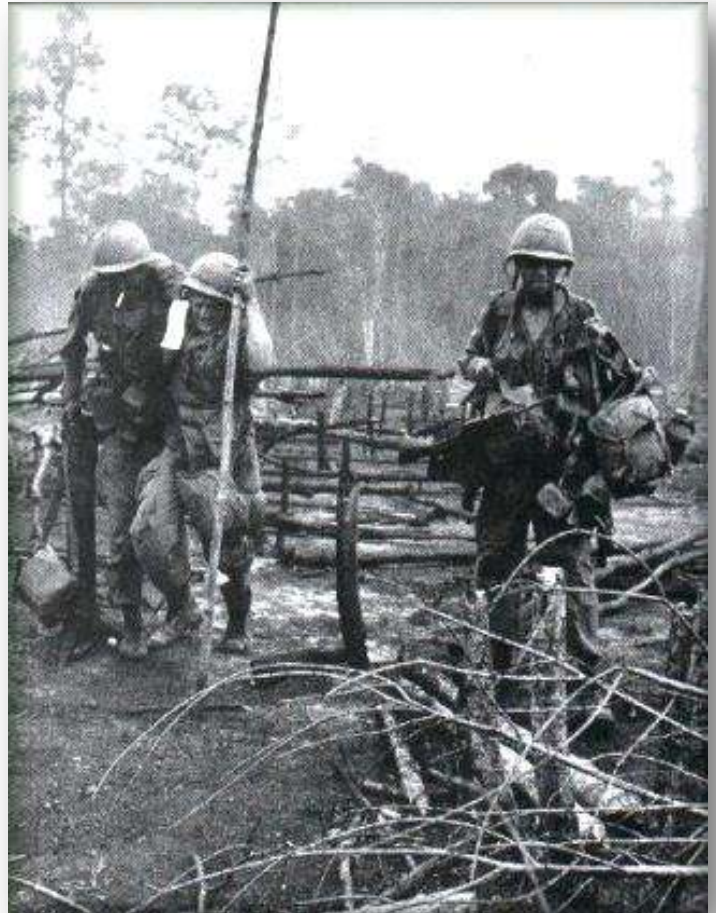
The company was setting up its perimeter when the patrol came running back. The company immediately got into position. Some of them were able to occupy holes remaining from Operation GREELEY which the Brigade had terminated on 14 October 1967 in the DAK TO area. (See issue 29 of this newsletter for *The Battle of The Slopes*. Ed). C and D-1-503d Inf had also come up the hill and were forming another but larger circle perimeter. Around the perimeter was about a five meter view. The area was trees, thick bamboo and underbrush.

The 1st platoon was on the west side of the perimeter while the 3d platoon covered the south side. The 2d platoon covered the southeast and C and D companies filled the remainder. A slight gap existed between the right flank of A Co across an open space (an old single ship LZ) and the connecting sister company.

LT Robinson located his two machine guns in the center of his western facing platoon so that they would be mutually supporting and cover both approaching trails. The platoon was fully armed with its basic load of ammunition.

The NVA opened up with heavy sniper fire, automatic weapons fire, machine guns, mortars, rifle

grenades and rockets. The 1st platoon counted 12 automatic weapons firing on them beside intense sniper fire from the trees. A fifty caliber machine gun was also heard firing. The NVA were grouping into twenty or thirty men and rushing the perimeter in bounds trying to locate the paratroopers' position. When they opened up and maneuvered, the Sky Soldiers returned their fire. The NVA soldiers were camouflaged very effectively over their entire body and were often very difficult to see unless moving, especially in the heavy undergrowth.



The 'buddy system' at Dak To. (Web photo)

The A company commander immediately requested air and artillery strikes. The air strikes came in with good effect on the NVA, however, the bombs blew debris all over which cut down on the distance the troopers could see. One man was wounded by the air strikes. Artillery did a good job and was right on target. 1st SGT Duckett set up an 81mm mortar and put it into action placing fire on the advancing NVA.

SSG Hookahi coordinated covering the right flank land as the battle progressed, manned the extreme right flank of the 1st platoon's perimeter. The NVA pressed their main assault from the west against the 1st platoon.

(continued...)



The NVA pressed the attack up to within ten meters of the perimeter. LT Robinson moved back and forth covering the perimeter. The heavy rifle grenades, rocket fire and mortars began to cause numerous wounded among the 1st platoon. The other platoons sent men up with fresh ammunition and grenades and helped withdraw the wounded.

PFC Hughs was wounded early in the fire fight and medical corpsman Withers gave Hughs mouth to mouth respiration for two hours to keep him alive. SP/4 Suth was manning one of the 2 M-60's with a line of fire directly upon the advancing NVA. His heavy bullets tore through the bamboo and were inflicting heavy casualties on the attacking NVA. When Suth's M-60 jammed, PFC Bruce moved from his south easterly firing position into Suth's position with his M-60. The NVA were keeping up a heavy grazing fire just a foot or two off the ground wounding or killing anyone who stood up. PFC Bruce fired for about three hours being moved from position to position by LT Robinson to confuse the enemy and not give away the gun's position.

At about 1630 hours, SGT Baum, a 1st platoon squad leader, was hit. A medic, SP/4 Dyer, came to his aid and was hit in the leg himself. He drug SGT Baum to a nearby tree where Dyer was shot in the head by a sniper and killed instantly.

Rocket fire came in and wounded PFC Bruce. PFC Hale then took over the position. The company commander then decided to withdraw the 1st platoon line about 20 meters and tighten his perimeter to fill the gaps caused by the wounded. Men from the 2d platoon and HQ's element crawled forward and reinforced the 1st platoon.

While leaving this position, PFC Hale's M-60 was blown out of his hand and destroyed by a rifle grenade. PFC Hale was wounded. All but three men from the first platoon had been wounded and all but the seriously wounded remained on the perimeter to fight.

A new machine gun was passed up and reinforcements joined the 1st platoon perimeter. From the second perimeter LT Robinson tried three different times to go back out and save SGT Baum. He was wounded each of the three times. On his third attempt LT Robinson called to SGT Baum and Baum opened his eyes and warned LT Robinson, *"For God sakes Lieutenant, don't come out here, there is a machine gun behind the tree,"* and he gestured behind the tree. SGT Baum died trying to crawl back to the perimeter. He had been shot seven times.

Between 1800 and 1830 hours, the wounded, who weren't in any condition to flight, plus the dead were assembled in the center of the perimeter. During this

process a rocket was fired by the NVA and landed in the center of the perimeter wounding several more personnel.

As it turned out the NVA laid down a heavy volume of 60mm mortar fire and broke contact. Throughout the night there were occasional NVA probes on the 2d platoon. The perimeter was closed tighter and the companies received aerial resupply and helicopter evacuated the wounded. At 1735 hours, A Co killed one NVA who jumped into a hole in their perimeter. Friendly casualties for the battle were, 6 KIA and 29 WIA.

Douglas Bruce Baum, HHC/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Samuel Lee Carmichael, A/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
William Anderson Collins, D/4/503, KIA 11/18/67

Michael Andrew Crabtree, D/4/503, KIA 11/18/67

Born to Andrew F. and Helen H. Crabtree, 1939, United States Military Academy, Class of 1962. 82nd Airborne, 1963-1965, 2nd Bn, 327th Infantry, 1966, Company Commander, Delta 4/503rd Infantry, 1967. REMEMBERED



Joseph Francis Dyer, Jr., HHC/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Raymond Garcia, Jr., A/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Douglas Graham Magruder, B/3/319, KIA 11/18/67

Richard Dale McGhee, D/4/503, KIA 11/18/67

Richard was my uncle, and though I never met him, I've always heard about him, how he enjoyed being an airborne mortarman. He also lived to hunt and spent more time in the mountains of West Virginia than he probably spent indoors. Used to write home to my dad and my uncle James telling them to take care of his dog. Most I gathered from family stories was that he was a rather quiet person. When he got done with jump school, he came home and showed his brothers and sisters how they had to land by jumping off of the roof of their home. Tom Canterbury

Thomas Jay Riley, A/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Charles Harvey Robinson, D/4/503, KIA 11/18/67
Ignacio Torres, Jr., D/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Leonard B. Washington, Jr., C/1/503, KIA 11/18/67
Harry Conard Wilson, II, 173d Eng Co., KIA 11/18/67

(continued....)



Note: A number of conflicts exist in dates of certain events as reported in official records such as the battalion After Action Report, Army War College reports, brigade web sites and the Virtual Wall listing KIA dates, particularly during the dates of 19-20 November 1967, and appear herein. Ken Smith, A/D/2/503d, who was manning the TOC during the battles at Dak To states such conflicts are likely the result of 1) the date(s) details were entered into battalion journals in the field versus 2) the transmittal date(s) to Bde HQ, and 3) the date(s) details were ultimately recorded there. For example: we identified certain of our men named here, but not necessarily all, as KIA on 20 November who were killed in action on 19 November. Tom Remington, A/2/503, a survivor of the battles at Dak To, added: *“Kiley, Hervas, Young, Shoop, Jacobson, Stokes and Villereal were all KIA on the 19th. Likewise, Carlos Lozada (MOH) was KIA on the 19th. The only reason I can give is that their bodies were not officially ID'd until very late on the 20th when the 4th Battalion joined our position. These men were all in A Co. Many other men from A Co. were also KIA and WIA on the 19th but, the foregoing were either at the LZ site or at the OP below the LZ when the attack from the rear began around 1400 on the 19th. These men were also separated from D Co., C Co. and the rest of A Co., behind and below the main battle up front with D and C. Hopefully, this information will be helpful.”* Ed



The damn hill. (Web photo)

D+25 (19 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. The 1-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 0632 hours, A Co captured 1 NVA who was wounded in the eye. At 0830 hours, A, C and D Co's conducting clearing patrols found 51 NVA KIA, 9 AK-47's, 3 B-40 RL's, 1 AK-50, 3 BA rifles, and 2 SKS rifles from the results of the contact on 18 November.

The 2-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AP HAWK. At 1040 hours, D Co engaged an unknown size NVA force. At 1131 hours, D Co received incoming B-40 rocket fire. At 1412 hours, A Co engaged an unknown size NVA force. At 1435 hours, A, C and C Co's reported they were in heavy

contact with an unknown size NVA force and surrounded. At 1510 hours, enemy contact was broken with all units of the 2-503d Inf. The casualty figures for the contact were 40 US KIA, 42 US WIA, and 32 US MIA. There were unknown NVA casualties. At 1853 hours, a Marine bomber accidentally dropped a bomb on the CP area.

At 0930 hours, C-4-503d Inf was helilifted from FSB 12 to a LZ. One US Paratrooper was wounded by sniper fire on the initial landing. At 1000 hours, A and B Co's were airlifted to FSB 12 to close in at 1125 hours. A Co followed Co C into the LZ at 1315 hours.

(continued....)



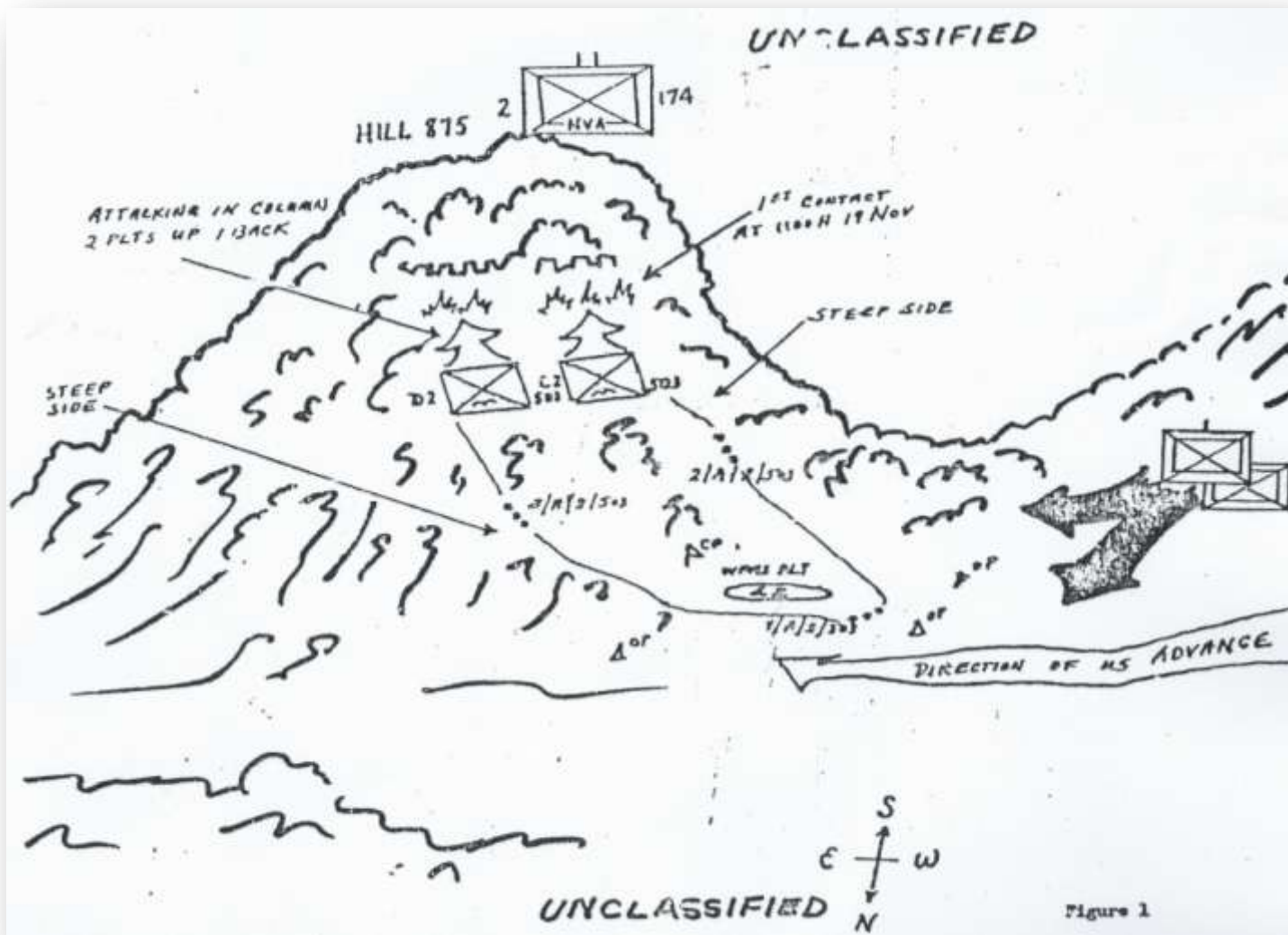


Figure 1

At 1530 hours, the 335th AHC aircraft 498 received AW fire in the vicinity of FSB 16 with no friendly casualties. The aircraft returned to DAK TO. At 1630 hours, aircraft 621 was shot down in the vicinity of FSB 16 with no friendly casualties. At 1740 hours, aircraft 717 was shot down in the vicinity of FSB 16 resulting in 2 US WIA. At 1745 hours, aircraft 638 was shot down in the vicinity of FSB 16 with no friendly casualties. All the aircraft were flying in support of resupply operations for the 2-503d Inf.

MSF elements continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON. At 1257 hours, the MSF Co under the OPCON of 2-503d Inf engaged 3 NVA resulting in 3 NVA KIA and 2 AK-47's and 1 SKS rifle being captured.

Intelligence: The intelligence Annex to OPORD 25-67, Operation MACARTHUR, Headquarters, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate), dated 050900 November 1967, gave the most current enemy locations available for use by friendly forces prior to conduct of Operation MACARTHUR. These enemy locations were general in nature and there were no confirmed enemy locations

within the Battalion area of operation at the beginning of the operations.

Mission: The 2-503d Infantry had been alerted to assault Hill 875 after the 26th MIKE Special Forces Company (OPCON to the 2/503d Infantry) had made contact with a large NVA force on its slopes the previous day (18 November 1967).

Concept of Operation / Execution:

The attack was to be made with 2 companies abreast. "D" Company on the left and "C" Company on the right with the trail running up the mountain acting as the boundary between the attacking companies. The companies were to attack with two platoons forward and one platoon in reserve. A third company ("A" Company) was to be held in reserve and was to insure security of the rear flank of the other two companies and secure the area at the bottom of the hill.

(continued...)



At 0730 hours, 19 November, the ambush elements from "A", "C" and "D" Companies (2/503) closed their unit's night laager site. Captain Harold J. Kaufman, senior company Commanding Officer issued the battle order while artillery and air preparation was being fired on Hill 875. The 26th MIKE Special Forces Company reached its blocking position at 0822 hours. At 0943 hours, the airstrikes were complete and the three companies began moving.

The attack was to be made with two companies abreast, "D" Company on the left and "C" Company on the right, with the trail running up the mountain acting as a boundary between the attacking companies. The companies were to attack with two platoons forward and one platoon held in reserve. "D" Company had its 3d Platoon on the left, 2d Platoon on the right, CP behind the 2d Platoon and the 1st and Weapons Platoon following in reserve. "C" Company had its 3d Platoon on the left, 2d Platoon on the right, CP behind the 3d Platoon and the 1st Platoon following in reserve. "A" Company was to be in reserve and to secure the rear.



Combat on The Hill. (Web photo)

The weather was clear and warm and the ridge slope gradual, approximately 100 meters wide, dropping off sharply to the east and more gradually to the west. The vegetation was fairly thick with bamboo, scrub brush and tall trees growing up the hill.

"C" and "D" Companies started out in two columns each. As they reached the base of the hill they deployed into two platoons abreast with two equal files in each platoon. They advanced slowly through the tangled and gnarled vegetation which had been mashed on by the bomb strikes. In the center-most file of the two companies was the 2d Squad, 2d Platoon of "D" Company. SP4 Kenneth Jacobson was the point man, SP4 Charlie Hinton about 5 meters behind him and SGT

Frederick Shipman, the squad leader, behind Hinton. As they approached the military crest of the hill, Jacobson received 3 small arms rounds and was killed instantly. The time was 1030 hours.

SP4 Hinton and SGT Shipman moved up closer to Jacobson and called for a medic. As the medic came up, he was hit by small arms fire and died a few minutes later (SP4 Farley). SP4 Hinton and SGT Shipman still did not know where the fire was coming from. It wasn't until the NVA started throwing grenades that SGT Shipman and his men could identify where the initial fire had come from. After the initial bursts of fire, rucksacks were dropped and the platoons began closing up and deploying on line. As they approached SGT Shipman's squad, which had been slightly forward, fire increased rapidly with recoilless rifle, automatic weapons fire and rifle grenades coming from the NVA positions. Over on the right flank, as "C" Company's 2d Platoon closed up and moved forward, one of their point men, SP4 Quinn – was hit by small arms fire. As the medic, SP4 Hagerty, moved up to assist, he was killed by small arms fire. The enemy fire lulled; they moved forward 5-6 meters on line, then the enemy fire exploded again. After returning fire and pausing for indirect fires to be brought in, the 2d Platoon moved forward approximately 20-30 meters using fire and movement. During the next two hours they took most their casualties from frag wounds from the exploding recoilless rifle rounds and hand grenades. Meanwhile, the 3d Platoon, "C" Company, which was near the trail, dropped their rucksacks and moved forward alongside of "D" Company receiving mostly sniper fire along the way. As they reached "D" Company's location, they too came under heavy recoilless rifle and B-40 rocket fire. At this time, "C" and "D" Companies marked their positions with smoke as FAC's adjusted in artillery and airstrikes.

The paratroopers returned fire on enemy positions. After approximately 30 minutes, the companies began moving again utilizing fire and movement.

Just five meters in front of SGT Shipman's position was a bunker from which the contact had originated. 1SG Deebs, SSG Page and others from "D" Company took the first bunker, throwing 4 or 5 hand grenades through the port. SSG Johnson's 1st Squad, 2d Platoon, "D" Company came across a dead NVA in a V-trench to the left of the bunker....

(continued....)



...The 2d Platoon advanced past the bunker and the trench, only to have an NVA throw several grenades at them from the bunker they had just blown. The bunker apparently had a tunnel leading to it from higher on the hill, as the 2d Platoon reported killing several NVA in the position and still they continued to receive resistance from the bunker. The platoon advanced slowly for 15-20 meters not knowing exactly where to fire since the enemy had its positions well concealed in the thick, broken bamboo and brush. Heavy recoilless rifle fire, grenades land small arms fire brought the assault to a stand-still in some places. Over on the left side, "D" Company reported advancing to within 15-20 meters of what appeared to be the main bunker system. Over on the right-hand side they were only able to close to within 15-20 meters. During this assault, LT Smith, 3d Platoon Leader, "C" Company, was cut down by automatic weapons fire and later died. Also, a couple of artillery short rounds fell on "D" Company on the left injuring PSG James Beam (SSG E6), SP4 Frank Carmody and one or two others. It was about this time that "A" Company got hit from the rear.



Wounded trooper at Dak To. (Web photo)

Captain Kaufman, seeing that the assault was bogging down and realizing that the rear was being attacked, ordered his men back and formed a perimeter. They did so over about 30 meters of the ground they had just covered, drawing their wounded with them.

SP4 Witold Leszczynski was WIA as he covered LT Peter Lantz who brought LT Smith back into the perimeter before he died. Over on the left hand side, 3d Platoon, "D" Company also got the word to withdraw and did so. The 2d Platoon, however, didn't get the word and continued fighting. Before long they realized that there was no one on their flanks. "D" Company's

3d Platoon had pulled back approximately 30 meters when they received word that the 2d Platoon was pinned down. They moved back up the hill to help. With the 1st Platoon covering, "D" Company began a rapid and broken withdrawal but many of the men were not quite aware of the situation. Captain Kaufman, "C" Company Commander, drew and fired his pistol in the air several times to regain control. Captain Kaufman only had his men pull back into the perimeter rather than withdraw as he didn't want to lose the high ground that they had gained. The front edge of the perimeter was only 20 meters from the NVA bunker and trench where the battle started. The men began to dig in with knives, steel pots or anything else they could work with.

"A" Company had left the laager site that morning right on the heels of "C" and "D" Companies in the march order of 2d, 3d, CP, Weapons and 1st Platoon. They moved approximately 500 meters in 45 minutes. As they moved up the hill, the 2d Platoon broke off to the right keeping in sight of "C" Company and the 3d Platoon went off to the left keeping "D" Company in sight. The CP, Weapons and the 1st Platoon remained in the middle. When contact occurred, "A" Company halted. As the action developed, Captain Kiley ordered the Weapons Platoon to start constructing an LZ. They did so at a point approximately 100 meters from where "C" and "D" Companies were engaged. The 1st Platoon secured the LZ from the rear by putting LP's out 30-20 meters to the flanks and rear and by positioning the remainder of the men on line 15 meters back. The 2d and 3d Platoon's secured the flanks. As "C" and "D" Companies slowly advanced, the two "A" Company platoons moved with them as best they could. The LZ construction was going slowly. An LZ kit was requested at 1300 hours, and dropped in at 1400 hours. Shortly afterward, the LZ received several mortar rounds.

The rear CP (reportedly from 2d Platoon, "A" Company. Ed) was located 30-40 meters back along the trail that the companies had moved down earlier. It was manned by SP4 James Kelley, the Team Leader who was armed with an M-16. SP4 John Steer, a rifleman, PFC Carlos Lozada, a machine-gunner and PFC Anthony Romano, the assistant machine-gunner....

(continued....)



A little after 1400 hours, SP4 Kelley was sitting on the right side of the trail behind a tree with PFC Romano, SP4 Steer and PFC Lozada, smoking and waiting. Romano mentioned not to fire at the first enemy that approached but to let them get close. SP4 Kelley began to hear twigs breaking in front of him so he leaned around the tree and aimed uphill.

Suddenly as fire broke out on the left (possibly mortar fire), PFC Lozada yelled, ***“Here they come, Kelly”***, and began to fire in long sweeping bursts down the hill into a group of about 15 advancing NVA. Lozada’s initial bursts into the advancing NVA caught the NVA by complete surprise and at such a close range that the M-60 machine gun tore the column to pieces.

The NVA evidently were caught by complete surprise and were unaware of the presence of the rear OP.

As soon as the firing broke out, members of the first platoon, SGT Jeffery Hilleshiem, PFC James Howard (RTO), PFC James Spellers and SP4 Eugene Rockman, dashed forward to aid the OP’s who were rapidly being pinned down by the advancing NVA. SGT Hilleshiem was hit while running forward and PFC Romano, assistant machine-gunner, ran back to help him, bringing him back to the LZ. PFC Lozada knelt behind a log and continued firing long sweeping bursts into the advancing NVA, while SP4 Kelley and SP4 Steer fired their M-16’s from the right side of the trail.

The sudden heavy fire from the rear had momentarily slowed the NVA attack and alerted the rest of the company. SP4 Kelley called for Lozada to fall back. Lozada responded by running across the trail firing and getting behind a log on the right side of the trail and continuing to fire into the onrushing NVA with steady streams of fire. Kelley continued to yell as he fell back and just after he shot a well camouflaged NVA at 10 meters, his weapon jammed. (Note: The NVA’s face was blackened and his weapon was wrapped in burlap). While Kelley worked on his weapon, Lozada jumped into the trail and began firing from the hip at the charging NVA as he walked slowly backwards up the trail. SP4 Steer started dropping back. Kelley fixed his weapon and started firing again. Lozada’s machine-gun jammed (or he ran out of ammunition). As he ran to catch up, the NVA fire hit him in the head knocking him

onto Steer. Steer became upset so Kelley ran back down the hill and got Steer on the trail moving back uphill. In the meantime, of the others who came to help the OP’s, Bookman and Howard were wounded and Speller killed by the heavy NVA fire. McGill and Coleski assisted the wounded man and they all moved rapidly up the hill using fire and movement with other men in the platoon. Kelley dropped M-26 fragmentation grenades behind him as he moved up the trail.



Here they come! (Web photo)

Back on the LZ after the first mortar rounds hit – the Weapons Platoon ran for their gear and formed a perimeter. As the action and mortar fire increased, SP4 Jack Shoop and PFC Martin Bergman ran back onto the LZ and attempted to initiate counter mortar fire. While in the process, Shoop was hit and killed by small arms fire.

Captain Kiley instructed his 2d and 3d Platoon, who had been carrying wounded down to the LZ to move down and reinforce the 1st Platoon. This was his last transmission. There were approximately 8-10 WIA’s on the LZ when the rear attack broke out. LT Thomas Remington immediately started moving his 2d Platoon back from the right hand side of the ridge. They never made it.

(continued....)





NVA Soldiers, 1967. (Web photo)

The NVA were approaching on a large, well-traveled trail that was very well constructed, including steps cut into the side of the hill. They smashed into the west flank of the 2d Platoon near the front, cutting them off from the rest of their company around the LZ. SGT Aaron Hervas was leading the 2d Platoon when the NVA opened up with a heavy volume of fire. He spun firing, hitting several NVA before he was felled with a bullet through the head. SP4 Frank Stokes and PVT Ernesto Villereal were killed in action. SP4 Benzing and PFC Sexton were pinned down. SP4 Orendorf and some others moved down and got Sexton out, however, SP4 Benzing, after killing 5-10 NVA from behind a tree, was himself killed. LT Remington was hit in both arms and both legs. PSG Smith (SSG E6) and several others were wounded in the fire fight. The 2d Platoon consolidated as best they could and pulled back up the hill to "C" and "D" Companies perimeter. The 3d Platoon was on the eastern side of the ridge, met lesser resistance and was able to link up with the LZ. They did receive effective fire from the west and sustained several casualties, as the NVA had smashed through to the main trail.

The NVA were evidently well prepared for the battle. The rear attack from the left flank and mortar attack, all came within minutes of each other. Both of the attacking forces were estimated to be company size. Several of the NVA were well camouflaged. It was noticed that several of the NVA had strange grins on their faces. One trooper reported seeing an NVA charge into a tree, bounce off and continue his charge. When the hill was finally taken, it was noticed that many of the enemy casualties and equipment had been policed from the battlefield, indicating that the enemy had avenues of withdrawal that could have been utilized at any time.

"A" Company's CP group was hit by one of the initial mortar rounds

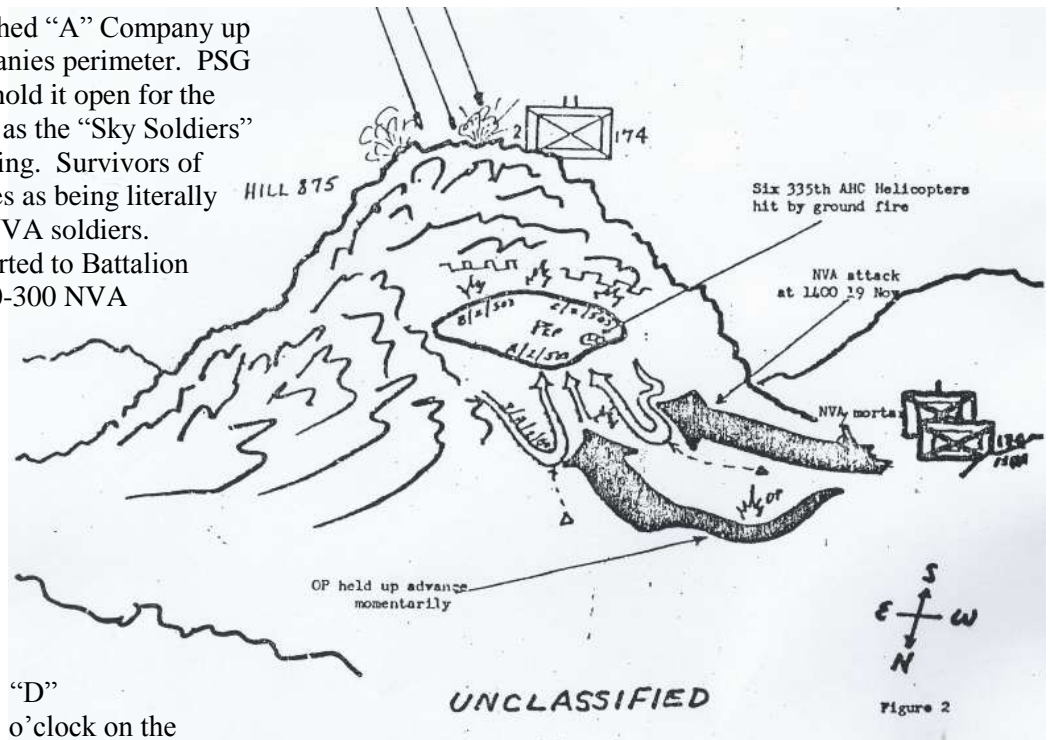
wounding Captain Kiley, LT Busenlehner, SGT Lyons, SGT Stacey and others. The CP group was then caught in the midst of an NVA attack from the west. A "C" Company medic who had been one of the wounded at the LZ said that the NVA came "swarming" up the side of the ridge. The CP group killed several of the NVA force before succumbing. There were six (6) in the CP group and they all went down fighting. Captain Kiley, SP5 Taylor (the Senior Medic who had been treating Captain Kiley and the others), SP4 Young (RTO) and three others all died fighting. One of the group was shot in the legs and the "C" Company medic could not carry him and had to abandon him to scramble back to the perimeter. LT Busenlehner, SGT Stacey and SGT Lyons had moved down to the Weapons Platoon near the LZ and instructed them to withdraw since the CP had been knocked out. The Weapons Platoon took their one good radio and as many of the wounded as they could carry and moved back up towards the "C" and "D" Company perimeter.

(continued....)



In 10-15 minutes, the NVA pushed "A" Company up the hill towards "C" and "D" Companies perimeter. PSG Siggers posted men on the trail to hold it open for the withdrawing paratroopers. As fast as the "Sky Soldiers" fired, the faster the NVA kept coming. Survivors of "A" Company described themselves as being literally swamped by a hoard of charging NVA soldiers. At 1500 hours, "C" Company reported to Battalion Headquarters that an estimated 200-300 NVA were all around them. The entire perimeter had come under mortar attack and now recoilless rifle, small arms and B-40 rocket fire pounded the perimeter as the NVA followed "A" Company right up to the perimeter.

Where the perimeter was established the slope was rather gradual, pitching off to either side. "D" Company had from 12 o'clock to 5 o'clock on the perimeter, "C" Company from 7 to 10 o'clock and "A" Company mingled from 4 to 10 o'clock. The Company CP's were located together where the wounded were consolidated. The paratroopers beat off the NVA attack, but continued to receive sporadic but effective sniper and mortar fire. At 1550 hours, "C" Company reported receiving B-40 rocket fire. At 1643 hours, an LOC ship dropped in an ammunition resupply but it landed approximately 15 meters outside the perimeter on the forward slope between the NVA and the US positions. LT Lantz and LT McDonough organized recovery teams and moved out to recover it. The operation was going fairly smoothly when a sniper hit LT Lantz, killing him instantly. The recovery party withdrew immediately. The 335th Assault Helicopter Company continued to attempt to resupply the companies, however, heavy hostile fire drove them away. A total of six (6) ships were grounded from automatic weapons and small arms fire. At 1750 hours, two pallets were successfully dropped in. Throughout this period a heavy barrage of TAC Air and artillery was adjusted in on the enemy. Sky Raiders, F-100's and helicopter gunships delivered their payloads making their passes on a SW to NW tangent on the perimeter. At 1858 hours, just after dark, a jet fighter approached Hill 875 from a NE to SW direction passing directly over the heads of the "Sky Soldiers". One or two of its bombs fell short, landing directly in the middle of the "D" Company CP where the leaders and wounded had been congregated. There were at least 42 killed and 45 wounded (either initially or after having been wounded initially) by the bomb. LT Bart O'Leary, "D" Company Commanding Officer, though suffering from serious wounds, stayed on the Battalion net throughout the night, maintaining communications. At first there was mass confusion and some panic.



Most of the leaders had been either hit or killed, including the chaplain, Father Watters, and the entire "C" Company CP group including leaders from each of the platoons. The paratrooper quickly recovered, however, with leaders emerging from the ranks.

The wounded were gotten off their feet and quieted down. PSG Peter Krawtzw took charge of "C" Company and reorganized their sector of the perimeter. LT McDonough from "D" Company and LT Sheridan from "A" Company had only minor wounds and were instrumental in re-establishing control. "A" Company's artillery RTO was the only one with initial contact with the Battalion Fire Direction Net. He adjusted the first artillery defensive concentration walking it in towards the perimeter. As he was adjusting his second defensive concentration in front of a different sector of the perimeter, he gave an adjustment that would have brought the round too close to the perimeter. During this period, PSG Krawtzw had gotten ahold of a radio and began turning the frequencies to get any friendly station. He happened to land on the Battalion Fire Direction Net and monitored the errant adjustment. At this point he intervened and he and SSG Moultrie called in and adjusted the defensive concentrations for the rest of the night. Shortly after the bomb hit at 1930 hours, one round of artillery hit in "D" Company's sector of the perimeter, killing one and injuring 3-4 others. Two PRC-25 radios were also knocked out. Someone came up on the net and told them to add 100 meters.

(continued...)



The NVA continued to probe during the night. SGT Williams from "D" Company and others in his foxhole heard movement to their front so they threw a couple of frag grenades. They heard hollering and then the NVA started yelling, "Chieu Hoi". The "Sky Soldiers" responded by throwing a couple more grenades. They didn't fire their weapons for fear of revealing their positions. The next morning they found numerous NVA bodies to the front of their position. (Note: They estimated 25-50 although some felt that this was the result of the second bomb which landed just outside of the perimeter). One of the bodies was within 10 meters of their position with a sack of grenades beside him. The three companies' laager site for the night was three quarters of the way up Hill 875.

