

CHAPTER XIII

The Battles of Ap Bau Bang II, Suoi Tre, and Ap Gu

Ap Ban Bang II

At 1150 on 19 March 1967, A Troop, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry Regiment, commanded by Captain Raoul H. Alcala, deployed within the perimeter of Fire Support Base 20. A unit of the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry, attached to the 1st Infantry Division, the 129-man company had six tanks, twenty M-113 armored personnel carriers, and three 4.2-inch mortar carriers. The unit formed into a circular (wagon train) perimeter defense with the mission of secur-ing the base for B Battery (105-mm.) of the 7th Battalion, 9th Artillery, commanded by Captain Duane W. Marion.

Fire Support Base 20 was located in relatively flat country 1,500 meters north of Ap Bau Bang immediately west of QL 13. To the south of the position was a rubber plantation, while wooded areas were prominent to the north and west. An abandoned railroad track ran parallel to and thirty meters east of the highway. (Map 15)

Intelligence sources had indicated that the Ap Bau Bang area was infested with local force guerrillas; they had also pointed out a well-used trail to the north which ran east and west. Captain Alcala sent his 2d Platoon commanded by First Lieutenant Harlan E. Short to establish an ambush along the trail at a point 1,500 meters north of the fire support base and approximately 350 meters west of Route 13. The ambush was to be in position by 1800. The perimeter was manned on the west by the 1st Platoon, commanded by First Lieutenant Roger A. Festa; occupying the eastern portion was the 3d Platoon under Second Lieutenant Hiram M. Wolfe, IV.

At 2250 that night a Viet Cong probe signaled the start of the second battle of Ap Bau Bang. The probe was spearheaded by a herd of fifteen belled cattle being driven across Route 13 at a point 150 meters northeast of the perimeter. Ten minutes later the Viet Cong started raking the northeast section of the perimeter with a wheel-mounted .50-caliber machine gun located on the railroad track embankment. Specialist Four Eugene W. Stevens, command-

Page 131

ing one of the tanks, trained his searchlight on the Viet Cong position and returned the fire with all his weapons. The fire fight was joined by the weapons of three of the APC's and continued for about three minutes. The enemy gun sprayed the perimeter with only five separate bursts of fire before it was silenced by the response of A troop.

During the lull that followed, the units, including the 2d Pla-toon still manning the ambush site, assumed a state of increased readiness. Reconnaissance by fire was conducted by Lieutenant Wolfe's tank along the wood line to the east beyond the railroad. At 2310 Captain Alcala reported: "Firing has ceased now, we are using infra-red to scan the area for movement. . . ."

At 0030, 20 March 1967, the Viet Cong attack resumed as Fire Support Base 20 was hit with mortar rounds, rifle grenades, rockets, and recoilless rifle fire. The beginning of the main phase of the battle had been signaled. Lieutenant Festa's track was hit, wound-ing his sergeant. It was apparent that the Viet Cong were well zeroed in. The fire was now coming from the west. Captain Alcala requested artillery support from the battalion he was securing and from Lai Khe.

Brigadier General James F. Hollingsworth, assistant division commander of the 1st Infantry Division, later described this phase of the battle:

Their mortar positions were located from 1500 to 2000 meters west of Ap Bau Bang in and around an old village that had been destroyed. The mortar positions were located by radar from the Lai Khe artillery base. . . . I understood the counter mortar radar played an important role in pick-ing them up. However, the most accurate way of picking up the mortars during this battle was by two airborne artillery observers who could see the flashes from the mortars. I think that a combination of both brought about their location.

As the intensity of the fire increased, another M-113 was hit. Then another APC received direct hits in the front and left side from recoilless rifle rounds; three of the crew were wounded and the vehicle was set afire. Two of the 3d Platoon tanks were hit; however, both remained in the battle.

Throughout the mortar and antitank bombardment, Captain Alcala maintained radio contact with his squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sidney S. Haszard, located to the south.

Within twenty minutes of the beginning of the mortar attack, the Viet Cong ground assault began with the main attack coming from the south and southwest and with a secondary attack from the north. The massed troops of the 273d Viet Cong Regiment emerged from the rubber trees and moved steadily forward

Page 132

under a base of fire. The enemy soldiers were wearing black pa-jamas or dark colored fatigues and sandals, and carrying individual weapons. The attack was co-ordinated with the mortar fire, and not until the enemy came out in the open was its magnitude apparent.

