



# WELCOME TO "A WALK WITH THE 35TH"



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1. NAME OF OPERATION: SAM HOUSTON
2. DATE OF OPERATION: 21 March 67 - 22 March 67
3. LOCATION:
  - a. A Company.....vic YA 665576
  - b. B Company.....vic YA 675536
  - c. C Company.....vic YA 680568
  - d. Battery C, 2d Bn 9<sup>th</sup> Arty, vic YA 675536
4. COMMAND AND CONTROL HEADQUARTERS:
  - a. HQ, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - b. Company A, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - c. Company B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - d. Company C, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - e. Battery C, 2d Bn 9<sup>th</sup> Arty
5. REPORTING OFFICERS:
  - a. LTC Clinton E. Granger, CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - b. CPT S.L.C. Barcena, CO, A Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - c. CPT Ralph E. Walker, CO, B Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - d. CPT Ronald B. Rykowski, CO, C Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - e. CPT James E. Lanning, CO, C Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - f. CPT Richard E. Dwinell, CO, Battery C, 2d Bn 9<sup>th</sup> Arty
6. TASK ORGANIZATION:
  - a. Company A, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - b. Company B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - c. Company C, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 35<sup>th</sup> Inf
  - d. Battery C, 2d Bn 9<sup>th</sup> Arty
7. SUPPORTING FORCES:
  - a. Battery D, Composite, 5<sup>th</sup> Bn 16<sup>th</sup> Arty
  - b. 7<sup>th</sup> US Air Force
  - c. Engineer Sqd, D Company, 4<sup>th</sup> Engineer Bn
  - d. 170<sup>th</sup> Avn Bn

8. INTELLIGENCE: Current IntSum

9. MISSIONS:

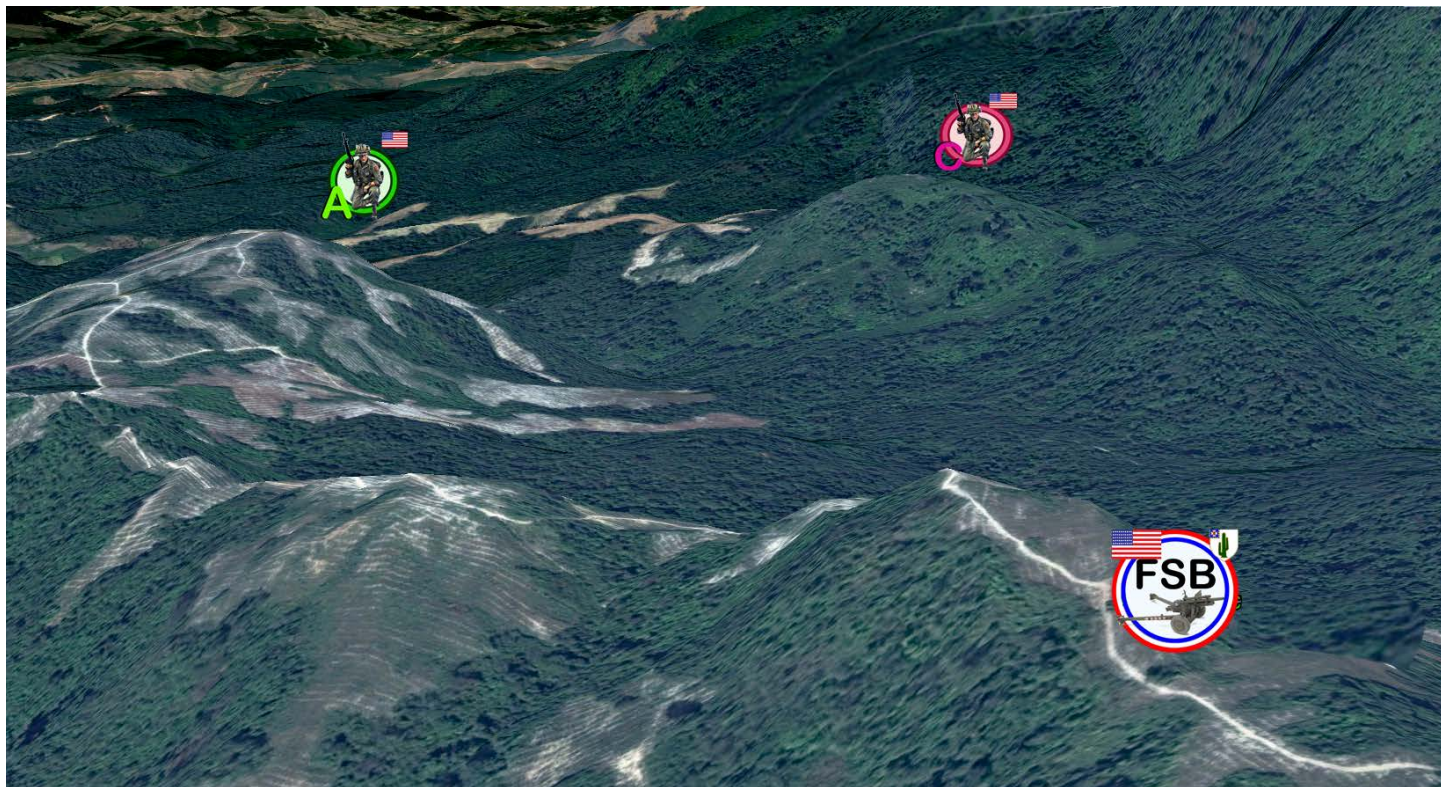
Company A: To conduct search and destroy operations from north to south between the 66 and 67 north/south grid lines and west of Company C.

Company B: Initially to provide FSB security; subsequently the company was directed to conduct a combat assault in relief of Company C.

Company C: To conduct search and destroy operations from north to south, to the east of, and parallel to Company A.

(Jim Anderson B 2/35<sup>th</sup>) Putting this story together I knew from the beginning was not going to be easy. The story involves a great many who were members of the 2/35<sup>th</sup> and personally there at the time. I've chosen to put the story together around the narrative as told by Cpt. "Rick" Rykowski, C Company's commanding officer. This due primarily because his is the most complete accounting of the events surrounding the fight, at least from the perspective of the element most seriously hit.

Like any battle that has ever taken place, the view from every foxhole is different. I've been lucky enough to have been able to gather a great many reports of the Cacti's battles. And, I've been even luckier to have been able to converse with many of those who were personally involved. The following passages in **Bold type** are from Cpt. Rykowski's report that he prepared for the Army. Sections that are in *Italics* are reports from a number of individuals who were involved in this battle.



**Company A and Company C locations in the afternoon of 21 March 1967**

**Operations of Company C, 2D Battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, in a search and destroy mission on 21 March 1967 in Kontum Province, Republic of Vietnam. Personal Experience of Rick Rykowski Company Commander.**

## INTRODUCTION

Operation "Sam Houston" began on 1 January 1967 in the Central Highlands, Republic of Vietnam. During the period 1 January through 15 March, small scale guerilla activities, consisting mainly of mining incidents, increased throughout Pleiku Province. In the later part of January, numerous enemy sightings were reported in the panhandle area of Kontum Province. Elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division crossed the Nam Sathay River in mid-February. During the next five weeks, the Division conducted search and destroy operations along the Cambodian Border.

In addition to conducting routine search and destroy operations, the Division was charged with securing highway 19E from Mang Yang Pass to Pleiku. Within the area of operations they also secured highways 509, 14N and 19W.

## THE EXISTING SITUATION

From late February through mid-March, the First Brigade, Fourth Infantry Division, with three battalions, assumed responsibility of an Area of Operations (AO) between the Se San and Nam Sathay Rivers. During the first three phases of the operation the battalions frequently

displaced in the AO to block exfiltration routes and to expand a number of potential Fire Support Bases (FSB). Contact with the enemy was generally light. However, four significant contacts did occur during the first three phases of the operation.

As Operation "Sam Houston" moved into its fourth phase on 16 March 1967, both the first and second brigades moved from an area west of the Se San River to an area bounded generally by the Se San River and 60 grid line on the north, the Pleiku defense sector and Tactical Areas of Responsibility (TAOR) on the east, the 20 grid line on the south, and the Cambodian Border on the west.