At 1045H, 19 Nov, B-4-503d Inf was helilifted from an LZ to FSB 12, closing at 1123H. B-4-503d Inf was alerted at FSB 12 that the 2-503d Inf was in hard fighting and that they were going in to reinforce them. B-4-503d Inf was then helilifted from FSB 12 to FSB 16 closing at 1731H.

The paratroopers of B-4-503d Airborne Infantry were eager to move out and relieve their comrades in the surrounded 2-503d Inf, but it was too close to dark, so the company laagered for the night on the eastern end of FSB 16 and cleaned their weapons preparing for the next day's battle. Since the Sky Soldiers knew they were going into a heavy fire fight they all drew and packed extra ammunition. Riflemen carried 600 rds or more, machine gunners carried upwards of 2000 rds, grenadiers 50 rds HE and usually about the same amount of shotgun rounds. Every one carried from 5 - 10 M-26 frag grenades and two smoke grenades. Since the paratroopers wanted to travel light and fast they only carried one meal of C-rations, one canteen of water (they would cross several streams), and a poncho for carrying their dead and wounded to the LZ. Each platoon carried 20 rds of 60mm mortar ammo except the weapons platoon which carried 70 rds and two 60mm mortars. Flamethrowers, 90mm RR, LAW's and 81mm mortars would be brought in later by helicopter.

Michael Edward Adams, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Bruce Martin Benzing, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

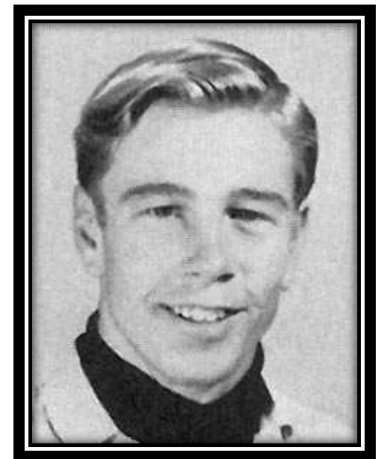


Roy James Blackwell, Jr., C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

*Do we weep for the heroes
 who died for us;
 Who living were true and
 tried for us;
 And dying sleep side by side
 for us;
 The martyr band that
 hallowed our land;
 Who shed their blood in a
 tide for us?*
 - Fr. Abram Ryan -
 Arnold M. Huskins



Mario Alvarez Cisneros, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Gary Robert Cooper, 173d Eng. Co., KIA 11/19/67

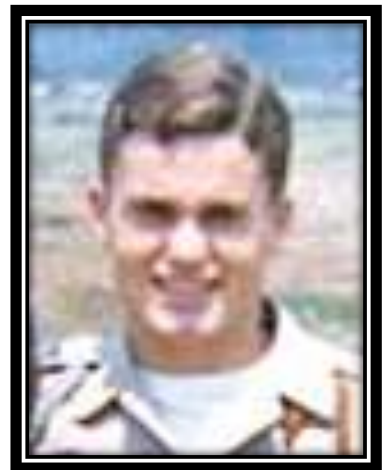


**Jack Lee Croxdale, II,
 C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67**

Benjamin David De Herrera, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

**Michael Le Roy Ellis,
 A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67**

*Greater love hath no
 man than this, that a man
 lay down his life for his
 friends. John 15:13 KJV*
Specialist Four Elis distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on 19 November 1967. On this day, on a search and destroy mission, contact was made with a well-fortified enemy force. With the initial burst of enemy fire Specialist Ellis ran forward and engaged the enemy despite the intense enemy fire. Specialist Ellis continuously moved from position to position to place accurate fire against the enemy positions....



* Brigade & After Action Report lists KIA date as 11/20/67

(continued....)



During the assault Specialist Ellis aided the wounded and dragged several troopers to a secure area for treatment and medical evacuation. As the intense firefight continued, Specialist Ellis was mortally wounded in his advance against the enemy. Specialist Ellis' outstanding display of aggressiveness, devotion to duty, and personal bravery were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service. (excerpts from Bronze Star Medal with "V" Device citation).

From his sister, Sheri (Ellis) Anderson

James Cabell Farley, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*
*Virtual Wall lists as 11/20/67

James William Flynt, III, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
James Carl Frederick, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Gerald Lee George, Jr., C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Prelow Grissette, B/2/503, KIA 11/19/67



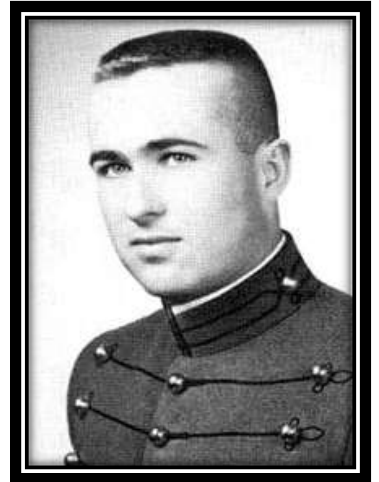
William Thomas Hagerty,
HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

Mark Richard Hering, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Aaron Kamala Hervas, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*
(first name is also listed as Aaron)

Thomas Pate Huddleston, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Donald landoli, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67



Kenneth James "Jake"
Jacobson,
HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

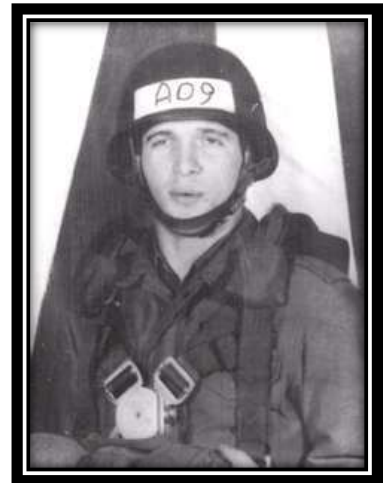


Michael James Kiley,
A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

Jeffrey Wayne Koonce, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Roger Allen Kros, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Peter J. Lantz, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Robert C. LaVallee, Jr., HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Witold John Leszczynski, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Witold "Vito" Leszczynski, the best friend I ever had. We met in 1962 when my parents moved us to East 19th Street in Brooklyn and were best of friends for the next 5 years. We had so many firsts together in our young lives, too numerous to mention. Vito was so proud of enlisting in the Army. He was a hero to many of us in the neighborhood. He would have been my best man at my wedding and my daughter's godfather had he survived, that's how close we were. I will never forget him and hope to meet up with him up there when my days here are through. From a friend, Richard "richie" Adam



Carlos James Lozada,
A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*



Medal of Honor
recipient

* Brigade & After Action Report lists KIA date as 11/20/67

(continued....)



Andrew John Orosz, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

It's been 34 years since you passed. Although our time together in the Army was short I felt you were closer to me than my family. I think of you often and smile at the fun we had in Charlie 2/505. God bless you, until we meet again. Lou

William Remer, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

William Allen Ross, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Robert James Sanders,
C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Robert James Sanders was killed at the young age of nineteen while serving his country. I decided on this special tribute to him because he came from the neighborhood where I grew up in Philadelphia. Although I did not know this boy personally, he was the brother of my sister's best friend. I remember visiting his house one day with my sister and I recall seeing a picture of him in his uniform. I cannot remember the date of that incident, so he may have already been killed in the Vietnam War by that time. I wonder if he died before that day. I don't even know. Even those of us who did not lose a family member to the Vietnam War, have a memory or two that comes to mind whenever we think back to the turbulent decade of the 1960's. From a friend's sister,
Barbara Malone



Jack Henry Shoop, Jr., A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Donald Eugene Smith, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

*"Not for fame or reward,
not for place or for rank,
but in simple obedience to duty,
as they understood it."*

Confederate Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery

Lewis Benjamin Smith, D/2/503, KIA 11/19/67



James Ronald Speller,
A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Harry Edward Stephens,
D/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

We called him "Skinny Eddie" because he was just that - skinny as a weed. Eddie was one of the guys in my dad's Scout Troop when we lived in Virginia. We had some great times and more fun than you could believe possible. In 1967 while eating dinner we got the call about Eddie getting killed in Nam. My Dad left the table and sat on the front porch and cried, one of the few times I saw him cry. His only words were "It's just not fair ... Eddie was so young." No one ever talked about it again and Dad remained a strong supporter of the war. "Only The Good Die Young" would fit so many of the Vietnam War dead and Eddie was one of them. From a boyhood friend, Charles W. Echols



Frank Edward Stokes, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

Ernest Ray Taylor, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67*

Richard W. Thompson, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Ernesto Villereal, A/2/503,
KIA 11/19/67*

Wearing his "We Try
Harder" button



Richard Walker, Jr., D/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

Rudolph Nathinal Ward, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/19/67

* Brigade & After Action Report lists KIA date as 11/20/67

(continued...)



**Charles Joseph Watters,
A/Spt Bn, KIA 11/19/67**



Medal of Honor recipient

This comment is 38 years late. You died at the same time - in the same place - as my brother. One of you would have been helping the other. My brother, Michael LeRoy Ellis, was killed in action on Hill 875, 19 November 1967. He turned 21 August 20, 1967. He was coming home December 1967. He did come home in December but not the way we expected. You and he died for our freedom and I thank you for that. It was documented that Mike was enjoying relative safety from the enemy but he repeatedly left that safety to try to retrieve his fallen comrades. One of these excursions was his last on this earth. I can only hope that those he saved honored his and your courage by continuing to love and protect this great country that you protected, fought for and ultimately died to preserve. Thank you, Charles Joseph Watters, and thank your family. From a fellow American, Sheri Ellis Anderson



**Remer Garth Williams, C/2/503, KIA 11/19/67
Ronald Wayne Young, A/2/503, KIA 11/19/67***

*Brigade & After Action Report lists KIA date as 11/20/67

D+26 (20 November 1967)

4-503d Inf assumed OPCON of 2-503d Inf. A and D-1-12 Inf assumed the mission as Brigade Reaction Force.

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. The 1-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1050 hours, A Co found 11 60mm mortar rounds 75 meters outside their perimeter. At 1035 hours, D Co found 4 82mm mortar rounds and 2 CHICOM grenades.

The 2-503d Inf continued patrolling, consolidation and policing of the battle area. At 1645 hours, D Co engaged an unknown size NVA force with unknown results.

Company B-4-503d Inf initiated movement from FSB 16 to expected relief of the 2-503d Inf. Companies A and C were airlifted to FSB 16 commencing at 0925 hours and closing at 1025 hours. Companies A and C followed Co B to affect relief of 2-503d Inf. All companies found US and NVA weapons and equipment and 41 NVA during movement to relief. Co's A and D-1-12th Inf arrived at FSB 12 to assume security mission at 1820 hours. Co's A, B and C linked up with 2-503d Inf at 1655 hours, 2110 hours and 2225 hours

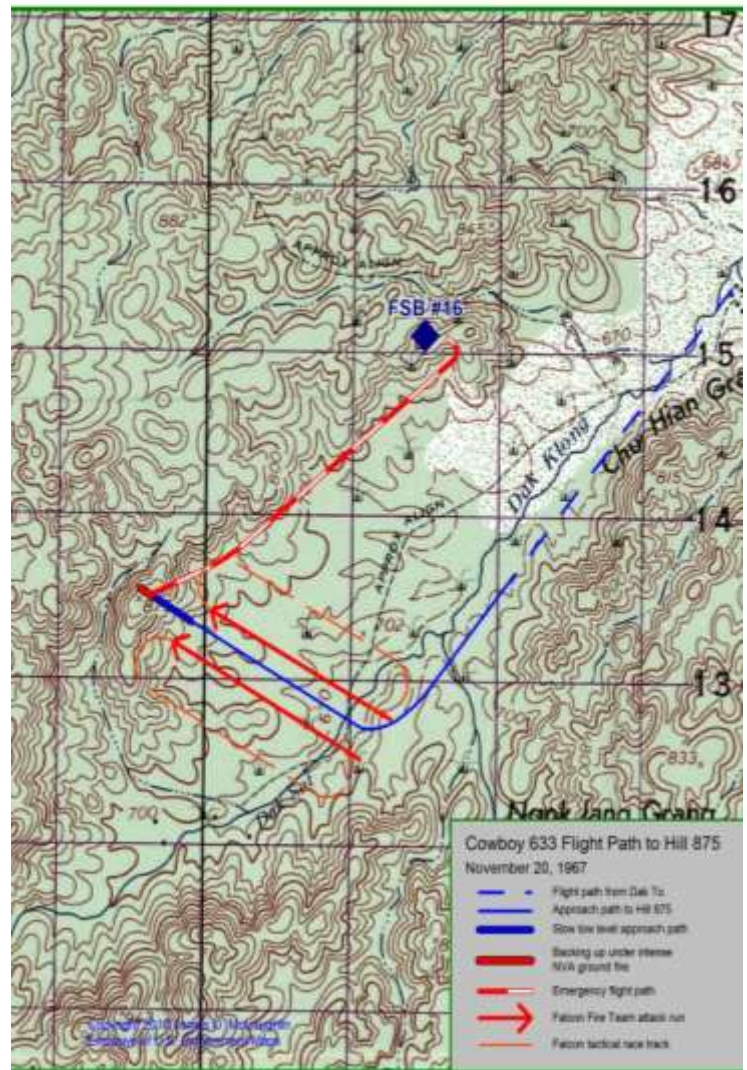
respectively. At 1800 hours Co. B was subjected to a mortar barrage. The mine sweep between FSB 12 and 13 discovered three anti-tank mines at 1100 hours.

D-17th Cav continued as Brigade Reaction Force. The MSP elements continued patrolling activities in AO HAWK and AO FALCON. At 1846 hours, A Co and D 1-12th Inf closed on FSB 12. Upon closure, elements of 1-12 Inf assumed mission as Brigade Reaction Force.

At 0820 hours, the 335th AHC aircraft 633 was shot down in the vicinity of FSB 16 with no friendly casualties. At 0820 hours the aircraft 637 was shot down in the same vicinity with no friendly casualties. These aircraft were flying in support of operations of the 2-503d Inf.

Approximate Flight Path of Cowboy 633 to Hill 875

November 20, 1967



(Copyright: Jim McLaughlin)

(continued...)





20 November 1967, Dak To, Captain O'Sullivan and 1st SGT Rodriguez, Bravo Company, 8th Cav, on Hill 1034.

(Insert): “In the afternoon of 20 Nov and proceeded by a devastating air and artillery barrage, Bravo Company completed the assault of Hill 1034.

We spent most of the evening and the following two days clearing the extensive enemy bunker complex surrounding Hill 1034, and collecting captured NVA weapons and a large supply of artillery and mortar ammunition, some of which had markings showing that they were manufactured in Russia. According to information recorded in a letter home, one of the enemy units occupying Hill 1034 was an NVA mortar unit with an identification number of 338. This information was obtained from enemy documents found in the bunkers. Another dangerous situation confronting us was the presence of numerous unexploded cluster bombs that were scattered all over Hill 1034 and an Explosive Ordnance Team spent many hours blowing them up. The entire ridgeline was cleared and secured by 21 Nov.”



Source:

<http://www.eagerarms.com/battleofdakto.html>

Concept of Operation / Execution:

On the early morning of the 20th at 0540 hours, “C” Company heard movement then shortly afterwards, received several rifle grenades. Fifteen minutes later, “D” Company heard heavy movement higher up on the hill and called in artillery fire. The first priority for the companies was to establish and secure an LZ to evacuate the wounded. At 0818 hours, an LOC ship was hit trying to kick off an LZ kit and one man was injured. Bomb strikes were conducted on the hill while the men

of the companies attempted to hack out an LZ. The battalion TAC CP organized a command group consisting of the Battalion XO, Major William Kelley, and the XO's of “A” and “C” Companies whose mission was to go in and reorganize their elements, expedite the evacuation of the wounded and if possible exploit the tactical situation. Their attempts to get in were frustrated by hostile ground fire, in spite of heavy TAC Air, artillery, gunship and infantry ground fire. At approximately 1400 hours, “D” Company sent out a clearing patrol up Hill 875 in an attempt to locate some of the tree snipers who were driving the helicopters away. The first 4 men in the patrol had barely left the perimeter when a captured M-60 machine

gun cut them down, killing one and wounding three. The fire came from the vicinity of the bunker which had caused so much trouble before. At 1900 hours, a DUSTOFF helicopter finally made it in and out, extracting five (5) of the critically wounded. It was the only ship able to make it in before dark. Leaving FSB #16 at 0937 hours, B/4/503d Infantry marched overland closing on the companies at 1700 hours. A/4/503d Infantry closed at 2100 hours and C/4/503d Infantry at 2220 hours. Major Kelley and the Command Group made it in on the successful DUSTOFF ship. B/4/503d Infantry reported two incoming B-40 rockets and at 2045 hours, 7-8 60mm mortar rounds landed within the perimeter injuring at least one. During the day of the 20th, 2/503d Infantry started its extraction from AO HAWK, their area of operation, by extracting their Battalion Headquarters minus the TAC CP group and by extracting the 4 2” mortar platoon.

The morning of the 20th, B-4-503d Inf mustered at 4 officers and 96 enlisted men. SP4 Edward D. Garcia, 173d Engineer Company was attached to the Company. The Company had been briefed that there were several hundred NVA on the hill and that they could expect an ambush on the way into 2-503d Infantry's perimeter. Therefore, CPT Leonard decided to swing wide and come into Hill 875 from the Northwest. At 0730H, B/4-503d Inf moved out in diamond type formation with the 3d Platoon commanded by 1LT Al Lindsath in the lead, 1st Platoon on the right flank led by 1LT Larry Moore, the 2d Platoon on the left flank led by 1LT Hugh Proffitt, and the weapons platoon under SSG Riley in the rear. CPT Leonard located himself behind the 3d Platoon and sent his point out about 100 meters in advance of the main body....

(continued....)



...The Company started out on an azimuth of 280 degrees, traveling along trails, thru thick bamboo, scrub, and tall tree cover for about six hundred meters before turning on a new azimuth of 240 degrees. While moving approximately 1500 meters along this bearing the paratroopers passed through several NVA base camps and found 4 dead NVA killed from air and Artillery fire. There were also pieces of bodies lying around. Fifteen mortar rds were found in the base camps and destroyed in place by the fast moving paratroopers.



Cowboys at Dak To (Photo from Tony Bolivar, Casper Pilot)

As they approached Hill 875, the company turned on to an azimuth of 120 degrees and began to move down the finger which ran south into Hill 875. The company arrived the finger at 1600H and proceeded to move down towards Hill 875. Coming down the hill the paratroopers passed numerous empty C-ration cans which the NVA had opened and eaten, occasional NVA rucksacks, bloody Chinese first aid dressings, and empty Chinese ammo cans. Hard by the trail in the location of A/2-503d Inf former CP on the trail they found a young paratrooper lying dead on his side in a pile of empty shell casings still clutching his jammed machine gun. In the creek at the bottom of the hill they found 15 or 20 M-16 magazines of ammo which the Americans had dropped and the NVA had collected and thrown in the stream. The paratroopers wiped them off and stuck them in their pocket for further use. The company filled their canteens in the stream for men of 2-503d Inf and began to move up Hill 875, passing numerous dead paratroopers of the 2d Battalion as they moved. One young paratrooper said he began to wonder if there was anybody alive as he saw all of the dead on the approach to the 2d Battalion's perimeter.

Bravo Company swept up the bullet smashed hill and linked up with C/2-503d Inf at 1700 hours. The men of the 2-503d Inf were beat and there were tears in their eyes as they greeted their buddies from the 4-503d Inf. Bravo Company passed out their water and rations to the 2d Battalion men and immediately moved to reinforce

the entire perimeter; none of the 2-503d Inf's wounded had been evacuated yet but they were making a great effort to hold on. All of Bravo's medics immediately were dispatched to aid the wounded. One medic, SP4 Earl Webb, worked constantly throughout the night and into the next day before he was killed by enemy fire trying to save a wounded man on the LZ during a mortar attack.

The 2-503d Inf was still supplied with ammo but had run out of food and water. While the company reinforced the perimeter and CPT Leonard checked positions, SSG Riley set up his two 60mm mortars on the right side of the perimeter in the only area where he had overhead clearance to fire on the hill. The mortars did not fire since they had no positions yet and did not want to attract NVA counter mortar fire.

The night passed quietly marked only by two NVA mortar rounds shortly after B Company arrived. A-4-503d Inf closed into the perimeter a little after 2000H and C/4-503d Inf came in about 30 to 40 minutes later. These companies completed reinforcing the perimeter.

Louis G.W. Arnold, A/4503, KIA 11/20/67
Gregory Charles Bauer, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Neal Ira Best, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
David Brooks Betchel, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Robert Tildon Bly, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Harvey Lee Brown, III, D/2/503, KIA 11/20/67



**Richard Thomas
 Busenlehner, A/3/319,
 KIA 11/20/67**

Manfred Francis Camarote, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Ernesto Soliz Cantu, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Thomas Louis Corbett, B/4/503, KIA 11/20/67
Charles Richard Crews, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Bruce Wayne Cunningham, 173d Eng. Co., KIA 11/20/67
John D'Agostino, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Larry Aime D Entremont, D/2/503 KIA 11/20/67

(continued....)



Robert Paul Degen,
A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Bob, It's been 34 years now, and not one has gone by without me thinking of you often. I always wonder why I got to enjoy birthdays, children, holidays. It seems like yesterday when we sat around your house one night waiting to go in and listening to Johnny Cash on the stereo, the last day I saw you, July 31, 1967.



Remember, my son was born the night before and we went swimming on the Sandy River. You made all the kids laugh by diving off the rocks like a frog. I'm still searching for a reason why. Maybe it will never come, but I will never forget Bob. You were here a short time but made such a lasting memory. You will always be loved. Bill Whiting (deceased April 13, 2006)

Casimiro Dianda, D/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

John Michael Dunbar, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

James Cabell Farley, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Michael William Ference, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Angel Ramo Flores-Jimenes, B/4/503, 11/20/67

Troy Alexander Galyan, A/3/319, KIA 11/20/67

Juan Manuel Garcia, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Michael Jay Gladden,
B/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

The last time I saw Mike before he departed for Vietnam was in the summer of 1967. He was home on leave and he came by where I worked. He was dressed in khakis, complete with his jump boots, airborne patches and wings, his infantry designations. We met later and partook of a few beers. I was getting ready to go into the Army at the time, I reported in



September, 1967. I remember telling Mike to take care of himself. He just laughed and we shook hands as we departed. I had just reported to AIT at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, when I heard of Mike's death. I was shook, it was beginning to get really scary, suddenly I was losing way too many friends in Vietnam. Mike was killed on Hill 875 at Dak To. A few years ago I saw the History Channel series on that infamous battle. It was a slaughter. I knew that Mike was initially reported MIA and as I read about the battle, I wondered just exactly what happened to him. He was reported to have died from multiple fragmentation wounds. I often wonder if he was among those that may have perished in the friendly fire episode when a U.S. bomb was dropped into the area where the casualties were

being treated. One of those was a Catholic Chaplain who received the Medal of Honor posthumously. I took a picture of Mike's name at the Wall. I had talked with his sister about giving it to her. Before I could get it to her, Mike's dad died. I thought it was too weird. Mike would have been 56, he never had the chance to live a full life, have kids, a career and a home. When I was compiling this, I found a strange irony, Mike had the same birthday as a classmate of his who also died in Vietnam 14 months earlier, Bobby L. Eaton, USMC. Both graduated in the Permian High School Class of 1965, both were friends of mine, and both are remembered on the Permian Basin Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. According to Mike's sister, he was awarded a Bronze Star with "V" device at the Battle of Dak To that took his life. Billy M. Brown

Hebert Hoover Gray, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Dennis Greenwald, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Clarence Hall, D/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Bobby Gene Hastings, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

William Allen Hawthorne, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

William Donald Herst, Jr., HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Harold James Kaufman, C/2/503, 11/20/67

Michael James Kiley, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Weston Joseph Langley, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Roger Dale Mabe, D/4/503, KIA 11/20/67

George Michael Mattingly, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Tracy Henry Murrey, C/4/503, KIA 11/20/67

Tracy Henry Murrey was killed during a massive attempt on Hill 875 near Dak To in November of 1967. I am not related to him, but found his name while doing some genealogical research. I think he deserves a memorial here. 123 men lost their lives during this intense 3 day firefight. God rest their souls, may they have finally found peace.

"A Chosen Few, The Herd"

*Only a chosen few of my generation could
Understand why the skeleton in my closet
Rattles in my deepest sleep.*

*Who are you to judge us, for you have not
Followed our trail, walked the point at night
Or heard the fire, Hell and screams of a single
Night. For we are the chosen few of "The Herd"
Who have touched the gates of Hell, seen the shadow
Of death and at times, are damned for surviving...*

by PFC A.M. Eyster, Co B 1/503rd, 173rd Abn

Josh Cain Noah, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

James William Nothern, Jr., C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Wallace Lee Ogea, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

John Manuel Ortiz, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Robert Edward Paciorek, B/4/503, KIA 11/20/67

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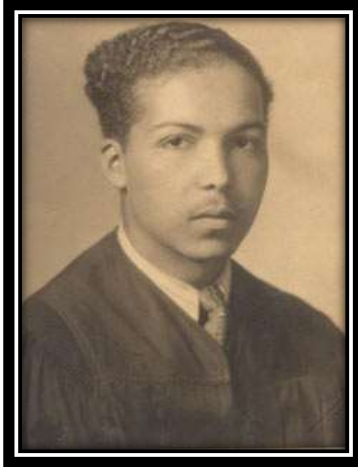


Joseph Pannell, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
James Robert Patterson, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Roy Charles Payne, Jr., HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Arnold Pinn, D/2/503,
KIA 11/20/67

God bless you, Arnold Pinn. In your short-lived life you made the ultimate sacrifice. You are remembered by all Pinn, and related families, as a true family hero! Lionel Pinn, Jr.

Memorial Day 2006 - I just got off the telephone with a Vietnam Veteran, Sgt George Lantz of Arlington, Washington. He called to share his personal story with me about the final hours he spent with my cousin PFC Arnold Pinn. It was November 20, 1967, (Hill 875) Sgt Lantz and his RTO Burnake were heading up a trail near Kontum, Vietnam when they stumbled onto PFC Arnold Pinn and another unknown soldier. The two had dug a foxhole about *"6 foot high and the width of three men"*. Sgt Lantz liked the location of the foxhole and decided to join the two men in order to *"keep an eye on the trail in both directions."* Even though they spent about 12 hours together in that foxhole there was no small talk about families back home. *"There were mortars flying all around us we did not have time to do anything but get ready for the next wave of mortars and think about staying alive."* Sgt Lantz was serving as a forward scout for A Co, 4th Bn, 503rd Infantry. He noted that he remembered Arnold as a young baby-faced man; he saw D Company, 2 Bn, 503rd Infantry badge and E4 ranking on his shoulder along with his name "Pinn". Sgt Lantz noted that they decided to run shifts. Two men would stay on guard duty while the other two slept. At some point it was decided that the foxhole needed some cover so Sgt Lantz and PFC Pinn volunteered to go and get some *"bamboo to use as cover for the foxhole."* Both men had a machete and their weapon in hand. According to Sgt Lantz they had only gotten *"about 20 yards away from the foxhole"* when they heard the distinctive *"thump thump"* of mortar shots and then they heard the other two men in the foxhole yelling *"In-coming!"* Lantz and Pinn immediately turned and headed back to the fox hole, when they dove in they both tossed their machetes aside and landed on top of the other two men in the hole. Within a couple of minutes a mortar went off *"just on the edge of the foxhole"*. When the dust had cleared Sgt Lantz had taken a piece of shrapnel in his leg. He looked around the foxhole and found PFC Pinn covered in blood. It was apparent that he had been hit a lot worse. *"He had several shrapnel wounds on his upper chest area."* According to Lantz they did try to revive him but he was dead. Lantz noted that Arnold *"did not make a sound."* Sgt Lantz is positive that by him and PFC Pinn diving into the foxhole and landing on top of the two other men, they saved their lives. Both men on bottom had no injuries. RTO Burnake was killed in an ambush later on and the other man was never identified.



Sgt Lantz was transported to a military hospital to recover. He was wounded once again before he left Vietnam in 1968. Sgt Lantz is now in a wheelchair suffering from cancer of his spine, which has paralyzed him. He is certain it was from the exposure to Agent Orange. *"My uniforms were soaked with the stuff."* He also noted that *"friendly fire"* was responsible for a lot of US deaths. When they (US) dropped the big bomb in there it landed right on top of us. I asked him why he picked Memorial Day to call, he noted that his son had found my name as a point-of-contact on The Virtual Wall and thought that his Dad would like to talk to someone in the family. It has been over 40 years but he wanted to share those last moments with someone from Arnold's family in hopes of bringing some closure and some peace. The Pinn family thanks you and salutes you, Sgt. George Lantz. From a cousin, Lionel Pinn, Jr.

Steven Reed Powell, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Leonard Jeffrey Richards, B/4/503, KIA 11/20/67
Walter Donald Ray, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Jesse Sanchez, A/3/319, KIA 11/20/67
Jerome Charles Shomaker, A/3/319, KIA 11/20/67

John William Smith,
A/4/503, KIA 11/20/67

I did not know John but his memory is kept alive by the students of Celina Middle School. Every year the 8th Grade takes a trip to Washington, D.C. and is asked to look up his name and make a rubbing. It would be great to hear from anyone who knew and served with John. From a friend, Robert W. Klosterman



Ervin Spain, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67



Harry Herbert Spencer,
C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

(continued...)



Frank Edward Stokes, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Robert Thomas Szymanski, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Ernest Ray Taylor, Jr., HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Nathaniel Thompson, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Arthur Turner, Jr., A/4/503 KIA 11/20/67

Sergeant Arthur Turner was a squad leader in the 2nd platoon of A/4/503rd Inf, 173rd Abn Bde. I first met him in August 1967 when I was assigned to the 2nd platoon of A Co. Sergeant Turner was easy to get to know and I made friends with him. We were in the Battle of Ngok Kom Leat on November 6, 1967 in Dak To. We were on Hill 875 together in Dak To on November 20, 1967, when Sergeant Turner was killed by a mortar round in the early morning. Sergeant Arthur Turner was one of the best Sergeants that I served under. (unsigned)

Lester Tyler, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Thomas Joe Wade, B/4/503, KIA 11/20/67

Tom Wade and I were drafted in February 1967. I met Tom at Ft. Polk, LA, in basic training. We were sent to Ft. Gordan, GA for airborne infantry A.I.T. We went to Ft. Benning, GA, for Jump School. We were both sent to Viet Nam in August 1967. Tom was assigned to B Co, 4th Bn, 503rd Inf and I was assigned to A Co, 4th Bn, 503rd Inf. We were both on Hill 875 in Dak To in November 1967. Tom was killed by a mortar round in the early morning of November 20, 1967, while trying to take Hill 875. My son, Melvin Wade Thomas, who is a Texas State Trooper, is named after Thomas Joe Wade. (Unsigned)

Earl Kennon Webb, HHC/4/503, KIA 11/20/67
Merrel P. Whittington, HHC/4/503, KIA 11/20/67
Lemuel Taylor Williams, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67



John Roby Wolf,
HHC/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

John Wesley Wooten, C/2/503, KIA 11/20/67
Ronald Wayne Young, A/2/503, KIA 11/20/67

Note: It's likely some of these men listed as KIA on 20 November 1967 were in fact killed in action on 19 November 1967.

D+27 (21 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. The 1-503d Inf continued patrolling activities in AO CONDOR. At 1635 hours, B Co engaged 1 NVA resulting in 2 US WIA. At 1335 hours, C Co found 2 dead NVA. They had been killed by SA and had been dead 3 days. At 1102 hours, C Co found 1 dead NVA. He had been dead 2 days.

The 2-503d Inf continued to extract WIA and KIA from the battle area. The CP group was extracted from FSB 16 and moved to FSB 12.



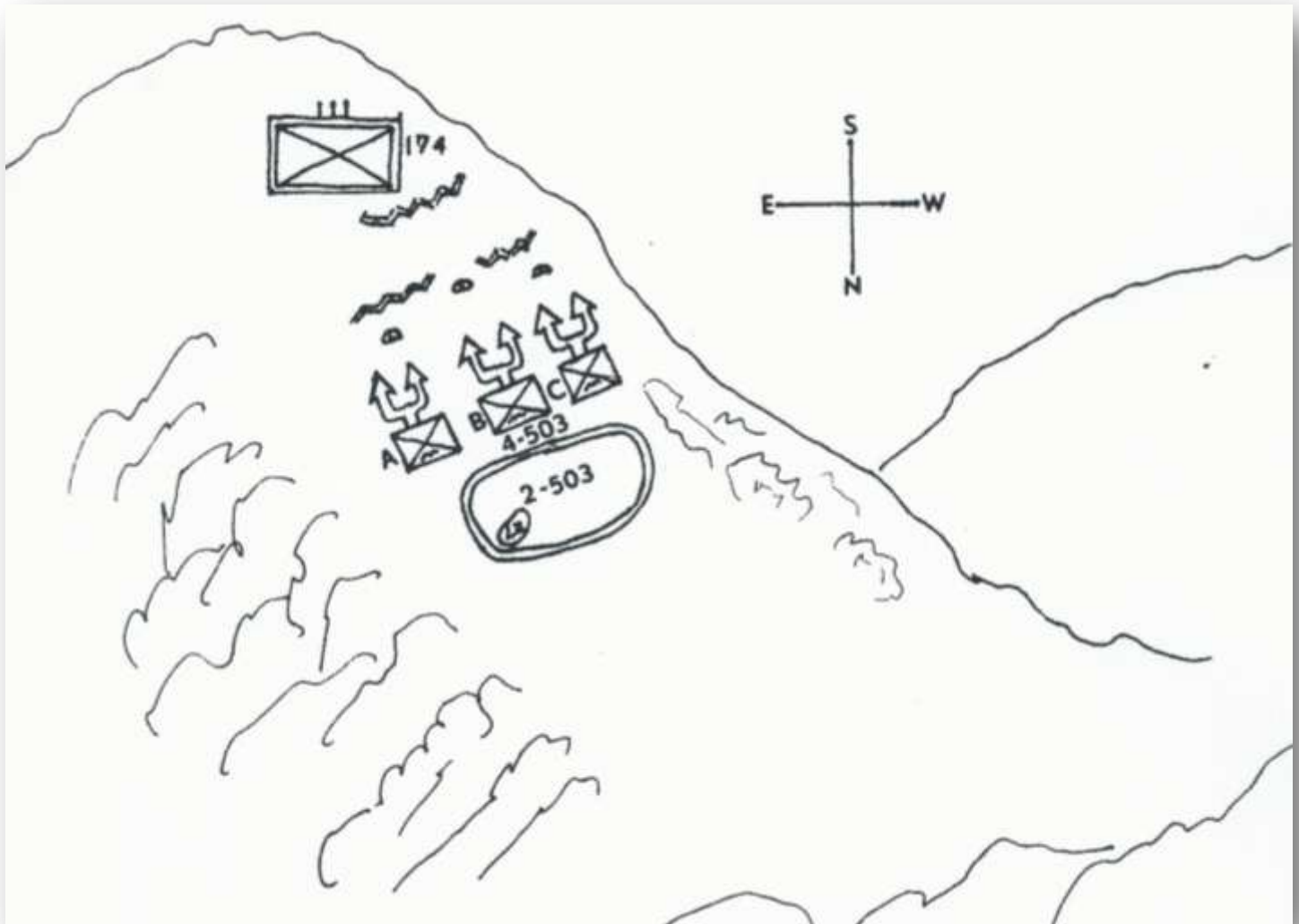
Saving a buddy at Dak To. (Web photo)

From 0605 hours and through the morning, all companies of the 4-503d Inf received heavy mortar rockets and small arms fire. Medical evacuation and resupply aircraft were unable to land to pick up the wounded and dead or to resupply elements. Air strikes and artillery were called in on Hill 875 and the surrounding hills from 0700 hours until 1050 hours. At 1050 hours, the 4th Battalion prepared to begin the assault on Hill 875 with Co A on the left, Co B in the center and Co C on the right. The assault was delayed until 1400 hours to call in more air strikes. Co C began preparing a new LZ out of direct fire from Hill 875. The LZ was completed at 1415 hours.