Captain Alcala advised his headquarters at 0050 that he could handle the attack, but asked that a ready reaction force be set up in case it was needed. Colonel Haszard acknowledged the message and alerted the 1st Platoon of B Troop to the north of Ap Bau Bang and the 3d Platoon of C Troop to the south to move to Fire Support Base 20. He gave Captain Alcala permission to alert his 2d Platoon at the ambush site to prepare for movement back into the perimeter. Colonel Haszard noted the growing size of the enemy offensive and decided to move with his command element to A Troop's position.

In the 3d Platoon sector on the eastern side of the perimeter, Lieutenant Wolfe detected Viet Cong movement and requested night illumination from a 4.2-inch mortar. As the light from the flare swung across the area, it was possible to see Viet Cong troops crossing the highway from east to west. The platoon commenced firing and the enemy movement stopped. Staff Sergeant George Hua reported, "I got two hits on top of my turret from 60mm mortar rounds, 2 rounds struck the gun shield below the gun tube. . . . Another round hit the main gun's blast deflector, so we opened fire with everything we could lay our hands on."

At 0100 Captain Alcala was advised that a fleet of Spooky 742-armed with miniguns, and a light fire team of helicopter gunships were on the way.

The enemy troops on the southwest portion of the perimeter were starting to swarm over some of the APC's. A voice from Track 10 came to Staff Sergeant Dorren in Track 17: "They are swarming all over my track. Dust me with canister." Sergeant Dorren hesitated, concerned about the effects of canister on the crew. Once again came the plea, "My people are down, shoot!" Several rounds of canister wiped out the enemy in the area of the overrun track. Staff Sergeant Ramos-Rasario also called for a dusting by canister. Sergeant Dorren fired several rounds in front of Track 11, eliminating the Viet Cong. Another

call for help came from Track 10. Sergeant Dorren fired again and then watched the track burst into a ball of fire as enemy mortar rounds scored direct hits. The wounded crew escaped, but Private First Class Steve Lopez died later of his wounds.

Two more armored personnel carriers were hit, one of them Lieutenant Wolfe's track. Because the Viet Cong were in so close

Page 133

to his line of APC's, Wolfe had to pull back about twenty-five or thirty meters and realign the platoon, completing the move by 0115. Lieutenant Wolfe's track was hit a second time by an RPG2 rocket. The entire crew was wounded and evacuated to the medical clearing tent in the center of the perimeter.

The troop's 2d Platoon came charging down Route 13 from its ambush site, the men firing intermittently as they came. The troopers, after arriving at the fire support base, manned the gaps in the hard-pressed southern half of the perimeter. As they took their positions, they were hit with recoilless rifle fire and grenades.

The elements of B and C Troops alerted earlier received the order to move and immediately raced to join the battle. The 3d Platoon of C Troop, attacking up Route 13 from its troop's position five kilometers to the south, ran through a barrage of enemy fire before reaching the perimeter at 0127. At the direction of Captain Alcalá, the platoon swept 1,500 meters south of the defenders along the rubber-grove tree line. Firing continually during their sweep, the cavalrymen swung west, then north, then doubled back and entered the perimeter from the southeast. The vehicles pulled into positions between A Troop's vehicles on the eastern portion of the perimeter defense.

At this same time the 1st Platoon of B Troop was tearing down Route 13 from its position eight kilometers north. After blasting through a hastily built ambush just north of the perimeter, the troopers moved around to the south, firing as they went. Moving into the perimeter, the platoon took up positions between A Troop's vehicles on the western half of the defensive ring.

The perimeter now contained the artillery battery, all of A Troop, and the two relief platoons—a large quantity of armor for the size of the perimeter. Captain Alcalá expanded the perimeter by forty meters with a counterattack at 0220.

Two of the tracks hit previously continued to burn throughout the engagement. Lieutenant Festa moved forward with two APC's to evacuate the wounded lying nearby. Several Viet Cong attempting to remove the .50-caliber machine gun from one of the burning tracks were killed, as were others attacking the foxholes containing the wounded. Lieutenant Festa and Specialist Four Abelardo Penedo, while under intense fire, dismounted and loaded the wounded into Festa's personnel carrier.

Meanwhile Colonel Haszard, in an APC followed by another M-113 bearing his command group, moved up Route 13 to the perimeter. Just short of the perimeter, Haszard's track was hit and disabled. Captain Alcalá sent a tank out of the perimeter to assist the disabled track. Colonel Haszard dismounted in heavy small

Page 134

arms fire and, warding off the Viet Cong, attached the towline. The command track, with its valuable communications equipment, was pulled into the perimeter.