In mid-March, there were reliable indications that North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were infiltrating into an area west of Highway 14B. Mortar attacks replaced mining incidents. On the night of 13 March and continuing into the next morning, the division Tactical Command Post (TAO CP) and the forward Command Post (CP) of the first and second brigades situated at Landing Zone (LZ) 3 Tango came under mortar attack. (YA850455)

*(Anderson B Co) The 2/35<sup>th</sup> Infantry was just coming off a fight from 12-13 March that had involved all three of her line companies. The battalion had suffered 14 KIA and 46 WIA. On the night of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> the battalion FSB, sitting next to Highway 14, had come under mortar attack; receiving approximately 140 rounds of 60mm and 82mm mortar rounds. Another KIA was registered with another 26 WIA.*



**NVA patrol**

## THE ENEMY

The enemy forces engaged during operation "Sam Houston" were essentially the same as engaged by the 3d Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during operation "Paul Revere IV", but they had changed their tactics. During operation "Paul Revere IV" the enemy would attack well dug-in positions at night following heavy mortar preparations. In operation "Sam Houston" he engaged company sized elements during daylight while they were still moving.

The enemy located the battalion FSB's and kept them under constant surveillance. When the companies moved out on patrol, the NVA would keep track of their movements through the use of small reconnaissance parties or trail watchers. At a time and place of his choosing, he would attempt to engage a rifle company while it was moving. The NVA would close quickly with elements of the company before supporting fires could be effectively employed. He would simultaneously

attempt to surround the entire company and then fragment it into platoon size elements.

## THE TERRAIN

The area of operations was rugged and mountainous, containing many steep-walled valleys and ravines. There was only one road in the AO and a limited number of LZ's. The hill masses were covered with thick underbrush.



A rare opening in the jungle with a view of the valley below. Photo Jim Anderson B 2/35

The trees ranged from 20 to 25 meters in height with some as high as 45 meters. The dense, broadleaf, evergreen forest effectively screened all movement from aerial observation. Due to the dense undergrowth, ground observation was restricted and seldom exceeded twenty meters.

The thick vegetation and terrain irregularities limited target acquisition and restricted adjustment of indirect fire support weapons. Additionally, the thick underbrush frequently deflected small arms fire and limited the employment of grenade launchers and hand grenades.

## THE BATTALION PLAN

After the mortar attacks on the division Tactical Command Post (TAC CP), the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry was given the mission of conducting search and destroy operations in the northwest portion of the AO along possible exfiltration routes.

Two rifle companies, "A" and "C" would make a combat assault northeast of the battalion FSB. For two days following the combat assault, they were to search west toward the Nam Sathay River. On the third day they would begin moving south towards the battalion FSB. As an additional security measure, the companies were directed to link-up each afternoon prior to darkness.

On the move south, Company "A" would move on the west, between the 66 and 67 grid lines, and Company "C" on the east, between the 67 and 68 grid lines. (See Map "A")

Company "B" would secure the battalion FSB and be the battalion reserve. The company had suffered heavy casualties five days prior (12 March 1967) to the start of the operation and was receiving replacements.

### THE PREPARATION

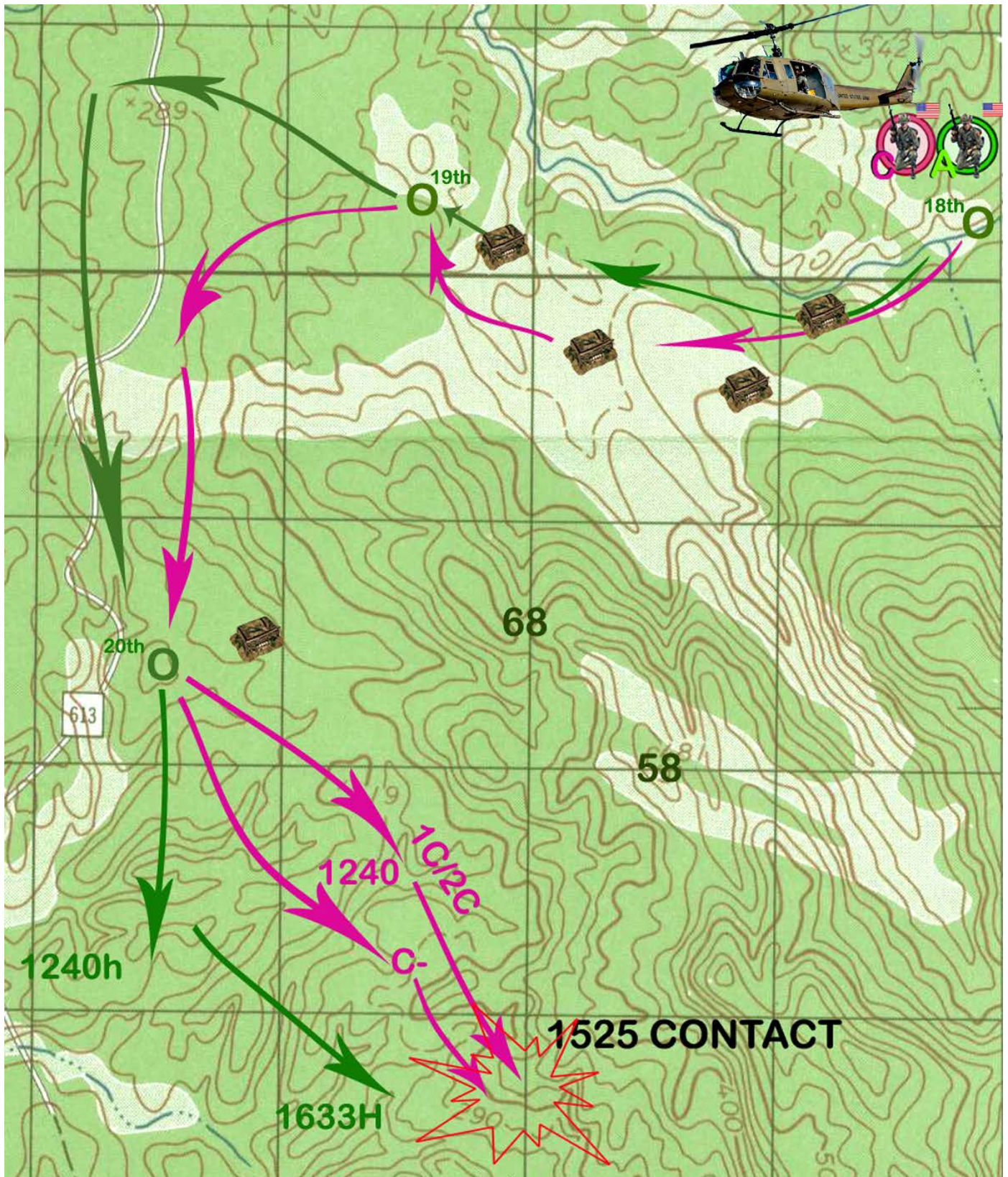
The two companies completed the combat assault late in the afternoon on 18 March 1967. The move west towards the Nam Sathay River in the next two days resulted in both companies finding NVA battalion size base camps that had been used within the previous three days. There was no contact made by either element during this move. On the 20th of March, the companies began their sweep south, towards the battalion FSB.



**Dinner is served in the Central Highlands photo by Walt Shields**

*(Johnson A Co) We stayed in the firebase for a day or two (after the 12 March battle) and then were lifted to a location just north and east of the firebase. There were some media there (from Spain) with us and they asked Capt. Barcena if they could get a few shots of our men shooting the M60. After he got permission from higher up they got their photos they left. We waited for*

*C Company to arrive and then we began patrolling the area. I had a crew of 3 men and we were humping the small 60 mortar, the load was nothing in comparison to humping the 81 mortar. We encountered a few abandoned NVA base camps but met no hostile fire during this day. I did have this creepy feeling all day that someone was watching us.*



General routes of travel 18-21 March. Night locations taken from Daily Journals.