Elements of the 1-12th Infantry and E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force elements continued patrolling actions in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

(continued....)





Concept of Operation / Execution:

4/503 Attack of Hill 875, 21 November 1967

On 21 November, together with the 4.503d Infantry, the paratroopers constructed a new LZ and extracted the wounded. The critical water and food resupply was completed. LAW's and flame throwers were brought in to assist on the assault of the hill. The two battalions were hit by three mortar attacks. One at 0655 hours, at 0845 hours and at 1420 hours. Both battalions took several casualties. "B" Company and the TAC CP were extracted from FSB #16 leaving only the three companies, "A", "C" and "D" Companies in the contested hills near Cambodia.

Just after seven o'clock the next morning (21 November 1967) the NVA conducted their own version of "standto", firing 5 to 6, 5 rd volleys of 60mm and 82mm mortar fire on the two battalion perimeter which was only about 100 meters wide to 100 to 125 meters deep. The NVA mortars were so close the men could hear the rds being fired and had time to dive into their holes. But the mortar rounds falling into the crowded perimeter caused numerous casualties, where direct hits

in holes crowded with six and seven often killed or wounded several men at one time. The holes had no overhead cover and although some men had tunneled into sides of their holes and some rounds exploded in the treetops, the mortar fire caused many casualties. Throughout the day whenever men started to chop overhead cover, the NVA would fire their mortars in a searching pattern, walking them through the perimeter in a line (usually 60mm, but sometimes 82mm).

At 0900H, Bravo Company was briefed that they would conduct a three platoon assault on Hill 875 at 1100H after the Air Force had finished pounding it. The 1st Platoon would be on the right with its 36 men, the 2d Platoon on the left with 20 men, the 3d Platoon in the center with 18 men, and weapons platoon with 17 men providing fire support. C Company 4-503d Inf was to attack on the right and A/4-503d Inf would assault on the left.

(continued...)



Around 1000H helicopters dropped in the LAW's, Flame-throwers, and 2x81mm mortars with 400 rounds of ammunition plus 60mm ammunition to raise the 60mm ammo to 250 (?) rounds. One 81mm was moved up forward about 15 meters to provide walking fire, the other back about 20 meters to fire on the hill top. The three 60mm mortars would cover the perimeter.

The men were instructed to carry 600 rounds of ammunition and all the grenades they could carry. Inexperienced men, one to two per platoon, were equipped with flame-throwers after a brief explanation of its use and handling. A few NCO's were issued the LAW since most men weren't trained on them and the officers were afraid the back blast would injure their own men. No satchel charges, CS grenades, or WP grenades were issued on the first assault.

The assault was postponed until 1430H to enable the Air Force to continue to strike the hill until 1400H and allow artillery to pound the hill until 1430H. Five air strikes continued until 1435H consisting of 10 F100's and 2 FAC's dropping 15 tons of HE and 7½ tons of napalm on the top of Hill 875.

The assault led by CPT Leonard moved out of the perimeter into the thick tangle of blown down trees at 1505H. Initial enemy mortar fire killed two men in the 2d Platoon. The men couldn't crawl under the trees but had to go over them, silhouetting themselves. The 2d Platoon was now in a different terrain and could use fire and maneuver to advance toward the trench system dodging behind trees. The men in the 1st Platoon were crawling over the logs. Snipers were firing from high trees on the flanks and the men were taking heavy automatic weapons, machine gun fire, rocket and mortar fire. The mortars fell mostly to the rear as they advanced.

In the 1st Platoon area where some of the heaviest fighting was, the men couldn't actually see the NVA troops who were firing from bunkers. LT Moore could count only 12 men with him out of 36 when his 1st Platoon became pinned down by heavy automatic weapons fire. The NVA were firing from six inch slots in their bunkers. LT Moore finally spotted a bunker opening covered with leaves and branches as camouflage and directed his remaining men to concentrate on it.

Meanwhile, sniper fire in the trees continued to grow until PFC Mason of the 1st Platoon stood up and sprayed



Back From Battle -- Dak To, South Vietnam: Members of the 173d Airborne Brigade are helped from evacuation helicopters by medics after returning from Hill 875. U.S. Army paratroopers of the 173d Airborne Brigade on Nov. 22 made a final assault up the bloody slopes of Hill 875.

(To photo, UPI Radiophoto by Al Webb. 11/22/67)

a long burst of M-60 machine gun fire into the trees off to the right. His fired killed two snipers and momentarily quieted the other snipers. The men crouched behind whatever cover they could find, small trees, logs, or mounds of dirt. It became almost impossible to move.

The NVA were firing rockets which slid along the ground and exploded a second or two later. LT Moore tried to call CPT Leonard but his RTO was killed passing him the mike, and his radio smashed. Both the 1st Platoon's PRC-25's were destroyed. A rocket slid down the hill towards LT Moore and one of his men and exploded as they desperately tried to twist aside, wounding both. The attack of the 1st Platoon was stopped.

On the left the 2d Platoon was making better progress through easier terrain but they soon ran up against two bunkers and trench systems. The 2d Platoon couldn't see the NVA either but located their positions by the smoke from their weapons. Rockets were coming in sliding along the ground and exploding, most of the mortar fire was falling behind the second platoon....

(continued....)



...The 2d Platoon concentrated on two bunkers to the left. Most of the casualties were caused by rocket and mortar fire; many of the men were saved by dud CHICOM grenades. The men were scared of the flame throwers and were ineffective in their employment.

A Company made contact on the left flank and reported to SSG Riley that his mortar rds had gotten about 20 NVA. The LAWs proved ineffective against the NVA bunkers with small slits since it's extremely difficult to get a direct hit on a bunker opening. SP4 Garcia (who received his briefing on the flamethrower during the fight) assaulted the bunkers with flame throwers but the flames proved ineffective. The American mortars proved mostly ineffective except for keeping the NVA down. Shells exploded harmlessly on top of bunkers that had as much as six feet of overhead cover. Other mortars failed to explode when they landed in the soft dirt which had been powdered by air strikes. Artillery was firing on the flanks and counter mortar missions.

As darkness approached word came to hold in place and then to fall back. "A" Company withdrew through the left flank of "B" Company. As the men fell back they screamed curses at the NVA and sang "Gory Gory What a Hell-of-a Way to Die". The men had wanted desperately to take the hill and felt cheated by darkness. Whether or not the remains of Bravo Company could have taken the hill that afternoon is a moot question but many men felt they could have stormed the hill if darkness had not fallen.

It was dark when Bravo pulled back into the perimeter. The first platoon had lost 7 KIA and 15 WIA reducing it to 14 men, the 3d platoon had 9 men left, and the 2d platoon was also mauled. Weapons platoon remained at 17 men.

When they assembled on the perimeter they were able to get a little water. Rations had come in but the 2d Battalion personnel had first priority since they had been without for the longest.

The battalions prepared to pull back 100 meters to allow air to continue pounding the hill for the next day. The 4-503d Inf had requested permission to pull back 1000 meters and hit the hill with B-52 strikes, however, Brigade turned this down since minimum safe distance was 3000 meters. The fourth battalion evacuated its dead and wounded with the help of men from the 2d Battalion such as SGT John Jiggs who led his squad to help. Bravo then moved all its mortars and ammo back down the hill and prepared their positions for the night.

The 2-503d saw the fourth battalion prepare their equipment for a fresh assault on Hill 875. The Bn recorded mortar fire that morning and sporadically throughout the day with occasional rockets. Dust off was accomplished for the dead and wounded due to mortar/rockets fire. By 2102H that evening the 4th Bn had lost 15 KIA, 108 WIA, and 4 MIA. A patrol closing the perimeter that evening reported 4 NVA bodies and 6 rifles grenades. CPT Leonard and SSG McClain directed air strikes and artillery throughout the day.

William Cecil Hinkle, C/2/503, KIA 11/21/67



FAMILY OF BRONZE STAR MEDAL WINNER, Army Pfc William C. Hinkle, 20, a Green Beret and paratrooper, killed in action Nov. 21, 1967, on Hill 875 at Dak To, Vietnam, receive the accompanying Citation from Lt. Col. David V. Fox, Granite City Army Depot deputy commander. Attending the recent ceremony were the serviceman's mother, Mrs. Helen Hinkle, his two brothers, Dennis and Charles, and his father, Deneen L. Hinkle, all of Rural Route One. Pfc Hinkle was previously awarded the Purple Heart Medal.

Gerald Klossek, C/4/503, KIA 11/21/67



**Roy Ronald Lee, A/4/503,
KIA 11/21/67**

(continued...)





**Robert William Lindgren,
B/4/503, KIA 11/21/67**

Roland Will Manuel, B/4/503, KIA 11/21/67



**Raymond W. Michalopoulos,
HHC/4/503, KIA 11/21/67**

**David Richard Reynolds, B/4/503, KIA 11/21/67
Olis Ray Rigby, HHC/2/503, KIA 11/21/67
Jesse E. Smith, C/4/503, KIA 11/21/67**

D+28 (22 November 1967)



22 November 1967, Dak To (Web photo)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued search and destroy operations on Operation MACARTHUR. 1-503d Inf continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1347 hours "C"

Company engaged an estimated NVA squad resulting in 1 NVA KIA and 1 US WIA. Contact was broken at 1350 hours. At 0930 hours, "D" Company engaged and killed 1 NVA and captured one small arms weapon. At 1000 hours, "D" Company found 1 NVA KIA. At 1310 hours, "D" Company engaged an unknown size NVA force resulting in 1 US KIA, 3 US WIA and unknown enemy casualties. Contact was broken at 1410 hours. One NVA body was later found in the area.

The 2-503d Infantry continued to extract elements from their battle area to FSB 12. Total casualties for the 19-22 November contact were 86 KIA, 130 WIA and 3 MIA. Casualties for company were: "A" 28 KIA, 45 WIA; "C" 32 KIA, 43 WIA and 3 MIA; "D" 19 KIA, 33 WIA; HHC 7 KIA, 9 WIA.



22 November in enemy complex. (Web photo)

The 4-503d Infantry continued to be in contact on Hill 875. During the morning and through mid-day and afternoon, continuous airstrikes were brought in on Hill 875. Many secondary explosions were noted. The assault that was planned for 1000 hours was postponed. At 1034 hours, A-1-12th Infantry and D-1-12th Infantry were helilifted into an LZ at YB 803127. The lift was completed at 1330 hours. They then began movement up the north slope of Hill 875 to vicinity of YB 797128 to await the assault planned for 23 November. They incurred 9 WIA from US gunships in route. Company D-4-503d Infantry sent out combat patrols from FSB 16 but made no contact. They heard mortar tubes popping in the vicinity of YB 810123. Artillery was fired into the area where the tubes were seen flashing and secondary explosions were noted.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force elements from KONTUM continued operations in AO HAWK to the 4-503d Infantry.

(continued....)



Concept of Operation / Execution:

On 22 November, "A", "C" and "D" Companies, besides securing the perimeter, undertook the task of identifying and extracting the KIA's. They also consolidated and extracted their extra weapons and equipment. The 2/503d Infantry's total approximate casualties minus attachments for the period 19-23 November 1967 were 86 KIA, 130 WIA and 3 MIA. Casualties per company were, "A" – 28 KIA, 45 WIA, "C" – 32 KIA, 43 WIA and 3 MIA, "D" – 19 KIA, 33 WIA, HHC – 7 KIA, 9 WIA. They received only one mortar attack but it resulted in the wounding and subsequent extraction of the Battalion Surgeon.



22 November 1967, Kyoichi Sawada, Pulitzer Prize Winner, photographer on Hill 875. (Web photo)

Billy Ray Cubit, C/4/503, KIA 11/22/67
Kenneth Grant Owens, B/4/503, KIA 11/22/67
John L. Pointing, B/4/503, KIA 11/22/67
Valdez Sharp, HHC/1/503, KIA 11/22/67

Charles Edwards Willbanks,
B/4/503, KIA 11/22/67

After graduation Eddie received a draft notice and "to make the best of it", and in a spirit of adventure joined the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The "regular" Army would never have done for Eddie. As proud as I would have been to have served my country in the Army, Eddie wanted something special. The 173rd Airborne is an elite group of men who pride themselves on their ability to jump out of airplanes and "live on nothing". "Sky Soldiers", as they are called, wear sky blue scarves and tuck their pants in their boots to let the world know they are 173rd. They jump at 150 mph, "just above treetops" and hit the ground fighting like cats. Nobody ever fit this mold better than Eddie Willbanks. He was tenacious, tough and he didn't know the meaning of the word "quit". I don't think Eddie ever gave any thought to not going to Vietnam. Children raised in the fifties were told from an early age by people like Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, George C. Marshall, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and many others that the world would fall like "dominoes" to Communism if not defended. We thought it was something we were supposed to do and at the time it would have been cowardice not to have gone to Vietnam. Eddie didn't know anything about Vietnam but he was very much in love with Gail Mann (67). He thought before he got married he would "enjoy a little excitement". In Eddie's mind the first Domino had fallen in Vietnam. So like brave men have always done, most in their late teens and early twenties, he left his girl to serve his country. Eddie went to Vietnam in July of 1967. The 173rd was assigned the responsibility of locating and destroying North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units in the mountainous northern regions of South Vietnam. After several months of fighting, the North Vietnamese Regular Army set a trap for the 173rd on a hill near Dak To ... Dak To, named for the nearby village (To = hot, Dak = water, after nearby hot springs). The North Vietnamese Regular Army is not to be confused with the Viet Cong. Unlike the Viet Cong, the NVA or the "Green Hats" were well trained and well-disciplined Soldiers from North Vietnam. The 1st Division NVA is the same army that defeated and forced the French to leave Vietnam in the fifties. Until "Dak To" the NVA had been unwilling to meet the American Army "man to man" on the battle field and for the most part left the fighting to the "hit and run tactics" of the Viet Cong...



(continued...)



...Their objective at Dak To was to inflict a horrible wound on the American Army and destroy America's resolve to continue the war. It was a huge mistake for the Green Hats. Westmoreland reported 4,000 NVA killed. About 4,500 troops of the US 4th Infantry Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade faced off 6,000 North Vietnamese troops of the 174th Regiment, 1st NVA Army. The NVA was driven from the field by the overwhelming firepower and the North Vietnamese were forced to withdraw. After meeting the 173rd, the North Vietnamese Army never again pursued them. Eddie Willbanks received the Bronze Star on Hill 823 at Dak To on November 7, 1967. In the book "Dak To," by Edward F. Murphy, Private 1st Class Willbanks is described saving the life of his First Sergeant Okendo whose gun had jammed. In another situation *"Sergeant Okendo had dropped down next to Eddie Willbanks in a bomb crater when the NVA jumped into the crater and tried to attack up the inter end. Eddie and Okendo leaned over the crater's rim and shot the lead soldiers with M16s. Eddie and Okendo then rushed to the outer rim of the crater, tossing grenades after the enemy."* Again Eddie is recognized for maneuvering a flame thrower behind an enemy position. I have often thought that Eddie would have won the Silver Star or better had he not been a member of an airborne brigade. But like they say, *"It's hard to soar when you fly with Eagles"* and the battle field at Dak To was full of eagles. Eddie received the first Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Star in recognition of his heroism. Eddie was wounded by mortars on the night of the 21st but rather than receiving medical attention he helped re-supply his army and carry other wounded soldiers to safety. He could have been flown out and attended to but he refused and I believe as a result of this decision Eddie bled to death on the morning of the 22nd. Eddie was one of 376 Americans killed in and around Dak To in November 1967. From a friend, David Morgan



22 November 1967

D+29 (23 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR today. At 0800 hours, "A", "C" and "D" Companies of the 1-503d Infantry moved on foot to FSB 16, closing at 1450 hours. At 0700 hours, "A" Company found 14 rifle grenades, 9 hand grenades, 6 B-40 rockets, 10 82mm mortar rounds and 19 60mm mortar rounds. All ammunition was destroyed.

Elements of the 2-503d Infantry secured an LZ and was provided flank security for the 4-503d Infantry attack. At 1600 hours, A-2-503d Infantry and D-2-503d Infantry were helilifted from PZ to FSB 12, closing at 1725 hours.

Continuous airstrikes and artillery were brought in on Hill 875 from first light until 1100 hours in support of the 4-503d Infantry assault on that hill. The assault began at 1100 hours, with "C" Company on the right, "B" Company on the left and "A" Company in reserve. At 1105 hours, they began to receive light resistance. At the same time Task Force 1 (A-1-12th Infantry and D-1-12th Infantry) began their assault from the south slope of the hill. By 1125 hours, the top of the hill had been reached. By 1130 hours, automatic weapons fire and mortar fire was being directed on the hill from the west. By 1150 hours, all friendly elements had consolidated on the hilltop and had begun construction of an LZ. Airstrikes and artillery fires were continued to the southwest, west and northwest until dark. At 1540 hours the LZ was completed and element of the 2-503d Infantry were evacuated to FSB 16 and then to FSB 12. The last elements departed Hill 875 at 1725 hours. All elements harbored in place on top of Hill 875. "D" Company reported movement on their perimeter during the night but there was no contact.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force elements from KONTUM continued operations in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

Concept of Operation / Execution:

On 23 November, a Task Force consisting of the 4-503d Infantry and 1/12th Infantry assaulted and took Hill 875, completing the assault in one hour after meeting a minimum of resistance. Just after the start of the assault, all elements on Hill 875, including the 2/503d Infantry received a mortar attack....

(continued....)



....The 2/503d Infantry's casualties were, "A" Company – 4 WIA, "D" Company – 1 KIA and 1 WIA. Between 1630 and 1730 hours, the three 2d Battalion companies were helilifted to FSB #12 completing a costly but victorious five days of fighting. Later estimated and sweeps of the battlefield credited the 2/503d Infantry with 255 NVA KIA (BC).

Thanksgiving morning Bravo (4/503d) received their first rations and planned their second assault on Hill 875. Weapons were checked, ammo distributed, satchel charges were passed out, C/S M-79 grenades, M-17 protective masks, and 90mm RR were prepared. Bravo was to assault the left and Charlie Company the right, "A" Company would bring up the rear taking care of snipers and flushing bunkers and protecting B and C from being shot in the back.



“23 Nov 1967, Dak To, South Vietnam --- Soldiers of the American 173rd Airborne Brigade pass the bodies of their comrades killed during the fighting at Dak To, Vietnam. Allied forces captured a North Vietnamese fortress at Hill 875 during the fighting.” (Web photo)

The 1/12th Inf which had been moved into position on the S/W slope of the hill was to assault at the same time as B and C Companies.

Two air strikes were conducted on Hill 875 that morning between 0939H and 1015H. The five F100's dropped four tons of HE and 3 tons of napalm and fired 2400 rds of 20mm. Both strikes were rated 100% on target.

At 0700H Thanksgiving morning Bravo received 20 to 25 rds of mortar fire with negative casualties.

At approximately 0900 H A-4-503d Inf killed 10 NVA.

1100H upon the preparing signal of the rounds of a volley of 30-81mm mortar rounds, CPT Leonard again led his company up Hill 875. In addition to leading his own company, CPT Leonard was in control of all artillery and air strikes for the day. The mortars were employed the same as for the first assault. Just prior to jumping off 3-82mm rounds hit on the right with no casualties.

As Bravo led the advance the weapons platoon walked 81mm fire 25 meters in front of them all the way out to 150 meters. The advance faced some mortar and

sniper fire. A flame thrower carrier was blown up (flame throwers were now carried by volunteers and some engineers). An incoming mortar round made a direct hit on SGT Cates who was carrying satchel charges blowing him to bits and killing several men around him. Most of the officers and NCO's felt flame throwers and satchel charges should be held back and brought up on call. Nearly the entire 3d platoon could have been killed by its own satchel charges. CPT Leonard was hit in the leg by a sniper but continued with his men.

As the men came to the top of Hill 875 they captured 3 60mm mortars with triggers and base plates manufactured to the tube. These were passed back to A company. The trench system they over-ran was deep enough for a man to walk in and be hidden, bunkers were dug into the back of the trench so that dead or wounded could be pushed out of the way. Some bunkers had six feet of overhead cover. One man found the date 3/7/67 carved in a bunker wall. The hilltop was blown bald by the constant air and artillery....

(continued....)



...The paratroopers found prone shelters and also a new type fortification described as a doughnut. Many bombs had exploded in the trees above the ground but only one dud was found. There were only a few NVA bodies around but the troopers could smell more.

The paratroopers over-ran the hilltop at 1122H amidst cheers of "Airborne" and "Geronimo." Some men pulled out cans of C-rations turkey loaf and proceeded to whip up a quick Thanksgiving meal. Others were crying with happiness and pride. Some men were disappointed there were not more NVA bodies, others were glad they had what was left. These were the men 1/12th Cav met on top of Hill 875 a half hour later.

Later that day the tired hungry paratroopers sat in the dust and debris of Hill 875 and ate their traditional Thanksgiving meal which was brought in hot by helicopter. As one Sky Soldier SGT said, "It was the best meal I ever ate."



Sky Soldiers on Hill 875. (Web photo)

D+30 (24 November 1967)

The 26th Mobile Strike Force Company was released from the OPCON of the 4-503d Infantry. The 4-503d Infantry was placed OPCON to the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division.

The 1-503d Infantry conducted search and destroy operations into an Arc Light Area. At 0730 hours, "B" Company was helilifted from FSB 15 to FSB 16 and "C" Company was helilifted from FSB 16 to FSB 15. At 1530 hours, "B" Company found a rucksack containing two B-40 rocket boosters, 2 Chicom grenades and 3 AK-47 rounds. At 1430 hours, "D" Company found one dead NVA. He had been dead for 4-5 days and had been killed by small arms fire. At 1602 hours, "D" Company engaged 4 NVA resulting in 1 NVA KIA and 1 AK-47 captured.

The 2-503d Infantry continued to organize at FSB 12.

At 1000 hours, A-1-12th Infantry assumed responsibility for the HAWK AO and initiated search and destroy operations in that AO. At 1400 hours B-1-12th Infantry was helilifted from DAK TO to FSB 16 closing at 1505 hours. At 1735 hours, A-1-12th Infantry and D-1-12th Infantry received 25-30 82mm mortar rounds resulting in 1 US WIA and 1 NVA KIA. Contact was broken at 1830 hours.

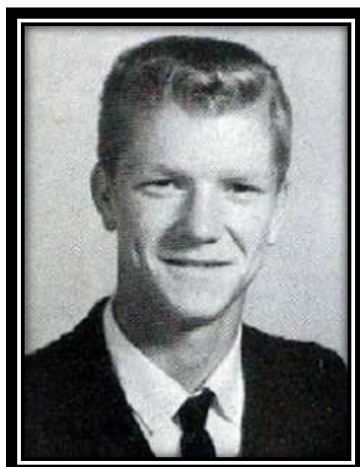
E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force elements continued operations in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

(continued...)



**William Lloyd Cates,
B/4/503, KIA 11/23/67**

- Le Roy Edward Fladry, C/4/503, KIA 11/23/67**
- Alan John Impelithere, 173d Eng. Co., KIA 11/23/67**
- Richard Nelson Kimball, Jr., HHC/2/503, KIA 11/23/67**
- Peter J. Lantz, C/2/503, KIA 11/23/67**



**Richard Floyd Mason,
B/4/503, KIA 11/23/67**

- Gary Doyle Roerink, A/2/503, KIA 11/23/67**
- James R. Worrell, B/4/503, KIA 11/23/67**



At 1655 hours, MIKE Force Company 26, OPCON to the 4-503d Infantry, was helilifted to DAK TO from PZ, released from OPCON and returned to its parent unit.

Concept of Operation / Execution:

The next day (24 November 1967) 1 LT Moore 1/B/4/503d Inf with his heart in his mouth as he described it, led a clearing patrol out from Hill 875 and found a rucksack containing starched blue and tan uniforms, a bolt action rifle and a rocket launcher leaning against a tree. Negative enemy resistance was encountered.

Note: The Brigade S2 believe the 2 Bn/176th NVA Regt held Hill 875 and the 3d Bn/174 NVA Regt on the hill to the west of Hill 875 placed most of the direct and indirect fire on the paratroopers during the attack on 23 November.

D+31 (25 November 1967)

4-503d Infantry released from OPCON to the 4th Infantry Division.



Sgt. John G. Sheehan of Boston, 25 November 1967
(Web photo)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR today. The 1-503d Infantry continued operations in AO CONDOR. At 1200 hours, "A" Company found 1 M-16 rifle. At 1145 hours, "B" Company engaged 2 NVA resulting in 1 NVA and 2 AK-47 rifles captured. At 1330 hours, "B" Company found 1 SKS rifle with grenade launcher. At 1430 hours, "B" Company found 4 B-40 rockets.

The 2-503d Infantry continued to reorganize at FSB 12.

The 4-503d Infantry continued to reorganize at DAK TO. The 4-503rd Infantry extracted one 60mm mortar and one Chicom grenade from Hill 875 as a result of the 19-23 November contact. At 0900 hours, the 4-503d Infantry was released from the OPCON of the 4th Infantry Division and returned to control of the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate).

The 1-12th Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO HAWK. At 0900 hours, 1-12th Infantry released from OPCON of the Brigade and returned to its parent unit. E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force.

At 0730 hours, 3-319th Artillery received sniper fire at FSB 16. Results were 1 US KIA. Mobile Strike Force elements from KONTUM continued operations in AO HAWK and AO FALCON.

Carl Ray Barnhart, A/3/319th, KIA 11/25/67

Thomas Curtis Mays, A/4/503, KIA 11/25/67 (Incident date 11/21/67)

D+32 (26 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued search and destroy operations on Operation MACARTHUR. The 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR. At 1400 hours, B-1-503d Infantry found 37 AK-47 rounds, 2 rifle grenades and 1 Chicom hand grenade. At 1420 hours, B-1-503d found 1 82mm mortar round.

The 2-503d Infantry continued to reorganize and conduct patrolling activities vic FSB 12.

The 4-503d Infantry continued their security mission of the DAK TO airstrip. A unit training cycle was initiated. Company "C" conducted a local security patrol to the north but had no contact.

E-17 Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. Mobile Strike Force element continued patrolling activities in the vicinity of FSB 12.

(continued....)





A fortunate few coming back off The Hill. (Web photo)

D+33 (27 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued search and destroy operations in AO SPAATZ in conjunction with elements of the 4th Infantry Division. The 1-503d continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR with negative contact.

The 2-503d Infantry continued to reorganize and conduct search and destroy operations in AO FALCON.

The 4-503d Infantry continued its security mission of the DAK TO airstrip. Companies "C" and "D" continued a search and destroy operation to a laager site on Hill 810. Negative contact was reported and their training cycle continued without incident.

E-17 Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force.

At 262000 hours November, A-3-319th Artillery received 25-30 mortar round vic FSB 16 resulting in 1 US KIA. Mobile Strike Force elements from KONTUM continued search and destroy operations in AO's HAWK and FALCON.

Ronald Gilmore, C/3/503, KIA 11/27/67

D+34 (28 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR in KONTUM PROVINCE. The 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO CONDOR.

The 2/503d(?) Infantry continued search and destroy operation in AO FALCON with negative contact.

D+35 29 November 1967

(This section of the After Action Report is unavailable.)

D+36 (30 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operation MACARTHUR. 1ST Battalion, 503d Infantry continued operations in their AO. At 0845 hours, "A", "B" and "D" Companies were helilifted from a PZ to FSB 13, closing at 1030 hours.

The 2-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO FALCON. At 0930 hours, C-2-503

Infantry engaged 4-5 NVA resulting in 2 US KIA, 2 US WIA. At 1305 hours, B-2-503d Infantry engaged 1 NVA and 1 AK-47 rifle captured.

The 4-503d Infantry continued security of the DAK TO airfield and bridge. At 0850 hours, Company "C" initiated security operations and laagered vic YB ZB 029240. At 1315 hours, Company "A" security patrols discovered an AK-47 rifle and five (5) empty 57mm recoilless rifle canisters. It was impossible to tell their age. Company "A" patrols closed into laager sites at 1400 hours with negative contact reported. At 1540 hours, a Company "D" security patrol discovered a hut with foodstuffs that were 3-4 days old.



"Dak To, November 1967: A Hook bringing in one of our wounded slicks. We had six slicks shot down on 11/19/67 while supporting the 173d Airborne Brigade's 2nd Bn/503rd Infantry on Hill 875."

(Image from Jeffrey Tillman, Cowboys' web)

(continued...)



Results of the Battle of DAK TO

The 1-12th Cavalry initiated search and destroy operations in their assigned AO. At 0802 hours, the CP group of 1-12th Cavalry was helilifted from PZ to FSB BOOM BOOM, closing at 0859 hours. At 0859 hours, B-2-19th Artillery was helilifted from PZ to FSB BOOM BOOM, closing at 1125 hours. At 1122 hours, A-1-12th Cavalry conducted a combat assault from FSB BOOM BOOM to an LZ closing at 1205 hours. At 1205 hours, C-1-12th Cavalry conducted a combat assault from PZ to an LZ closing at 1320 hours. At 1340 hours, B-1-12th Cavalry was helilifted from PZ to FSB BOOM BOOM, closing at 1500 hours.

E-17th Cavalry continued as Brigade Reaction Force. A-3-319th Artillery was helilifted from FSB 16 to FSB 13, closing at 1330 hours.

John William Hartman, C/2/503, KIA 11/30/67
Wilmer Watson, C/2/503, KIA 11/30/67

D+37 (31 November 1967)

The 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) continued Operations MACARTHUR, however, the Battle of DAK TO was declared over

1 December 1967

The 1-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in their AO with negative results.

The 2-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO FALCON with negative results.

At 1825 hours, FSB 12 came under mortar and rocket fire and received small arms fire resulting in 1 US WIA. FSB 12 received a total of 25 rounds with contact broken at 2000 hours.

The 4-503d Infantry continued search and destroy operations in AO VULTURE with no contact.

The 1-12th Cavalry continued search and destroy operations in their assigned AO. At 1445 hours, 1-12th Cavalry found 1 SKS rifle, 2 B-40 rocket launcher rounds, 2 blocks of dynamite, 150 60mm mortar rounds and 300 AK-47 rounds.

E-17th Cavalry continued as the Brigade Reaction Force. At 0930 hours, LRRP Team "E" engaged an unknown size enemy force resulting in 3 NVA KIA and 1 AK-47 rifle captured and 2 AK-50 rifles captured.

Friendly losses:

Personnel:	
KIA	191
WIA	642
MIA	15
Non-Battle Injuries	33

Enemy Losses:

Personnel:	
NVA/VC KIA (BC)	715
NVA/VC (POSS)	33
NVA/VC POW	9
Ralliers	1

Robert L. Morris, B/2/503, KIA 12/2/67



Rocky Stone, B/4/503, atop The Hill.

It is finished.

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*The President of the United States
in the name of The Congress
takes pleasure in presenting the
Medal of Honor*

to

JOHN ANDREW BARNES, III

Rank: Private First Class

Organization: U.S. Army, Company C, 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry Regiment, 173d Airborne Brigade

Place and date: Dak To, Republic of Vietnam, 12 November 1967

Entered service at: Boston, Massachusetts

Born: 16 April 1945, Boston, Massachusetts

~ Citation ~

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Pfc. Barnes distinguished himself by exceptional heroism while engaged in combat against hostile forces. Pfc. Barnes was serving as a grenadier when his unit was attacked by a North Vietnamese force, estimated to be a battalion. Upon seeing the crew of a machinegun team killed, Pfc. Barnes, without hesitation, dashed through the bullet swept area, manned the machinegun, and killed 9 enemy soldiers as they assaulted his position. While pausing just long enough to retrieve more ammunition, Pfc. Barnes observed an enemy grenade thrown into the midst of some severely wounded personnel close to his position. Realizing that the grenade could further injure or kill the majority of the wounded personnel, he sacrificed his life by throwing himself directly onto the hand grenade as it exploded. Through his indomitable courage, complete disregard for his own safety, and profound concern for his fellow soldiers, he averted a probable loss of life and injury to the wounded members of his unit. Pfc. Barnes' extraordinary heroism, and intrepidity at the cost of his life, above and beyond the call of duty, are in the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.



~ A Sky Soldier Returns to the Scene ~

Dak To village, 2009



Dak To airstrip/base camp, 2009.

(Photos by Jack McLaughlin/Sarah Konek)

In 2009, after 42 years I was able to achieve one of my life's goals and that was to return to the base camp at Dak To, Kontum Province, Central Highlands of the Republic of South Vietnam. A friend, Jack McLaughlin, Vietnam Vet, 198th Inf., Americal Division, had facilitated the visit. I had no plan and it was not at the top of my bucket list. It just nagged at me for all of these years and rolled around in the back of my head; snuck in at those empty times, when Vietnam comes a calling.

I accomplished none of practical things with this visit that I had thought about over the years. I was lucky to get photographs and that was only because of my fellow travelers. I was so overcome with emotion that I could do nothing but wander around. My companions were waiting on me like "Well, is this it? Are you done yet? What are you looking at? There is nothing here...." I did not see the ghosts but I could feel them, their spirits restless, trying to answer the question of their time in this place, the living and the dead. I felt the privilege of walking among these men & women, their shadows still residing here, then and now.



Steve, at Dak To base camp, 2009

The runway is still there, blacktop cracking under the drying manioc root. A small encampment to tend the root and the cattle wandering about. What was once bare earth covered with olive drab tents, sandbags, vehicles, airplanes, helicopters, and humanity is now eerily silent, covered with the returning green scrub that will become jungle and erase our presence. Young men and young lives, dreams and ambitions, lost in the foggy mist of this ancient, strategically critical, spot of memory.

Steve Konek, Sr.
173d Abn Bde





Medal of Honor

CARLOS JAMES LOZADA



Private First Class

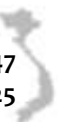
U.S. Army

“A” Co., 2nd Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep)

Republic of Vietnam

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Pfc. Lozada, U.S. Army, distinguished himself at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty in the battle of Dak To. While serving as a machine gunner with the 1st Platoon, Company A, Pfc. Lozada was part of a 4-man early warning outpost, located 35 meters from his company's lines. At 1400 hours a North Vietnamese Army company rapidly approached the outpost along a well defined trail. Pfc. Lozada alerted his comrades and commenced firing at the enemy who were within 10 meters of the outpost. His heavy and accurate machine gun fire killed at least 20 North Vietnamese soldiers and completely disrupted their initial attack. Pfc. Lozada remained in an exposed position and continued to pour deadly fire upon the enemy despite the urgent pleas of his comrades to withdraw. The enemy continued their assault, attempting to envelop the outpost. At the same time enemy forces launched a heavy attack on the forward west flank of Company A with the intent to cut them off from their battalion. Company A was given the order to withdraw. Pfc. Lozada apparently realized that

if he abandoned his position there would be nothing to hold back the surging North Vietnamese soldiers and that the entire Company withdrawal would be jeopardized. He called for his comrades to move back and that he would stay and provide cover for them. He made this decision realizing that the enemy was converging on 3 sides of the position and only meters away, and a delay in withdrawal meant almost certain death. Pfc. Lozada continued to deliver a heavy, accurate volume of suppressive fire against the enemy until he was mortally wounded. His heroic deeds served as an example and an inspiration to his comrades throughout the ensuing 4-day battle. Pfc. Lozada's actions are in the highest traditions of the U.S. Army and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.