<http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/90-7/ch13.htm>

4/8/2012

At 0300 another attack was developing to the south of the perimeter. It appeared to Captain Alcala that this attack was an attempt by the Viet Cong to recover bodies. Behind a line of skirmishers, unarmed troops advanced carrying ropes and wires with hooks attached to recover the bodies left on the battlefield. The attacking force was stopped within fifteen meters of the perimeter.

During this attack, and for the next four hours, miniguns and air strikes pounded the Viet Cong from above. An Air Force flare-ship kept the battle area continually lighted. Initially the artillery covered the northwest, west, and southwest sides of the perimeter while aircraft attacked on a north-south axis east of Route 13. Later a switch was made and the aircraft attack runs were made from east to west on the south and southwest sides of the perimeter.

During the battle, resupply and "Dust-off" (medical evacuation) missions continued under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Paul F. Gorman, G-3 of the 1st Infantry Division. Because of the nature of the battle and the preponderance of automatic weapons on armored vehicles, two and in some cases three basic loads of .50-caliber and 7.62-mm. ammunition were expended during the fight. At 0330 the enemy fire slackened; resupply of the units and evacuation of the wounded was completed during the next hour and fifteen minutes while the artillery and air strikes continued. Twenty-six of the sixty-three men wounded were evacuated; many of the slightly wounded chose to stay in their positions and man their weapons.

By 0450 it was noted under the illumination of flares and tank searchlights that the enemy was massing for an attack on the south and southeast sides of the perimeter. The Viet Cong started their attack at 0500; the artillery shifted its fire to the west, and aircraft dropped cluster bomb units followed by napalm and 500 pound bombs on the attackers. The final assault of the Viet Cong was blunted and the noises of battle subsided. At 0700 the final air strike and artillery rounds were placed on the withdrawing enemy.

Colonel Haszard delivered the following message to the men who had taken part in the battle:

I am extremely proud of every man in this unit for [his] actions last night. However, there are still many VC in the area. Therefore, you must take all precautions. I want you to have reaction forces ready for all elements in the way that you did today. . . . Sweep operations tomorrow must be done thoroughly. Insure that perimeters tonight are the best possible.

Page 135

The battle of Ap Bau Bang II¹ resulted in 227 (known) enemy dead, 3 prisoners taken, and the capture of much enemy equipment and weapons. Blood trails stood as mute evidence of the many bodies hauled away by the Viet Cong. Although more enemy than usual are killed by small arms when attacks are made on cavalry and armored units, the majority of enemy deaths in this battle, as in others, resulted from artillery and air strikes. In this instance, 29 air strikes delivered 29 tons of ordnance, and the artillery fired nearly 3,000 rounds. U.S. battle losses were 3 men killed and 63 wounded. Enemy prisoners identified the attackers as the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 273d Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division. Intelligence experts believed the whole regiment participated.

As a result of the battle, General Hay wrote a letter to the 9th Division commander. Printed in Vietnamese in leaflet form, it was dropped into the enemy area. Translated, the text of the letter read:

This is to advise you that during the battle of Ap Bau Bang on 20 March the Regimental Commander of Q763 (273d Regiment) and his Battalion Commanders disgraced themselves by performing in an un-soldierly manner. During this battle with elements of this Division and attached units your officers failed to accomplish their mission and left the battlefield covered with dead and wounded from their units. We have buried your dead and taken care of your wounded from this battle.

The letter bore the signature of General J. H. Hay.

Suoi Tre

The target for the helicopters was an egg-shaped clearing close to Suoi Tre, near the center of War Zone C and ninety kilometers northwest of Saigon. It was just three kilometers away from the area in which, during Operation ATTLEBORO four months earlier, the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, of the U.S. 1st Division had defeated elements of the 272d Viet Cong and 101st North Vietnamese Regiments at the battle of AP Cha Do. Events would reveal that the 272d had returned.

On 19 March, in an area surrounded by a tree line of sparse woodland which had been blighted by defoliants, U.S. helicopters

1Ap Bau Bang was also the site of the first major Vietnam action in which the 1st Infantry Division participated on 12 November 1965. In Ap Bau Bang I the 272d and 273d Regiments of the 9th Viet Cong Division attacked the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry (-), defensive perimeter and were repelled with the assistance of air strikes and direct fire artillery at the cost to the Viet Cong of 198 killed.