**On the morning of 21 March, the companies remained in the overnight location pending the arrival of replacements. The company commanders utilized this time to co-ordinate their respective routes for the day. Specific items closely coordinated were: the tentative location of the noon halt, the location for that evening's overnight position, and the routes for each of the subordinate elements in the companies.**

*(Johnson A Co) I always paid close attention to my gut feelings because they were usually right and had on several occasions saved my life. We met up with C Company and set up our night position a short ways from a well-used NVA trail. This was one of the biggest trails I had seen so far and even had commo wire on it. I'm telling you, this was a really spooky area; it gave me chills to think that we were right in the middle of all these NVA. As usual the lowly grunt did not know squat about anything and this was no exception. I knew since we were setting up with C Company somebody higher up knew that we were in for a world of hurt. We sent out several LPs that night and the one near the NVA trail was reporting heavy movement most of the night by NVA moving south. I did not get any sleep that night waiting for the shit to hit the fan. (Artillery was called in about 400 meters to the north of A Company's position. Sweeps were sent out with negative results)*

*In the morning C Company called in some defensive concentrations around us, while this was happening something hit me in the throat. I looked around because I thought someone was pulling my chain and threw something at me. I finally looked down at my feet and there was a piece of a 105 round smoldering in the dried leaves. I checked out my neck and it was ok, luckily the flat piece was spent before it hit me. The artillery forward observer from C Company ran up to me and checked it out, he asked if I wanted a purple heart. My reply was, "That and a quarter would get me a cup of coffee" He just laughed and left. C Company then sent out a small patrol to sweep around the perimeter. A few minutes later I heard one shot come from the patrol. Word came back to us that one of them shot himself in the foot. We waited for the dust off to arrive and then A Company left the area. My recollection was that we left south west in platoon elements. We went with 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon headed by Lt. David Dunn.*

**Captain Ronald B. Rykowski, the commanding officer of Company "C", completed a map reconnaissance and plotted artillery concentrations along the company's intended routes. The preplanned requests were in turn submitted to the artillery Forward Observer, Lieutenant Emory, who had joined the company the previous evening. The company commander requested that the fires be placed on call, and the concentration numbers given to him as soon as possible.**

**After receiving the artillery concentration numbers, the company commander called the platoon leaders to his location and briefed them on the routes and concentration numbers. The concentrations served a dual purpose; they placed fires on likely danger areas along the routes from which the platoon leaders could quickly adjust fire, and they served as marking rounds for the platoons.**

**Because of the known enemy tactics, the company commander split the company into two elements. The east element consisted of the first and second platoons; the west element consisted of the third platoon and the headquarters group. This arrangement placed the headquarters group nearest to Company "A" in the event of enemy contact.**

The replacements were received at 0930. Prior to departing the overnight location, a sweep of the perimeter was conducted by the second platoon. When the platoon returned, the company commander requested the first artillery concentration. Company "A" left the perimeter under cover of the supporting fires.

Company "C" remained in the perimeter for ten minutes to allow Company "A" sufficient time to clear the area. During this time, Company "C" remained ready to react to a possible NVA ambush against Company "A".

The first and second platoons departed the perimeter from the eastern portion of the overnight location. Ten minutes later the company (-) departed the overnight location through the southern portion of the perimeter. The two elements moved abreast, about 600 meters apart. This allowed each element sufficient maneuver space and provided for rapid reinforcement.

## NARRATION

*(LT Stoner 1/C PL) We broke camp rather early that day and had made decent progress given that it was deep forest and not particularly deep in brush.*

*The 1st and 2d platoons were moving together, with HQ and 3d paralleling on our flank some 500+ meters and slightly ahead of us. We were in good, constant radio contact with HQ and 3d.*

*Late morning, perhaps around 11:00 or so, Devalis Rutledge, DV for short and 2d platoon leader, and I decided to halt for chow at first opportune moment, consonant with HQ and 3d. DV as a 1st LT was, I believe, the senior of us.*

At 1405, the company (-) located a well-traveled, high speed trail. (see Map "B"). The company commander halted the company (-) until the first and second platoons reached the trail further to the east. The first platoon was then directed to search the trail to the northeast for 400 meters. The second platoon was directed to search the trail to the southwest and establish contact with the company (-). The third platoon was directed to send a reconnaissance element 400 meters to the southwest of their present location.

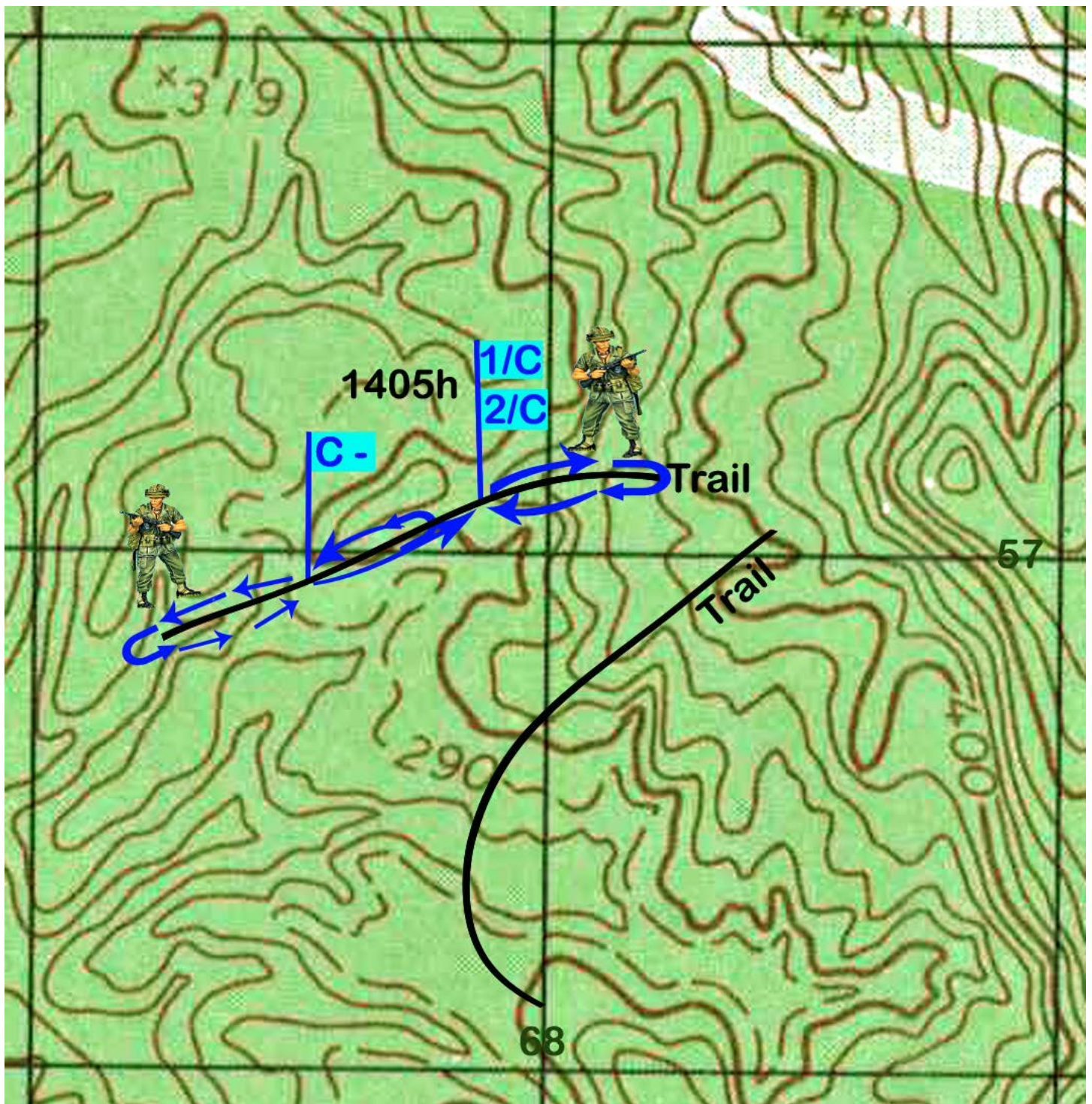
While the three platoons conducted the search along the trail, the company commander called in preplanned fires 500 meters south of the first and second platoons. At 1445, the element from the third platoon had completed the search to the southwest and rejoined the platoon.