The Longest Night

Sitting here in front of the computer I think back to that first day on the hill. My mind goes back and I realize that this Battle for Hill 875 has been talked about for decades. It's been documented in the book by Edward Murphy and *The Battle for Hill 875, Combat Zone* on the Military Channel. Most know that I was fire team leader of the battalion point element. I'll let the others who were on the Hill with me tell their stories and I will try and relate some of the unpublished story.



Steve

It was the darkest of times for 2nd Battalion considering how many brothers were killed and how many others were wounded. It was also a time of honor, bravery and extreme courage by those men I had the honor of serving with. Many have tried to put into words what they experienced on that first day, but I guess you just had to be there to understand it. Many who wear our patch who have seen combat know what I'm talking about.

The few of us who survived that first day and night still have those memories locked away within us which we relive everyday of our lives. I have tried to convey in poems what I felt and saw on that hill. Each poem written was something that was experienced by me.

Many friends sacrificed much during that day and night. Many died protecting others who were wounded. Each of us who survived that battle remembers, yet wishes we didn't. Our Battalion is rich with a legacy of what happened on that day and those of us who were there will always remember those of us who didn't make it back home.

I remember being at the Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. seeing all the names of the brothers we lost in that single day, and I found it very hard and painful to read the names of my friends. Rest in peace my brothers for your story will live on in infamy as long as there is someone to read or tell the story of the Battle for Hill 875.

Hill 875: The Longest Night

**The flare, the roaring jet then you see the bomb
coming right at you
You grab your friend and you both hit the trench
The bomb explodes and you felt like you were
going to die
Then the silence, then the cries
Your mind goes close to the brink
If only there was some water to drink
You and your buddy smell the stench of death
all around**

**So both of you get up on your knees off the ground
Your friend needs to see if he can help those in need
Now you are alone, alone to meet your fate
Your mind dreads the unknown and you (wait)
Now you are the only thing between the enemy
and your friends
Then there is another explosion next to your head
Throwing you back in the foxhole
you think you are dead
As you become conscience you check yourself out
You are still in one piece and that's what counts
Peering into the darkness you can't see a thing
But you know the enemy is there
as your ears still ring
You hear a sound
A twig snaps as you lay closer to the ground
NVA try to probe as you and others hold them off
Throwing grenades afraid to even cough
In your mind you say a prayer
Hoping your family knows you cared
If I have to die this lonely night
Let them know I went down with a fight
The night wears on as you expect to be overrun
Knowing they will know where you are
when you fire your gun
As each moment seems an eternity
you make peace with God
Because in your mind you believe it might be the end
This is the place you belong
With the brothers of 2nd battalion
who are alive or gone**

Always wear our patch with pride, honor and respect because we are all part of something very special in history and always will be. Each time I look at the 173d patch I remember those who sacrificed their lives so I may live mine and remember theirs.

Steve Welch
C/2/503d



Steve at Dak To airstrip, October 1967





Fr. Charlie Watters

On January 17, 1927 Charles Joseph Watters first saw the light of day. Attending college at Seton Hall, he made the decision to become a priest and went on to Immaculate Conception Seminary. Ordained on May 30, 1953, he served parishes in Jersey City, Rutherford, Paramus and Cranford, all in New Jersey. While attending to his priestly duties, Father Watters became a pilot. His longest solo flight was a trip to Argentina. He earned a commercial pilot's license and an instrument rating. In 1962 he joined the Air Force National Guard in New Jersey. A military tradition ran in his family with his uncle, John J. Doran, a boson's mate aboard the USS Marblehead, having been awarded the Medal of Honor for his courage at Cienfuegos, Cuba on May 11, 1898.



In August 1965 he transferred to the Army as a chaplain. At the age of 38, a remarkably advanced age to be going through that rugged course in my opinion, Father Watters successfully completed Airborne training and joined the 173d Airborne Brigade, the Sky Soldiers. In June of 1966 Major Watters began a twelve month tour of duty in Vietnam with the 173d.

Chaplain Watters quickly became a legend in the 173d. He constantly stayed with units in combat. When a unit he was attached to rotated to the rear, he joined another unit in action. He believed that his role was to be with the fighting units serving the men. Saying mass, joking with the men, giving them spiritual guidance, tending the wounded, Chaplain Watters seemed to be everywhere. A Sky Soldier remembered decades later that when he lacked the money to buy a crib for a new-born daughter Father Watters sought him out and gave him the money. The word quickly spread in "The Herd", as the 173d was called, about the priest who didn't mind risking his life with them, a reputation sealed when Father Watters made a combat jump with the troops during Operation Junction City on February 22, 1967.

Chaplain Watters became something of a celebrity, but he denigrated the attention paid to him. In May 1967 he told a reporter, *"I'm the peaceful kind. All I shoot is my camera. If they start shooting at me, I'd just yell 'Tourist!' Seriously a weapon weighs too much, and, after all, a priest's job is taking care of the boys. But if we ever get overrun, I guess there'll be plenty of weapons lying around waiting to be picked up."* During

his first tour he was decorated with an Air Medal and a Bronze Star with a V for valor.

In June of 1967 his tour was over and Father Watters was free to leave Vietnam. He didn't go. Instead he signed up for another tour. His boys needed him, and he couldn't let them down.

On November 19, 1967, he was with the second battalion, 503 infantry (2/503) as it made ready to assault Hill 875 near Dak To, South Vietnam. Dak To is in Kontum province in the Central Highlands area of Vietnam. Located near the Cambodia and Laos borders, this area was a major infiltration point for North Vietnamese soldiers, supplies and munitions entering South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail that wound south from North Vietnam down through Laos and Cambodia. The North Vietnamese high command had built up the North Vietnamese 1st Division in the area around Dak To in October 1967 and decided that the time was ripe to take Dak To. On November 2, 1967 an NVA reconnaissance sergeant surrendered and brought with him a detailed battle plan for the assault on Dak To. Elements of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 173d Airborne brigade were rushed to Dak To. Beginning on November 4, 1967, American and South Vietnamese units began a series of attacks around Dak To to disrupt the NVA offensive. On November 19, 1967 the 2/503 was ordered to attack and seize Hill 875.

It was thought by Brigadier General Leo H. Schweiter, commanding officer of the 173d Brigade, that the Hill was held by depleted units of the 66th NVA infantry regiment. That regiment had suffered huge casualties in the earlier fighting around Dak To. Unfortunately the Hill was held by 2000 men of the fresh NVA 174th infantry regiment. The 2/503 had approximately 300 men. Prior to the assault beginning, Father Watters said Mass at the base of the hill, a Mass which was well-attended, with many Protestant troopers joining the Catholic troopers.



Chaplain Watters, right, at Dak To

(continued...)



The battalion advanced up the north slope of the hill with Delta Company on the left side of the ridge line, Charlie Company on the right side of the ridge line, and Alpha Company in reserve bringing up the rear. Although he could have stayed behind in safety, Chaplain Watters was with the battalion as it advanced. Delta and Charlie quickly came under withering fire from NVA troops in concealed bunkers covered by foliage. Both companies were pinned under heavy enemy fire, including machine guns and mortars as well as rifle fire. Wounded men began crying out for help and Father Watters throughout a very long day rendered that help. Here is the official citation:

~ Medal of Honor ~

“For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, Chaplain Watters distinguished himself during an assault in the vicinity of Dak To. Chaplain Watters was moving with one of the companies when it engaged a heavily armed enemy battalion. As the battle raged and the casualties mounted, Chaplain Watters, with complete disregard for his safety, rushed forward to the line of contact. Unarmed and completely exposed, he moved among, as well as in front of the advancing troops, giving aid to the wounded, assisting in their evacuation, giving words of encouragement, and administering the last rites to the dying. When a wounded paratrooper was standing in shock in front of the assaulting forces, Chaplain Watters ran forward, picked the man up on his shoulders and carried him to safety. As the troopers battled to the first enemy entrenchment, Chaplain Watters ran through the intense enemy fire to the front of the entrenchment to aid a fallen comrade. A short time later, the paratroopers pulled back in preparation for a second assault. Chaplain Watters exposed himself to both friendly and enemy fire between the 2 forces in order to recover 2 wounded soldiers. Later, when the battalion was forced to pull back into a perimeter, Chaplain Watters noticed that several wounded soldiers were lying outside the newly formed perimeter. Without hesitation and ignoring attempts to restrain him, Chaplain Watters left the perimeter three times in the face of small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire to carry and to assist the injured troopers to safety. Satisfied that all of the wounded were inside the perimeter, he began aiding the medics... applying field bandages to open wounds, obtaining and serving food and water, giving spiritual and mental strength and comfort. During his ministering, he moved out to the perimeter from position to position redistributing

food and water, and tending to the needs of his men. Chaplain Watters was giving aid to the wounded when he himself was mortally wounded. Chaplain Watters’ unyielding perseverance and selfless devotion to his comrades was in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Army.”

Ironically it was not enemy fire that took the life of Father Watters, but, tragically, an American 500 pound bomb. A Marine pilot, desperately trying to aid the battalion, dropped a bomb which killed 45 Americans, including Father Watters. It was one of the worst friendly fire incidents of the Vietnam War.

Ultimately the 173d took Hill 875. The NVA units involved in the battles around Dak To were so badly decimated that they were unable to participate in the Tet Offensive at the beginning of 1968.

The many men he had saved that day never forgot Father Watters and neither did the Army. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, one of seven Chaplains to be so honored. The Army on November 20, 2007 renamed the Army Chaplain’s School Watter’s Hall in his honor. His name is on the Vietnam Wall and on the Virtual Wall. Schools have been named after Father Watters, a bridge is being named after him and Assembly 2688 of the Knights of Columbus bears his name. However, I am sure that the honor that means most to Father Watters is that through his efforts some of his boys did not die on Hill 875. Like so many good priests, Father Watters did not view the title of “Father” as a mere honorific, but rather something to live for and, if necessary, die for.



Dak To

One Hell Of A Fight

By John Prados

There were real flash points during the war, where battle was virtually certain. Grunts remember them only too well. At some places, the Viet Cong would react like angry wasps when American troops came near. These existed throughout South Vietnam: the U Minh Forest, the Rung Sat Swamp, Cu Chi, the Iron Triangle, the Ho Bo Woods, Binh Dinh, Bong Son, the Batangan Peninsula, the A Shau Valley. Others were points the North Vietnamese or VC were more than likely to attack: the DMZ, Lang Vei, Khe Sanh, and Dak To.

Dak To was among the worst. Nestled in the Central Highlands northwest of Kontum, the Dak To Special Forces camp guarded the approaches to an important provincial capital. Established in the summer of 1962, abandoned, then recreated in August 1965, Dak To was threatened, besieged, or attacked repeatedly – notably in 1966, 1969, 1971, and 1972. The 1966 and 1972 battles were particularly fierce.

But ask GIs about Dak To and usually it's 1967 that they remember. Not just any moment of that year – for it is possible to say that a “campaign” took place around Dak To from the spring to the fall – but one specific series of battles that November. The veterans of Dak To participated in an incredible epic of courage, privation, and frustration.

A BATTLE WAITING TO HAPPEN

The Kontum area lay across from the tri-border region – the intersection of Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam. Hanoi had established its Base Area 609 there, one of its nerve centers in the war. By 1967, the Ho Chi Minh Trail allowed easy communication with this area, which enhanced enemy capabilities. That spring the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division had engaged the North Vietnamese in a brief but sharp fight, which led MACV Commanding Gen. William C. Westmoreland to lay on a full-scale riposte,

Operation Greeley, which began in June and lasted through October.



Gen. Westmoreland with 173d Sky Soldier
(Don Hall, 173d PIO)

Greeley featured some tough engagements, especially the late-June scrape that pitted the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Airborne Infantry against the North Vietnamese 24th Regiment. That engagement took place no more than five kilometers from Dak To. There was also an enemy attack on the nearby Tan Canh Special Forces Camp.

During these events the whole of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the parent unit of the 2/503, and the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division were pulled into the melee. Infantry sweeps, harassment and interdiction fire, and B-52 strikes continued throughout the summer....

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But Base Area 609 still loomed across the border where it could not be touched – at least by American troops on the ground. Meanwhile, a full division of first-line NVA regulars gathered there. In a way, Dak To was a battle waiting to happen.



The bad guys on the move. Some called him Mr. Charles.
(Web photo)

Lt. Gen. William R. Rosson took command of MACV's regional command for this area, I Field Force, in early August. Rosson knew of both Greeley and the companion Operation Paul Revere in Pleiku province. He had worked for a long time with Westmoreland and was an old hand in Indochina, having been part of the original U.S. military aid group in the mid-1950s. He was an excellent choice to lead the U.S. forces in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. The senior field commander, Maj. Gen. William R. ("Ray") Peers of the 4th Infantry Division, was an officer commissioned from the ranks with experience in jungle warfare stretching all the way back to Burma in World War II, where he had learned guerrilla tactics from the other side – as an American guerrilla fighting the Japanese. If Dak To was waiting to happen, Rosson and Peers were well equipped to deal with it.

Neither they nor Westmoreland knew about Hanoi's decision to mount an offensive during Tet 1968. That plan, finalized in late July, called for a series of engagements along South Vietnam's borders that were designed to draw out MACV and Saigon forces.

Hanoi also planned a battle in Kontum province, around Dak To. This was the sector of the North Vietnamese B-3 Front led by Maj. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao, a veteran of Dien Bien Phu, and political officer Col. Tran The Mon. Thao's forces, built around the North Vietnamese 1st Division, included five infantry regiments and the 40th Artillery. Despite Operation Greeley, his *bo doi*, or soldiers, had had ample time to prepare the battlefield. Attacking GIs would encounter complete defensive systems layered one upon another and separated by intervals of a kilometer or two. The clear intent was to oblige the Americans to fight their way through successive defense lines. Gen. Thao set the stage carefully.

EARLY SKIRMISHES

When the People's Army 24th Regiment faded away that

summer, major contacts became scarce in Kontum. Gen. Rosson began to focus elsewhere. Phu Yen province looked like trouble, so he sent the 173rd Airborne Brigade there, leaving behind just one battalion, Maj. James R. Steverton's 2/503rd Airborne Infantry. It, too, left and was replaced by the 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry (Mechanized).

Kontum was hardly good mech country, though, and the 299th Engineers, responsible for the local roads, most importantly Route 14, had their hands full restoring the bridges blown up in guerrilla actions. So the grunts were mostly occupied in opening the roads. The most dangerous threats were ambushes, mines, and booby traps. The enemy seemed to have hunkered down in its base area across the border.

The withdrawal of the airborne brigade would be fortuitous in one respect. The movement by C-130 aircraft took place over several days of rainy weather, which rutted the runway at Dak To's airstrip. The engineers' work to restore the strip turned out to be critical to its use when the North Vietnamese emerged from their bases.

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That happened in the latter half of October. According to a briefing given to Gen. Westmoreland early in December, it was at that time that the U.S. detected the North Vietnamese 1st Division in the tri-border area. Gen. Peers reacted quickly, flooding the hills with LRRP patrols, crisscrossing the sky with observation planes, employing chemical sensors (“Snoopy”) to detect *bo doi* urine and infrared (Red Haze) to find their campfires from the sky. Peers pulled his mechanized troops, substituting the foot sloggers of Lt. Col. John P. Vollmer’s 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry. LRRP patrols reported that the North Vietnamese were indeed on the move, and toward Dak To.

On October 29, Peers deployed the headquarters of 4th Division’s 1st Brigade to Dak To under Col. Richard H. Johnson. Along with it went Lt. Col. Glen D. Belnap’s 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry. Col. Johnson put Vollmer’s battalion in a cordon south of Dak To and Belnap’s to the southwest. A battalion of the South Vietnamese 42nd Regiment held Dak To itself, and another was sprinkled around the area.

There were Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and Mobile Strike Force (Mike Force) companies at several Special Forces camps in the area, including Dak Seang, Polei Kleng, and Polei Krong. There was a planned CIDG camp at Ben Het, where Westmoreland wanted to install 175mm guns to shell enemy base camps across the border. Their scout patrols, too, indicated the enemy was on the move.

Before dawn on November 2, a *bo doi* sergeant named Vu Hong surrendered to a U.S. patrol west of Ben Het. Hong said he was a member of a fifty-man reconnaissance unit scouting out potential firing positions for rockets and artillery. Hong proceeded to detail the locations of every element of the North Vietnamese 1st Division. His own 66th Regiment was on the march toward Ben Het. The 174th was moving toward there from the northwest. The 24th Regiment supposedly had hacked its way along jungle trails southwest toward Tan Canh, and the 32nd was approaching Dak To itself from the southwest. It was a lot for a sergeant to know.

The December briefing to Westmoreland conceded that Hong had had “quite a fantastic tale to tell,” and that “there were a lot of people who disbelieved him because he knew too much.” But Hong’s information coincided with what U.S. intelligence thought it knew. The indications were that the North Vietnamese had seven thousand troops in the area. Some look

askance at David Hackworth, the highly-decorated American battalion commander, but Hackworth was a veteran of the 1966 fracas at Dak To and surely spoke the truth when he criticized the defector’s intelligence as “one of the oldest tricks in the guerrilla handbook.” In fact, an official history of the Vietnam People’s Army notes that “the Front Military Command . . . used deception to lure the enemy into preplanned areas.”



Col. David Hackworth, 1930-2005.

In any case, I Field Force took no chances. Gen. Rosson immediately began feeding the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the “Sky Soldiers,” back into Dak To piece by piece. First to arrive was Lt. Col. James H. Johnson’s 4th Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry, which went directly to Ben Het. MACV dubbed the new effort Operation MacArthur.

Two companies of the 3/12 Infantry were pushing along Hill 1338, which loomed above Dak To, when Bravo Company first met the enemy on November 3. As much artillery as could be brought to bear, plus forty aircraft, plastered the position. The firefight occurred just two or three hundred meters from where a company of airborne troops nearly had been massacred in the June battle that touched off Operation Greeley.

Col. Belnap’s 3/8 Infantry set up a firebase on the hill. The next morning his Alpha Company air-assaulted onto the next ridge. Before long, both battalions were engaged. At this point, Gen. Rosson ordered the remainder of the 173rd Brigade into the sector and gave Gen. Peers control of the operation....

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...The 173rd was a big brigade, with four rifle battalions, but 3/503 had only recently been formed. Brig. Gen. Leo H. Schweiter left it behind for extra training and sweeps around Tuy Hoa. Schweiter moved quickly and had his men in position by November 6.

That same day, the 4/503, already in position at Ben Het with orders to seek out the headquarters of the North Vietnamese 66th Regiment (supposed to be nearby), put three of its companies on the line to dig out the enemy. They were also to establish a new firebase on Hill 823. The units were small – the largest rifle company had 125 men; the smallest, only 65 – so platoons of CIDG strikers were added. The weakest, Capt. Thomas Baird's Dog Company, ended up in a firefight against an entrenched enemy near the foot of Hill 823. The CIDGs ran away. Johnson pushed his companies hard, ordering the others to relieve Dog, where Capt. Baird, badly wounded, still led his men. Dog held out all night. The next morning the enemy was gone.

Col. Johnson decided on a helicopter assault, flinging his last company onto the crest of the hill at the climax of this fight. U.S. tactical maps of the area contain the notation, "Generally Forest Covered." This hardly does justice to the dense triple canopy in the area. There was no Landing Zone and the bombing did not clear one. Johnson requested more and heavier bombing, and even that barely beat down the jungle growth. The company ended up in the middle of a North Vietnamese defense complex. The ensuing fight went through the night. There were heavy losses. Battalion commander Johnson wanted to go on, but Gen. Schweiter ordered all of 4/503 back to Ben Het for rest and replacements.

Lt. Col. David J. Schumacher's 1/503 replaced Johnson's battalion and moved out to the west of Ben Het to "pursue" the enemy. It, too, had heavy contact. Capt. Thomas McElwain's Charlie Company, paired with Capt. Abe Hardy's Dog Company, were pressed so hard that they required rescue, too. Gen. Schweiter had to intervene with the battalion commander to get the relief force into action. The two-company force lost 20 dead, 154 wounded, and two missing. The relieving company suffered an additional 30 wounded. Capt. Hardy was killed, leaving Dog Company with just one officer standing, plus about 50 GIs. There were just 40 men left in Charlie Company.



The Dak To airstrip was chaotic from a logistics standpoint. There had been a series of accidents over several months involving aircraft and ground vehicles, caused by vehicles forced to drive on the airstrip to stay out of the mud. In two accidents in September, C-130s collided with trucks. An accident in mid-October, when the ground vehicle was a bulldozer, resulted in the death of the dozer driver and the loss of the aircraft, which took off successfully but crashed on landing.

The new battle brought an emergency lift to deliver a three-day supply reserve. Beginning on November 8, MACV allocated twenty C-130 flights per day to Dak To. Troop movements were on top of that requirement, leading to very heavy use of the airstrip. Emergency runway lights were installed for night flights. Brig. Gen. Hugh E. Wild of the 834th Air Division, the Seventh Air Force's transport command, warned MACV to be prepared for the loss of aircraft if flights were continued. The warning was prophetic.

THE BARRAGE CONTINUES

The battle for Hill 823 turned out to be only a prelude. Gen. Peers brought up another battalion, 1/8 Infantry, and the Vietnamese added two, including their 9th Airborne Battalion, used to shield Tan Canh from the enemy's 24th Infantry. A U.S. armored cavalry troop and a tank company secured Route 14. Maneuvering along the ridge above Dak To, the 3/12th Infantry encountered new defense lines every 1,500-2,000 meters. Col. Belnap's 3/8th Infantry, laagered for the night of November 9, were hit by mortars, B-40 rockets, and fierce attacks that went on through noon the next day. The North Vietnamese hurled more than a battalion at the position. One officer believed it was one of the biggest ground attacks of the war. Americans counted 232 enemy dead on the ground the next day.

Belnap moved west and had another day-long fight, this time on Hill 724. The battalion claimed a hundred enemy dead, but was heavily damaged in turn. Belnap's strongest company was down to seventy-eight men, his other two had fifty-nine and forty-four. A smashed helicopter on the LZ burned all day, preventing medical evacuations or supply runs. The Americans were in a meat grinder.

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Hill 724 Dak To, November 1967, downed chopper.

Gen. Rosson sent more reinforcements, starting with the 1/12 Cavalry of the 1st Cavalry Division, to patrol the Dak To perimeter, after which two of its companies successively reinforced the 3/8 Infantry and 2/503 Airborne. Maj. Steverton's 2/503 air assaulted into the site of a firebase the Sky Soldiers had once used, headed toward the border, and encountered sporadic contacts.



c-130 explodes at Dak To airstrip. (Jeffrey Tillman/Cowboys)

On the night of November 12, Dak To received its first direct attack, a mortar barrage of forty-four rounds. Several vehicles were damaged and two men wounded. An even bigger hit took place three days later. That morning a barrage of about ten rounds hit the airfield, where several C-130s were loading elements of the ARVN 9th Airborne to return to Saigon. One plane was set on fire, wounding the battalion commander and two of his officers. Another C-130 blew up. The third plane survived, backed away by two crewmembers during a lull in the bombardment. Capt. Joseph K. Glenn and Sgt. Joseph

H. Mack were awarded Silver Stars for saving the aircraft. A fourth C-130, just landing, accelerated and took off again.

Late that afternoon, the barrage resumed and seventy-eight more mortars fell on Dak To. This time shells hit the ammunition dump, igniting a fire that spread from bunker to bunker. An American sergeant had almost extinguished the fire when a nearby pallet of ammo exploded, shattering his leg and cutting the hoses of Dak To's fire truck. After that, there was nothing to be done. Steel flew through the air almost all night. Almost 1,300 tons of ammunition and 17,000 gallons of fuel were destroyed.

“Jesus,” exclaimed Lt. Fred Drysen, “It looked like Charlie had gotten hold of some nuclear weapons!”

Miraculously, only three Americans and three South Vietnamese were wounded in the conflagration and no one was killed. The Special Forces camp had to be rebuilt.

The ARVN had their own scrape with the North Vietnamese 24th Regiment at Hill 1416, northeast of Tan Canh. The 3rd Battalion, 42nd Regiment, brought up from road security duty on Highway 14, made the contact. After that, the 2nd and 3rd ARVN Airborne Battalions moved in, replacing the 9th. The infantry blocked escape routes while the paratroopers made the assault. It was as big a melee as any of the others. American artillery and two South Vietnamese 105mm batteries laid a barrage on the hill before the ARVN, as the briefers liked to say, “worked” the position. The Vietnamese reported 66 dead and 290 wounded and claimed a body count of 248.

The ammunition explosion and heavy losses confronted the U.S. command with huge obstacles. The Dak To airstrip remained unusable until November 17. Air shipments were diverted to Kontum for road haul. When flights did resume, only one plane was permitted on the ground at a time.

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Gen. Rosson had his supply people seek out spare ammo stocks throughout I Field Force, and the corps appealed to MACV for munitions from anywhere in South Vietnam. It became his biggest challenge of Operation MacArthur and the worst headache of his tour. Army logistics people recorded 12,700 tons of supplies received at Dak To through November, some 5,100 tons coming by air. Rebuilding of the Dak To CIDG camp began on November 26. At MACV, the deputy chief of staff for personnel, Brig. Gen. Earl Cole, was desperate to get replacements to the front. He suspended the usual routine under which GIs checked in at Saigon or Long Binh. "We called the Defense Department," Cole said, "and got them to divert aircraft loaded with replacements from Saigon to Cam Ranh Bay" – the jet-capable airfield nearest to the battlefield. Within twenty-four hours the new men reached the 173rd Brigade's rear base at An Khe. Other support included 2,096 air strike sorties and 151,000 rounds of artillery fire.

THE MAIN EVENT

All this happened before the main event. On November 18, a Mike Force company from Dak To camp, on one of the half-dozen forays mounted by Capt. Jimmy L. Braddock's Special Forces Detachment A-244, was working its way across the eastern slope of Hill 875 when it encountered the enemy. The North Vietnamese 174th Regiment were hunkered down in an elaborate system of trenches and bunkers. The Mike Force strikers pulled back, and the next day Gen. Schweiter sent the 2/503 up the hill. Maj. Jim Steverson's battalion moved from where it had been exploring an abandoned enemy base camp – a huge complex which, if it mirrored the defenses on Hill 875, portended trouble for the Americans and South Vietnamese.

Although the unit had incorporated some replacements, its field strength still amounted to only 330 GIs. The assault marked the beginning of a four-day battle that was the worst yet. The enemy let the two leading companies pass. Then masses of *bo dois* emerged seemingly from nowhere to overrun the battalion reserve, Capt. Michael J. Kiley's Alpha Company. Reduced to remnants, Kiley's men retreated uphill to link with C and D Companies, and

the whole force formed a perimeter to fight off the enemy.



"173d assault on Hill 875." (Web photo)

The firing became so intense that the grunts ran low on ammunition, and choppers with new supplies could not get through the curtain of North Vietnamese flak, even just to kick pallets of magazines to the GIs below. Sky Soldiers took ammunition off dead bodies.

Late that afternoon, a Marine fighter-bomber mistakenly dropped its ordnance on the American position, a disaster that resulted in twenty killed and twenty to thirty wounded. "A lot of guys died from that bomb," Pvt. Johnny Hayes said. "It just blew the dead and wounded all over the place. God, it was awful."

Of the sixteen company officers who started up Hill 875, eight died and the others were wounded. The battalion suffered ninety-five dead on the hill, seventy-one of them the first day. There were eighty-seven more GIs who lay wounded the next morning. Dak To was one of the bloodiest battles of the American war in South Vietnam.

Gen. Schweiter could not leave that battalion out there. He ordered Col. Johnson to gather his battalion and get to Hill 875 as quickly as possible...

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...The 4/503 already had been at the center of several firefights, but these were fellow Sky Soldiers in trouble. Everyone would carry a double load of ammunition to help resupply their comrades.

The approach march went slowly, with the troopers ringed by a roving artillery barrage every step of the way. The first reinforcing company reached the beleaguered 2/503 in the evening, and the others arrived at intervals throughout the night.

Morning revealed a scene of chaos, with all kinds of discarded equipment littering the airborne perimeter and the hill denuded by the enormous firepower that had been aimed at it. Offering a reporter a gas mask picked up from the ground, because the Sky Soldiers intended to use tear gas in their assault, a sergeant of the 2/503 said:

“Reckon we have spares of pretty well everything in the Second Battalion right now.”

By afternoon, the combined efforts of men from the two units succeeded in hacking out an LZ on the slope for medevacs. Sgt. Maj. Hector Lehva of the 2/503 astonished comrades, saying he wanted emergency resupply of razor blades and boot polish. Incredulous, they asked why. “So you guys can look like paratroops again,” Lehva replied. One of the wounded was overheard saying, “That goddamned hill. Those goddamned gooks. I ain’t never goin’ back. No one can make me.”

But grunts were going back, or more accurately, had never left, and the Sky Soldiers of 4/503 gradually fought their way toward the crest. The North Vietnamese harassed them with mortar fire. Col. Johnson stopped his lead company short, because its flanking cohorts had been held up by the enemy. The whole thing was repeated on November 23, when two companies of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry provided an assist. The Sky Soldiers reached the summit, giving MACV commanders Hill 875 for a Thanksgiving present. A turkey dinner was flown out to the paratroopers before dusk.

That marked the effective end of the Battle of Dak To. The brass claimed 322 dead North Vietnamese, but the Sky Soldiers counted few bodies on the ground. There would be what MACV called an “exploitation phase,” in which MACV released the full 1st Brigade of

the 1st Cavalry Division, and the ARVN added their 7th Airborne Battalion and 22nd Rangers.

The South Vietnamese made the last big contact, with their Rangers in the lead. And there came a fresh crisis in the Bong Son Valley, so I Field Force returned the Cav brigade there, keeping only the single battalion that had previously been at Dak To. MACV claimed 1,227 North Vietnamese dead in Operation MacArthur, and the ARVN a body count of 417. Gen. Rosson questioned these figures and believed the real toll on the enemy had been about a thousand. He was not the only person to doubt the body count.

Nineteen *bo dois* were captured, along with 314 small arms and 109 crew-served weapons. Obtaining these results had been costly. An officer of the 173rd told Col. Hackworth that Dak To had been a “bloodbath,” and that the brigade had suffered a total of 883 casualties, including 194 dead. The 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division had incurred an additional 82 dead, and the ARVN had 73 killed in action. There were a total of 344 dead and 1,441 wounded. Beyond that, two C-130s were lost and forty helicopters downed or damaged beyond repair.

Gen. Westmoreland, in the United States to drum up support for the war, missed most of the action, returning only when Dak To had reached its “exploitation” phase. But based on the field reporting, he told a press conference during the trip that the battle was the “beginning of a great defeat” for Hanoi. Senior staff officers at MACV said the battle had ended North Vietnamese plans to capture Dak To once and for all.

Both statements were wrong. Journalists’ views were closer to those of the grunts. ***“With victories like this,”*** one muttered, ***“who needs defeats?”***

Historian John Prados is the author of twenty-one books, including most recently, In Country: Remember the Vietnam War (an edited anthology) and Normandy Crucible: The Decisive Battle that Shaped World War II in Europe. Available on Amazon.com

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No One Would Listen

During the weeks just prior to and a few weeks after, I was a recon team leader at FOB-2, the base for MACV-SOG located at Kontum. Our SF recon teams had been very busy covering the areas that included 875 and the entire Tri-Border area that the NVA was using as a sanctuary and route to move into Northern II Corps.



Moe, when he was a SFC with the 5th SF in '68

Our guys had reported weapons caches, food caches, dirt steps with hand rails to steady porters and extensive bunker and assembly areas. Some areas were occupied by angry guys with guns and other complexes were just prepared and unoccupied during our visits. If you spent any time at the air strip you may remember a derelict H-34 sitting on one end of the strip. It took about 90 hits while extracting a team and made it that far before the engine and transmission began to seize and they had to land. We were busy.

One team leader and I were having a beer during this time and he told me that while his extraction helicopters were refueling he walked over to the 173d TOC. He tried to brief the S3/S2 on what they had seen that day and what they knew from previous missions. He was basically shown the door. Either no one was interested or they did not think some snake eating NCO knew anything they didn't.

He went back to the strip, boarded up and flew back to the FOB. You guys know what happened shortly after.

By the way, we were required to mark on our maps trails, bunkers and other enemy facilities and later MACV would publish maps with this data. At least some one was listening!

During the '67-'69 time frame we took over 100% casualties (luckily I never took a hit bad enough to count) among our recon and reaction force members. Some years later we got a Presidential Unit Citation as well. That was after DoD decided to acknowledge our operations.

Don't know if you want to put this in, just needed to tell some damn body.

Darrell "Moe" Elmore, LTC (Ret)
C/D/HHC/2/503d & SF

A Long Time Ago

I was the Casper Platoon commander at Hill 875. In fact, I did the initial recon of the hill. I was flying one of our H-13s with a major who, I believe, was the S-3 of the 2/503d. I had been over the hill in the spring, but I can remember telling him that there had been a whole lot of activity there (trenches, bunkers, etc.). He said that was not what intelligence reported. So much for intelligence.



Casper nose art

I don't remember how many wounded or dead that I pulled off that hill. I do remember that I had to put a Huey's right skid up against the hill, while the left was several feet in the air. There were troops hiding under stacks of bodies for cover. The 2/503d forgot the principal of war that even if you attack with 400+ troops, if you attack one behind another, you are attacking with one man.

The 4/503d (LTC Johnson?) had the sense to flank the dinks. It was a long, bloody battle. They had to bring refrigerator trucks up from Pleiku/Kontum to handle the bodies. I seem to remember that the KIA total was 183, but that's a long time ago.

So that's about it, unless you want me to try to remember more. I managed to survive to retirement, even though they were RIF'ing aviators left and right. I still have, and can see it in my bookcase, "*Vietnam, the Second Year*" the book of the 173d. A long time ago. All the way.

Richard "Dick" Head, Maj.
Casper Platoon



Caspers WO1 Hank Echols, SP5 Rick Canning & Sgt. Johnnie K. Rogers in Dak To just 3 days before "Hill 875" 1967. (Casper's web site)



A Ground Level View of Hill 875

By Augie Scarino
Recon/Charlie Company
Jan. '67 – Jan '68

I've attempted to refrain from any personal opinions and feelings about the operation in general, and will instead emphasize a chronology of events from an eye witness perspective. This is a condensed version of my story, and is one of many who had similar experiences on that hill. This is an attempt to give the reader a picture of what it was like at ground level. Augie



Augie, digging in.

My story begins two days before 2nd Battalion assaulted Hill 875 at Dak To. Our battalion was airlifted to a Fire Support Base some distance from the hill. It was late afternoon; many trees had been felled to make a clearing. No sooner had our company ("C") assembled, when shooting began to be directed at us. We could not see the enemy – we all began to shoot in the direction the fire was coming from. Senior NCOs were shouting for the front line to throw grenades, which many of us immediately did. Just before sundown, the firing ceased.

"B" Company went down the hill and a short time later returned with a captured NVA soldier; a tiny man in his mid-twenties who appeared to be scared for his life. We set-up a perimeter and began night preparations. I went down the slope to set-up flares and Claymore mines – there was still enough light to see some distance.

As I began to walk down the slope, I noticed a Chinese-made machinegun not more than ten feet from our perimeter. Walking towards it and a few feet lower, partly hidden behind a short, skinny tree was a North Vietnamese soldier lying face down. I went to investigate, and turned him over. I was surprised to see he had a large head attached to his small body. It was then I saw the tiny bullet hole in his forehead. As I looked up and down his dead body I noticed that his genitals and entrails were outside his body, just below his crotch. I searched his person and found a wallet and a letter. In the wallet was a picture of a smiling, well-groomed young woman. Wife? Friend? Sister? I gathered all his belongings, plus the machinegun, and gave the items to our platoon sergeant.