Page 136

airlanded the 3d Battalion of the 22d Infantry and the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery (-), led by Lieutenant Colonels John A. Bender and John W. Vessey, Jr., respectively, under the control of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division (Colonel Garth). Their mission was to establish a fire support base (GOLD) in support of Phase II of JUNCTION CITY. Heavy action was not expected. However, from the outset it was apparent that things would be different at Suoi Tre. (Map 16)

Page 137

As the three lifts of choppers touched down, five heavy command-detonated charges were set off by the Viet Cong in the tiny clearing. Three helicopters were destroyed and 6 more damaged with a toll of 15 killed and 28 wounded.² A Viet Cong claymore-type mine was also detonated against C Company of the 3d Battalion, wounding 5 infantrymen.

Company B of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, was assigned the east portion of the defensive perimeter, Company A the western half. Later that day the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, landed at Fire Support Base GOLD and moved to the northwest. Its last lift drew enemy fire, and another seven choppers were damaged.

Work progressed rapidly on 20 March to improve the fire support base perimeter defenses, and fortunate it was for the occupants of the base. The battle of Suoi Tre was to begin the next day.

At 0430 a night patrol from Company B operating outside the battalion perimeter reported movement around its ambush site. Minutes-then hours-passed and no further movement was detected. At 0630 the patrol prepared to return to camp. One minute later the area exploded as the base came under heavy attack from enemy 60-mm. and 82-mm. mortars. At the same time the patrol was attacked by a massive Viet Cong force. Within five minutes the patrol had been overrun, and all of its men were killed or wounded.

The first enemy mortar round had impacted on the doorstep of a company command post; seconds later another exploded outside battalion headquarters. In all, an estimated 650 mortar rounds fell while the

Viet Cong advanced toward the perimeter. As they moved closer, enemy machine guns and recoilless rifles joined

2 On the following day, 20 March, a similar misfortune might well have occurred in the 1st Division's area. There the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, had moved by foot to seize Sroc Con Trang which was to become Fire Support Patrol Base C for Phase II of JUNCTION CITY. It was unusual for the forces of the Big Red One not to make an airmobile assault into such an area. However, on 30 June 1966 the 1st Division had captured a Viet Cong plan to attack and annihilate a U.S. battalion on a landing zone at Sroc Con Trang. After the 1st of the 26th had secured the area, the 36th South Vietnamese Ranger Battalion, among other units, occupied and helped secure it. On 21 March the 36th Rangers discovered batteries and a wire in the wood line near the fire support base; following the wire, they found four holes filled with explosives. There was a center hole, and radiating from it was wire leading to three other holes at a distance of about twenty-five meters. In each hole were the necessary detonating caps. In the center one were also the following rounds: eight 75-mm., seven 81-mm., fourteen 60-mm. and 105 pounds of TNT. The other holes had similar but smaller loads: only 35 pounds of TNT each and various numbers and types of U.S. ordnance. It was all set to be command deto-nated. From then on the Big Red One, when it placed artillery and air strike preparatory fires around and into any landing zone into which it was bringing troops, always used a number of instantaneous fuzed bombs to strike the planned landing site of its chopper lifts in order to cut any wires and yet not chew up the terrain so much that it would be difficult to land and traverse.

Page 138

the attack. The Viet Cong made final preparations to assault the position.

Within minutes the entire perimeter came under heavy attack by waves of Viet Cong emerging from the jungle and firing recoil-less rifles, RPG2 rockets, automatic weapons, and small arms. The heaviest attacks were concentrated on the northeastern and southeastern portions of the defensive perimeter. As the attack increased in intensity, the three artillery batteries initiated countermortar fire in an effort to neutralize the heavy mortar concentrations which continued to rake the position. During the first assault Company B reported that its 1st Platoon positions on the south-eastern perimeter had been penetrated and that the reaction force from the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery, was needed to reinforce that sector. Artillerymen responded to the call, rushing to the perim-eter to help repulse the continuing attacks.

At 0700 the first forward air controller arrived overhead in a light observation aircraft and immediately began directing Air Force strikes against the attackers. At the same time, supporting fire from two batteries of 105-mm. howitzers located at nearby fire support bases was brought within one hundred meters of the battalion's perimeter. At 0711, Company B reported that its 1st Platoon had been overrun and surrounded by a human-wave attack. Air strikes were called in all along the wood line to the east to relieve the pressure on the company's perimeter. The for-ward air controller directing these strikes was shot down by heavy automatic weapons fire. At 0750 the Company B commander requested that the artillery fire its "beehive" rounds (canisters filled with hundreds of metal darts) into the southeastern and southern sections of his perimeter. At 0756 Company B reported that complete enemy penetration had been made in the 1st Pla-toon sector and that they were desperate for ammunition resupply. Ammunition and a 20-man reaction force from Company A were sent to assist B Company. At 0813 the northeastern section of the perimeter was overrun by another human-wave attack. Two minutes later, elements of Company A which had established an ambush just outside the perimeter the previous night charged into the camp's perimeter and assumed defensive positions. Somehow all of the men had managed to elude the surrounding Viet Cong.