Contact had been established between the second platoon and the company (-) and the second platoon moved back into position.

The company commander radioed the first platoon leader to determine the progress of their search to the northwest. The platoon had completed its search of the trail with negative results and was proceeding back. While the first and second platoons were reorganizing, the company (-) continued on its original route.

Upon completion of their reorganization, the first and second platoons again moved to the southeast. At 1525, the lead element of the first platoon was moving up a ridgeline when the rear security from the second platoon observed two NVA traveling south on the trail that had just been searched. The security element fired on the two NVA who fled back to the northeast.





Map B

The first and second platoons discovered a bunker complex at 1550 and began searching the area. The first platoon came upon a fresh grave containing one NVA body. The two platoons intensified the search of the area and notified the company commander. While continuing the search the two platoons began receiving fire from two NVA armed with AK 47's. The platoons immediately returned the fire, and the NVA fled to the southeast.

*(LT Stoner 1/C PL) We came upon one of those lovely trails leading up the side of a finger, which eventually took us into the fringe of an NVA base camp. There were signs of activity on the trail, eg foot prints in the dust, etc, so we knew we weren't exactly alone. Someone had actually found a smoking cigarette butt – I think it was one of those rolled up leaves with a*

*Bamboo splinter stuck through it, which was a bit disconcerting to say the least. Everyone's mental antenna was up.*

*When we settled into that little area, which had a grave site and maybe 10-12 pre-dug fighting positions, we set about establishing a roughly oval-shaped perimeter. I can't remember if it was DV or me, but one of us posted several trail watchers on the route we had just taken. Those who weren't engaged in digging up the grave -- which turned out to contain several bodies that might well have been NVA who were killed some days earlier (12 March) in that engagement which called for C Company to move to night relief of A Company -- broke out the C-Rats. Time was between 11:30 and 12:00, but little attention was given to checking watches.*

*HQ and 3d decided either to continue for a bit more or take their chow break at same time... believe it was the latter. They were maybe 300 - 400 or so meters off, but no visual contact was possible due to terrain and undergrowth. You probably know how that stuff was as well as I.*

*At around noon (actually later that afternoon) the trail watchers made contact with several NVA who had apparently been trailing us. Shots were exchanged and I think the NVA were killed straight away. Our OP scrambled back to the perimeter and within a very brief time all hell began to break loose.*

**Hearing the firing, the company commander called the second platoon leader, Lieutenant Rutledge. The company commander was informed of the contact and that the second platoon had suffered one seriously wounded.**

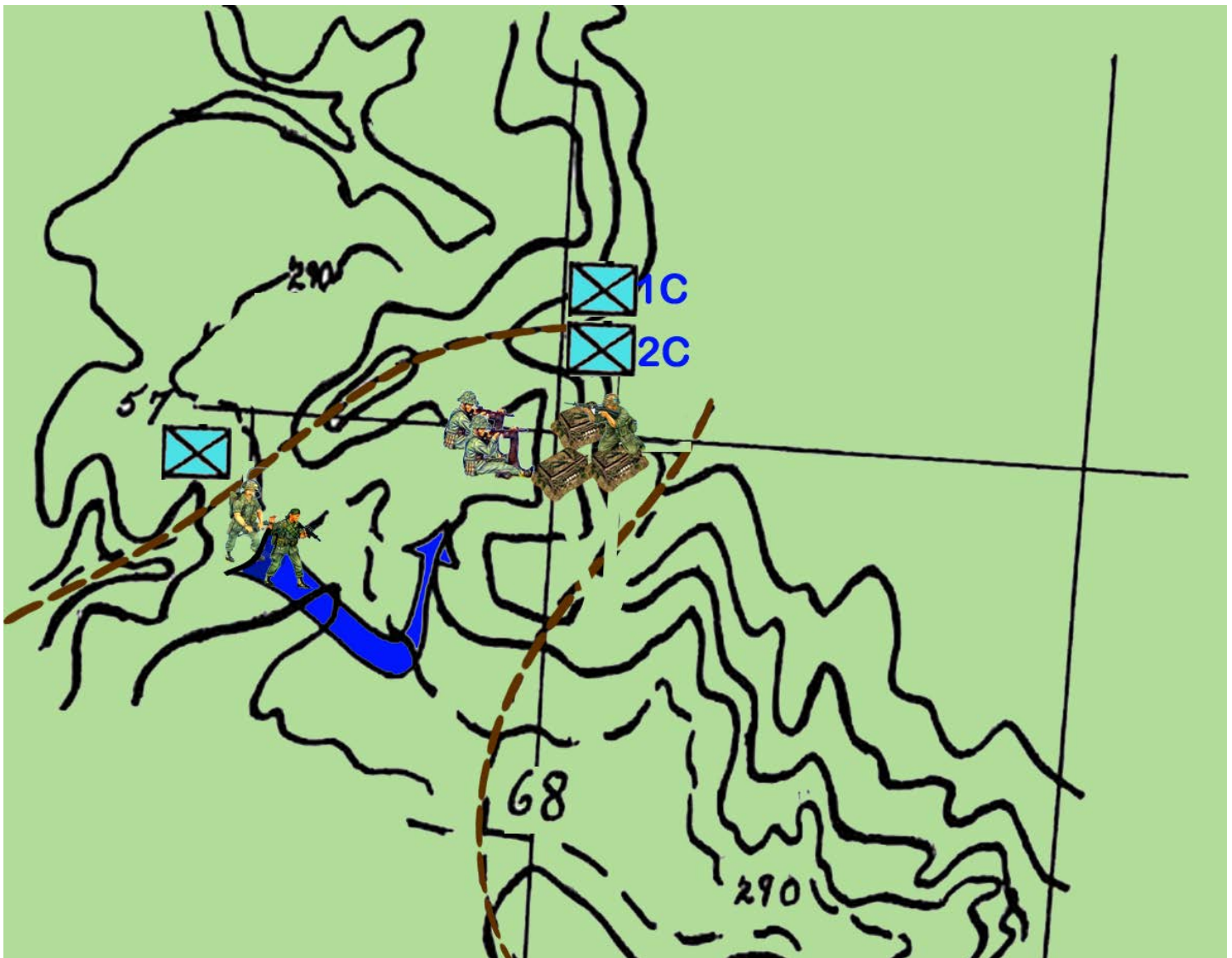
**The company commander instructed the platoons to set up a perimeter and call for artillery fire to the south. The first platoon was directed to conduct a sweep of the area after the supporting fires were lifted. The company commander then radioed battalion to inform them of the situation and to request a Dustoff helicopter. As the company commander talked to the battalion CP, firing again broke out in the vicinity of the first and second platoons.**

**The second platoon leader called the company commander to inform him that the two platoons were receiving fire from what was estimated to be five automatic weapons located to their southeast and southwest. Lieutenant Rutledge was directed to adjust indirect fires to the southeast and south of his location. He was informed that the Company (-) was located about 500 meters southwest of his position, and that they were to maneuver towards his position from the southwest to envelop the enemy forces. (See Map "C")**

**The battalion was notified of the situation by the company commander. The proposed scheme of maneuver was explained and a request was made for company "A" to begin moving towards Company "C".**

*(Stoner 1/C PL) Sporadic firing began to come from up the finger [direction East?], where the bulk of the NVA were apparently located and within minutes we were in close contact on three sides.... I can't say we were enveloped, but close to it.*

*Given what we were facing I passed the word to fire single, aimed shots and believe it or not, within a very short period followed that with the ancient command to fix bayonets. It was crystal clear that we couldn't continue automatic return fire before everyone was out of ammunition. Our guys facing up the finger had set out Claymores and a few of those were also detonated in short order.*



Map C

*(LT Dunn 2/A PL) I remember hearing the first few shots about 1500 hrs that afternoon. I knew that it had to be Charlie Company. I recall reporting this to my company commander over the radio. It wasn't long after that, that I could tell that a serious battle was in progress. I asked my CO numerous times if I could move 2nd Plt. so as to be in a better position to support Charlie Company. When my orders finally came, it was to hold in place and await instructions.*