Early the following morning the entire battalion, minus "B" Company, began to march, with "C" Company in the lead. On the way towards our objective we moved through what appeared to be many well-constructed defensive positions. Many of these areas had been hit with artillery fire. Evidence of the smell of death, and pieces of flesh and pools of blood were everywhere to be seen. By early evening we had arrived at the base of Hill 875.

As we prepared our night positions, officers and NCOs attended a conference with Captain Kaufman, the leader of the mission, where they discussed tactics to be employed on the following morning. Our platoon leader, Lt. Thompson, gave us an account of how the assault would proceed. As I recall, there was no discussion amongst us. Everyone seemed to be engrossed in their own thoughts, with silent, serious facial expressions. As we each looked into the faces of our buddies, everyone's eyes told a story of fear under control – there were no statements of bravado. The visible anxiety of not knowing the outcome of "Who?" "When?" and "How?" was evident on every face.

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Just before sunrise the next morning, we began our preparations; breakfast, some shaved, we collected our gear, double checked it, and by the time the sun was rising, we began to assemble in our order of battle. Four, single columns moving parallel; slowly and methodically we moved up the hill with Charlie Company on the right, Delta Company on the left, and Alpha Company in the rear.

As we moved up the hill no one was talking. It was a beautiful, sunny, clear sky that morning. We could hear the familiar jungle sounds, feel the warmth of the sun, and I wondered how many noticed the natural beauty around us on that fateful morning?

Our platoon continued moving up the hill, with my squad at the head of the far right column. Behind me was a 1st Lieutenant (FO). As we got close to the crest the points of the two inner columns began to receive machinegun fire. Firing was continuous and loud; the smell of gun powder permeated the air. Our "FO" immediately contacted the Fire Support Base and began giving coordinates for artillery fire. The first incoming rounds could be heard screeching as they approached their targets, exploding in the top of the jungle canopy right above our heads. We could hear the screams of shrapnel buzzing above us and embedding themselves into the trunks of the trees. The "FO" quickly radioed new coordinates, and the following rounds could be heard screeching over our heads again, but this time exploding ahead of us. Enemy casualties? Damage to enemy fortifications?



The fighting continued all morning and into the afternoon. Around late afternoon, remnants of "A" Company were running up the hill towards us shouting, "Help us! Help us! They are overrunning us!"

Myself and Riggs (M-79), a Tennessee man, started to run down the hill. After a short distance, Riggs' helmet was shot off his head, he was not injured. I

looked down the trail and saw an NVA soldier with a painted face moving up the trail. I fired in his direction, then Riggs and I quickly ran up to our line.

We formed a perimeter and began to direct fire down at the approaching NVA soldiers. Lt. Thompson was shouting, "Hold the line! Throw grenades!" The fight continued until almost dusk. The NVA stopped their attack, and a very short time of quiet occurred. Just as daylight was flickering out, there was a loud explosion; we saw a huge ball of fire and a mushroom of black smoke. A minute or two later, Carl Ashbury, our platoon leader, came to where Riggs and I were and told us of the death and destruction caused by the explosion of friendly bombs.

Neither Riggs nor I slept that night. The cries of the wounded were difficult to cope with as we listened to our wounded calling out to their mothers and for God to help them. At the same time, NVA soldiers close to our line were shouting, "Choi Hoi. Choi Hoi!" Riggs and I threw grenades at them, and soon we heard no more "Choi Hoi."

Morning light revealed the carnage caused by the friendly fire. As I moved among the dead and wounded, many were missing limbs. There were partial torsos strewn about, and many of the bodies had been blackened by the ball of fire. I came upon a wounded GI and recognized him as an old buddy from the disbanded "Recon" platoon which had later made-up the core of Delta Company. His two feet were completely turned around from their original forms. He asked me for water; I had none. I went down the hill looking for water and finally saw two plastic bags of water. As I went down to retrieve them, some twenty feet down, I observed the dead bodies of four NVA soldiers. I returned with the water and handed it out to the wounded. Sadly, my buddy did not survive the hill.

That night 4th Battalion arrived and took control of the battle. Three days later, November 23, 1967, Thanksgiving Day, what remained of the 2nd Battalion was airlifted to a large Fire Support Base. A new company commander and new platoon leaders were waiting there – I don't recall their names. What I do recall is our new platoon leader who, in a harsh tone of voice said, "Soldier, you shave before you are served your dinner."

Welcome back Augie.



Study Project ~ Unclassified, 30 March 1988

**THE BATTLE FOR HILL 875
DAK TO, VIETNAM 1967**

By LTC Leonard B. Scott, Inf
Dr. Jim Williams, Project Advisor
US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013

Hill 875 was the most costly terrain feature taken by U.S. servicemen in the Vietnam war, yet little is known about the battle. Current published works on the battle have been incomplete, vague and sketchy.

This paper will attempt to describe in detail the events leading to and the actual battle for the terrain feature that survivors simply called 'The Hill.'

This report is based on Technical Reports – Combat Operations After Action Reports from the participating units and personal interviews with veterans of the battle. Questions concerning leadership are addressed concerning the conduct of the battle and conclusions drawn. For the benefit of future leaders lessons learned and recommendations are made for consideration.

(Photos added)



THE BATTLE FOR HILL 875 DAK TO VIETNAM 1967



USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

An individual Study Project Intended for Publication

By: LTC B. Scott Dr. Jim Williams
Inf Project Advisor

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U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
30 March 1988

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies.



Ben Het, 12 miles west of Dak To

The Battle For Hill 875 Dak To Vietnam 1967

General Situation: In late October 1967, American intelligence sources indicated North Vietnamese forces were building up in the Central Highlands province of Kontum. The enemy's focus seemed to be the northern portion of the province in the vicinity of Dak To, due (to) its natural geographical approach to the sparsely populated but strategically important region.

The Dak To region was particularly notorious for its difficult terrain. Choking rain forest covered mountain peaks that rose to 1,800 meters while bamboo and twisting strangler figs covered the valleys and lower slopes. The dense foliage provided the enemy perfect concealment allowing them to move undetected. Temperatures reached sticky nineties during the day but dropped to the chilling fifties at night.

On 3 November the enemy plans became clear. Sergeant Vu Hong, an artillery specialist assigned to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 66th Regiment, surrendered himself to South Vietnamese Popular Forces near Dak To....

(continued....)



... Vu Hong stated he was part of a reconnaissance team scouting the Dak To area for an upcoming attack by his division. The sergeant went on to give his unit's entire battle order. The enemy forces of the 1st NVA Division were divulged to be the 24th, 32nd, 66th and 174th Infantry Regiments with the 40th NVA Artillery Regiment in support. The mission of the NVA force was to annihilate a major U.S. element in order to force Allied forces to deploy additional troops to the region.

Based on the previous intelligence reports and the sergeant's information, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, (MACV), issued orders to meet the threat. Sixteen battalions and support units were immediately rushed to Kontum Province. The 4th Division's Commander, Major General William Peers, was designated as the overall Commander for the operation. The 4th Infantry Division with two brigades, a brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, three battalions from the 173d Airborne Brigade, and six Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalions, totaled a little more than 16,000 troops under General Peers' control. The resulting battle that occurred was not designated as an operation in itself, but occurred within the boundaries of the 4th Infantry Division's operation known as 'MACARTHUR'. The battle would be called, 'The Battle for Dak To'.

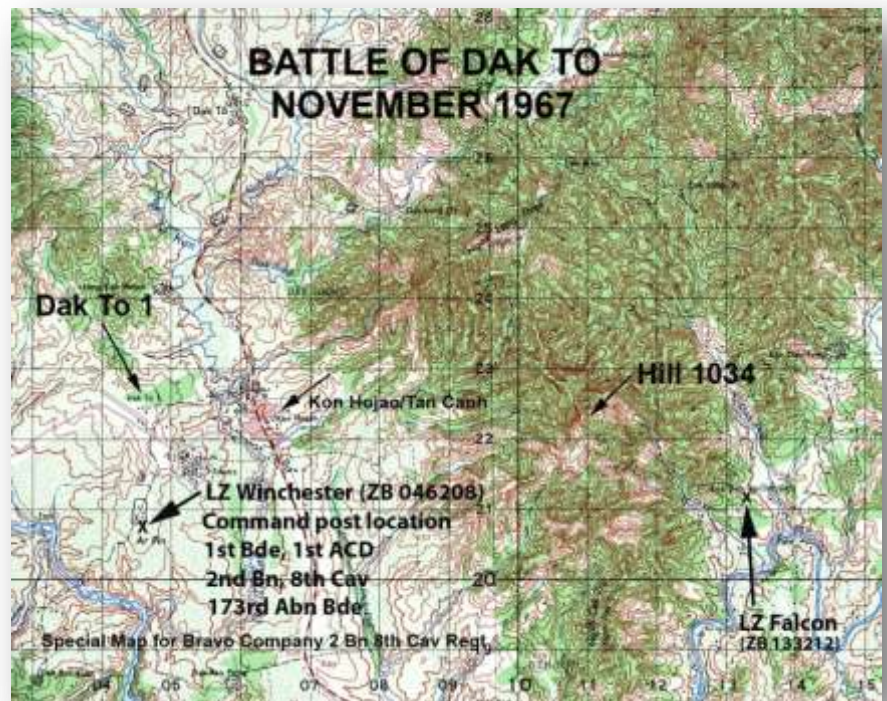
The first engagements in early November were bloody and costly to U.S. forces who had combed through the difficult terrain trying to find, fix and destroy enemy forces before they could launch their planned attack. It became evident the NVA had been preparing for the battle for some time. Expanded trails, roads, well-constructed defensive positions with overhead cover, and signs of usage of draft animals all pointed to the undeniable fact the enemy had lured the Allies forces onto the ground of their choosing. General Peers later wrote,

“The enemy had prepared the battlefield well. Nearly every key terrain feature was heavily fortified with elaborate bunker and trench complexes. He had moved quantities of supplies and ammunition into the area. He was prepared to stay.”

The first major contacts occurred on November 3rd and 4th when two 4th Division battalions met entrenched enemy in different locations. Both American units were stopped cold by a tenacious enemy entrenched in

defensive positions. Only after tons of bombs were dropped by Air Force aircraft and thousands of artillery rounds fired were the American forces able to take the positions – only to find the NVA had withdrawn. The cost was high for the soldiers of the Ivy Division while the enemy losses were considered light.

During the next ten days, U.S. and ARVN forces found the enemy and repeatedly made bloody assaults in the attempt to dig him out of his bunkers and trenches. Casualties mounted reducing companies in some Allied battalions to 50 and 60 percent. The 173rd Airborne Brigade's three battalions especially took heavy losses. On the 11th of November the 1st Battalion of the 503rd engaged in a battle that decimated two of their companies formed into a task force. Twenty-one paratroopers were killed and one hundred and fifty-four were wounded rendering the task force combat-ineffective. The enemy used a tactic of pinning down the assaulting American force from bunkers then attacking with another unit to the rear or flanks. The enemy had learned to close on, hug, the American perimeter to keep from being destroyed by artillery and aerial bombing.



The culminating battle of operation 'MACARTHUR' occurred on the 19th of November and lasted five days. The following account described the battle in detail:

(continued...)





2/503rd Location when Captain Kaufman received mission 18 Nov to attack Hill 875

~ 18 November, 1967 ~

1400 Hours

Deep within the central highland just eight kilometers from the Cambodian border Specialist Six (SP6), Fred Devereux recalled the tired company commander sat down on the jungle floor beside his radio operator. Captain Harold J. Kaufman, Charlie Company commander of the 2nd Battalion 503rd Infantry, slid a map from his leg pocket and plotted the coordinates to his new objective. He had received word over the radio from his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James Steverson, that as the senior company commander, he would be in charge of planning and leading the battalion in an assault on the nameless hill to the southeast. Colonel Steverson had told him a Special Forces mobile strike force only two kilometers away had been advancing up the hill and been taken under fire by NVA in bunkers. Steverson had told Kaufman he would not accompany the battalion but would direct the operation from the command and control (C&C) helicopter.

Kaufman noticed on the map the hill, unlike most, was marked by its height in meters. He glanced up in the direction of the new objective and made his first decision as ground force commander. He would call his objective "Hill 875". Taking out his damp notepad Kaufman began jotting down notes to brief his two fellow company commanders. Captain Tom Kiley, the Alpha Company commander and 1st Lieutenant Bart O'Leary commander of Delta Company, were fairly new to their commands. The news of enemy in bunkers would require a detailed briefing from Captain Kaufman on how he wanted to accomplish the mission.

In the past fourteen days the 173rd and 4th Division had lost over 150 men killed and another 500 wounded. Captain Kaufman's battalion, 2nd of the 503rd, had suffered 25 killed and 77 wounded in the past ten days. Bravo Company had sustained 63 of the casualties and was considered combat ineffective....

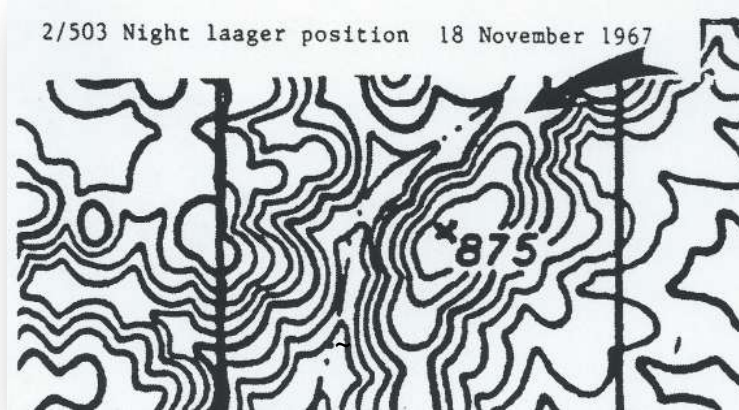
(continued....)



...Captain Kiley's Alpha Company had 20 men lost to wounds and had been reduced to 85 men left in the field. The 2nd Battalion was supposed to have four maneuver companies with a total field strength of about 600 men, but Captain Kaufman would have to plan the attack for three companies with a total strength numbering a few less than 290 paratroopers.

1430 Hours

Kaufman issued the change of orders to the other company commanders and in 30 minutes the units began moving across the mountainous terrain. Alpha Company was the lead company and after moving for two hours the point team found a small hospital complex at the base of Hill 875. Kaufman ordered the battalion into a laager for the night at the northern base of the hill to prepare for the attack the following day. Ambushes were established and the forward observer (FO) from the 319th Artillery, attached to Charlie Company began calling in fires on the hill.



19 November 1967 ~

0800 Hours

SP6 Fred Deveraux recalls he spent a sleepless night at the base of the hill to let the Artillery and Air Force bombard the objective. He said he prayed the barrage had convinced the enemy to withdraw from the hill. Deveraux was an old veteran and was senior medic from Headquarters Company. He had been with the 1st Cavalry Division in 1965 and had fought in the battle of the Ia Drang. He remembers anticipation hung in the air as real as the smell of the napalm. In silence the men of the 2nd Battalion slipped on their rucksacks and double-checked their weapons. Each rifleman carried 18 to 20 magazines of M-16 ammunition with most carrying extra boxes of 5.56 ammo in their rucksacks. They felt they were ready to take the hill.

0940 Hours

Captain Kaufman stood at the base of (the) hill waiting for the last bomb run. He had delayed the attack until the forward air controller (FAC) brought in a last pair of

F-100's to drop 500-pounders to finish softening the forward (area and to allow the) field grade officer with the Battalion to catch up and wait alongside him.

SP4 Brock recalls Major Charlie Watters, the 2nd Battalion Chaplain, passed by him with his ever-present smile.

“Tom, I think I’m getting too old for this.”

Brock responded with,

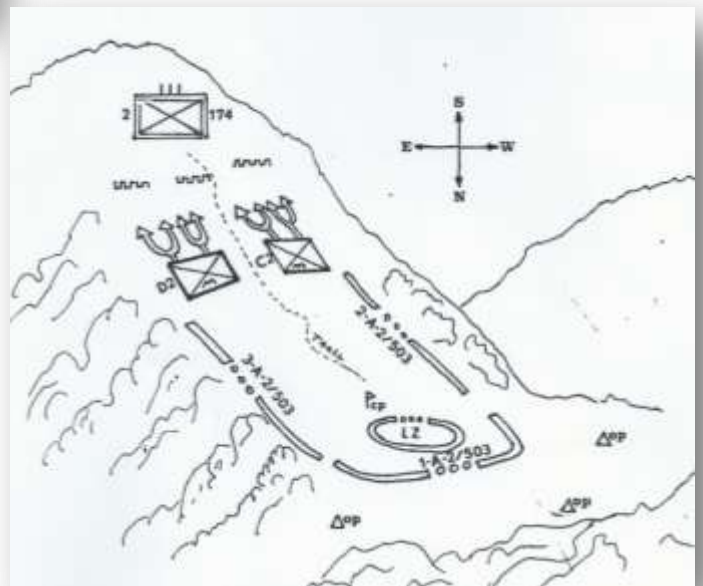
“Father, that makes two of us.”

Tom Brock. Like most of the men in the 2nd Battalion considered Charlie Watters a good friend. The Chaplain was unlike most Brock had met, in that Father Watters stayed in the field with his beloved soldiers. He was famous for his camouflage parachute vestment and weekly announcement of,

“Church Call, and no excuses!”

1030 Hours

First Lieutenant O’Leary, commander of Delta Company, moved up closer toward his point team and could see to his front the effects of the artillery and bombing. The top of the thick jungle canopy had huge holes blown through it that let sunlight reach the forest floor. Below the tree tops the forest floor was covered in shattered and gnarled debris of bamboo, vines, and smaller splintered trees. Making his way over the debris 1Lt. O’Leary saw his point man, SP4 Kenneth Jacobson, climb over a fallen tree and turn around to his slack man motioning to his nose. O’Leary stiffened knowing Jacobson was signaling he smelled the enemy.



2/503 Attack on Hill 875, 19 November 1967

(continued....)



The point man slowly lowered his hand and began to turn around when shots rang out. Jacobson pitched backwards, hit by three rounds in the chest. The air immediately filled with screams and bursts of return fire from the stunned point squad. Not knowing where the killer was hidden, the vengeful paratroopers emptied M-16's wildly into the trees and debris. The platoon medic ran forward toward the fallen soldier. The aidman, SP4 Farley, had just knelt by his comrade when he was knocked violently backwards. Shot in the head by automatic weapons fire, Farley died instantly. Delta Company had found the enemy.

Captain Kaufman received the report holding the radio handset tightly to his ear barely able to hear over the roaring sound of gunfire. Lieutenant O'Leary was reporting over the radio the first casualties when more shooting broke out in front of Charlie Company. The 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, on the left side of (the) trail, was under enemy fire as well. Their point man was shot and a medic was killed trying to reach him.



Carrying a buddy off the battlefield at Dak To.
(Web photo)

Kaufman could only acknowledge the situation reports and motion for the other handset that would give him contact with battalion headquarters. Meanwhile junior officers and NCO's shouted orders to scared, confused men to move forward and fix the enemy positions. The shock of the first deaths wore off quickly as the junior leaders got down to the deadly business of closing with the enemy. They spread their men out and began moving forward using fire and movement. The ragged line of Infantrymen advanced over debris

approximately 10 meters when they were raked with machinegun fire and grenade shrapnel. Taking casualties and unable to move forward the assault leaders reported their situation to the commander. Realizing the attack had failed but not wanting to give up the ground already taken, Kaufman ordered a withdrawal of only twenty meters and the establishment of a perimeter. He reported to battalion headquarters that the attack was stalled by an estimated entrenched enemy company. He then requested additional artillery and air support to try and blast the defenders out of their positions before attempting another assault.

SP4 Tom Brock recalls Chaplain Watters knelt beside Captain Kiley as he listened to the radio. Kiley shook his head and spoke softly to the Chaplain.

“We got KIA's and wounded.”

Watters rose without speaking and began walking up the hill toward the sound of gunfire. Brock knew better than try and stop the Chaplain. Father Watters would want to be with the wounded as he had always done before to try to help in any way he could.

Captain Kiley yelled for his weapon's platoon leaders to get busy cutting a landing zone (LZ) for extraction for the wounded. Kaufman would not have to call and tell him about the LZ or rear security; these things were standard operation procedure (SOP). The unit and junior leaders were experienced and knew what had to be done. Events would unfold slowly like they always did. It would take time to determine the strength of the enemy and his dispositions. Artillery and air would be brought in and another attack would be mounted once the hill was softened up. Kiley glanced at his watch; it was a little after eleven.

1300 Hours

The F-100 pulled up and banked right as the hill shook with the explosion of two 500 pounders hitting its forward slope. Captain Kaufman stood and waved his men forward. Both companies advanced only fifteen meters over the plowed ground when again the NVA machineguns began their deadly chatter....

(continued....)



...Lieutenant Donald Smith, 3rd Platoon Leader of Charlie Company spotted a machinegun position and led a squad forward to take it out. Moving along a depression an unseen mutual supporting machinegunner caught the lieutenant and attacking squad in flanking enfilade fire. Bullets cut down Lt. Smith and two of his men.

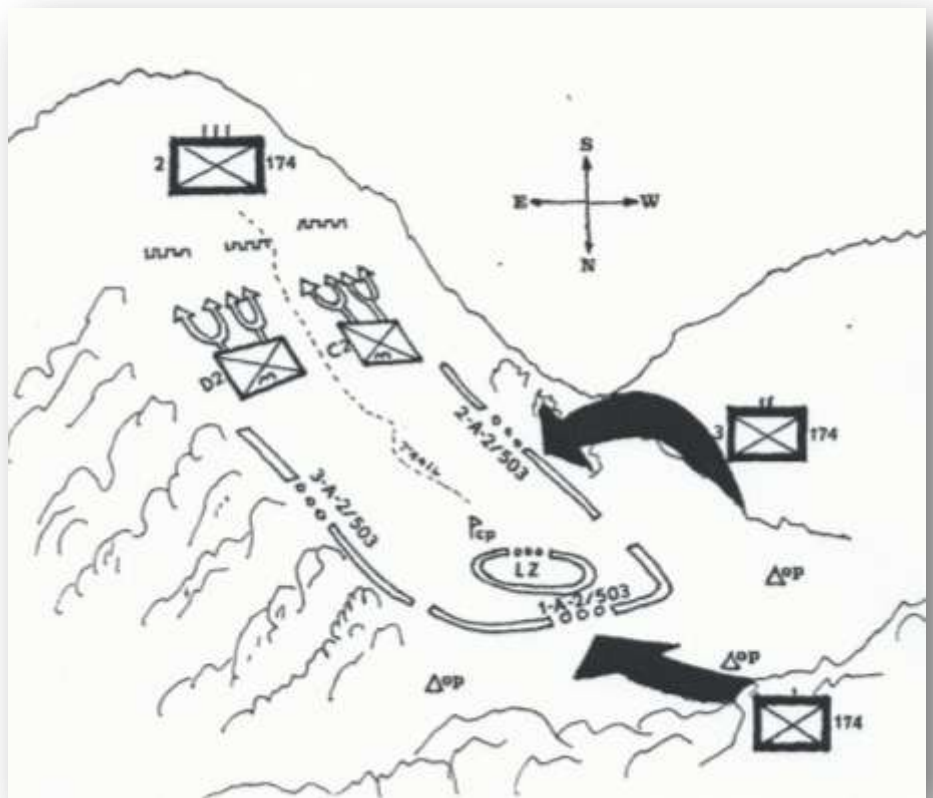
First Sergeant Deebbs of Delta Company spotted a firing port only ten meters from where he lay and he tossed in two grenades. After the explosions Deebbs moved the 2nd Platoon forward in the attack. No sooner had the platoon passed the bunker than the dead inside were replaced with more NVA who began throwing grenades out the portal toward the surprised and exposed 2nd Platoon members. First Sergeant Deebbs and the 2nd Platoon fell back taking their wounded. They now knew the bunkers had interconnecting tunnels. The battle for the hill was going to require digging the enemy out.

Captain Kaufman was receiving reports from his platoon leaders and Delta Company commander that their lead elements were pinned down and unable to advance. Casualties were mounting from small arms fire and shrapnel from grenades being thrown from the trenches. Two short artillery rounds had exploded in the midst of Delta Company and wounded Platoon Sergeant James Beam and three others. Kaufman knew the attack had lost momentum and ordered his units to fall back to the perimeter on the ridge.

1400 Hours

Captain Kiley of Alpha Company inspected the construction progress of the landing zone and checked the wounded assembled at the evacuation point. Their faces told him in one glance of their agony. Kiley approached his command post not liking the disposition of his company. The second platoon had followed Charlie Company on the east side of the trail and the third platoon had followed Delta on the west side. Both platoons were strung out at least one-hundred meters down the ridge to where they were tied in with first platoon that had established rear security. The platoons were spread so thin in the thick vegetation they couldn't support or even see each other. Kiley was about to walk up the hill and find Captain Kaufman when the ground erupted in ear-shattering explosions. NVA 82 millimeter mortar rounds were impacting around him and gunfire suddenly broke out to his rear where the 1st platoon had positioned an outpost.

The small Alpha Company observation post (OP), placed on the trail twenty five meters in front of the first platoon had heard twigs snapping and movement. The machinegunner, SP4 Carlos Lozada, from South Bronx, got down behind his M-60. Just as the lead element of an attacking NVA company walked into his field of fire. Waiting until the enemy closed to within 20 feet, Lozada opened up with a long burst. He caught the attackers by surprise and gunned down an estimated fifteen to twenty NVA. Holding the enemy at bay for several minutes, Lozada began running low on ammunitions. SP4 Steers ordered the OP to withdraw in bounds. Lozada covered his friends as they ran back ten yards to another position. He got up to make his dash but was shot as soon as he stood. Carlos Lozada died never knowing he and the outpost had given his platoon precious time to form a perimeter.



The attack by 2/503, 1400H, 19 November 1967

Captain Kiley pushed the sidebar to the radio handset to contact the 1st Platoon leader for a situation report when the ground around him erupted again. Mortar rounds impacted in shattering explosions sending deadly shrapnel whizzing over his head. The men who had been working on the LZ dived for cover – leaving three troopers writhing in agony from wounds.

(continued...)



Below the partially completed LZ the survivors of the OP linked up with their comrades in the 1st Platoon and began firing at the attacking NVA that had burst out of the trees. Hearing the heavy fighting, Kiley ordered the 2nd and 3rd Platoons to reinforce the embattled 1st Platoon.



At the ready, Dak To. (web photo)

Lt. Remington, 2nd Platoon Leader, immediately led his men down the western side of the ridge but was suddenly hit by small arms fire from the west. Shot in both arms and legs the lieutenant pitched over. NVA began pouring over the western ridge in a coordinated flank attack using a well-constructed trail including steps carved into the side of the ridge. Sergeant Aaron Hervas spun around firing and hit several screaming attackers before he was killed. SP4 Frank Stokes and PVT Ernesto Villereal were killed seconds later. SP4 Benzine, a team leader, laid down a base of fire to protect his pinned own team and killed 5 to 10 attackers before being felled by a bullet. Several more men of the 2nd Platoon were shot and bayoneted as the enemy charged over their hasty fighting positions. The NVA company continued their assault to the trail and swept down the ridge toward Alpha Company's command post. SP4 Brock remembers the bamboo around him being mowed down like a huge lawnmower from the NVA machine-guns. His platoon had been caught in total surprise from the flank attack.

The survivors of the Second Platoon recovered as many of the wounded that they could carry, and made their way to the ridge toward Charlie and Delta Companies' perimeter to keep from being annihilated.

A mortar round had hit in the tree tops above the Alpha Company command post and had wounded Captain Kiley and 31 others. The senior medic, SP5 Taylor, was attending to Captain Kiley's back wound when the charging NVA broke into view from up the ridge. Kiley and the rest of the wounded fired their M-16's at the attackers bringing down ten to twelve but were overrun by the screaming North Vietnamese. Captain Kiley, SP5 Taylor, SP4 Young, the RTO, and two others were killed defending their position.

Third Platoon of Alpha Company located on the eastern side of the ridge took some casualties during the surprise assault but had managed to form a quick perimeter and turn back the attack before being overrun. Without radio communications to Captain Kiley and cut off to the rear, the Platoon Leader orders his men to withdraw to Charlie and Delta Companies' perimeter.

An unexplainable lull ensued after the flank attack during which time the remaining survivors of Alpha Company crawled up the ridge carrying many of their wounded and joined the perimeter.

1435 Hours

Captain Kaufman reported by radio to battalion headquarters that his three companies were surrounded and engaged by a large North Vietnamese force.

Second Battalion was hit by several more infantry assaults and received heavy mortar, automatic weapons, and B-40 rocket fire. The perimeter was established where the ridge slope was gradual, pitching off on both sides. Charlie Company had from 12 O'clock to 5 O'clock and Delta had from 2 to 12 with Alpha intermingled from 4 to 10. The men were running low on ammunition and most were out of water. Realizing they could not hold much longer, Charlie Company's First Sergeant ordered a resupply for the battalion. The 335th Assault Helicopter Company, known affectionately as the 'Cowboys' attempted repeatedly to drop a resupply pallet, but intense ground fire kept the birds away. Six helicopters were lost to ground fire and several more damaged. One of the choppers had dropped its load outside the perimeter before going down and Kaufman ordered a retrieval party to try to recover the desperately needed ammunition....

(continued...)



...Lieutenant Lantz was shot dead crawling only a few feet outside the perimeter while leading a recovery team. The team was immediately ordered back.

1735 Hours

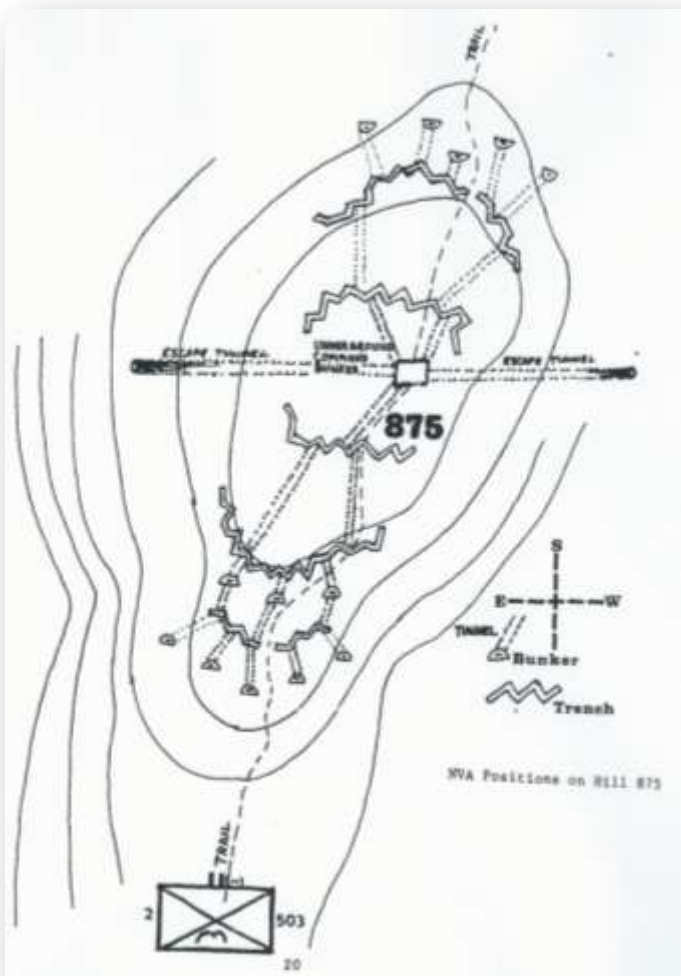
The 335th continued trying to supply the battalion and a helicopter was able to drop two pallets of ammunition into the perimeter from 80 feet. The resupply of bullets and grenades gave renewed hope to the beleaguered battalion. The officers and senior NCO's moved from position to position to raise the men's spirits and pass out ammo as the 319th Artillery continued to keep a protective ring of steel around the perimeter. Skyraiders and F-100's made continuous passes dropping their ordnance on the hilltop to keep the enemies' heads down while the battalion recovered. Captain Kaufman moved his command post to a huge lone tree in the perimeter where the wounded were assembled. Father Watters was with the wounded men trying to ease their suffering as best he could. He reported to Captain Kaufman the medics had run out of medical supplies and the men were in desperate need of water. Kaufman could hear the moaning of his injured men as he brought the radio handset up to call in the emergency request for water and medical supplies.

The NVA 174th Regiment had prepared their ground and plan exceptionally well. The 2nd Battalion, and headquarters of the 174th Regiment occupied the 875 complex consisting of three lines of mutually-supporting bunkers all dug into the side of the hill and inter-connecting with deep bombproof tunnels. A series of trench lines ran around the crest of (the) hill from which grenades could be thrown and rocket propelled grenades (RPG's) fired. Outside the complex the 3rd Battalion had been given the responsibility for the attack of the flank and rear of the American unit. Mortar crews were positioned on the ridges behind the hill and were to provide indirect fire support. The 3rd Battalion's mission, once their rear and flank attacks had been completed, was to establish a ring around the trapped Americans to stop resupply and reinforcement by helicopter. Machinegun positions were dug into air defense positions and RPG rockets were stockpiled.

1835 Hours

The FAC pilot flying a 0-1 Birddog was almost out of fuel and began flying back to base before his replacement came on duty. By radio the FAC pilot told his relief, who was ten miles away, of a small fire on the side of the hill he was using as the reference point for the fast movers to drop their ordnance. Unknown to the departing pilot the fire had gone out and another had started further down the hill.

Captain Kaufman had his leaders assembled at the lone tree as it began turning dark for a meeting and had just received a status report. The 2nd Battalion had suffered 40 dead, 42 wounded and had 42 missing that were presumed dead. Kaufman was staggered by the losses. He told his leaders to tighten the perimeter and prepare for a night assault on their position. While Kaufman conducted his meeting the Delta Company radio operator, SP4 Robert Fleming, noticed a Sky Raider approaching from the south....



Sky Raider being loaded with napalm, 1967

(continued...)



...Previous bomb runs had been coming in from the southeast to the northwest but none had flown directly over the perimeter. Fleming asked First Sergeant Deebes what the aircraft was doing. Deebes yelled at PFC Ellerbrook to call battalion headquarters and find out who was directing the pilot. The prop-driven aircraft flew directly overhead and banked right. Fleming watched the plane in fascination and remembered seeing flames coming out its exhaust port. The plane turned and made another low level approach from south to north. Fleming saw the two bombs being released and knew immediately they were going to be hit.



SGM Mike Deebes
Survivor of Hill 875

The first 500 pound bomb hit outside the perimeter but the second hit the branches of the lone tree exploding in a ear-splitting airburst. Fleming did not know how long he was unconscious but when he sat up small fires were raging all around him revealing the destruction. Bodies and parts of bodies lay in every conceivable position of death scattered beneath the still standing tree. Captain Kaufman, his officers, the wounded, medics, and Chaplain Watters had all been killed. His ear drums ruptured, Fleming couldn't hear but remembers screaming for someone to put out the fire. He was afraid the enemy would see the scattered dead and attack. He recalled believing an NVA platoon could easily have wiped them out following the bomb burst.

(Insert)

"I felt a flame wrap around me. At the same time an extreme noise hit me. Everything went black. For a while I was unconscious, I don't know how long. My first memory is of gasping for air, sucking in hot ash and debris... things were still falling from the blast. My legs had been naked before the blast because of my earlier wound. The hot burning



ash falling was burning my legs and I was still so stunned at this point I could not move. I had no idea what had happened to cause all this pain, where I was or probably what planet I was on. I was bleeding from every part of my body. I had so much blood in my eyes, and didn't have much function in my limbs. I sat there and took the pain."