The commander of Company A reported the Viet Cong had penetrated the northern sector of the perimeter. Ten minutes later a quad-.50 machine gun located in that sector of the base was hit by RPG2 rocket rounds and overrun. As the attacking Viet Cong swarmed over the weapon and attempted to turn it on the friendly positions, the gun was blown apart by a well-placed round

Page 139

from a 105-mm. howitzer crew who had witnessed the whole action from their position some seventy-five meters away. By 0840 the northeastern, eastern, and southeastern portions of the perimeter had withdrawn to a secondary defensive line around the guns of the artillery batteries. The northern, western, and southern sectors were managing to hold despite intense pressure from large numbers of Viet Cong who had advanced as close as fifteen meters from the defensive positions. Attackers had infiltrated to within hand grenade range of the battalion command post and only five meters from the battalion aid station.

The howitzers of the artillery battalion, with their tubes leveled, began firing beehive rounds into the Viet Cong. At point-blank range, round after round of direct fire was delivered, each round spewing 8,000 finned steel missiles into the enemy.

Air strikes were brought within as little as fifty meters of U.S. forces, and supporting artillery batteries threw up a continuous wall of shrapnel around the battalion perimeter. When the artillery inside the perimeter had exhausted its supply of beehive rounds, it began to fire high explosive rounds at point-blank range. By 0900 the northern, western, and southern sectors of the perimeter were holding but still under Viet Cong pressure. The positions on the east had withdrawn even closer, but the line was still intact.

The 3d Brigade headquarters had earlier alerted its other units which were conducting operations to the west. They were the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry; the mechanized 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry; and the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor (-). When word of the attack reached these forces, they reacted immediately. The 2d of the 12th moved from the northwest traveling cross-country and avoiding traveled roads and trails. The mechanized infantry and armor battalions moved from the southwest until they reached the Suoi (stream) Samat. An intensive search revealed only one suitable fording site.

At 0900 the relief column from the 2d of the 12th broke through and linked up with the battered Company B. With the added forces and firepower, the units were able to counterattack to the east and re-establish the original perimeter. But the Viet Cong were still attacking. As they advanced, many of the soldiers could be seen wearing bandages from earlier wounds. Some, so badly wounded that they could not walk, were carried piggyback into the assaults by their comrades.

Twelve minutes after the first relief unit arrived, the mechanized infantry and armor column broke through the jungle from the southwest. With their 90-mm. guns firing canister rounds and all machine guns blazing, they moved into the advancing Viet

Page 140

Cong, cutting them down. Shortly thereafter, the enemy began to withdraw. By 0930 the original perimeter had been re-established and by 1000 resupply choppers were arriving and began evacuating the wounded. By 1045 the battle of Suoi Tre was over. Elements of the mechanized and armor battalions pursued the fleeing enemy, and artillery and air strikes continued to pound routes of withdrawal. Sporadic contact continued until noon.

The attacking unit had been decimated; 647 bodies were recovered, 7 prisoners were taken, and 65 crew-served and 94 individual weapons were captured. (Of the weapons captured, 50 were RPG2's, a small bazooka-type antitank weapon.) U.S. losses were 31 killed and 109 wounded.

Documents found in the area showed that intensive planning had been made by the Viet Cong before the attack. The attacking force was identified as the 272d Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division reinforced by elements of U-80 Artillery. The 272d was considered one of the best organized and equipped enemy units and was one of the few Viet Cong units that dared to make day-light attacks. But at Suoi Tre its troops had been scattered in a disorganized route to the northeast with artillery and air strikes pounding at their heels.