*I remember switching to the battalion frequency on the radio, trying to understand what was going on. I then jumped over to Charlie Company's net and listened as they worked to maneuver and close with one another. It was professional and composed but it was clear that they were facing a vastly superior force. In short, they were being decimated and I still wasn't there to help.*

*When I finally got the OK to move, it was to an assembly point. The location was near the base of the ridge that Charlie Company was on. I was ordered to hold my platoon there until the rest of the company closed with us. We moved quietly but quickly to the assembly position. We waited and waited. It seemed like we waited forever for the other two platoons and the company HQ section to join us. It seemed like hours, though I know it wasn't. Granted, I knew that my platoon was the closest to the battle area but the wait for the rest of my company was seemingly interminable. The battle was continuing and I knew that Charlie Company was getting weaker by the minute. I remember becoming very angry that my Alpha Company was so seemingly slow in coming to Charlie Company's aide.*

## MOVEMENT TO CONTACT

The Company (-) moved southeast initially. This would place them behind the enemy. The third platoon was placed in a column formation with a point element some 5 meters to the front. Flank security was placed twenty meters out from the column. The headquarters group brought up the rear.

To increase security and provide the company with a reserve, the Weapons platoon and Headquarters platoon had been organized into three fire teams. The 106 Recoilless Rifle squads were organized into two fire teams and provided flank security to the command group. The third fire team consisted of the company commander's driver, two additional RTO's, and the communications sergeant. They provided rear security for the column which was under the control of the weapons platoon leader, Lieutenant Sudborough.

The company (-) moved southeast about 250 meters before turning northeast towards the first and second platoons. The company commander radioed Lieutenant Rutledge and requested the status on the indirect supporting fires. The second platoon leader told him that the fires had been requested, but had not yet been received.

The company (-) continued its movement towards the first and second platoons without the use of supporting indirect fires. The artillery Forward Observer was given the locations of the first and second platoons and the company (-). The company commander requested immediate fires to the east of the company (-). Lieutenant Rutledge was directed to monitor the fire direction net to preclude shifting fires into his perimeter.

As the company (-) closed to within an estimated 300 meters south of the two platoons, the point element crossed a well-used trail. To preclude the third platoon from walking into a possible ambush the platoon leader was directed to swing to the west of the trail and have his flank security move out further.

At 1620, the third platoon's point element made contact with an unknown size NVA force. The enemy was dug in to their northeast. The lead element was only 200 meters south of the first and second platoons. (see Map "C")

*(LT Stoner 1/C PL) Concomitantly, Rick (Rykowski, company CO in HQ group) indicated that he was moving to our location and I advised exercising extreme care since there was an unknown number of NVA between him and us. Some moments later there was an eruption of fire from his general vicinity. I think that's where he was ambushed by an NVA formation that might've been originally headed in our direction. Contact between us was very intermittent from this time onwards as I think the Artillery FO party and his radio operator were either killed or wounded.*

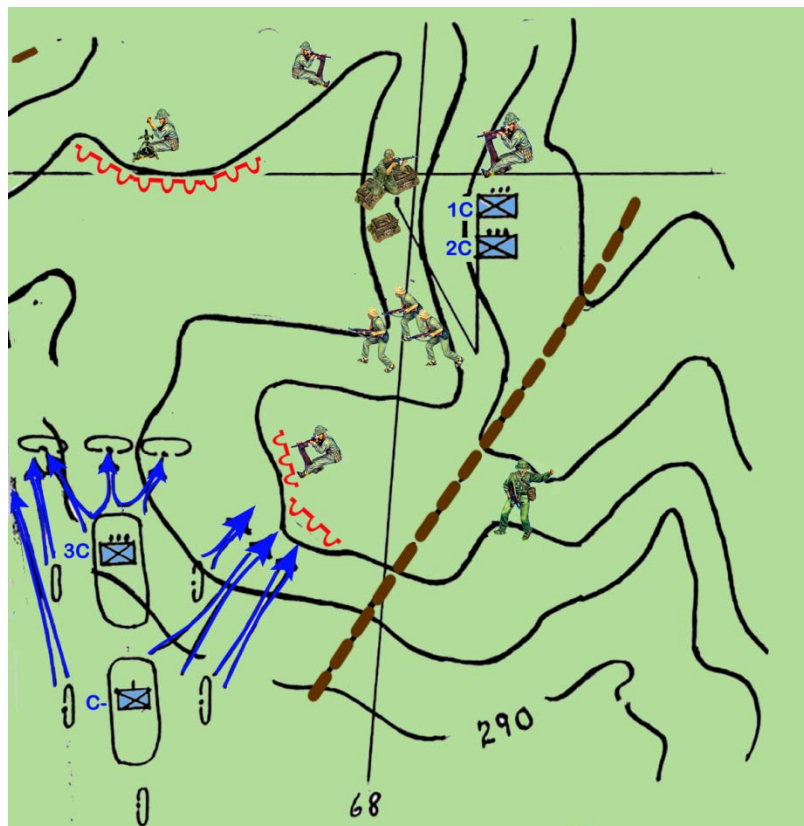
*Not knowing his exact location I undertook to call for all available artillery in the general direction of where our heaviest in-coming fire was emanating. Thank God for the artillery that day -- and the superb training given to all of us by our regular FO, 1st Lt Murphy who was himself on R&R or some such -- as they were on it within seconds as the spotting round came zipping in close by. Think there was a fire base not more than 8-10 km away, so we had a massive number of rounds in the air at the same moment. In retrospect, that might also have caused the NVA attention to shift to the more lucrative and vulnerable target, HQ and 3d Platoon. If so, pure luck had favored the 1st and 2d.*

## DEVELOPING THE SITUATION

The company commander radioed the second platoon leader to ascertain his platoon's location relative to the third platoon. Once this information was received Captain Rykowski relayed it to the artillery Forward Observer. He requested immediate fires placed to the southeast of the third platoon and adjusted in until east of the company (-).

The battalion was notified of the contact and the location of the company (-) with respect to the first and second platoons.

The third platoon was directed to maintain contact and to maneuver on line. The platoon used fire and movement until the platoon had formed a line formation. (See Map "D")



Map D

The weapons platoon leader, Lieutenant Sudborough, was directed to move the 106 Recoilless Rifle squad located on the left flank of the headquarters group to the west flank of the third platoon and provide the third platoon with flank security. The 106 Recoilless Rifle squad on the right flank of the headquarters group was moved by the company commander to a position on the east flank of the third platoon.

## THE ATTACK

Lieutenant Alvarado, the third platoon leader, was directed to move north utilizing fire and movement and close with the enemy positions. The attack was slowed by the dense vegetation and the heavy enemy fire. At 1623, the company (-) began receiving

heavy 60mm and 82mm mortar fire as the attack continued.