**Bob Fleming
A/D/2/503d**

SP4 Brock of the 2nd Platoon was on the perimeter when the bomb exploded and remembers the brilliant flash of light then the horrific sound. The men in the lower half of the perimeter, down the ridge, had caught the brunt of the shrapnel. A soldier kneeling by Brock's foxhole had his feet sliced off at the ankles. He was hit by a shard like a huge razor blade. Brock remembers vividly feeling the soldier's legs thinking he was all right until he had felt warm blood gush into his hands. The soldier's boots were still laced to the point of amputation.

The explosion killed 42 men and wounded another 45. Of the 290 men in the battalion over one hundred were dead and over fifty were wounded. Panic and despair spread like wild fire. Stunned, men walked in circles while others cried uncontrollably knowing they would die. In the darkness the living climbed over the dead to find other survivors in the desperate need to know they were not alone. Men hugged each other and clustered in groups for reassurance they could continue to survive in the nightmare that had befallen them

Eight of the sixteen officers of the 2nd Battalion were dead and the other eight were wounded. Of the thirteen medics that started up the hill, eleven had died; the others were wounded. Most of Senior NCO's were dead or wounded, leaving the junior officers and noncoms to regain control. Young sergeants and specialists rose amid the destruction to become leaders. Within thirty minutes of the blast the perimeter was reestablished by men who had been hit hard but were not giving up.

(continued...)



Lieutenant Joseph Sheridan, Platoon Sergeant Krawtzow and Lieutenant MacDonough took command of A, C and D Companies respectively and began reestablishing the perimeter. Lt. O'Leary, Delta Company commander, was wounded badly but assumed command of the force. He had all the remaining radios brought to the new command post and reestablished communications with battalion headquarters and with the all-important artillery. The survivors of the 2nd Battalion clung to life praying a relief force would arrive soon. They spent the longest night of their lives three-quarters of the way up Hill 875.

The 4th Battalion 503rd Infantry, commanded by Colonel James Johnson, had been conducting search-and-destroy operations west of Ben Het. The colonel received word late that evening about the 2nd Battalion's predicament. Colonel Johnson was ordered by the brigade commander to move his battalion to landing zones first thing in the morning for pick-up and airlift to Firebase (FB) 16. Firebase 16 was only three kilometers northwest of Hill 875. Colonel Johnson gave Alpha and Bravo Companies orders to relieve the 2nd Battalion, construct a landing zone and prepare to assault the hill too. Charlie Company was to link up and be the reserve company and Delta Company was to secure FB 16. Although the 4th Battalion was already committed, the 173rd had no reserve force available.

~ 20 November 1967 ~

0600 Hours

The situation was critical for the 2nd Battalion. The unit was low on ammunition, out of medical supplies and in desperate need of water. The wounded were in horrible condition – three had died during the night. The temperature dropped into the fifties during the early morning and most only had their poncho liners and ponchos to keep them warm. Many of the injured were using towels, bandoliers and T-shirts for bandages. Some had even used safety pins from bandoliers to pin wounds closed. The sun rose, bringing its warmth out also revealing the destruction. The dead lay everywhere within the perimeter. SP4 Brock remembers looking at the wounded and thinking they were all dead. Their eyes were glazed and none spoke or moved. Only when mortar rounds impacted did they flinch and distinguish themselves from the dead. SP4 Fleming was wounded twice again during the night and recalls that he didn't think he was going to live. His wounds were horribly painful but like other survivors he remembers the need for the water as the worst experience. His tongue had swollen twice its size and he could hardly breathe.

(Insert)

"We were the first on the killing field the next day. The bamboo was shredded with bullet holes. In front of one dead trooper slumped over his M-60, there were gallons of blood leading up to his gun. He must have killed a lot of them before they got him."



**Steve Vargo
C/2/503d**

0630 Hours

Fourth Battalion had problems moving to landing zones through the thick vegetation. Bravo Company arrived first at an LZ but experienced more problems. The 173rd's 335th Aviation Battalion had lost or suffered damage to most of their aircraft trying to support the 2nd Battalion. Only two Hueys were available for the airlift to FB 16.

0900 Hours

The last of Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, arrived at the firebase and hurried to resupply themselves. The previous days of humping had depleted their ammunition, food and water supply. Captain Ron Leonard, commander of Bravo Company was ordered by Colonel Johnson not to wait for the rest of the battalion but to begin moving toward Hill 878 as soon as his unit was resupplied. The rest of the battalion would take at least four hours before arriving and time was critical.

The 4th Battalion had seen much action and was drastically reduced in strength. They had sustained 21 killed and 94 wounded in the past two weeks. The total number of men in the relief force would number less than 280 men.

0947 Hours

Bravo Company left the firebase and began moving cautiously toward their objective. The situation was extremely dangerous....

(continued....)



...The NVA were notorious for ambushing relief units and it was known a very large enemy force was in the area. A single American rifle company would be an easy target for an enemy battalion lying in wait. Captain Leonard could only place his best platoon and point man in the lead of his unit and pray they would spot the enemy first.

1400 Hours

The 2nd Battalion survivors were understandably upset and frustrated to learn the relief force was still hours away from making it in to their perimeter. SP6 Fred Devereaux, Headquarters medic, was doing everything he could to keep the wounded alive. Every minute of delay lessened their chances of surviving – two more paratroopers had died of their wounds since that afternoon. Devereaux had thought the 4th Battalion would have arrived early that morning and had been shocked to hear about the delays. The men of the 2nd Battalion were exhausted physically and mentally, dangerously short of ammunition and had no water. Disregarding his own wounds, Devereaux crawled about the perimeter taking used bandages off the dead to place on those patients who could still use them.

Tired of waiting for the 4th Battalion, 1st Lieutenant O’Leary ordered patrols to knock out the snipers that were harassing the perimeter from surrounding trees. The snipers had to be eliminated before another LZ could be started to remove the wounded. Delta Company sent out a clearing patrol but made it out of the perimeter only ten meters when an enemy automatic weapon opened up. One man was killed and three were wounded in less than five seconds. The patrols were aborted.

1730 Hours

The point team of Bravo Company 4th Battalion, finally reached the base of Hill 875 after a harrowing march. During the movement they had passed through several abandoned enemy base camps and found over 40 dead NVA scattered along the trail. The bodies had been left in small groups for later pick up by their comrades.

The point team reached the crest of the hill and found the first dead Americans of Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion. The dead lay as they had fallen. It was evident the men of 1st Platoon of Alpha Company had fought to the death and made the enemy pay heavily.

Bravo Company made it into the beleaguered 2nd Battalion’s perimeter and immediately passed out what little water they had left after the hard march. Captain Leonard ordered his men to construct an LZ but NVA mortars began raining down, stopping all work. A single helicopter suddenly popped over the trees and hovered over the perimeter.



The fight for Dak To was so furious that entire stands of 200-foot-high trees were ripped away. Above, a U.S. patrol moves out after being ferried into battle by a helicopter. (Life magazine)

Major William Kelly, the 2nd Battalion’s Executive Officer, Captain Grosso, the Battalion surgeon, and three company executive officers jumped from the Huey still hovering 15 feet above ground. Not taking fire the bird risked a landing and took onboard five of the critically wounded. The helicopter lifted off and immediately was taken under fire by NVA automatic weapons. Banking hard, the bird barely escaped destruction and made it to safety. Another helicopter tried to come in following the lead of the first chopper but, stitched by bullets, had to turn back.

(continued...)



Major Kelly assumed command of the perimeter and was visibly shaken by the sight of the death and destruction. It was evident to him the battalion was finished as a fighting force and incapable of helping the 4th Battalion take the Hill. As darkness fell the wounded were comforted by the newly-arrived surgeon and medics.

1830 Hours

Just as sun began to set a barrage of mortar rounds landed on members of the 4th Battalion as they again tried to cut an LZ. The devastating shrapnel killed several men and lightly wounded Captain Leonard and his First Sergeant. The 4th Battalion had its first blood drawn on Hill 875.

2100 Hours

Despite the darkness Alpha Company of the 4th Battalion closed into the perimeter at 2100 hours and Charlie Company made it in at 2220 hours. Like the 2nd Battalion's colonel the 4th's battalion commander had elected not to go with his unit and stayed in the command and control helicopter to direct the relief. Again, the senior company commander on the ground had been made the ground force commander. The 4th expanded the perimeter and gave the survivors of the 2nd their first real chance for rest. The wounded – many of whom had been waiting for evacuation for over 36 hours – would have to shiver through another night and hope of the fresh paratroopers would be able to get them out the following day.

~ 21 November 1967 ~

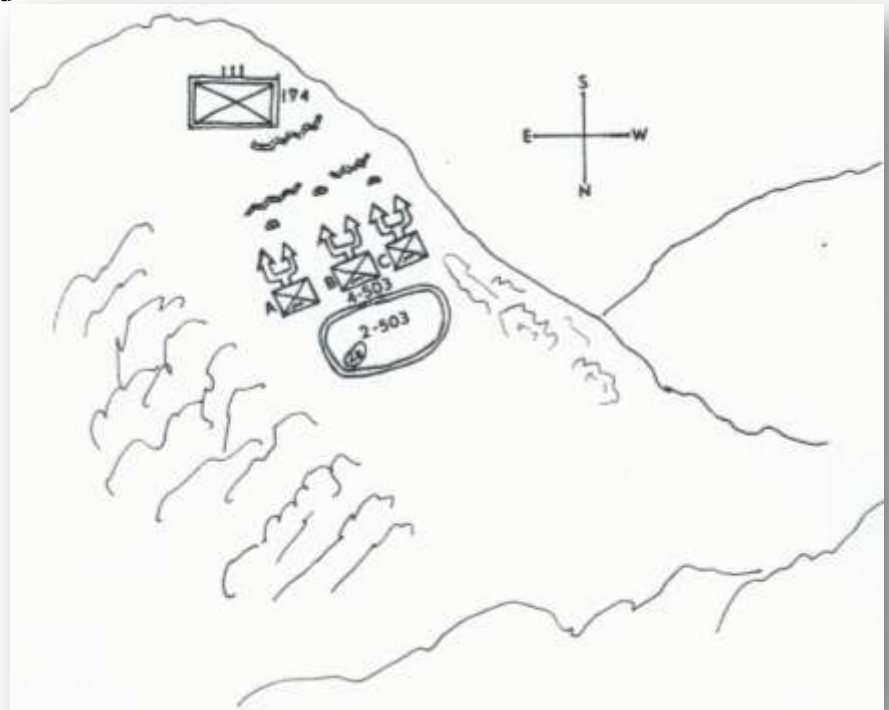
0700 Hours

Morning revealed that two more of the wounded had died during the night despite the surgeon's efforts. Mortar rounds hit within the perimeter where members of the 4th Battalion were trying to clear a LZ – eight troopers were wounded. Artillery was adjusted on the suspected mortar positions and by noon the first of a few choppers were able to land and pick up wounded. The choppers also brought in more ammo and more water.

1430 Hours

The 4th Battalion planned to attack the hill at 1100 but delayed until 1430 to let jets drop more ordnance. The last bomb explosions were echoing through the mountains when the 4th Battalion rose from their fighting positions to launch their assault. Bravo Company took the center with Charlie Company on the right and Alpha on the left. As Captain Leonard led Bravo Company out

of the perimeter the 1st Platoon's radio operator was killed. The 4th Battalion moved forward using fire and movement, shooting their weapons at suspected enemy positions. The entrenched NVA held their fire until the Americans had cleared the perimeter, then opened up with murderous effect raking the exposed, attacking paratroopers. Simultaneously mortar rounds rained down on Alpha Company as they assaulted – wounding fifteen men in the 1st Platoon in the first several minutes of the attack. Second Platoon of Alpha was partially protected by debris as they advanced and fought their way to the first trench line on the hill, a military crest.



4/503d Attack of Hill 875, 21 November 1967

FSG Johnson Decanto and his machinegunner, SP4 John Deathrage of the 3rd Platoon knocked out a bunker in their sector – killing five of the enemy. The rest of the 1st and 3rd Platoons were pinned down and could not move. Alpha Company was taking casualties one by one without advancing. Realizing the company had lost their momentum, Sergeant First Class Fraizer, the acting First Sergeant, crawled in next to the bunker that was shooting diagonally across the company. Covered by PFC Dennis Adams, an attached engineer who had picked up a machinegun from a wounded trooper – Fraizer crept close enough to be burned by the ejected shells but was unable to get a grenade into the small firing portal. Meantime SFC Thornton and a group of volunteers from the weapons platoon maneuvered under fire to evacuate the wounded.

(continued....)



Charlie Company on the right flank had made it to the first bunker system but then got pinned down. Lieutenant Tracy Murray assaulted the main bunker twice and was killed on the third attempt, only five meters in front of the enemy machinegunner. The battle raged all afternoon without success. With darkness closing in and unable to advance, the battalion was ordered to withdraw into the perimeter to try again the following day. The cost of the attack had been high. Alpha Company had seven men killed and 58 wounded. Bravo Company had 11 killed and 34 wounded, and Charlie had 1 killed and 11 wounded. The total – including 2nd Battalion losses due to mortar fire – was 21

killed and 119 wounded. Fourth Battalion had lost one third of its force. During the night a few helicopters came in and extracted more of the 2nd Battalion's wounded and the worst cases from the 4th Battalion. The NVA kept their mortars and rockets coming in all during the night. Captain John Connaly, commander of Charlie Company, 4th Battalion remembers vividly the attitude of his men. The hill had become more than just an objective. To the soldiers who had seen so many men die and become wounded, taking the hill had become an obsession. Although the 4th battalion had been hurt, the pervasive thought among the paratroopers was that they would take the hill the following day.



DAK TO, SOUTH VIETNAM, 11/22/67: Members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade are engaged in a long, long crawl to the crest of Hill 875, a steep mound that in four days has cost American forces some of their highest casualties of the war. Pushing inch-by-inch of sloping earth behind them, U.S. paratroopers seized most of the hill Nov. 22. They are now faced with a North Vietnamese stronghold atop the peak and reports of two fresh regiments of NVA troops moving into the region. (Web photo)

~ 22 November 1967 ~

The 4th Battalion continued to reorganize and rearm for the attack. Later in the morning the brigade commander decided to postpone the assault for one more day to allow artillery and bombs to level the objective....

(continued....)



....The hill had bled the brigade dry and there were no replacements available. The commander realized further frontal assaults would only increase the losses and reduce the value of their ultimate victory. While the 4th Battalion settled back into their foxholes the 2nd Battalion survivors went about the gruesome duty of identifying and extracting their dead.

Captain Ron Leonard of Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, positioned himself at the edge of the perimeter close to the hilltop. There he adjusted all the artillery and bomb runs. Meanwhile, a task force from the 4th Division, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, airmobiled into a landing zone in the valley east of the hill in preparation for coordinated attack with the 4th Battalion.



Sky Soldiers of the 4/503d, 23 November 1967 (Web photo)

For the five day battle the total losses of the 2nd and 4th Battalions plus attachments was 130 killed and 314 wounded. Of the 570 men who struggled to take the hill, less than 130 came away unscathed. The actual enemy body count after the hill was taken was only 22 dead NVA. Later, more bodies were reported found but most had been taken by the defenders. Captured enemy documents found in December revealed the 174th Regiment defenders lost more than half of their numbers.

Hill 875 was abandoned on 1 December 1967 by elements of the 4th Infantry Division concluding the operation known as 'MACARTHUR'.

On 23 November the New York Times reported that in a briefing at the Pentagon, General Westmoreland said the battle around Dak To was "*the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy.*" General Westmoreland then asserted that the enemy had not succeeded in destroying an American battalion and that "*at no time have U.S. or ARVN troops been considered trapped, cut off or surrounded in the area of Dak To.*"

The battle for Hill 875 was considered a victory by American units participating. It was a victory in that the hill was taken by extremely brave men under the worst of conditions. Fate, bad luck, and a host of other problems were surmounted by the American soldier who fought gallantly and accomplished the mission: *they took the hill.*

LESSON LEARNED

General: The conduct of the battle for Hill 875 raises serious questions about the leadership and tactics employed. For the purposes of this paper only the area of leadership will be discussed.

(continued...)



“22 Nov 1967, Dak To, South Vietnam --- In Battle. Dak To, South Vietnam: A member of the 173rd Airborne Brigade crouches beside the body of a dead comrade and equipment left by wounded at the height of the battle on Hill 875. U.S. Army paratroopers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade began a final assault up the bloody slopes of Hill 875.” (Web photo)

~ 23 November 1967, Thanksgiving Day ~

Unknown to the American forces the NVA of the 174th Regiment withdrew through escape tunnels during the night taking most of their dead. The NVA left only their mortars in position on a ridge behind the hill. At 1100 the 4th Battalion rose up from their foxholes to make the final assault. Bravo Company was on the left, Charlie Company on the right, and Alpha in the rear as reserve. At the same time the 1st of the 12th attacked from the southeast.

Captain Leonard of Bravo Company led his men up to the ridge as supporting mortars walked their fires up the hill in advance of the assault. SFC William Cates, 3rd Platoon Sergeant, was carrying a satchel charge and was hit by an enemy mortar round. The satchel charge detonated killing Cates and two men beside him. The attack continued and by 1122 the hilltop was secured. The 1st of the 12th arrived a few minutes later and joined the paratroopers in consolidating the desolate position. Later the 4th and the 2nd Battalions of the 503rd were airlifted back to Dak To for a much-needed standdown.





“Exhausted soldiers of the 173rd Airborne after campaigning in the Central Highlands” (Web photo)

Problem: During the fight for Hill 875 the battalion commanders of the 2nd and 4th Battalions did not accompany, join, or lead their units during the struggle. Neither current doctrine, nor doctrine at the time (1967), specifically states where a commander should be on the battlefield.

Discussion: During the battle for Hill 875 the 2nd and 4th Battalion commanders did not lead their men by their physical presence. The phenomenon of battalion commanders not leading their units on the ground had been going on since 1966 and continued through the duration of the war. The normal command and control arrangements were the battalion commander and operations officer would use command and control helicopter as their forward command post. The battalion executive officer would be responsible for the primary tactical operations center located in the rear. The Army bible or leadership was, and still is, Field Manual 22-100, Military Leadership. This manual defines Military leadership as **“The art of or influencing and directing men in such a way as to obtain their willing obedience, confidence, respect, and loyal cooperation to accomplish the mission.”** FM 22-100, 1968 and 1983 versions are replete with examples of what a leader is supposed to embody – all of which implies the commander personally leads his men. The leadership manual defines Management as *“The process whereby the resources of men, money, material, time, and facilities are utilized to accomplish the missions and tasks of the organization.”*

Analysis: The 2nd and 4th Battalion commander felt their senior company commanders were capable of leading their battalions without their physical presence. The commanders believed they could contribute more in

‘managing’ the battle rather than leading soldiers on the ground. There are no published accounts of any senior leader ever questioning this practice. The Battle for Dak To after action report makes no mention of this command arrangement in a negative way. It is clear commanders honestly believed they could ‘see’ and ‘influence’ the battle from their circling helicopters flying above their units at three to five thousand feet.

The manuals and instruction teaching the time-proven principles of leadership were ignored and a different type of commander emerged in the Vietnam war – a manager but not a leader in the traditional sense. The true ‘leaders’ of the battle for Hill 875 were the senior company commanders. The battalion commanders were reduced to managers. The principles of military leadership were ignored thereby causing a distinction between the words, Commander and Leader.

Conclusion: The absence of Battalion command leadership on the ground grew out of earlier experience of commanders in Vietnam. This practice was at odds with but not prohibited by existing doctrine.

Lesson Learned: Commanding does not necessarily mean leading. Future leaders must be cautious of adapting ‘new’ methods of command and control that violate the principles of leadership.

Recommendations:

1. FM 22-100 should distinguish a ‘Leader’ from ‘Manager’.
2. FM 22-100 should cite examples of commanders who ‘managed’ their units during combat operations by flying in command and control aircraft as not being true ‘leaders’.
3. FM 22-100 should have a section added on ‘combat leadership’ and cite example/guidelines of how a commander takes command under combat conditions. The section should include specific guidelines as to the location of the commander on the battlefield. Example: A leader should locate himself on the battlefield where he can best influence the action of his subordinates. Some general rules are:
 - When a leader’s unit is split or separated he will usually place himself with the majority of the unit.

Note: This verbatim Army War College report presented here was sent in by Roger Wittenbrook, C/2/503d, Dak To survivor, and received with our gratitude. Photos have been added. Ed

(continued...)



Dak To – Hill 724 – Nov. 1967

Helicopter UH-1H 66-16539

170th AHC “The Bikini’s”

Information on U.S. helicopter UH 1H tail number 66-16539

Total flight hours at this point: 00000376

Date: 11/13/67

Incident number: 67111455 KIA

Unit: 170 AHC

This was a Combat incident. This helicopter was LOSS TO INVENTORY. This was a Logistics Support mission for Resupply to Forward Area. While on Landing Zone this helicopter was on the Ground at 0000 feet and 000 knots.

South Vietnam.

Helicopter took 1 hit from:

Explosive Weapons Non-Artillery launched or static weapons containing explosive charges. (81MM RR)

The helicopter was hit in the Main Rotor Blade System.

Systems damaged were: MAIN ROTOR SYS, PERSONNEL.

Casualties = YES.

Aircraft Destroyed.

Both mission and flight capability were terminated.

Burned.

Original source(s) and document(s)

from which the incident was created or updates:

Defense Intelligence Agency Helicopter Loss database.

Survivability/Vulnerability Information Analysis Center

Helicopter database. Also: OPERA, UH1P2, 74074

(Operations Report).

Loss to Inventory.

Crew Members:

P WO1 ROLAND LARUS WAYNE, KIA

AC HARRIS AL, INJ

CE HARRILLA JOE

G PARADISE GEORGE

Passengers:

LTC BENLAP, AR, PX

War Story:

Thirty one years ago today the crew of 539 was as follows Al Harris (AC) nickname Roger Ram Jet, currently lives (I believe) in Texas near San Antonio. Larus W. Roland (Peter Pilot). Gunner was George Paradise approximately a month in country currently living in CA. The crew chief was Joe Harrilla (Kid). We were flying C&C that day for 3/8th, flying LTC

Belnap, call sign was “Saber” (Later was killed 1/68 I believe in helicopter crash). Company A 3/8th on hill 724 radio Saber that they had broken contact and were in dire need of water. Saber ordered us to take him back to hill 1335 and strip the radio off and load up with water containers. Now, Al Harris was DEROS the next day, but this did not hesitate on what we had to do, and everyone knew there was no such thing as breaking contact, the NVA at Dak To, Hill 724 was a one ship LZ, almost a vertical decent through the trees. The report said we had just landed, but you could not land there because of stumps and debris. The next thing I knew I heard the engine screaming with an over speed. Everything seemed to go into slow motion, as I looked up front I saw Larus going through the front windshield and Al Harris going out the left door. At that very instant flames were rolling through the middle of the ship and the ship was rolling over. After the ship came to rest I crawled out. I couldn’t walk but I could crawl



really good. I was trying to crawl up the hill to get to the good guys when I came upon Larus. His left leg was broken and sticking through his pants, but other than that could not see any other wound at the time. He asked me if everyone else had gotten out of the ship OK, and I said I wasn’t sure. When I looked in his eyes (they were blue) they looked dull, so I thought he was in shock. I then found he was bleeding badly from the base of the skull. We laid in that LZ for about 4 to 5 hours. After being medivaced out to the battalion aid at Dak To they medivaced us

to the 71st Evac. Larry Schultz was the crew chief on the ship that took us out, #170. The grunts said that we had three B-40s shot at us.

Joe Harrilla
170th AHC
13 Nov. ‘98

The 170th Aviation Company (Light Airmobile) was activated September 1, 1965 at Fort Benning, GA under TOE1-77E (augmented), by General Order 264, Third Army Headquarters dated August 25, 1965. It consisted of a headquarters section, an armed flight platoon with eight (8) UH-1B helicopters, two flight lift platoons with twenty (20) UH-1D troop carriers (slicks) and a service platoon. The 405th Transportation Detachment (TC), 447th Signal Detachment (SD), and the 755th Medical Detachment (MD), were attached. The unit was to become one of the most elite helicopters units of the Vietnam War.



Vietnams' Bloodiest Battle

How It Was On Hill 875

By PETER ARNETT

Hill 875, DAK TO, Vietnam (AP) – Hour after hour of battle gave the living and the dead the same gray pallor on Hill 875. At times the only way to tell them apart was to watch when the enemy mortars crashed in on the exhausted American paratroopers.

The living rushed unashamedly to the tiny bunkers dug into the red clay.

The wounded squirmed toward the shelter of trees blasted to the ground.

The dead – propped up in bunkers or face down in the dust – didn't move.



“Warrior Hugs Mother Earth. Paratrooper of U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade hugs ground on lip of AP writer Peter Arnett’s foxhole during height of North Vietnamese mortar attack on Hill 875 Tuesday. Picture was taken by Arnett.” (AP)

SINCE SUNDAY the most brutal and bloody fighting of the Vietnam war has ebbed and flowed across this remote hill in the western sector of the Dak To battleground. The 2nd Battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade went up 875 first. It nearly died.

Of the 16 officers who led the men across the ridgeline Sunday, eight were killed and the other eight wounded. Eleven of the 13 medics died.

The battalion took its first casualties at midday Sunday as it crested Hill 875, one of the hundreds of knolls that dot the ridges in the Dak To fighting region near the Cambodian-Laotian border.

All weekend as the paratroopers moved along the jungle hills enemy base camps were uncovered. The biggest was on 875 and D Company lost several men in the first encounter with the bunkers.

A COMPANY moved back down the hill to cut a landing zone and was chopped to pieces by a North Vietnamese flanking attack.

The remnants fled back to the crest of the hill while the paratrooper propped his gun on the trail and kept firing at the advancing enemy, ignoring orders to retreat with the others.

“You can keep gunning them down, but sooner or later when there are enough of them they’ll get to you,” said Pfc. James Kelly of Fort Myers, Fla., who saw the machine gunner go down after killing about 17 North Vietnamese.

D COMPANY, hearing the roar of battle below it, returned to the crest of the hill and established a 50-yard perimeter *“because we figured we were surrounded by a regiment,”* one officer said.

As the battalion was regrouping late in the afternoon for another crack at the bunker system, one of the American planes striking at the nearby enemy dropped a 500-pound bomb too soon. About 30 of the paratroopers were killed.

From then until a reinforcing battalion arrived the following night, the paratroopers on the hill dug in desperately. Only one medic was able to work on the many wounded, and the enemy kept driving off the rescue helicopters.

(continued...)



THE RELIEF battalion made it into the tiny perimeter on 875 Monday night. In the moonlight bodies of the dead lay spread-eagled across the ground. The wounded whimpered.

The survivors, hungry and thirsty, rushed up eagerly to get food and water only to learn that the relief battalion had brought enough supplies for one day only and had already consumed them.

Monday night was sleepless but uneventful. On Tuesday the North Vietnamese struck with renewed fury.

FROM POSITIONS just 100 yards away, they pounded the American perimeter with 82mm mortars. The first rounds slapped in at daybreak, killing three paratroopers in a foxhole and wounding 17 others on the line.

For the rest of the day, the Communists methodically worked over the hill, pumping rounds in five or six at a time, giving new wounds to those who lay bleeding in the open and tearing through bunkers. The plop of the rounds as they left the enemy tubes gave the paratroopers a second or two to dash for cover.

The foxholes got deeper as the day wore on. Foxhole after foxhole took hits. A dog handler and his German shepherd died together. Men joking with you and offering cigarettes writhed on the ground wounded and pleaded for water minutes later. There was no water for anyone.

THE DAYS POUNDING steadily reduced the platoon commanded by 1st Lt. Bryan MacDonough, 25, of Fort Lee, Va. He had started out Sunday with 27 men. He had nine left by noon Tuesday.

“If the Viets keep this up, there’ll be none left by evening,” he said.

The enemy positions seemed impervious to constant American air strikes. Napalm fireballs exploded on the bunkers 30 yards away. The earth shook with heavy bombs.

“We’ve tried 750 pounders, napalm and everything else, but air can’t do it. It’s going to take manpower to get those positions,” MacDonough said.

By late afternoon a new landing zone was cut below the hill. The enemy mortars searched for it but the helicopters came in anyway. A line of wounded trudged down the hill and by evening 140 of them had been evacuated.

THE ARRIVAL of the helicopters with food, water and ammunition seemed to put new life into the paratroopers. They talked eagerly of a final assault on the enemy bunkers

As darkness fell flame throwers were brought up. The first stubborn bunker yielded, and the paratroopers were at last started on their way to gain the ridgeline which they had set out to take three days earlier.

[Sent in by Roger Wittenbrook, C/2/503d. Photos added]



“23 Nov 1967, Dak To, South Vietnam, the battle for hill 875 is over and American troops are at the hill's top. These battle weary men of the U.S. 173d Airborne Brigade pause for a moment's rest. American troops went to the top of hill 875 after some of the bloodiest fighting of the Vietnam War.” (Web photo)



A Medic's Diary

By Larry "Doc" Speed
1/503d



Doc Speed

November 67: Left the next morning and went through a marsh in water waist deep and extracted by slick to Tuy Hoa airfield. Going back to that dreaded Dak To. Got sandwich and ice cream...caught C130 to Kontum and camped for night and bought gook goodies. Left this morning by Chinook to Dak To...took a tumble down a very steep, muddy hill.

6 November 67: Puff firing at night. 4th Bat made contact...17 KIA and 36 WIA.

7 November 67: Moved out about four times today. Set up near FSB.

8 November 67: Left for other FSB near trail and got lost again. Extracted by slick from FSB and went to a hill where C Company is now located. Took KIA, and found about 50 gooks buried in bomb crater. This area really looks beaten. Tonight when supply chopper began coming in, we got mortared three to four times...5 men wounded. Puff firing all night long.

9 November 67: Got mail with shrapnel in it. We were mortared tonight. Puff at work and butterfly bombs... B52's strike early this morning.

10 November 67: D Company moved out with C Company and ????.1st Platoon of D Co stayed back until Alpha called us, which was this afternoon. FSB was being cleared of bamboo by Bangalore torpedoes. Doran got a piece of shrapnel in his leg. I removed the shrapnel. Donnally received a piece in his head. After linking up with A Company, we moved about one thousand meters and set up for the night. 1st squad had ambush on this night.

11 November 67: "Mike" element of A Company moved out this morning and went into an NVA base camp. Pointman opened up and shot 3 to 4 gooks, then the element began to pull back to our laager sight. Meanwhile, security was set up and we began digging up old bunkers and putting overhead back on. 4.2 mortar and our 81mm began firing, followed by artillery. After we finished with our bunkers, air strikes came in. We marked our perimeter with smoke grenades. Two men received fragment wounds from the artillery, but were not hurt seriously. The initial contact was made around 0830 and the last of the air strikes were over at noon. "Mike" element formed back up and headed back to the

base camp to check it out. 4.2 mortar was still being called in and one round fell short and hit the machine gunner. He died moments later and his body was brought back to our laager site. What had happened, the NVA made their escape after the first contact and they were probably the same ones who ran into C and D Company because they made contact during our air strike. Checking out the base camp we found bunkers about 6-7 feet deep with tunnels leading back into the ground. It would be almost impossible for an air strike or artillery to drive them out, but they ran before it came in. We set up in base camp and dusted off the two wounded and one dead soldier. One air strike was very near...jets coming in over our heads. Last night "Spooky" was called in. Air strikes all around.

12 November 67: Our report on C and D Company; E-17 and C Company of the 4th Batt went in to assist... total killed: 36 and 150 WIA. This morning we are pushing up this ridge line toward them. The NVA are supposed to be between us. Found base camp of 200 bunkers...about 3-4 men position...contact made today with NVA's in bunkers. Over the radio came a call for a medic, so I went up front and found Sgt. Mescan working on a soldier who was shot through the leg. Then Vasques received grenade shrapnel on the left side under the ribs. We got him back to the rear area and then we carried the other soldier back on a poncho. While we were reinforcing the bandages, another one of our guys got shot in the head. Left the other wounded man and went up to help this soldier. We gave him 2 bottles of albumin and while doing this, the



1st Bat Troopers Moving Out

(By Larry Speed)

bullets were flying low and over our heads. Then an air strike was called in. The 3 wounded were later dusted off after the air strike. Firefight over with, and we are now moving out. Dead NVA all along the trail. Getting into battle area of C and D Company...charred area... steel pots, bloody bandages, ammo, battered weapons, men carrying fallen comrades off in body bags. The wounded are still being extracted from yesterday's battle.

13 November 67: Six bodies missing. Searched area, but no finds. All kinds of gook weapons and equipment laying around – everywhere you look...a grave or a unburied body.

(continued...)



14 November 67: Continued body search today. One body found of D Company member.

15 November 67: A and D Companies moved out today to a hill which is only a few 100 meters away. Contact made with enemy on next hill...air strike called in.



Doc Speed

16 November 67: Moved out to check out the hill. We find many connecting trenches and bunkers. Dud Chicom grenades, sniper positions in trees with ladder leading up to them. Utley found a 51 Cal machine gun. Reporters are flown in.

17 November 67: Moved out with Lema as point element. Set up in a deserted NVA base camp with connecting bunkers and trenches. I found belt buckle with star. Newspaper woman joined us. Hot chow and church services...bombed tunnel that Channell checked out.

18 November 67: Moved out after destroying bunkers. Contact made on Hill 882...heavy contact!

19 November 67: Bad, very Bad! 6 of our men were killed and several WIA's. 2 newspaper (CBS) men injured, wounded extracted late last night. Snipers in trees while we were digging bunkers and air strike very close to our position. Sgt. Torres killed when standing by tree. Dyer, a medic was killed. Gook bodies all over the place. Many weapons and ammo captured. Bodies in graves that we dig up. Point man killed today when grenade exploded. Medical aid kit (gook) found.

20 November 67: Set up.

21 November 67: Movement last night...gook spotted through starlight and artillery brought in close. The 2nd and 4th trying to take Hill 875.

22 November 67: Moved out with Lema as lead platoon...2 KIA and 1 POW. The lead platoon saw two gooks in the jungle and fired upon them. One took off and the other just sat on a log holding his head as he rocked back and forth. "K" and I took off and chased after the escaped gook. We found him lying in a stream and "K" pulled out a knife and tried to stab him in the neck. I stopped him from killing the gook. We opened up his eyelid and put the knife up close to his eye, but he never reacted. He had a head wound, but it did not appear to be that serious. I picked the gook up and threw him over my shoulder and we started back to the area where the others were. Just as I approached with the wounded gook, someone called out for me to drop him. Whoever it was said that the gook had his hand on one of my hand grenades. The other wounded gook

remained on the log, but no one wanted to approach for fear that he had a hand grenade. Lt. Serrem asked if I wanted to attend to the wounded NVA. I declined. No grenade. We recovered a field telephone and a pistol. We are going uphill with artillery coming in on our flanks. Reached top and bunkers found. For some reason we are returning to hill 882. Made contact and one of our men KIA. 2nd and 4th Batt in heavy contact on Hill 875.

23 November 67: Humped back to FSB #16 for Thanksgiving dinner.

24 November 67: Very good dinner, in spite of the fact that I had been helping unload dead soldiers in body bags from the choppers when they were brought in from Hill 875. Returned to Hill 882. One gook KIA when we caught him searching through our sump.

29 November 67: Followed trail out of jungle and hills which lead to old road. Set up for the night and got hot chow and mail.

30 November 67: Extracted today by Hueys and went to FSB #13.

2 December 67: Went into aid station for ear trouble.

4 December 67: Returned to FSB.

5 December 67: 2nd 1/503d Troopers squad of Lema went on road clearing and found 16 mines. Coming back to FSB, truck carrying all of the troops hit a mine...2 men WIA. (By Larry Speed)



6 December 67: Went on mine sweeping operation today with engineers. Montagnards told us that VC were around their village.