Ap Gu

On 26 March the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry (the Blue Spaders), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alexander M. Haig, was alerted to prepare for an assault deeper into War Zone C and near the Cambodian border. At that time the battalion was attached to the 2d Brigade of the 1st Division and was located at Fire Support Patrol Base C at Sroc Con Trang. There it was engaged in perimeter defense, road security, and occasional search and destroy operations. Now Colonel Haig turned his S-3 loose on the planning for the assault. It was to be made in late morning on the 30th into Landing Zone GEORGE, some fourteen kilometers to the west in Operational Area Sioux. The Blue Spaders would secure the zone for a follow-up landing by the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, and then conduct operations in their assigned sector. Intelligence indicated that they could expect to make contact with the enemy in that area. (Map 17)

On the day scheduled for the assault, poor weather delayed the preparatory air strikes around and on the landing zone, resulting in a two-hour delay in H-hour. (The assault of the 1st of the 2nd was postponed a day. It was not until early afternoon that the initial elements of the battalion touched down at GEORGE. (The landing

Page 142

zone terrain consisted of open fields covered with tall, meadow-like grass. The area was surrounded by medium to heavy jungle.) The remainder of the battalion closed within an hour. Upon landing the battalion immediately dispatched cloverleaf patrols to seek the enemy. The patrols uncovered fortified positions in and around the landing zone; however, they made no contact. That evening the unit organized its night defensive position in the vicinity of the zone. Fighting positions were dug as always with full overhead cover and interlocking fires all around. Listening posts were established and ambush patrols sent out. No significant contacts occurred that night.

The next morning, 31 March, the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry (Lieutenant Colonel William C. Simpson commanding), was air-landed in GEORGE without incident. Upon landing, the 1st of the 2d moved to a position two kilometers southwest of the landing zone. The 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, began search and destroy operations in the surrounding area. Company A went south and C Company east. B Company remained in reserve, manning and patrolling the battalion perimeter at the landing zone.

The battalion's reconnaissance platoon was searching the woods northwest of the perimeter. There it became obvious that the Americans were expected: from the trees hung small signs written in English warning that Americans going beyond the signs would not return.

At 1300 the platoon moved farther to the north into a wooded area and was approximately five kilometers south of the Cambodian border when first contact was made. The platoon's point man was hit by enemy fire. First Lieutenant Richard A. Hill, an infantry officer experienced in Vietnam combat, went forward to check the situation and was hit and mortally wounded. Only Hill's radio operator was left in contact with the battalion S-3. Before being hit, Hill had advised the battalion that the platoon was

heavily engaged with automatic weapons, small arms, and gre-nades. Colonel Haig had called for artillery support and, when advised that the platoon leader had been hit, immediately took action to coordinate the artillery fire and air strikes in support of the platoon.

At the same time, B Company was just closing on the perimeter after a sweep of the battalion's defensive area. When advised of the reconnaissance platoon's desperate position and that its leader had been hit, the commander on his own initiative swung his company to the north and proceeded to the assistance of the embattled platoon.

Page 143

Colonel Haig boarded his helicopter, and it was not until he was airborne that he learned of B Company's move north. As Haig pointed out later, while this move to extract the platoon was necessary, the lack of accurate control of artillery fires and air support complicated the problem. As a result, B Company had entered the engagement without sufficient preparation and found itself heavily engaged along with the reconnaissance platoon.

The B Company commander confirmed that he was confronting at least a battalion-size enemy force. His initially optimistic reports became progressively more pessimistic; the company was pinned down by heavy machine gun fire, rockets, mortars, and recoilless rifles, and was running low on ammunition. Colonel Haig realized that he must reinforce and extract the units.

Company A was alerted for action and moved forward to pass through and relieve B Company.

Colonel Haig landed near the point of contact and had his battalion operations officer go airborne to control fire direction. Haig found Lieutenant Hill dead and the B Company commander wounded and in mild shock. Electing to stay with his units, Colonel Haig was joined by the A Company commander who had moved his unit through B Company and gained fire superiority over the enemy force.

The intensity and accuracy of artillery and air strikes increased, permitting all units, except initially two platoons of A Company still in contact, to be extracted. As the units moved back, the Viet Cong left their bunkers and moved forward to maintain contact; they were finally forced to terminate the engagement because of exposure to the incoming bombardment. Contact was broken at 1705. The engagement resulted in seven Americans killed and thirty-eight wounded. Enemy casualties were unknown at that time.

Meanwhile the division commander, General Hay, had ordered reinforcements into the area. At 1555 the first element of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, minus C Company, touched down at Landing Zone GEORGE under heavy sniper fire and occupied positions to the west and northwest of the 1st of the 26th. The battalion, under Colonel Lazzell, established its night defensive positions. The two battalions co-ordinated defensive plans, improved their fighting positions, established listening posts, and sent out ambush patrols.

During the night, friendly harassment and interdiction artillery and mortar fires were placed in the area around the perimeter. From midnight until 0400 on 1 April, listening posts to the north,

Page 144

east, and south reported some movement to their front; however, there was no significant contact. Mortar fire was directed into areas of suspected enemy activity.