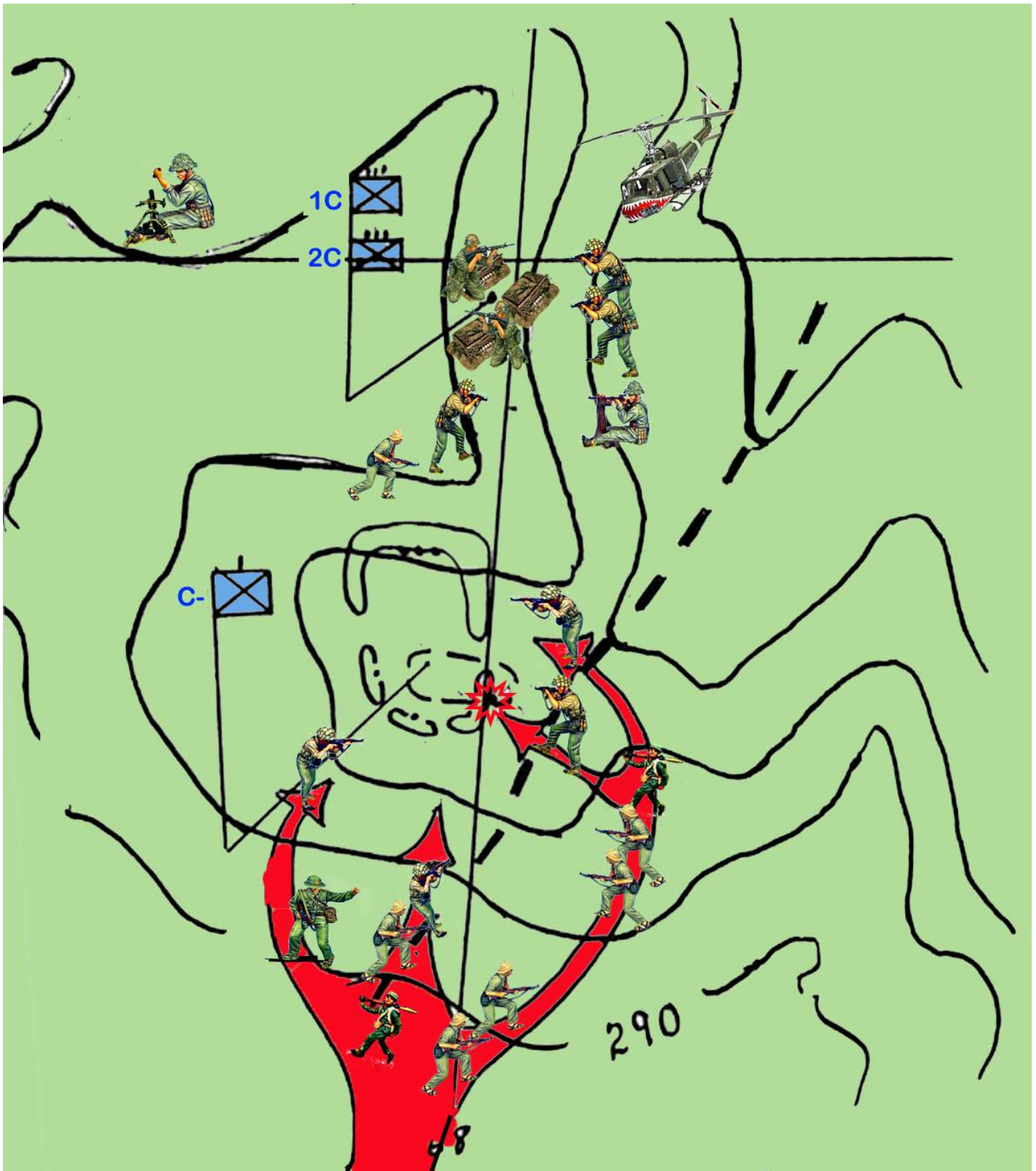
The east flank of the third platoon began receiving flanking fire from a small hill located twenty meters away.

The company commander requested that the supporting indirect fires be brought in closer. As the enemy fire continued to build up on the right flank of the third platoon, the company commander maneuvered the 106 Recoilless Rifle Squad and a fire team from the third platoon against the small hill. The company command group provided flank security for the assault on the enemy held hill.

As the attackers seized the hill, they come upon an estimated NVA battalion moving toward them from the southwest. This battalion was moving along a trail, three abreast, and were less than forty meters away. The 106 Recoilless Rifle Squad immediately took the advancing NVA under fire.

## THE HASTY DEFENSE DUE TO ENEMY ACTION

Lieutenant Alvarado was immediately notified of the new threat, and was ordered to break contact to his front and to fall back towards the small hill. Lieutenant Emory, the artillery Forward Observer was directed to bring all available fires to bear on the attacking NVA battalion.



Map E

After issuing orders to Lieutenants Alvarado and Emory the company commander called Lieutenant Sudborough, the weapons platoon leader, and directed him to fill back with his west flank security and tie in with the company command group. Lieutenant Rutledge, the second platoon leader, was notified of the situation and was directed to attack south with the first and second platoons to reinforce the company (-).



NVA RPG

The company commander radioed the battalion commander and informed him of the new development. He requested immediate close-air support.

The battalion commander directed Captain Rykowski to break contact to allow full use of air and artillery support against the large enemy force. By 1633, the Company (-) was heavily engaged on two flanks and unable to break contact. The NVA battalion had cut off the withdrawal route. (See Map "E")

As the company commander radioed the battalion commander to inform him that the Company (-) could not break contacts intense automatic weapons fire laced into the command group from three directions. The company commander organized the 106 Recoilless Rifle Squad, the fire team from the third platoon and the command group in a hasty perimeter.

The third platoon fell back under intense small arms and automatic weapons fire. They tied in with the 106 Recoilless Rifle Squad. The west flank Recoilless Rifle Squad, under Lieutenant Sudborough, was unable to reach the command group on the top of the hill and tied-in with the fire team from the third platoon on the southern portion of the hill.

At 1637, the enemy launched an attack from three directions. (See Map "D") The third platoon was attacked from the east; the headquarters group from the southeast, the south, and the southwest.

**Maneuvering under automatic weapons covering fire, the attacking NVA overran the fire team from the third platoon on the southern portion of the perimeter. The command group, located on the top of the hill, took the attacking force under fire and repulsed the attack from the south.**

**At 1640, Captain Rykowski was severely wounded by enemy automatic weapons fire. The NVA attacking the hill from the southeast pushed the 106 Recoilless Rifle squad to the top of the hill where they overran it. The command group turned to meet the new threat.**

**By 1645, the attack on the southeast portion of the hill had been repulsed with heavy casualties suffered by the command group. The artillery Forward Observer and his Recon Sergeant were mortally wounded. His RTO was slightly wounded. The 4.2 inch Heavy Mortar Forward Observer was seriously wounded, and his RTO killed. The company commander was hit again. He and one of his RTO's were seriously wounded.**

**The command group had lost all of its assigned forward observers, and only one radio within the command group was still operational.**

**The attack from the southwest was repulsed by Lieutenant Sudborough's security element. Lieutenant Sudborough was killed and only two men in the rear security element and the remaining 106 Recoilless Rifle squad survived the attack.**

**The company commander informed the battalion commander of the situation and requested close in artillery and air support be employed. The battalion commander directed the company (-) to mark its location for the gunships on station.**



**Popping smoke was SOP but in terrain like this was virtually useless.**



Both Lieutenant Alvarado and Captain Rykowski employed all available smoke grenades during the next four minutes, but the smoke could not penetrate the thick double canopy.

Captain Rykowski directed Lieutenant Alvarado to employ hand held flares in an attempt to penetrate the jungle canopy and guide the command and control ship to their location. The company commander then directed his attentions to reorganizing the hasty perimeter.

Lightly wounded personnel were placed back on the perimeter after medical care. Claymore mines were taken from the dead and seriously wounded, passed up to the company commander, and placed across the top of the hill. Fragmentation and White Phosphorous grenades were passed up to the company commander and the two RTO's.

No longer able to move on his own, the company commander had himself positioned near the top of the hill. From this vantage point, he could see most of the perimeter and directed personnel into positions along its southern and eastern portions.

### CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE

As wounded men moved into position on the east flank of the perimeter, the NVA launched a "Human Wave" attack from the south. As the enemy came across the top of the hill, passing through the gap left by the fallen 106 Recoilless Rifle squad, eight claymore mines were detonated simultaneously. This inflicted heavy casualties in the center of the attacking force and repulsed it. The NVA fell back under cover of automatic weapons and 82mm mortar fire.



**NVA Attack**

The headquarters group of the company (-) had taken heavy casualties in the second attack. Only three men, the company commander and two RTO's, were left on the hill. The remnants of Lieutenant Sudborough's west flank security were moved to a position at the western base of the hill. From this location they could prevent the NVA from flanking the hill in that direction.

To replace serious casualties on the eastern portion of the perimeter, the senior medical aidman was directed to assist less seriously wounded personnel into positions covering approaches around the hill from that

direction. The senior medical aidman was the only trained medic left alive in the company (-). He was one of the four persons in the company (-) still capable of walking.

While the senior aidman was assisting men into positions, the NVA launched another "Human Wave" attack. The main attack was directed against the third platoon on the east, and the supporting attack directed against the hill on the south.