15 December 67: Extracted by Huey and flew to Hill 1040 where we cleared for FSB. Many thousand pounds of C4 used to clear the hill.

25 December 67: Christmas Dinner.

27 December 67: Left laager sight by Huey and flew back to Dak To. From here, we convoyed back to Kontum.

28 December 67: Stayed all night and flew to FSB by Chinook and companies moved out.



Dak To Posts, Berets Camp, Hit By Reds

Saigon (UPI) – North Vietnamese troops attacked four U.S. outposts near embattled Dak To with deadly mortar fire Sunday and followed up before dawn Monday by raining mortar shells on Kontum, the capital of the main province on South Vietnam's central highlands. The raids at Kontum hit a U.S. military advisers compound and a Special Forces Camp.

The U.S. commander said the raids Sunday and Monday killed at least six American and wounded 21.

Dak To, scene of heavy fighting since November 2, is near the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border 280 miles north of Saigon. Kontum, a major city, is about 30 miles southeast of Dak To.

REPORTS SUNDAY said the four North Vietnamese raids on American troop positions in the Dak To area wounded 16 Americans in coordinated attacks that lasted 50 minutes.

The shells exploded at three American artillery emplacements and in an area manned by forward elements of the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division, the Sunday reports said.

THE ASSAULT on Kontum was regarded as particularly bold. The city is the capital of Kontum province and a major allied base for men and war supplies.

U.S. commanders expressed the belief that North Vietnamese forces, badly mauled in the 25-day highlands campaign, were unable to launch a ground attack and were falling back on the old tactics of hit-and-run mortar raids, firing from positions in jungle cover.

American reports said the highlands fighting since Nov. 2 had killed 3,000 to 4,000 North Vietnamese.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 27, 1967)

Orlandoans In Thick Of Hill 875 Conflict

HILL 875 has a special significance for Orlandoans – at least seven and possibly more local men are known to have participated in that bloody Vietnamese action.

Three of these were wounded and two gave that “last full measure of devotion,” their lives.

NEARLY all of them were apparently members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade which suffered 278 wounded and 99 killed out of its complement of between 400 and 500 men.

Local men killed in the action were Pfc. Kenneth Grant Owens, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charlie F. Owens, 634 Bryn Mawr, and Lt. Peter James Lantz, son of retired Col. Dayle R. Lantz, 5400 San Juan Blvd.

The wounded include Lt. John R. Robinson, Lt. Joseph M. Sheridan and Lt. Thomas F. Remington.

IN A LETTER to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Sheridan, Sr., 101 S. Bumby. Lt. Sheridan told of finding Remington, Lantz and a Lt. Charles Brown, also of Orlando, in his paratroop company.

The name of a “Lt. Wortz” or “Wertz” of Winter Park was mentioned as being a member of Alpha Company in a letter Remington wrote his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles L. Remington, 2712 Nela Ave.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 1967)

Orlando GI Dies In Battle For Hill 875

An 18-year-old Orlando youth was the victim of the fierce fighting at Hill 875 near Dak To, South Vietnam, last Monday, his family reported Sunday.

Pfc. Kenneth Grant Owens, son of Mr. and Mrs. Cherrie F. Owens, 84 Bryn Mawr, entered the Army in April and had been in Vietnam less than a month.

A GRADUATE of Edgewater High School, he attended Orlando Junior College one semester before entering the Army.

He was a member of the 173d Airborne Brigade, the unit in the heaviest fighting in the Dak To area.

Owens was employed by the Northgate Public Store before entering the service.

IN ADDITION to his parents he is survived by brothers, Ted M. Rabum, New Orleans, La.; sister, Mrs. Robert M. Aogles, Vero Beach; grandmother, Mr. Mary L. Hargrave, Orlando.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 1967)



KENNETH OWENS
... Killed in action



Orlandoan Dies Leading Platoon In 875 Battle



LT. PETER J. LANTZ
... West Point

1st Lt. Peter James Lantz, 24, a West Point graduate and son of retired Col. Dayle R. Lantz, 5400 San Juan Blvd., was killed during bitter fighting at Hill 875 near Dak To, South Vietnam, his family reported Monday.

He was reported missing Friday, after leading his platoon of the 503rd Infantry up Hill 875, the family said. Lantz is the second Orlandoan to lose his life in the fighting at Hill 875.

HE GRADUATED from Colonial High School and from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., in June 1965. He was married the next day.

His widow, Dagmar, and three-week-old daughter, Yvonne Kristel, live on Long Island, N.Y. Lantz was a native of Waterville, Maine, and his family has lived in Orlando for 12 years. Other survivors are a brother, Dayle R. Jr., Annandale, Va., and grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. E. Lantz, Glouster, Ohio.

The family said burial will be at West Point. Services to be announced.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 1967)

Orlandoan Killed In Hill 875 Battle



PFC PATTERSON
... Killed in action

Pfc. James Robert "Bobby" Patterson, 19, son of Mrs. Marguerite Irene Patterson, 1701 E. Michigan St., was killed Nov. 20 in action in Vietnam.

His mother was told Saturday by the Defense Department her son had been missing in the Hill 875 fighting since Nov. 20. His death was confirmed Wednesday.

HE WAS WITH the 173rd Airborne Brigade. He entered the Army in August 1966 and went to Vietnam in March.

He was a native of Orlando and attended Kaley Elementary, Cherokee Junior and Boone High Schools.

Survivors besides his mother include sisters, Mrs. Patricia Lou Stevenson, Orlando, and Mrs. Peggy Marie Covington, Tampa.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 1967)



Deadliest Vietnam Battles

'33 Days of Violent, Sustained Combat'

In November 1967, the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade slugged it out with four NVA regiments in the Central Highlands. The centerpiece of the battle was the 110-hour fight for Hill 875.

by Tim Dyhouse

In November 1967, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units were determined to rid the Central Highlands of American forces. The NVA poured thousands of troops into an area where the borders of Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam meet.

Specifically, they sought to destroy Special Forces camps at Ben Het, about five miles east of the Cambodian border, and at Dak To, some 10 miles east of Ben Het. The U.S. camps represented a major roadblock at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Americans reacted to the NVA buildup by launching Operation MacArthur, with the 4th Infantry Division assuming operational control over the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

The 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade included the 1st, 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 8th Inf. Regt.; 1st and 3rd battalions of the 12th Inf. Regt.; and the attached 2nd Sqdn., 1st Cav Regt.

The 173rd Airborne Brigade fielded the 1st, 2nd and 4th battalions of the 503rd Inf. Regt., and supporting units such as the 335th Aviation Company.

Some 15 Army artillery batteries along with tactical air support provided immense firepower.

1st Cavalry Division units—1st Bn., 12th Cav Regt., and 2nd Bn., 8th Cavalry—also played a part in the campaign.

The 23rd and 26th Mike Force companies (indigenous outfits led by Green Berets) were engaged as well. Also in the mix were six ARVN battalions.

Opposing them at one time or another were the NVA's 1st Infantry Division. One paratrooper said of the enemy: "They fight like they're all John Waynes, three clips and making every bullet count."

'A Merciless Land'

Combat was brutal, close and fought in the unforgiving terrain of the Central Highlands.

"It is a merciless land of steep limestone ridges, some of them exceeding 4,000 feet," wrote Robert Barr Smith in Vietnam magazine. "The sharp ridges are covered with double and sometimes triple-canopy jungle. The draws between the ridges are dreary, tangled places of perpetual twilight. The jungle is laced with vines and thorns, and in it live diverse snakes, a million leeches and about half the mosquitoes in the world."

Another historian called the terrain "probably the wildest in South Vietnam if not all Southeast Asia."

The weather, however, during the Nov. 1-23 continuous battles was "excellent," according to E. Clifford Berry, Jr., in *The Illustrated History of Sky Soldiers, The Vietnam War*, with dry conditions and daily high and low temperatures between 91 and 55 degrees.



Dust Off of our KIA (Web photo)

(continued....)



'Deadly Prelude'

The Battle of Dak To was actually a series of intense clashes culminating in the decisive battle for Hill 875. Leading up to that climatic end, the 173rd Airborne Brigade fought several engagements south of Ben Het.

A recon patrol made the first contact on Nov. 2, briefly skirmishing with NVA, resulting in one U.S. KIA.

Four days later, A, B, C and D companies of the 4th Bn., 503rd Inf., fought the NVA for four hours in the Ngok Kam Leat chain of hills and adjacent Hill 823. Losing 16 KIA and 37 WIA.

On Nov. 11, A, C and D companies of the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf., engaged the NVA for eight hours at two separate locations south of Ben Het sustaining 21 KIA and 128 WIA.

On Veterans Day, Task Force Black (170 men of the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf.) was inserted into a landing zone on Hill 823 and wound up losing 20 KIA, 154 WIA and two MIA.

The next day, Pfc. John Barnes of C Company earned a posthumous Medal of Honor when he saved the lives of several wounded men by throwing himself on a grenade. Before this heroic act, according to his citation, Barnes *"dashed through the bullet swept area, manned the machine gun (the team had been killed) and killed nine enemy soldiers as they assaulted his position."*

Following on the heels of TF Black's ordeal, A and B companies from the 2nd Bn., 503rd Inf., fought for more than four hours near Fire Support Base 16, located about five miles south of Hill 823. B Company counted 21 KIA and 17 WIA after the firefight.

Nov. 18 saw the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf., lose seven KIA on Hill 882, while D Company of the 4th Battalion had six dead to "friendly fire."

Before Hill 875 was even assaulted, the 173rd had already sustained 79 KIA and 287 WIA.

'Get up the Goddamn Hill'

By Nov. 19, the NVA's 174th Regiment, moving south along the Lao/Cambodian border, had covered the retreat of the 66th Regiment. The 174th set up on Hill 875 about 10 miles southwest of Ben Het and less than a mile east of the Cambodian border. The 173rd's 2nd Bn., 503rd Inf., led the assault.

Companies C and D started up the hill at 9:43 a.m., with A Company providing rear security and attempting to cut out a landing zone at the bottom. C and D companies soon found themselves absorbing small arms and grenade attacks from seemingly every direction.

"Jesus, they were all over the place," one paratrooper recalled. *"The non-coms kept shouting, 'Get up the hill, get up the goddamn hill'. But we couldn't. We were surrounded, and we were firing in all directions."*

Company commanders pulled their troops back and called for more firepower. Artillery from A Bty., 3rd Bn., 319th Artillery Regt., and air strikes started ravaging the hilltop.

Meanwhile, NVA soldiers began a ferocious attack on A Company at the bottom of the hill. Pfc. Carlos Lozada, after receiving orders to retreat back up the hill, provided covering fire, at times walking backward up the hill spraying M-60 machine-gun fire into the brush on either side of the trail. When his weapon jammed, an NVA bullet ripped into his head. Lozada's actions garnered him a posthumous Medal of Honor.



Fighting on The Hill. (Web photo)

The surviving paratroopers of A Company hustled up the slope and into a perimeter formed by the beleaguered C and D companies.

"By 3 p.m.," Terrence Maitland and Peter McInerney wrote in *A Contagion of War*, *"the C Company commander reported they were surrounded by 200 to 300 NVA and under attack by mortars, automatic weapons and B-40 rockets."*

(continued...)





“Aviation Company helicopters while attempting to resupply the pinned-down troopers were shot down during the day. U.S. aircraft hit enemy positions as close as 50 meters to the perimeter as GIs dug in for an NVA night attack.” (Web photo)

‘Slept with Corpses’

Tragically, one air strike hit too close to the paratroopers. At 6:58 p.m., a Marine Corps fighter-bomber mistakenly dropped two 500-pound bombs on the U.S. position. One hit outside the perimeter, killing 25 NVA troops. The other hit C Company’s command post and aid station. Some 42 Americans (many of them already wounded) were killed and 45 wounded in the war’s worst “friendly fire” incident.

“[There were] heaps of dead after that bomb,” a survivor remembered. “You didn’t know where to go, you did not know where to hide. You slept with corpses. I slept with Joe. He was dead, but he kept me warm.”

One soldier who didn’t survive the blast was chaplain Maj. Charles Watters. During the battle, father Watters had ventured outside the perimeter at least five times, carrying wounded troops back to the aid station. According to survivors, he was on his knees giving last rites to a dying paratrooper when the bombs hit, killing him instantly. Watters received a posthumous Medal of Honor.

The next morning, Nov. 20, 4th Bn., 503rd Inf., set out to relieve the 2nd Battalion paratroopers. NVA snipers made the going slow, but B Company finally reached the perimeter by dusk. Two more companies arrived after dark and provided much-needed food and water to the exhausted troopers.

*“Dawn on Tuesday, Nov. 21, revealed a scene on Hill 875 no survivor of that battle could ever forget.” Edward F. Murphy wrote in *Dak To: America’s Sky Soldiers in South Vietnam’s Central Highlands*, “The enormous amounts of ordnance expended by both forces had turned the once-lush tropical jungle into a scarred and torn landscape.”*

“The acrid odor of decaying and rotting flesh combined with the smells of vomit, feces, urine, blood, gunpowder and napalm etched itself permanently into the memories of those who were on Hill 875,” Murphy wrote.

‘Every Objective Was Taken’

Throughout the day, U.S. airstrikes and artillery continued to pound the top of the hill, as the NVA lobbed mortars at the U.S. perimeter. The 4th Battalion launched an unsuccessful attack at around 3 p.m., and pulled back to defensive positions after dark. The battalion lost 12 KIA.

On Nov. 23, the 4th Battalion from the north slope coordinated a final assault on the hilltop with the 1st Bn., 12th Inf., 4th Inf. Div., charging up the south slope. Neither battalion faced heavy resistance as the NVA had decamped during the night, denying the Americans a chance at some revenge. But the GIs had fulfilled their objective.

“To walk away from Hill 875 would have diminished the importance of their sacrifices,” Murphy concluded. “The paratroopers esprit de corps, elitism and personal pride would not permit that.”

Though they were severely bloodied, the paratroopers inflicted even heavier losses on the NVA. So heavy, in fact, that the NVA’s 32nd, 66th and 174th regiments were unable to participate in the 1968 Tet Offensive.

“In a strictly military sense, the Dak To fighting has been a victory for the allied forces,” war correspondent Peter Arnett was forced to admit in an Associated Press report filed after spending 10 days at the scene. *“Every objective was taken. The enemy loss in lives was about four times that of the allies.”*

(continued...)



Despite reportedly higher enemy body counts, Maj. Gen. William B. Rosson, earlier commander of Task Force Oregon, estimated 1,000 NVA were killed.

For the bravery and sacrifices of its paratroopers around Dak To, the 173rd earned the Presidential Unit Citation.

Lethal Fire: Enemy and “Friendly”

According to the after-action report, GIs sustained 242 KIA and 876 WIA in the battles between Nov. 2 and Dec. 1, 1967. But Murphy says that during the actions around Dak To, 376 Americans were killed and 1,441 wounded.

Of the 3,200 paratroopers from the 173rd deployed to Dak To, 27% were either killed (208) or wounded (645). The 173rd's rifle companies sustained some 90% of the unit's casualties.

“The rifle companies suffered 51% losses in just one month,” Murphy wrote. *“And about 60 of the dead paratroopers—29% were killed by friendly fire.”*

The single deadliest day of Dak To was Nov. 19, when 83 Americans were killed and 110 wounded. Tragically, 50% of the deaths were due to “friendly fire.” Enemy fire claimed 41 GIs' lives that day.

For the medics in the mix, casualties represented far more than statistics. The anguished cries of the wounded are what they remember most.

“There is something gut-wrenching about severely wounded men that I will never forget,” recalls Earle Jackson, a 173rd medic who served on Hill 875. *“It is that most become delirious and almost always cry out for their mothers.”*

Pfc. John Barnes

On Nov. 12, 1967, Pfc. Barnes manned a machine gun after its crew had been killed. He then eliminated nine enemy soldiers who were assaulting his position. While retrieving more ammo, Barnes saw a grenade tossed among a group of severely wounded soldiers. In an instant, he leaped on the device, shielding the blast with his body.



Maj. Charles J. Watters, Chaplain

On Nov. 19, 1967, Chaplain Watters repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire in order to aid fallen men outside the perimeter. Five times troopers tried to hold him back, yet Watters persisted in aiding and carrying the wounded back to safety. He was hit and killed later, still tending to the wounded.



Pfc. Carlos Lozada

On Nov. 20, 1967, Pfc. Lozada stayed behind and poured deadly machine-gun fire on an advancing NVA force, allowing his company to safely withdraw. Nearly surrounded, Lozada jumped from his covered position and fired his M-60 from the hip, providing further cover for fellow soldiers when he was mortally wounded.



Source:
VFW Magazine, March 2006
Web: www.vfw.org



U.S. Jets Hit Diehard N. Viets Still Clinging to Bloody Hill 875

SAIGON (AP) – Wave after wave of U.S. jets battered enemy bunkers on Hill 875 yesterday in an effort to help ground troops to victory in the Battle of Dak To, the bloodiest engagement of the war for Americans and North Vietnamese alike.

Paratroopers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade called in nearly 100 air strikes on North Vietnamese diehards who fought for the fourth day on Hill 875 from ridgeline fortifications of log and earth that were churned by bombs and napalm.

THE AMERICANS pulled back from part of the hillside to give the jets free play. But they found themselves still under enemy mortar fire. The shell explosions brought fresh casualties, adding to the dead, who lay under ponchos at edges of the battlefield, and to the wounded, who were being ferried out by helicopters.

American mortars shot back.

Far overshadowing their fire-power were the airdrops 750- and 1,000-pound bombs, antipersonnel ordinance and napalm.

Two battalions of the 173rd, including fresh troops who replaced drawn and haggard survivors of the opening drive, seemed at noon to be in nearly full control of the hill, 14 miles southwest of Dak To.

But it appeared that only man-to-man combat on the ridge could end this phase of the battle that broke out 20 days ago around Dak To, a central highlands community near the frontiers of Laos and Cambodia 270 miles north of Saigon.

“We’ll be up there for Thanksgiving,” a battalion commander said.

WITH THE DAY’S field accounting still awaited, the U.S. Command announced 246 Americans had been killed and 860 wounded in the Dak To campaign while reported North Vietnamese dead totaled 1,290. Of the American dead, 79 were said to have fallen on Hill 875.

South Vietnamese troops, including elite rangers, also are engaged in the fight around Dak To, where the North Vietnamese have sought a prestige victory if not the establishment of a second front similar to the hard lines drawn at the demilitarized zone in the north. The South Vietnamese list 32 dead and 153 wounded.

The Thanksgiving holiday today meant the traditional turkey-and-trimmings meal for most American servicemen in Vietnam. But the paratroopers were prepared for at least one more day of bitter fighting.

The battle could erupt then in another area.

[Sent in by Roger Wittenbrook, C/2/503d, photos added]



“A deathly peace” (Web photo)



Paratroops Push To Drive Foe Off Hill

Dak To Battle May End On Thanksgiving

SAIGON (AP) – U.S. paratroopers inched toward Communist bunker positions atop Hill 875 Thursday in an effort to capture the hill as a Thanksgiving Day prize and possibly wind up the battle of Dak To, bloodiest of the war for Americans and North Vietnamese alike.

The paratroopers already held most of the hill except for a commanding ridgeline near the crest. As they undertook what they hoped was a final thrust, it appeared they would have to use flame throwers and hand grenades to root out remaining Communist diehards from their well-protected bunkers.

REPORTS FROM the battle sector said the paratroopers pulled back from close to the ridgeline late Wednesday to allow repeated air strikes to pound the entrenched North Vietnamese. They spent a cold night in hillside foxholes, with the temperature dropping to 50 degrees as it does at night in South Vietnam's central highlands.

In the area near Hill 875, some 15 miles southwest of Dak To, units of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Wednesday found bodies of 82 of the enemy who had been killed in fighting Monday and Tuesday.

THIS BROUGHT the announced toll of North Vietnamese killed in 21 days of fighting in the Dak To sector to 1,372.

Also in the Dak To area, 270 miles north of Saigon, U.S. B52 Bombers raided early Thursday North Vietnamese supply bases and escape routes 19 miles west-southwest of Dak To and near the Cambodian border.

Elsewhere across South Vietnam, only minor actions were reported by the U.S. and South Vietnamese military commands but a command post of the U.S. Army's 199th Light Infantry Brigade only nine miles southwest of Saigon received 20 rounds of enemy mortar fire. Twelve infantrymen were wounded in the shelling late Wednesday night, the U.S. Command said.

Across South Vietnam, at air bases in Thailand and aboard aircraft carriers in the gulf of Tonkin, more than half a million American servicemen observed Thanksgiving with traditional turkey and trimmings.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 23, 1967)



Buddies at Dak To



Ceremony of the Empty Boots Memorial Day Remembrances

By Steve Welsh

C/2/503d

Survivor of Hill 875, Dak To

New jungle boots all lined up in a row
Signifying the young soldiers who wouldn't grow old
It was our custom after a battle to show this respect
As we stood there at attention with time to reflect

The names of the dead were read off
And Life Magazine pictures were taken
Honoring these men so they wouldn't be forsaken

We all stood there in the sweat of the hot day
Feeling their loss in our own special way

All those boots and not one being filled
Showed just how many of us had been killed
Our 2nd battalion of 330 men
Had been reduced to only a few
As fifty plus were able to walk off that Hill in their
own boots

The colors of our flag shown bright in the slight
breeze
And none of us wanted to leave

The ceremony was done, but we stayed in a group
As the sound echoed in our ears of the 21 gun salute

These were our friends, the brave men of the 173d

Our fallen brothers like many in Wars before them are the
hero's respected and honored
On this very special day called Memorial Day

**Central Highlands, Dak To, Vietnam,
November 1967, Battle for Hill 875**



There were not enough boots.

~ THE HILL ~

By: John "Johnny" R. Jones

C/2/503d

The order was out,
it must be taken, Hill 875 a
hill, so bare, so forsaken.

They all knew the cost would be high,
But all knew they must do or die.
They all lived by the Airborne Code
"Death Before Dishonor."

This hill that had claimed
Chaplain Watters, Lozada and O'Connor.
The Wind was dry,

The sun was hot.
And every man had the thought of liberty and of freedom
too.
That this land might be free
Like the land he knew.

Yes, they won the hill that day.
Why they did isn't hard to say.

For the price of freedom is very high,
you know when you see a mother cry.

Yes, many a man would today be alive,
But they took "Hill 875".

173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep)



Johnny Jones, survivor of Hill 875



CAMBODIA: MORE AND MORE A HAVEN FOR ATTACKS ON SOUTH VIETNAM

SAIGON – There no longer is any question about it; Cambodia is now an active base for Communists waging war in South Vietnam – and the situation may get dramatically worse.

U.S. military men have reported this to President Johnson, and now they have a go-ahead to get word to the U.S. public.

As a result, there have been a series of “background briefings” in recent days here and in Washington stressing these points:

- Some 15,000 North Vietnamese regulars have been using one corner of Cambodia as a staging area, and 11,000 of them crossed into the central highlands of South Vietnam to take part in the just-ended battle near Dak To, and earlier at Loc Ninh. Beaten and facing disaster, the Reds retreated to their privileged sanctuary.
- Cambodian merchants have been supplying thousands of tons of rice to the hungry Viet Cong inside South Vietnam, and probably ammunitions and other military equipment as well.
- The port of Sihanoukville, it is now virtually certain, is being turned into a major entry point for arms and ammunition from Soviet Russia and Red China.

Behind the shift to Cambodia lie growing problems of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in mounting operations within South Vietnam.



Long road to camp U.S. can't attack.

(World Wide photo)

“As time goes on,” says one U.S. officer, “Cambodia is going to become more and more important to the Communists.”

A hidden base.

Cambodia's chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, long has denied that Communist forces of any size were using his territory.

On November 20, however, the Associated Press and United Press

International distributed dispatches describing visits by reporters to an evacuated Communist camp just 4 miles inside Cambodia. There was evidence the camp was only one of many along the border, the correspondents wrote.

According to reliable sources, the Communists have at least six large bases in Cambodia. The biggest is near the point where the Cambodian, Laotian and South Vietnamese frontiers meet.

In addition, says a U.S. officer, there are “several score” smaller camps strung along the border. Virtually all are within the 5-mile-wide belt which Cambodian troops do not patrol.



House for thousands. Anywhere up to 35,000 troops – both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese – are using Cambodia, sources say. This poses major problems for U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders. Unlike Laos, where air strikes are carried out regularly against infiltration routes, Cambodia is a haven for the Reds.

They are able to stockpile supplies, rest and regroup units, rotate forces in and out of South Vietnam.

Says a senior American officer:

“There are not many sanctuaries left in South Vietnam for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main-force units. That makes Cambodia all the more important to them, all the more frustrating for us.”

(U.S. News & World Report, Dec. 4, 1967)



Hill 875 ~ Memories of a Cowboy

By James O. McLaughlin
Cowboy 633

I completed the Army's Rotary Wing Flight School as a WO-1 Army Aviator in June 1967 and was sent to Vietnam in July 1967. I was a 22 year old farm kid from California's San Joaquin Valley and had joined the army just in time to avoid the draft. I wanted to fly and thought it would be nicer than walking. Vietnam seemed so far away and it didn't really seem real until I arrived in Bien Hoa.



Cowboy Jim McLaughlin

I was assigned to the 335th AHC "The Cowboys" and sent to a place near the edge of the world called Dak To joining the unit in the middle of July 1967. We lived next to the airstrip and provided direct support for the 173d Abn Bde (Sep). We followed the Brigade to the Coast at Thuy Hoa/ Phu Hiep and back To Dak To in November 1967. This time our company area was located on the outskirts of Kontum and we had to fly up to Dak To for fuel and mission briefings each day. By then I was an AC and on 19 November, I was given the mission of flying the 2nd Battalion Commander around all day and as such I was there during the first day of the battle for Hill 875.

We had four or six aircraft shot up (today I don't remember the exact number) trying to resupply the troops on the ground that day. All made forced landings at FSB 16 or other secure locations and all aircraft were recovered. Every 30 minutes or less a Cowboy Slick would arrive, pick up the load and fly to the hill knowing they would be exposed to intense ground fire. Machines made of plastic and aluminum flying without hesitation into intense and accurate small arms and 12.7 mm fire was an amazing act of courage to watch. We had a few other aircraft take hits that day in other locations but all were able to fly home. We also had a few other aircraft take serious hits in the days prior to the 19th.

American casualties grew heavier as the day wore on and it became apparent our resupply efforts were not going to work due to the intense ground fire, and we

called off resupply efforts late in the day.

There are two things other than the battle for Hill 875 and the line of Cowboys trying to resupply the troops on the ground that I remember from November 19th. One happened north of Hill 875 when an NVA point man walked out into the clear on one side of a bomb crater as the point man from our troops walked out on the other side. They both saw each other at about the same time and both ducked back into the jungle. The Bn Co had me drop smoke on the NVA position but there was no more contact at that point. The second happened a few hours later as I was orbiting over the Dak Klong river valley east of Hill 875 at about the time US and NVA forces began engaging each other around the hill. I happened to look up through the window over my head and saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off two B-52s at altitude heading in the same direction as I was and some distance ahead. Just about that time the radio came alive on the guard channel and I heard "all aircraft in the vicinity of... (I didn't catch the location)... Arc Light, altitude 32,000." It was an "oh shit moment" because the bombers were over and past me and had released minutes before. Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide; all I could do was wait for impact. A few moments later the earth about a mile to my east began to rise in the air in a rather spectacular manner. It was only in the last year I discovered the 4th Infantry was also in a battle with the NVA further to the east and the B-52's were supporting that action. Here's a photo of that strike.



B-52's strike in support of 4th Inf Div at Dak To
(Jim McLaughlin photo)

(continued...)



Early in the morning on Nov. 20, I was asked by the Brigade Aviation Officer if I would volunteer to fly an LZ Kit to Hill 875 because I was familiar with the situation; there was no way I was going to say no. The LZ kit contained chain saws, blasting caps and C-4 plastic explosives. I was briefed on the tactical situation and was told about the bombs that had been dropped on the US position during the night and was also told the US position was only 50 meters across and that so far this morning things were quiet on the hill.

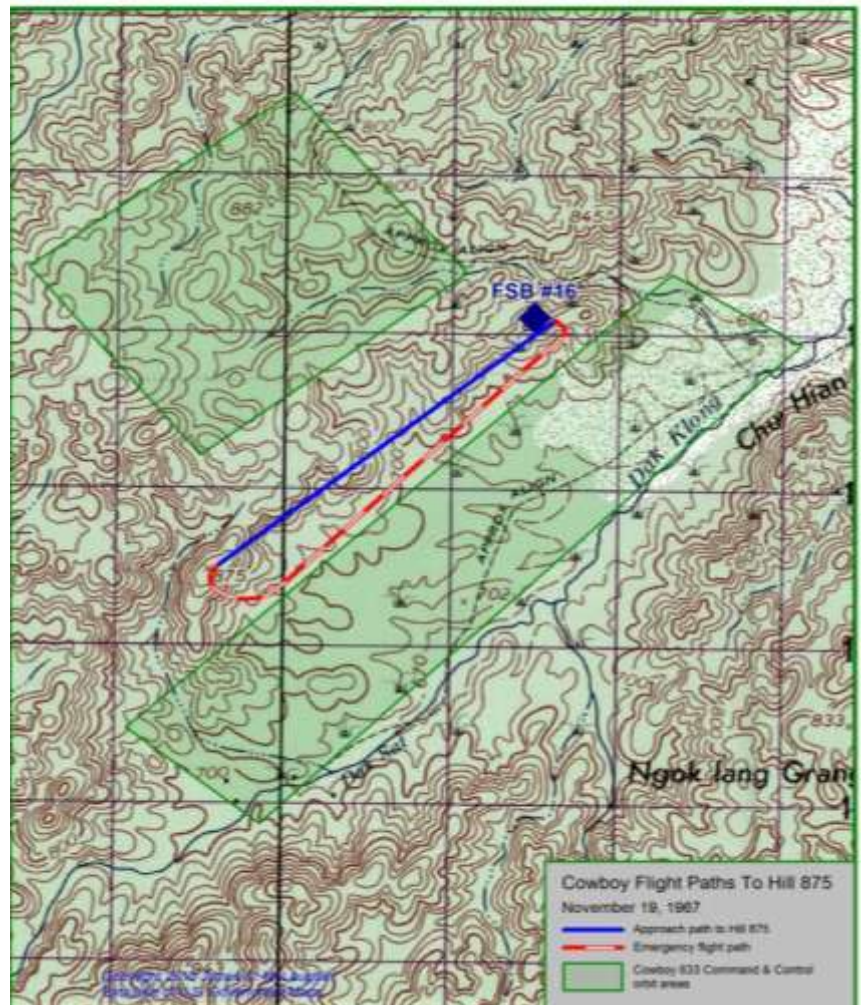
I went to my aircraft and gave my crew an abbreviated briefing. The crew chief and door gunner had been with me the day before so I didn't think I needed to elaborate with them on the situation. They were instructed to man their M-60 door guns and keep their eyes open for both friendly and enemy troops and were cleared to fire on the NVA. My co-pilot was WO-1 John Hooks who had asked me the night before if he could fly with me the next day and I told him sure, we'll go make some more circles in the sky. John was getting short and not flying as much but was being kept busy helping take care of the endless flow of paperwork at the company level. I was scheduled to fly the same mission I had flown on the 19th and I thought it would be a good mission for him to fly. I didn't think about him not being there on the previous day, so I don't think I told him the whole story.

The UH-1 Huey was designed to be flown by one pilot from the right seat. This allows him to keep his hand on the cyclic (controls direction) which is a must but allows him to let go of the collective (up/down/ throttle) with his left hand and set radios, instruments and other tasks as needed. The instrument panel extends in front of the right side and gives the pilot a full instrument panel. The left seat does not have this extension but does provide basic instruments for VFR flight. This gives the pilot in the left seat a better view to the front of the aircraft and for this reason, we flew with Aircraft Commanders in the left seat and the copilot in the right seat. Pilot positions in "B-model or C-model" gunships were reversed because being in trim is a must when firing aerial rockets and the greater visibility on the left allowed the copilot an advantage when firing the flex guns, mini-guns or 40 mm grenades.

We loaded the LZ kit and I climbed into my familiar left seat, my copilot in the right, the crew chief took his place on the door gunner seat in the well on the left beside the transmission housing and the door gunner took his seat in the well on the right. The Brigade sent a 1st lieutenant with us to act as an observer and to kick the load out when we got over the hill. This would allow the crew chief and door gunner to stay on their guns. Our observer sat on the cargo floor with his back to the transmission housing. We never put the jump seats or seat belts in for this kind of mission because it restricted movement in the cargo area. We ran up the aircraft, made our preflight checks and departed Dak To on the 10 or 15 min flight to Hill 875 where we would meet the Falcon Gunships that would cover our approach to the hill.

Approximate Flight Path of Cowboys to Hill 875

November 19, 1967



(Copyright: Jim McLaughlin)

(continued...)



As we got close to the hill, I made radio contact with the guns and told them my plan of approach. I also made contact with the radio operator on the hill and told him that I was going to shoot for a point about 1/3 of the way below the top of the hill trying to shield myself as long as possible from the hills to the west where I feared the NVA might have 12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns. I would then proceed up the hill at about 20-30 knots airspeed until I was over them. He was to talk me up the hill and tell me when I was close and when I was over them because the vegetation was too thick to see down through. I didn't want them to pop smoke because that would have alerted the NVA to my destination. He told me he understood and again stated they still had not had any contact with the NVA that morning.

We joined with the guns in formation with a light fire team (2 gunships) on my left and another fire team on my right. I made my approach from the east across the Dak Klong River with the two Falcon fire team's maneuvering into their attack formations. It has taken me nearly 40 years to place the following 10 minutes or so in perspective because, to me, time seemed to slow down. I began to focus on the radio operator on the hill and mentally turned the rest of the world off. All got quiet on the radios as I approached the hill and the point I was shooting for. I reached my point down from the top of the hill and just above the tree tops continuing uphill carrying my airspeed as planned. The RTO on the ground told me he could hear me and I was coming toward him and to keep coming. I continued to the top of the hill and all of a sudden the RTO on the ground suddenly said you are right over us. I had too much airspeed to make an immediate stop and my momentum carried me past the US position. What I had thought was a good plan suddenly went out the window. Now I was hovering over the NVA and all I could do to get back over the US troops was to back up. The NVA must have been asleep as I approached the hill but now they were all awake and we began to take small arms fire. To me, time was still in slow motion and I could hear an AK-47 directly under me and on my side of the aircraft firing full auto into the aircraft, but to me it seemed there were several seconds between rounds. After each report from the gun I could feel a hit on the aircraft

and I continued to back up hoping to get behind the tree tops or out of view. I didn't think that AK would ever run out of ammunition and I can still hear it firing today. As I started backing up and knowing I was taking a lot of hits, I scanned the instrument console and everything was in the green. About this time the crew chief came on the intercom and told me the observer was hit and was lying on the floor. He had his right hand on the back of my seat looking out the left cargo door and the bullet went through his right shoulder. Fortunately he fell into the aircraft and not out the door.

Now I had a wounded man and no one to kick the load out and I was not getting instructions from the RTO on the ground as to my position and I didn't want to kick the load out to the NVA, so I decided to exit stage right. I called the guns and told them I was taking heavy fire and that all engine and transmission lights were in the green and I would be breaking to the right. No sooner than I made the call; I heard the master caution audio tone squawk to life and instantly knew I probably had a real problem. When I looked down at the center console it was lit up like a Christmas tree and all engine and transmission instruments were in the red. I immediately told the guns of my situation and that I was going to continue to fly the aircraft and try to make it to Fire Support Base 16 a couple of kilometers away. It seemed more like a hundred miles at the time. There was no way I wanted to be on the ground in the vicinity of the hill and I didn't think the troops on the hill needed a Huey falling on top of them.