At 0455 a single enemy mortar round exploded to the front of the perimeter of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry. Colonel Haig heard it and correctly interpreted it to be a registration round for a Viet Cong mortar attack. He immediately ordered all of his companies to a full alert posture and directed them to take cover and be prepared for an attack. He also recommended that the 1st of the 16th follow suit. Colonel Lazzell's "Rangers" concurred and manned their fighting positions.

Colonel Haig immediately requested artillery fire for east of his position.

Five minutes after the enemy registration round had detonated, the first of several hundred rounds of 60-mm., 82-mm., and 120-mm. mortar rounds were fired into the northern portions of the battalions' areas. The rounds came from a position estimated to be a thousand meters northeast of the defensive perimeter. The mortars were so close that the U.S. troops could hear the rounds being fired. So many mortars were firing at once that the noise they made "sounded like loud, heavy machine guns." Because of the early warning, the rapid response to the first enemy round fired, and the defensive strength of the fighting positions, only twelve men were wounded.

At the same time the mortar attack opened on the units in Landing Zone GEORGE, a co-ordinated attack started on Fire Support Patrol Base C, where much of the supporting artillery for the 1st of the 26th and the 1st of the 16th was dug in. With the incoming mortar and 75-mm. pack howitzer rounds exploding around them, the artillerymen were not so efficient as usual in getting off the requested fires. However, they did not cease firing. In addition, the artillery that had moved into Fire Support Patrol Base THRUST on 29 March was not under incoming mortar attack so that it could- and did-provide the usual support to Colonels Haig and Lazzell. Why the enemy did not bring this base under attack has never come to light, but it was a mistake on his part.

When asked later about his immediate response to the registering mortar round, Colonel Haig replied that he had sensed the ultimate ground attack, but not its extent or the size of the force involved. He felt, as he was sure the Viet Cong commander felt, that they had unfinished business as a result of the action the day before. "There were indicators available to both sides that follow-up action might be appropriate, and in the VC's case, especially in view of the fact that he had four or five battalions to employ

Page 145

... I [also] was set to exploit what I thought had been a fairly successful action the day before." There was little question that another engagement was imminent; if not instigated by the Viet Cong, then Colonel Haig would have taken the initiative.

The heavy mortar attack on the two battalions ended at 0515. (It lasted an hour longer at Fire Support Patrol Base C.) During this time flareships, a light helicopter fire team, and forward air controllers were requested from and furnished by the 2d Brigade tactical headquarters. Seven minutes later the Viet Cong launched their initial ground attack against the northeast edge of the perimeter.

The attack hit primarily B and C Companies of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, and A Company and the reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry. As the soldiers manning the friendly listening posts withdrew to the perimeter, the enemy had followed them in.

Private First Class William Trickett, a fire team leader in C Company, described the attack:

When the listening post came back in, they hit their [own] trip flares. . . .An [enemy] automatic weapon opened up on them and I fired my M-79-I believe I hit and silenced her. [The VC] came on in and wound up in the 1st Platoon area. It was a mix

up after dark. The next thing we know they're sprawling all over the field. Some way or another they came through our trip flares and were already in the field digging positions.

. . . We lost one of our machine guns that was hit by a mortar. The other one kept firing, but considering the people we had on the listening post and everything, our positions were just under strength-we just got hit. They realized our weakness and came through us.

It was apparent that the co-ordination of mortar fire with the unobserved movement of the enemy through the woods and tall grass immediately ahead of C Company had permitted surprise in their attack resulting in the capture of three bunkers and a penetration roughly forty meters deep and a hundred meters wide in the C Company sector. Decisive hand-to-hand fighting was taking place in the penetration.

(Colonel Haig later indicated that he had known from the day he selected the night defensive position that the natural wood line-leading into the northeast portion of the perimeter was the most vulnerable portion of his perimeter. He realized that he was up against a very intelligent enemy when the commander picked this spot for his attack.)

As described by Captain George A. Joulwan, S-3 of the battalion, the Viet Cong ". . . walked right through our mortar fire and artillery fire-they just kept coming so we knew we had a very large force out there. Charlie Company was fighting hand to hand

Page 146

in the bunkers as was our Bravo Company. . . . We organized about seventy-five meters back . . . consolidated the line, and held."

The commander of Company C, Captain Brian H. Cundiff, without regard to the intense enemy fire, moved among his men and mustered an effective defense which held the shoulders of the penetration. During this time he also killed six of the attacking enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Although wounded three times, he refused medical aid and continued to fight and rally his force.