The third platoon initially engaged the attack with claymore mines. As the attack slowed, the third platoon placed a heavy volume of automatic weapons fire on the advancing forces. The enemy closed with the third platoon and was repulsed by hand to hand combat.

The supporting attack moved below the topographical crest of the hill to the south. As the enemy attempted to flank the hill from the west, the RTO's began throwing grenades from the top of the hill. This forced the NVA to withdraw back down the slope into the direct fire of the repositioned west flank security.

On the southeast, the grenades held up the enemy's advance. This allowed the senior aidman time to complete moving wounded men into position. Once in position, they began to place effective fire on the enemy from less than ten meters, causing him to withdraw. They then assisted the third platoon by fire in repulsing the main attack.

When the attack was repulsed, the company commander had the four men capable of walking redistribute ammunition. While this was in progress, he called the first and second platoons. He requested information on their progress towards the company (-) location.

The second platoon leader informed the company commander that both platoons were engaged from the east and the south and were unable to reinforce the company (-).

*(LT Stoner 1/C PL) Either DV or I called for some helicopter gunships who were also in the vicinity, but frankly it was their rocket fire that caused a number of our own casualties when several errant rounds fell into the perimeter. Can't blame the pilots at all. We pitched a couple of smoke grenades to mark our location, but the stuff was drifting parallel to the terrain and filtering through the trees outside our location.*

*The heaviest volume of small arms fire continued to come from the direction of HQ and 3d. For us I believe the NVA left just enough force to keep us engaged and pinned down. There were a few snipers in the trees around us and sporadically we took a mortar or RPG round in the area.*

The company commander switched his only radio back to the battalion Command Frequency and relayed the situation to the battalion commander. At this time, further attempts were made by the company commander to guide the battalion commander's Command and Control helicopter to his location. All remaining hand held flares were fired; however none penetrated the canopy.

At 1717, gunships from the 170th Aviation Company were able to identify all friendly units in the area. As they began close-in support of the first and second platoons, the NVA initiated an assault on the two platoons.

To prevent close-in air support, the enemy pressed close to the perimeter of the two platoons. Lieutenant Stoner, the first platoon leader, directed the gunships in even closer. Supporting fires from the gunships fell along the perimeter. Lieutenant Stoner and several men in the first platoon were hit by machinegun fire from one of the gunships. This close-in, effective fire broke the attack and killed a large number of the enemy.

At 1740, close contact was broken by the enemy. The first and second platoons began their reorganization and reconsolidation. Due to casualties, they were unable to proceed towards the company (-) to affect a link-up.

To the south, the company (-) was still surrounded. They were receiving heavy sniper and automatic weapons fire. However, the enemy made no further attempts to overrun the beleaguered elements.

The NVA, under cover of intensive fire, began policing the battle area. From his vantage point, the company commander observed the enemy's effort and requested artillery support be brought in closer. Due to the inability of Lieutenant Alvarado and Captain Rykowski to adequately mark their location, the battalion commander was reluctant to adjust indirect fire support closer to the Company (-).

## REINFORCEMENT

At 1825, Company "A" linked up with the first and second platoons of Company "C". Captain Barcena, the commanding officer of Company "A", assumed command of the force. Company "A" took over responsibility for the perimeter, and the two platoons from Company "C" began clearing an LZ for extraction of the casualties.

*(LT Dunn 2/A PL) I recall that my CO had wanted the company to move up the ridgeline with three platoons "on line" with the HQ section following. What worked better was my platoon taking the point and center with the other two platoons, one on each flank, in a "U" formation. The company HQ section followed well to the rear. This, in effect, placed me in operational control of the company. That arrangement worked just fine. We rapidly worked our way up the ridge from the assembly point employing fire and maneuver, quickly eliminating the little resistance that remained. Shortly thereafter we closed with and moved through Charlie Company's positions. It was clear to me by then that the main NVA force was withdrawing, leaving only a small covering force.*

*After linking up with what was left of two platoons of Charlie Company, we consolidated, tended the wounded and silenced the remaining snipers. By this time it was getting dark. I remember that we received a number of 82MM mortar rounds fired from a position that was fairly close. We offered counter fire with M-79's at moderately high trajectory through holes in the tree cover to where we thought the mortars were firing from. Our counter fire may have been close because they ceased fire immediately. The NVA mortar fire was never again accurate for the remainder of that night.*

At 1845, the battalion commander led a seven man Command and Control party in a combat assault on an LZ 300 meters south of the company (-). As the Battalion Command Group began moving towards the Company (-), the point man spotted NVA moving to their front. The Command Group temporarily returned to the LZ.

*(Maj Crosby Bn S-3) Rykowski was getting weaker. We heard his radio transmissions trail off as he nears death from loss of blood. Butters and I, in the TOC, can understand this clearly. Butters said that if we don't get a medevac in there soon, Rykowski and many of his men will not last much longer.*

*And now it is getting dark...not a nice situation.*

*LTC Granger and I agreed that I will take Captain Jim Lanning from Texas, the Assistant S-3 into the battle zone whose drawl was well known to all RTOs and put him in command of C company while on that same helicopter evacuate Rykowski to the battalion aid station where he*

*can be stabilized. Once a wounded soldier gets medical attention, he has a much better chance of long term survival but Rykowski had none bleeding to death in the jungle.*

*Butters demands to go but I order him to stay with the TOC as we need him there more than we need him tromping through the jungle. LTC Granger agreed that he will stay in the firebase as it is not wise to have both senior officers of the battalion out trekking through the jungle in search of what remains of Charlie Company.*

*At about a few minutes before seven in the evening we; CPT Lanning, two radio operators, a couple of other soldiers and myself, jumped from the Command and Control (C&C) helicopter into a jungle clearing somewhere south of Charlie Company hoping to be able to link up with the remnants of Charlie or Alpha which had now joined forces in Charlie's defensive perimeter. The C&C was unable to land as the trees were too tall. Plus the area selected as a landing zone (LZ) was covered with downed trees from artillery strikes or earlier B-52 bombing runs. My guess is that we had to leap ten feet but at the time it seemed like twenty. Nonetheless, we rallied our small group of soldiers and headed in what we believed to be in the direction of Charlie and Alpha. There, hopefully, was a relatively secure location. Enemy activity was absent....at least it was now. I was not sure how far we would have to travel to get to those friendly soldiers but my guess from the map was that it would be about five hundred meters. Five hundred meters in this jungle can be a lifetime. This is not like ambling down the Boardwalk.*

*After boring through about two hundred meters of thick jungle in the near darkness, the six of us came upon a well-worn trail leading in the direction that we wanted to go. As the senior officer, I was leading our small patrol. When I was going through Ranger training at Fort Benning, Georgia, as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, I learned to never get on a trail -- much less one in enemy territory where we now were -- it's a sure ticket to an ambush and this is one ticket you don't want. We immediately left that trail only to enter a large enemy bunker complex, unoccupied thank goodness, only a few meters from that same trail.*

*Soon after we arrived in this bunker area formerly occupied by the enemy, we heard sounds of movement coming down that used trail. I thought it might be soldiers of Alpha or Charlie seeking to link up with us to lead us to their night lager position.*

*So I yelled, "Hey, who's there?"*

*And the answer I got was the last thing I wanted to hear. It was Vietnamese. There was a lot of yelling none of it to my liking. We all hit the ground -- Captain Jim Lanning was only a couple feet from me. I quickly and quietly asked everyone to put their weapons on full automatic for if they come at us we would take as many as we could. Even though the jungle air had cooled somewhat, sweat oozed from my every pore. It was not from exertion. We were in trouble. A handful of lightly armed American soldiers faced a withdrawing battalion of heavily armed North Vietnamese Regulars. They had been bloodied but they weren't dead yet.*

*I asked Jim if he had any hand grenades. He said, “No.”*

*I said in a whisper, “Hold your fire.” There was utter silence from us as we lay there in this enemy bunker complex breathing only when required. I cupped the radio mike closely to my mouth and quietly transmitted to the TOC that we made contact with the enemy. But I had no idea where we were with respect to Charlie Company. All the while, enemy soldiers were now noisily crashing through the dark jungle the trail at a trot – how many, I don’t know – but one helluva lot more than there were Americans hiding in this abandoned North Vietnamese Army bunker complex. My guess is that nearly a hundred enemy passed by six hiding and silently praying Americans of which I was but one.*