We were told in flight school the transmission was designed to fly for 20 minutes without oil but who wanted to test it, but what about the engine with no oil pressure? After a few minutes, which seemed more like an hour, I was able to make a forced landing at FSB 16 and tried to set down as far as possible to one side of the LZ so other aircraft could land. When I went to shut the aircraft down, I discovered one of the rounds that hit us had taken out the bevel gear and cross tube that runs from the left collective to the right collective and we had no throttle control to the engine....

(continued...)



...Thank God those turbines run on a governor. We shut the master fuel switch off and let the engine run out of fuel. I didn't want a crew member around the engine or transmission in case one or the other locked up.

We had taken rounds between my copilot and me, behind my head which hit the Lieutenant, a dozen or so up through the fuel cells under the cargo floor, several through the main rotor and tail boom but the two that I think about the most are the ones that came up at an angle entering about two inches under the crew chief's feet, passing through the transmission well and exiting about six inches or so above the door gunner's head. The medics carried the wounded Lieutenant away and we unpacked the LZ kit and pulled gear out of the aircraft and waited for the next Cowboy to arrive.

A short time later, WO-1 Wes Hiliker arrived and we loaded the LZ Kit into his aircraft for the next attempt. There was a Capt from the 173d who was going to ride on this attempt. I had worked with him a lot in Phu Hiep and at Dak To where he usually ran our resupply pick up points. He was well liked by the Cowboys and kept things running smoothly on the LOC pads. I told him "Don't go, you are going to get hit" and he gave me his normal big grin; said he would be ok and climbed in.

Mr. Hiliker and his crew made an approach similar to mine and were also driven from the hill by intense ground fire. The Captain took a round through the groin as he lay on the cargo floor. I heard this on the radio and when they landed, I ran to the ship and grabbed his hand looking him straight in the eyes I yelled, "You stupid son-of-a-bitch, I told you not to go!" He was ash white and obviously in great pain as he squeezed my hand and gave me that big grin of his. The medics arrived and carried him away and I never saw him or the Lieutenant again. I have always wondered how they fared, but today I don't remember their names so if anyone knows please contact me.

Edward Murphy, in his book "Dak To" wrote something to the effect that on November 20th a helicopter flew low over the hill and the crew waived and flew off. I'm sorry but I didn't have time to wave and now you know the real story.

By the way, John Hooks never asked to fly with me again.

####



The picture is several days after we created our perimeter. There were still trees and brush standing. I haven't found a picture showing the creation of our perimeter and after the bomb dropped. Our bunker was at 1:00 o'clock. Where the perimeter was established the slope was rather gradual, pitching off to either side/



This picture is us going up the hill. I was somewhere in the front. We had snipers in the trees as we passed them. We emptied several rounds in the trees to take out the snipers. We got hit in the front and rear along with the snipers. We were told to dig in and hold the perimeter. After the initial hits and the bomb 2nd battalion was in bad shape. The NVA tried to get through where we were but, we took them out with grenades to keep from giving away our position. When 4th battalion came in through our bunker we felt better. I have great admiration for the men of the 4th battalion. The enemy wasn't very far from our perimeter maybe 30 meters or less.

After the bomb hit along with several NVA mortar hits, I ran so much and jumped in any hole I could find when the mortars started coming in. I saw a mortar hit right in a hole with three paratroopers in it. We had several wounded we tried to take care of without any medical supplies. We gave moral support to hold on until we could get them out. I felt like I could hear and smell the NVA they were that close to us.

I have a difficult time remembering what happened on Hill 875. It comes back to me in bits and pieces.

Roger Wittenbrook, C/2/503d



A Very Bad Place

I was at “Dak To” twice during my tenure in Vietnam. Once with the 173d (1966) and once with the 101st (1969). Both were very bad experiences. I will never forget Dak To or War Zone D – bad, bad places.



Les

(Photo by Jim Steele, 1/503)

I don't believe I have any photos but I will look. This is what I recall. I just want to get these memories out of my head and into this text, in response to your request. That is it.

It was November 1967 and I was getting ready to DEROS home. My first year in combat turned out to be a great learning experience and I made it through alive. I had just left six months on the line as Recon Platoon Leader, 1/503; recently returned from R&R in Sidney, (that is another story), and made CPT while I was gone. I became Liaison Officer from the 1/503 to the Brigade HQ, essentially killing time to go home when we deployed to “Dak To.” When I stepped off the aircraft on that rutted airstrip at Dak To, I just could sense I had arrived in a very bad place.



1/503 over the Central Highlands of Vietnam

(Photo by Jim Steele, Recon 1/503d)

I recall being in the Brigade TOC when two companies of 2/503 came into heavy contact with a well-equipped enemy force. Chatter on the Brigade radios began to build to the point of pure terror and chaos. Having just come off the line I knew exactly what was happening to those men and those units.

I sought permission from the Brigade S3 to put together an ad hoc Rifle Company of HQ cooks, mechanics and bottle washers to go up the mountain and help reinforce the engaged units. Fortunately for me, a relief company made contact with our engaged units on the backside of the mountain and my plan/idea was called off. I was not looking forward to leading a group thrown together in the way that they were, without any Infantry or small unit combat experience.

The bad news for many of the men on the mountain is they were eventually overrun and many were shot in the head overnight. I do believe that it was in this battle that Chaplain Charlie Watters earned the Medal of Honor. He had been Chaplain in the 1/503 before moving over to 2/503. He was a great Chaplain and obviously a great Warrior and Hero as well.

I left for home shortly after that battle but it will never leave my memory. We lost a very large number of very fine Paratroopers on that stupid mountain.

That is my memory dump for Dak To.

Airborne & RLTW!!

Les Colegrove

Recon 1/503d



Proudly standing outside Les' home.



November 2012

By Wambi Cook
A/2/503d



RTO Wambi Cook during a reflective moment in Vietnam.

Though the epic encounters on the mounts of both 875 and 882 in the Central Highlands of South Viet Nam that late fall of 1967, I remember vibrantly the events leading up to these battles. Long gone were the laid-back victories the Herd had relished in D Zone, in and around Bien Hoa, Saigon or Tay Ninh just to name a few. For months on end, we kicked plenty pajama ass, and bothered not with taking names. Now, however, the Viet Cong's northern compatriots were a much more formidable force than we neither anticipated nor were accustomed. Since arriving in late spring, every unit within the Herd had its share of comparative victories countered by a handful of dispiriting defeats culminating in the annihilation of Alpha Company 2nd Battalion on the subsequent June 22.

In the south, we often went weeks without so much a chance encounter with a prototypical "gook" sighting. The Highlands, on the other hand, accorded us ample prospects to match might against might with some of Uncle Ho's elite and decades tested North Viet regulars.

I recall a welcomed, nonetheless brief, respite on the beaches of the South China Sea in Tuy Hoa late that October. The mountainous triple canopied highlands had taken its toll on most of us. So the sun and fun was just what we needed. Rumor had it that the brigade would soon be relocating back to Bien Hoa base camp. This misapprehension was hastily quelled when our marching orders had us airlifted off Black Horse firebase to the Dak To airstrips the first week of November. I can still see the newly jungle-fatigued raw recruits from the 3rd battalion disembarking from Chinooks and quickly taking over our positions. I ruminated if they'd yet grasped the enormity of what lay ahead in these god forsaken mountain ranges.

From the time we launched phase two operations in and about Dak To, we were constantly under fire. There was a period in early November where 2nd Battalion fought pitched battles every day and sometimes through the night. The enemy was relentless and resolute. They were unyielding in every way imaginable. At the same time, we gave no quarter which usually resulted in our ultimate triumph.

Probably, the principal lesson learned from earlier conquests was that our strength was in numbers. We would not be caught undermanned and hopelessly spread too thin as we'd done on June 22. We routinely operated in nothing less than in a battalion size scope. The NVA would be foolish to go up against such an intimidating mass.

Apparently, their many years of warring did not concur with our own time tested combat strategies. In short order, the Herd was in for mêlées of a lifetime.

Leading up to the assault on Hill 875 and knowing full well the decades of resolve demonstrated by the enemy, I reason, to the man, we were supremely confident that we could rebuff any and everything the NVA heaved at us, and victory would ultimately be ours.

It's been 45 years and I reminiscence...

Relieved when it initially seemed like Delta and Charlie companies had the "skirmish" well in hand. Alpha would be assigned to cut a landing zone for the 'few' wounded.

Flustered when it was apparent that "our numbers" were not equal to the enemy's.

(continued...)



Frustrated when it was obvious that we were surrounded by a greater force, and couldn't get the mounting wounded to the LZ in a timely manner before we'd be overrun from all sides.

Angered when I couldn't determine who was leading us. Our circumstances became stronger 35 years later after viewing several documentaries, reading After Action Reports and accounts from other first-hand combatants. It took a while before officers and NCOs assumed some semblance of command. I hark back to when one young Lt. dazed and confused later that same day, but don't remember seeing him again in the ensuing days. He was not a KIA, however.

Terrified when our own aircraft released a 500 lb. bomb in the middle of our wounded and command post just before dusk that night. The entire perimeter was aglow from the massive fireball it produced. Immediately, horrific shouts of "*They're coming over the berm!*" rang out. I never used a foxhole, so I was at the ready for the inevitable blitzkrieg.

Mystified when the onslaught never materialized. More astounding was discovering the next day a second unexploded 500 pounder rested harmlessly with its rear fin fully visible on my good friend since jump school Joe Gray's foxhole. Why the enemy didn't take advantage when we were most vulnerable is one of my many imponderables surrounding the day's events.

Disconsolate when overlooking the bomb's after effects. Aerial flares lighted the 'pit' where most of the wounded lay dying. Many of whom could/should have probably survived were it not for the missile's devastating efficacy.

Distraught after finding out that a medic from either Delta or Charlie company didn't survive the blast. I'd personally aided him and several other WIAs soon after impact. I don't recall his name, but assured him he'd get back to his girl in Detroit.

Resolute when I was informed that the decimated second battalion was ordered to remain in the rear in the course of the final assault. I and many others from 2nd Battalion were just as determined to be a part of the primary attack element as anyone. We randomly incorporated into the ranks of the 4th battalion's concluding charge.

Petrified when the engineers set off untold pounds of unexploded ordnance at dusk that same night. I was in

the chow line awaiting our Thanksgiving fare. We were alerted by "*Fire in the hole!*" but were not prepared for this horrific light show. I likened it to a mini atomic bomb blast.

Remaining on the hill the following day with a half dozen others from 2nd Battalion, all of the 4th Battalion, and a contingent from the 4th Infantry Division ostensibly to assist the onsite military historians with our recollections from the previous four days' actions. For some strange reason, I'm fairly confident that I was not interviewed by anyone associated with this task.

Amazingly, I suffered no physical wounds, but will bear the emotional scars ad infinitum.

Grateful I survived to tell my story for what it's worth.

Myself and three others returned to Viet Nam in February of 2011. We collected soil from atop Hills 875 and 882. Anyone wishing a small portion of this sacred soil may contact me via email. (See Page 122)



From left, Sky Soldiers Gene Counselman A/1/503d, Wambi Cook and Les Fuller A/2/503d on the summit of Hill 875, Dak To in 2011.

####



We came across this poignant poem by Gary Jacobson. As we copied Gary's poem to this newsletter, repeatedly buried in the text were the words "Winged Airborne Heart". We don't know if that may have been an early title Gary planned for his poem, as attempts to contact him failed. Instead, our 1st Air Cav brother simply entitled his poem, "Dak To, Vietnam 1967".



Dak To, Vietnam 1967

By Gary Jacobson

During the fierce battle for a hill called 875
Elite Airborne Infantry struggled just to stay alive.

These leather tough men,
These hard fighting men,
Were the best of men,
And they were the worst of men,
But they were men...
They were our brothers.
They were our fathers.

They were our favored sons.
They were the handsome "Boy Next Door,"
That all young girls adore.

Fighting soldiers from the sky,
Fearless men who jump knowing they might die,
The flowers of American youth,
Defending freedoms from tyrants uncouth,
Inspired by honor distilled from heavens above,
More than self their country love.

Airborne sky troopers patrolling an unnamed hill
Came under intense recoilless rifle fire.
A withering blanket of VC rifle grenades
made the situation dire.

Fearing their lives might soon expire,
The 173rd Airborne
Fighting all bloody morn,
Withstood wave after wave of attacks,
Displaying bravery in a hundred single,

Gallant acts,
Struggling in close quarters hand-to hand,
Determined at all costs
to make a stand.
173rd Airborne elite, pressed to evict the North
Vietnamese Army by combat edict,
To give Charley the boot,
From his dug-in fortress route,
From hilltop enclave entrenched,
Like a honeycombed beehive
On a hill with no name, just numbered 875.

Airborne infantry assaulted the ridgeline,
Facing NVA regulars, top of the line,
Fighting mad like hornets around a nest pissed,
Repelling Airborne infantry attacks
Launched on their lofty summit sublime,
Time after time after time.

Up the bloody hill
Filled with faith and hope still,
The "Boys next door" advance
Gambling heavily on chance,
To the NVA's perimeter trench.
They crawled within 25 yards
Of bunkers a lofty summit guards,
Through withering fire of artillery barrage,
Encircling them in smoking camouflage.

Mid ear shattering din thundering
Mid devastating fire blistering,
Mid air support close in
Exploding the hill in smoke again,
And yet again,
Feeling heat of Charley's mortars Incoming,
Mid annihilations deadly ring of fire raging,
Astride a burning, exploding, funeral pyre.

With coming dawn,
Charley unleashed a blistering attack,
To prove of fighting will they had no lack,
Bent on driving yankee usurpers back.
Charley would not soon give or flinch,
Quite comfy in elaborate tunnels and trench.
Charley had not dee dee'd and fled
Bunkers with thick dirt roofs overhead.
In fact,
Charley would be fortified there still,
If not for American will.

(continued....)



Sky troopers encircled the Cong's position,
In the face of intense demolition.
Moving through an inferno still burning,
A hill still smoldering,
With American blood and ash blackened.
Up the hill by grim battle charred,

Airborne infantry relentlessly charged,
Through a gauntlet threatening
destruction,
Through shadow of death's imminent obliteration.
Brave men could not this battle undone leave,
Though NVA loomed so close,
You could hear them breathe.

Airborne talked prideful talk,
Now it was time to walk the walk.
Through the very pits of hell,
hearing Charley's cursing yell.
Amid carnage darkning dim,
Brimstone raining down on them,
Pungent fear in throats lumping,
Foul hatreds around them smelling,
Men from the land of the brave
All around them crying,
Men from the home of the free
All around them dying,
Machine guns pumping
God awful fearing,
Gut-shot brothers around them groaning,
Hearts and beings churning,
In primal screaming,
Nostrils pure hate breathing,
Dreams of death souls torturing,
Breathlessly through acrid smoke running
Lungs burning,
Countless dramas unfolding,
Of heroic soldiers rescuing,
Being rescued,
Shooting,
Being shot at,
Grenades throwing,
Ducking grenades down on them rolling,
Hoping, praying, cursing the Vietcong,
Hiding from the Vietcong,
Hiding from themselves.

With fixed bayonets on rifles M-16,
Cascading rivulets of sweat down foreheads careen,
On charred infantrymen faces sheen,
Hot swelter on brows shining,
Down camouflaged faces coursing,
Down faces caked with chalk and mud,
Unsure the rivers weren't life blood.

Soldiers from both sides,
See eye-to-eye the surging tides,
See faces of others fearing death,
See the last vestiges of humanity bereft,
See face-to-face incarnate foes,
Brother shadows,
All their beings absorbed with hating,
Each consumed with Killing,
Each preoccupied with the others dying.
Tremendous fears flutter in their head,
These soldiers fighting and dying,
In the abode of the dead.
War is an unholy estate,
A malingering Devil's hate,
Where condemned soldier's time
After time after time after time,
In horrible combat rhyme,
Deliver pure souls
To war's most Satanic roles.
Forced to kill or be killed,
War causes a strained separation from God...
Tumbling from the precepts of the iron Rod.
Yet strangely, in war,
Soldiers are never nearer to God!

Who will this fray win,
By the rockets red glare,
In horrors deepening pit of despair,
Mid bombs bursting in air?
Each man wagers a meager immortality
That he will not be a fatality,
In battles basic futility.
The summit of Hill 875
Goes to he standing last, still alive.

These leather tough men,
These hard fighting men,
Were the best of men,
And they were the worst of men,
But they were men...
There were our brothers.
They were our fathers.
They were our favored sons.
They were the handsome "Boy Next Door,"
That all young girls adore.

Gary Jacobson
B/2/7th 1st Air Cav
'66/'67

Source: <http://pzzzz.tripod.com/Airborne.html>



U.S. GIs Stop Four Savage Red Attacks

SAIGON (UPI) – American troops beat back four new attacks by 2,500 North Vietnamese in bloody fighting that raged in the jungle covered highland hills around Dak To near the Cambodian border until early Sunday morning.

At least 103 Communists were killed in the latest series of fights – part of a nine-day battle in which the Communists hoped to overrun and seize the area. It sent their dead soaring to 527 confirmed and an estimated death toll of more than 1,000.

GEN. CREIGHTON W. Abrams, deputy to Gen.



William C. Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, visited the battlefield Saturday and told the troops that despite the still continuing fighting, they had smashed a Communist attempt to set up a series of enclaves along the Cambodian border.

Even as he spoke, fresh fighting broke out in the jungles soaked by dying

Typhoon Freida. The determination of the North Vietnamese to keep coming back for more punishment amazed veteran field officers.

FOR THE second day in a row, American troops pulled back to let tactical fighter bombers and the big B52 Strategic Air Command monsters hammer Communist positions with massive strikes of bombs, rockets and napalm.

But as the Americans moved back into the bombarded hills and jungles, the North Vietnamese struck with a fury.

At least two regiments were involved in the day-long fights Saturday, and intelligence reports indicated another two regiments were lurking in the area, being held in reserve.

SHORTLY AFTER dawn Saturday, North Vietnamese troops attacked the paratroopers fire base of the 173rd Airborne with its mortars and artillery about five miles west of Dak To. The paratroopers battled back for four hours, hanging on until help arrived, then drove the North Vietnamese back in another four hours of bitter fighting.

Just a mile or two away, two companies of the 4th Infantry Division locked in a fierce fight on the slopes of Hill 724 which overlooks Dak To. The two companies managed to link up and shortly after midnight had beaten the North Vietnamese into retreat.

(Orlando Sentinel, November 12, 1967)



The stark ridge lines studded with shell-splintered tree trunks are the site of the longest and bloodiest single battle of the Vietnam war. The fighting began a month ago after 6,000 North Vietnamese troops – protecting infiltration routes along the Cambodian border – moved into the hills overlooking the U.S. airstrip and Special Forces camp at Dak To. Under attack from 15,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops, the bulk of the enemy withdrew into the jungle. But last week, on Hill 875, a tough and disciplined force of North Vietnamese took a stand. Holed up in deep bunkers that defied constant air and artillery attacks, they pinned down a battalion of the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade with such fire that for three days the paratroopers could not even evacuate their wounded by helicopter. Finally, behind flame-throwers, reinforcing battalions clawed their way up Hill 875 and took it. The cost: 178 wounded and 79 dead paratroopers – 30 of them victims of a misplaced U.S. bomb. Dak To as a whole had claimed at least 273 Americans, 32 South Vietnamese and 1,290 North Vietnamese, a toll exceeding that of the fight for the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965. General William Westmoreland, in Washington for meetings with the President, called Dak To the start of “a great defeat for the enemy.” (Life magazine)



Paratroopers Find Death On Hill 882

By Jurate Kazickas

HILL 882, Vietnam (AP) The paratrooper came running back through the woods on this hill near Dak To in the central highlands. He waved his rifle, and blood streamed from his mouth.

“Stay down! Keep your heads down!” he shouted. “They’re all around us!”

WE TOOK shelter behind a tree as North Vietnamese machine guns raised the jungle from 50 yards away.

It was Saturday afternoon on Hill 882, about 11 miles southwest of Dak To. A company of the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade had moved up the slopes of Hill 882 looking for the enemy. They had found him.

Soldiers huddled behind any clump of bamboo roots or logs that would protect them.

NO PLACE was safe. The North Vietnamese had tied themselves into the branches of 100-foot trees and were firing from everywhere.

Beyond the command group, a platoon led by Lt. John R. Robinson, 27, of Orlando, Fla., had encountered a reinforced company of North Vietnamese troops. The fighting was at such close quarters the enemy was at times hurling back grenades thrown by the Americans. At one point, a North Vietnamese jumped into the same hole with a U.S. paratrooper. The North Vietnamese did not leave the hole.

After two hours of fighting, there were 17 wounded Americans. While part of the company laid down a curtain of fire into the dense bamboo jungles, other men started to pull back with the wounded.

IN A JUMBLE of packs, weapons and helmets the wounded lay within a small perimeter. It was a

clearing where only a few hours before some of the troops had been eating their C rations.

The North Vietnamese continued to fire. Then they added Claymore mines and mortars to their barrage. The paratroopers slowly pulled back.

Men from two other companies, their own strength weakened by combat, moved quickly to protect the wounded men.

DARKNESS BEGAN setting in. Air strikes pounded the North Vietnamese positions, and the rounds of supporting artillery whistled overhead. Finally, the shooting died out.

Medical evacuation helicopters came in to lift out the wounded. Some sniper fire met them as they dropped down. Troops dragged their dead and wounded in ponchos to the landing zone.

The landing zone where the choppers touched down was an area that was to have been the scene of an awards ceremony with a general attending. But that was the plan before the battle began.



Source: United States Army in Vietnam: Images of a Lengthy War. A paratrooper from the 173rd Airborne Brigade calls for a medic on Hill 882 near Dak To.

The other paratroopers began digging in. No one spoke much. ###



RTO for an Afternoon, or Hill 875, Late on the First Day

By **Sam Stewart**
C/2/503d

Sweating in the heat, Gonzalez, myself, and one of the new guys scratched out a foxhole with a discarded steel pot, an empty ammo can, and a stick only to hear that Capt. Kaufman ordered a realignment of the perimeter, moving our position forward out of the lightly shredded tree line and onto the crest. It looked too exposed to me, but so what. Plt. Sgt. Kendrick was the one who gave us the word. He was carrying the last of our platoon PRC-25's. All five RTO's were WIA or KIA during the assault on the bunker line. He asked one of us to be the 3rd platoon's RTO. Well, Gonzalez was the gunner, so he couldn't take it and man-handle a machine gun too, and the other guy had only been with us for 4 – 5 weeks and wasn't up to speed on commo protocol, so I said I'd take it. The Sergeant had asked me several weeks earlier if I was interested in being his RTO, but I declined, preferring to hump the M-79. Given the scorecard for RTO's during the afternoon, it was a good decision, I felt.

Resupply choppers buzzed in around 17:00 – 18:00 dropping ammo as they slowly moved over our position. One box of grenades landed between me and another man, missing us both by about 18 inches. We just grinned, opened the box of canisters, and commenced to bend the pins on the frags.

The Hueys were taking hits as they flew passed; small holes appeared in the fuselage of one as I gaped upward, hoping it wouldn't drop out of the sky, and wishing they'd hurry up and leave so the enemy fire would subside. Some of the ammunition landed outside our perimeter, so Lt. Lantz and a party of several others moved out to retrieve it. The terrain was sloping somewhat up towards the NVA bunker complex and was littered with fallen trees and limbs, as if a giant had dropped a very large bundle of pick-up-sticks onto the hill. You had to climb over, under, and around the entanglement to make any headway. The last time I saw Lt. Lantz was during this retrieval of the ammo. He didn't have on a helmet, and I don't recall seeing his CAR-15, but he may have had it. Ten-to-fifteen minutes later the word made the rounds that Lt. Lantz was killed by a sniper.

We didn't get any water with the resupply, and as luck would have it, we'd dropped our rucksacks on the steep west side of the hill when the first burst of fire erupted on the point that morning around 09:00, I believe it was.



Sam Stewart, survivor of the battles at Dak To in June and November 1967.

Now we were without our rucks, they being outside our perimeter after the NVA rolled up A Company, pushing them into our right rear. I'd already shared my one canteen with other guys in the squad; most of the men didn't carry canteens on their web gear, preferring to load them into the pockets of their rucksacks. So, we were thirsty by late afternoon, having first waited a couple of hours to make the assault as TAC air and Arty. pounded the enemy positions, then made the assault only to be called back into a defensive posture as Charlie outflanked us on the right and mowed down A Co. Our thirst would get worse the next day.

Some D-handled shovels did make it to the top, so we passed them around from position-to-position. I helped Gonzalez and the new guy with their hole; we dragged logs across the top and packed it with branches and dirt. Their foxhole faced the enemy and formed the extreme right of the 2nd battalion perimeter. The defensive perimeter then took a right angle facing down-slope in the direction the NVA had flanked us earlier. I believe 1st platoon held this part of the perimeter.

(continued....)



After finishing up Gonzalez's machine gun position, I moved back ten - twelve meters and started to dig in. By now it was getting on to 19:00 and evening was upon us. My foxhole was set at 90 degrees from Gonzalez's position and was digging out deeper on the left or rear than the right or front of the foxhole. My hole actually faced down-slope to the right or west side of the hill, positioned in a gap between the Gonzalez hole and the 1st platoon left flank hole. I got down to about 20 inches on the left and 14 inches on the right (about one shovel-head depth) when the probing from the NVA became more intense, forcing us to-ground. There were exchanges of fire and some grenade activity as the enemy moved in on us. I lay prone and kept my ear to the radio handset.



L-R: Charlie Company's Sgt. Koontz, 3rd Platoon Team Leader, KIA; Madrid, 3rd Platoon Rifleman, WIA on 875.

(Photos by Sam Stewart)

Captain Kaufman called a poop meeting of all platoon leaders during this time. Sgt. Kendricks filled this role for 3rd platoon, Lt. Smith having been WIA during the charge. He died in the afternoon; I heard it was from shock. He'd sustained a leg wound and a head wound, from what I could tell when I saw him carried passed me in a firemen's carry by two others.

As it was getting dark, Charlie Kilo, I believe it was, came on the net and announced that TAC air was going to make another pass. There were soft pops as parachute flares opened up, scattering flickering light over the scarred landscape. It was eerie, because you knew "they" were out there and "they" were hungry to get at you.

I didn't hear the jet, but I heard that swooshing sound of a fast moving object through air as the bomb came in. The sound lasted much less than a second, and three thoughts tumbled out of my mind almost simultaneously. First, I thought this was an enemy mortar; second, I thought it was going to be a very close one by the intense, short duration of the sound, and third, as the explosion erupted, I realized it was not a mortar; it was a bomb.

The concussion bounced me repeatedly off the ground, my right leg going into a spasm. I was looking past my right shoulder and observed a strobe of red-orange light against black trees. I guess this went on for a few seconds, after which there was a silent pause before the wailing of the injured started. I didn't know it at the time, but it was a tree burst directly over the Charlie Company CP group where the leaders were gathered for the meeting maybe 35 meters behind me. There was no traffic on the radio, so I thumbed the handset: "...Charlie Kilo, this is November Kilo, over...." Nothing.

Message repeated and still no come-back from Sanders, the Charlie Company RTO. Next, "...Lima Kilo, this is November Kilo, over...." Silence; no response from the 1st platoon RTO. Next, "...Mike Kilo, this is November, over..." when up comes the response, "...November Kilo, this is Sgt. K in 1st platoon, over...." After informing him that there was no response from 2nd platoon or the CP, Sgt. Koontz, platoon Sgt. of 1st platoon, instructed me to hold where I was and stay on the radio. Then Gonzalez called to me, stating they could not exit their foxhole, because there were tree limbs blocking the way. I raised-up and made it about 6 inches before banging my helmet on a hard object. Feeling with my hands, I realized it was a tree. The bomb blast felled the tree directly over my position with the bottom somewhere passed my feet and the top passed my head and over to Gonzalez's foxhole. There were tree limbs blocking my way on both sides, limbs above me and limbs directly below me. If I'd dug in anywhere but where I did, or not to the depth I dug, I would have been crushed or impaled. With difficulty, I wormed my way out of the tree and took a couple of steps in the direction of Gonzalez's position when Madrid, rifleman in my fire team, came up to me. He did not have his helmet and he said he was hit in the back by the blast. Sgt. K wanted my radio at his CP, so with great difficulty I managed to extract it from the tree branches. It was still operative as I handed it over to Madrid.

That was the end of my tenure as an RTO as I moved forward to help Gonzalez get out of his foxhole.

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World On Your Shoulders

Day One Hill 875

Just want it to end
Memories of all those lost friends
How can one year in your life
40 plus years later still haunt you
at night?
Why do you carry the world on
your shoulders?
How come these old dreams get
much bolder?
Holding the wounded friend in
your arms
You try to protect him from any more harm
Pulling him through the tangle of wood and bamboo
Trying to get him to safety is all you can do
Looking at his wounds and feeling his pain
You see another soldier lose it and go insane
Reaching for his field dressing you cover the bloody
flesh
You tell him it's Okay and then go back into the mess
The fighting gets worse as more of your friends go
down
Crying in pain as they lay wounded on the ground
You're only one man in a sea of dead and dying
As you pull another friend to safety you feel like crying
But then the thought hits, they would do the same for
you if the tables were reversed
Dragging those buddies along the ground you start to
curse
Then you look back and see more lying in blood
Give me strength God to go back into that human
flood
Again and again you go to tempt fate
Praying and hoping that you won't be too late
You know your friends are counting on you
Body so tired, but still does what you tell it to
You see the pleading in their eyes
And you know at least you have to try
When the battle comes to an end
And you look at all those dead and wounded friends
You wonder in your mind
Is it going to be me...next time?
This must be why you felt you carried the world on
your shoulders

Steve Welch
C/2/503d



Steve

Recollections

I was medivaced into
Dak To from north of
Plateau GI on Thanks-
giving day. A young
LRRP team leader came
up to me and he was
really mad. He had just
returned from a BDA at
an Arc Light site. He
told me they had found
a white man's arm
wearing a Russian Watch.



Dave

He said when he told his chain
of command in the debriefing they said, "No you
didn't." He wanted me to pass the word through SF
channels, which I did. Unfortunately they didn't bring
the arm back with them. I believe him though.

It was not the only time I knew of Russian officers
in the AO. One was spotted in Laos wearing Soviet
General Staff tabs on his collar.

Lots of guys at the Dak To airstrip kept looking at
the position of the sun and saying, "*Hanoi Hanna
better hurry*." When I asked what they were talking
about they said Hanoi Hanna had said over the radio
that she and Ho Chi Minh were going to have
Thanksgiving Day lunch on the Dak To airstrip.
Instead it was some senator from Texas having lunch
there.

Guys in the book (*Dak To* by Edward Murphy) I
knew were 1Lt Mike Burton. Mike lost both eyes on a
later tour. Cpt Joe Grosso MD, I think he was 2nd
Bn Surgeon and my roommate in jump school. He got
a Silver Star and about 200 pieces of shrapnel on Hill
875. He was trying to get the docs at the 71st Evac to
send him back to Dak To. I told one of the docs, "*Send
that stupid son-of-a-bitch to Japan*." They said, "*Don't
worry we are*." Joe could do six miles in just over 30
minutes - not bad for a doctor. 1Lt Bryan
MacDonough, kind of a sour personality with red
hair. I can't remember the fourth guy off the top of
my head. Airborne!

Dave Adkins
3rd/5th/12th/20th Special Forces



The Ivy Dragons

“Operation MACARTHUR begins. It was a continuation of the 4th Infantry Division border guard operations in the western II Corps that claimed 5,731 known enemy casualties. GREELEY was folded into MACARTHUR and the remainder of the Battle of Dak To would as part of this operation. The 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division and the attached 4/503d Abn from the 173d Airborne Brigade were located at Dak To. The 2d Brigade was at LZ Oasis, southwest of Pleiku and the 3d Brigade was at Ban Me Thuot.”



Ivy Dragons, B Company's attached 81mm mortar crew. On right is PFC Ralph Harry Barlett, Jr., KIA 11/11/67 on Hill 724.



RARE EARTH FROM HILLS 875 & 882

For those faithful 2nd Battalion newsletter followers, and other interested parties, I extend an offer I made last year; Myself and two Herd alumnae returned to Viet Nam in February 2011, and through varied maneuverings and a bit of luck, we ascended the infamous Hills 875 and 882.



Wambi, displaying sacred soil

Before leaving the Hills on 2/22/11, we each secured a *baggie* of sacred soil that we hoped to share primarily with those 1st, 2nd and 4th Battalion Brothers who survived these battles. A few survivors took advantage of this offer.

Well, we have residual earth that is still available, but on a first request basis. All that is required is to send to my home address a self-addressed, prepaid envelope. The amount of soil is approximately seven (7) grams. Check with your local USPS as to the necessary postage cost.

Actual battle participants will have priority.

Contact:

Wambi Cook
18458 East Orkney Street
Azusa, CA 91702
Or email:
Wambicook@aol.com

The Most Special Day

True story.....only 5 minutes ago I was telling a teacher about the Battle of Dak To and went to Wikipedia to explain to her what happened. One of the most profound moments of my life was when I went to the 3 panels at the Memorial in DC and felt such sorrow. I think I also told you in 90 degree heat I went by myself to Arlington and walked around to find Father Watters' grave and could not find it....I did find the Catholic memorial to him.....It was the most special day and will be in my heart always.

Christine McMillan

Wife of Mike MacMillan, Sniper A/4/503d



LZ ENGLISH, home of the 1st Cavalry Division in 1967.



Sky Soldiers take Hill 875 But at what price?



“U.S. troops move toward the crest of Hill 875 at Dak To in November, 1967 after 21 days of fighting, during which at least 285 Americans were believed killed. The hill in the central highlands, of little apparent strategic value to the North Vietnamese, was nevertheless the focus of intense fighting and heavy losses to both sides.” (AP Photo)



Westmoreland claims U.S. victory at Dak To

Nov 22, 1967:

General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, briefs officials at the **Pentagon** and says that the battle around Dak To was *"the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy."*

The battle for Dak To began on November 3 when 4,500 U.S. troops from the U.S. 4th Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade engaged four communist regiments of about 6,000 troops in the Central Highlands. The climax of the operation came in a savage battle that began on November 19 on Hill 875, 12 miles southwest of Dak To. The 173rd defeated the North Vietnamese, causing them to abandon their last defensive line on the ridge of Hill 875. However, it was a costly victory for the Americans, who suffered the loss of 135 men. In the 19 days of the battle in and around Dak To, North Vietnamese fatalities were estimated at 1,455. Total U.S. casualties included 285 killed, 985 wounded, and 18 missing.

In his briefing at the Pentagon, Westmoreland stressed the positive outcome of the battle. He revealed that a document removed from the body of a dead North Vietnamese soldier on November 6 stated that the Dak To battle was to be the beginning of a winter/spring offensive by the Communist B-3 Front. This document also revealed that the main objective of the action at Dak To was the destruction of a major American unit. The communists came close but ultimately failed in this objective. The Americans, despite heavy losses, defeated the North Vietnamese, mauling three enemy regiments so badly that they had to be withdrawn from South Vietnam to Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries for refitting.

Westmoreland was reportedly brought home from Vietnam by President Johnson to fulfill a public relations task and revive flagging morale throughout the country. His message on U.S. military prospects in Vietnam was continually optimistic, as he emphasized that progress was being made in the fight against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. These public statements came back to haunt him when the communists launch a massive offensive during the Tet New Year holiday on January 30, 1968.

Source: History.com



As long as a Sky Soldier walks this earth, they will not be forgotten.