At 0630 the reserve of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, the reconnaissance platoon, was moved into a blocking position behind C Company and, along with B Company, fought to re-establish the perimeter. Meanwhile the enemy was launching diversionary attacks from the east and west.

The Air Force air strikes were now arriving over the target area at the rate of one flight each fifteen minutes, thus providing continuous air cover. Initially there was some difficulty in getting the flights armed with cluster bomb units.³

It appeared that slowly the main Viet Cong attack was beginning to falter under the heavy volume of fire placed upon it. Light and heavy helicopter fire teams were firing rockets and miniguns on the wood line to the northeast; artillery was massing fires along the east flank and in depth to the east. As the flights started arriving with cluster bomb units on board, the jets began striking within thirty meters of the American positions, littering the entire area on both sides of the perimeter with enemy dead.⁴ As the ordnance began taking its toll, the Viet Cong started to run, many of them throwing down their weapons.

In the meantime, Captain Cundiff led elements of C Company, reinforced by the 1st Platoon of B Company, in a massive counter-attack which was pushing the remaining Viet Cong back into the deadly artillery barrages and air strikes. By 0800 the perimeter was restored.

As the Viet Cong broke contact and began withdrawing, the 1st of the 2d and 1st of the 16th passed through the 1st of the 26th to pursue the enemy to the east and northeast. However, no significant contact was made. Artillery and air strikes (including two

³Cluster bomb units were badly needed since they were the most effective ordnance for the situation which existed: enemy troops in the open, echeloned in depth, and in contact with our own troops. Since the pilot can release the small bomb units from their cannister at low level, he can drop them within thirty meters of our own troops, and, when they explode on contact, our troops are unharmed, since the lethal radius of the ordnance is slightly less than that distance.

⁴After the battle there was one string of twenty-nine enemy dead in a line 150 meters long; a duster bomb unit run had literally curled them up.

Page 147

B-52 strikes) were shifted to likely routes of withdrawal and known enemy base camps in the area.

After contact was broken and the enemy routed, the Blue Spaders began to police the battlefield, evacuate casualties, and bury the Viet Cong dead. Four hundred ninety-one bodies were found among their defenses and those of Colonel Lazzell's battalion. After sweeps around the area had been made, the known enemy dead totaled many more. During the two-day battle, the enemy (all three battalions of the 271st Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division and elements of the 70th Guard Regiment) lost 609 killed, 5 captured, and over 50 weapons of all types. U.S. casualties were 17 killed and 102 wounded.

During the mortar attack on Fire Support Patrol Base C (where the 2d Brigade command post was located), Colonel Grimsley was wounded and evacuated; command of the brigade was assumed by General Hollingsworth. Later that day, command was turned over to Colonel Haig.

During the fight artillery units of the 1st Division had fired

Page 148

some 15,000 rounds into the battle area, while Air Force jet fighter-bombers logged 103 sorties with over 100 tons of ordnance in support of the ground action.

Asked at what point the pendulum of victory had swung in his favor, Colonel Haig replied:

In the subjective sense there's no question: with the arrival of the air, tactical air and especially the ordnance, the CBU ordnance was the main factor. However, this is subjective . . . and while it was the straw that broke the camel's back, I would be very remiss if I didn't say that the artillery . . . our mortars, and our own automatic weapons were major factors. And had not all of these been employed to their utmost, and closely coordinated, and well integrated, no single factor by itself would have changed the outcome. . . . As it turned out, the amount of fire that we had falling by way of artillery and our own automatic fire and infantry weapons, [and,] may I add . . . the CBU, with the enemy configured as he was, that is, stacked in depth, in the open, and moving forward, [it was this] combination of things that really made the difference.

Colonel Haig had this further thought about the battle of Ap Gu:

In this particular attack, I think, as in ATTLEBORO last fall, when you get belly to belly with a large VC force, they are not sufficiently flexi-ble to react especially intelligently. They are going to react like most soldiers and that is to attack. In this case, we were right on their doorstep. We found them by aggressive reconnaissance, the order was called, and the battle was started. . . . I think this was a case of being in their back-yard, confronting the commander . . . with a basic problem: When the enemy [the U.S. force] is there, do you run? If you run on top of the series of defeats, where do you stop? When do your men finally realize this is a lost cause? I think this commander was confronted with that very tough decision and he came

down hard on the wrong side-at least from the perspective of his future effectiveness.

Back near the Cambodian border that Viet Cong commander probably would have agreed.

Return to the Table of Contents