*After the enemy passed and it got quiet, we resumed moving but as slowly and as quietly as it is possible in this now dark jungle. Suddenly, behind us, we heard the whop, whop, whop of approaching rotor blades. Some more of our soldiers were arriving at the jungle clearing we had jumped into earlier. We returned to the vicinity of that so-called LZ only to find that LTC Granger and his radio operators had dropped in the same place we had just left a half an hour or so before. So we joined up and headed back toward the enemy bunker complex. Radio contact was made with Charlie Company and we, now reinforced, moved out to link up with them.*



**Maj. Ben Crosby photo of downed chopper**

**The first and second platoons of Company “C” had cleared an LZ by 1900, and a Dustoff helicopter was requested. In addition, a request for the battalion surgeon, medical aidmen, and medical supplies was sent to the battalion CP.**

**The helicopter arrived at 2000. While hovering to hoist the wounded, it was shot down by an enemy B-40 Rocket. Two of the crewmen were killed and two were wounded.**

*(Johnson 2/A) Someone ordered all the C-4 to be piled up near our position in case we needed*

*to blast trees for the dust off. The incoming mortar fire stopped and I could hear the dust off coming in off towards the west of the hill top. The smoke grenade started the dried leaves on fire and the rotor wash was blowing the burning debris all over us and the pile of C-4. I just knew that the C-4 was going to go up so we took cover the best we could. The C-4 exploded; I was dazed for a while but could hear the dust off crash just over the crest of the hill. I checked my men and they were ok except for being dazed.*

*It seemed to me that everything then began to crumble before us, we began taking more mortar fire and it was turning dark. I felt pinned down and confused. I wondered if we were going to make it off this hill. It was then that Lt. Col. Granger was above us in his chopper, he radioed that he had spotted a small clearing on the south side of the hill that would better suit our needs for an LZ. He ordered us off the hill. I was then contacted by Bob Chandler, Capt. Barcena’s RTO. Bob said that Capt. Barcena was in a state of shock and could not move. He wanted me*

*to help him down the hill. We all started down the hill in total darkness, Capt. Barcena was still in a dazed state and we had to physically carry him down the hill. Several times we had to stop and fight off the NVA who were everywhere.*

*It took some time to get to the clearing but upon arrival set up a parameter. I turned Capt. Barcena over to Bob and my men and I set up in a position on the line. I don't remember much that happened that night but at first light I spotted a C Company guy coming down the hill. He was stripped naked and had a terrible leg wound, I ran up to help him but he would have no part of it. He would not let us touch him; the medics finally got him taken care of. The C Company KIA's and KIA's from the chopper were placed in ponchos and laid out on the LZ to await evacuation. I was told to set up our mortar on a portion of the lz that was slightly elevated and had no canopy to interfere with us. A portion of A Company then prepared to sweep the area where C Company got hit. I pleaded to go on that patrol but was told to stay in the lz to support the patrol with our mortar. I complied but was very disappointed that we could not go. We stayed in the lz all day and waited for a fire mission that never came. Several choppers came in to drop off supplies and haul off the dead, one of them crashed when its rotor hit some trees. The crew has not injured and they stripped the chopper of its weapons and set up with us to await more choppers.*

**The explosion of the helicopter ended any further attempt of evacuation at that location. The battalion commander, aware of the downed helicopter, was able to secure a more desirable LZ with his patrol. He directed Company "A" and the two platoons of company "C" to move to the new LZ.**

**The company (-) heard the dustoff helicopter approach the location of the first and second platoons. They heard the explosion of the B-40 Rocket and saw the flames of the helicopter as it crashed.**

**A platoon from Company "A" linked up with company (-) at 2100. The company commander directed the platoon leader from Company "A" to assume responsibility for the perimeter. Once the platoon from Company "A" was in position, Captain Rykowski requested assistance in moving down the hill.**

### **EVACUATION OF THE CASUALTIES**

**At the base of the hill, the company commander briefed the platoon leader from Company "A" on the trace of the perimeter. He indicated the main avenues of approach into the perimeter and informed the platoon leader of the enemy's policing activities to the south.**

**As the platoon leader from Company "A" inspected the perimeter, medical aidmen from Company "A" began tending to the wounded. To hasten the evacuation of the wounded to the new LZ, the company commander directed Lieutenant Alvarado, the third platoon leader, to supervise the construction of poncho litters.**

**Once the litters were constructed, the company commander briefed the bearers. Before leaving the perimeter, the company commander instructed Lieutenant Alvarado to maintain contact with the battalion command group on the LZ. At 2150 the evacuation of the wounded began.**

With a small security force to lead the way, the wounded were carried 300 meters southwest of the perimeter to the new LZ. The carrying party could hear the NVA policing the battle area: however, contact was not made. At 2210 the wounded arrived at the new LZ.

The first Dustoff helicopter arrived at 2220. It contained the Battalion surgeon and an engineer team. The battalion surgeon was needed to evaluate priorities for evacuation of the seriously wounded.



*Downed chopper after its tail rotor clipped a tree photo by Maj. Ben Crosby*

*(Maj. Crosby Bn S-3) It became obvious when I arrived at the lager site that the evacuation was going to be difficult, if not impossible, as the trees were about one hundred feet high and the hole cut by the battalion engineering team was only big enough for one HU-1D (Huey) to get into and out of. The pilots informed us that due to the height of the trees, they could only lift out two wounded at a time. And that would take better than average flying skill. The Hueys had to lift straight up and could not deviate in any direction or they would crash into the trees and come down on those of us under them. Hitting a tree with one's tail rotor didn't make for the best takeoff. The only way to get this done was for me to stand directly under the helicopters as they hovered down guiding them with my flashlight and radio. It was bold and simple...but somewhat dangerous. I used the bright flashes of the emergency strobe light to lead the pilots to the general area in the dark but turned off the strobe as they hovered*

*down toward the ground as flashes from the strobe hampered the pilots' night vision. There were no night vision goggles in Vietnam at that time. I screamed to the pilots over my radio as the thunder from the rotor downwash was deafening and signaled to them with my handheld flashlight to tell them to go forwards or backwards or sideways a few feet while they hovered down. Only a few short feet spared the spinning tail rotor from the tall jungle trees. A single tail rotor strike could terminate the evacuation...not to mention me. I planned to jump sideways off the tree stump where I was standing were a chopper to come crashing down. But, truthfully, I would not have made it. The air blast from main rotor wash burned my eyes but I dared not shut them while the helicopters hovered only a few feet above my head. A single mistake would mean the seriously wounded would most likely not get medical attention until the next day -- probably too damn late.*

*A successful landing (a most liberal use of the term) allowed the pilots to put only one of their helicopter skids on a fallen tree while we loaded the wounded. Full power was required to keep the UH-1D steady as soldiers shoved litters carrying two of Charley's bleeding, moaning soldiers aboard to be lifted out to their only chance for life saving aid. My ears still ring when I think of those rotor blades swishing just above my head as I communicated with pilots via flashlight hand signals. Sometimes one is just lucky and the Cacti Blue needed all its luck that long night in the Vietnamese jungle. Charlie had already paid a fair share of dues to the luck-god -- enough for the entire battalion -- so it was only fair that we received a night of good luck in exchange. The first flight brought in the Battalion Surgeon, a Doctor, and his chief medical assistant to administer emergency first aid to the wounded. He began the difficult task of sorting the horribly wounded from the slightly wounded and the dead. Those able to survive the night would have to wait until first light in the morning before getting to the aid station or the hospital. The others we would evacuate now.*

*It took the better part of three hours to lift out thirty or more severely wounded. But it worked. And I have been told that none of our wounded that we evacuated that night died from their wounds --- not at all bad. It is clear that had we not undertaken this radical and somewhat dangerous medical evacuation, more Americans would have died even though we had the Battalion Surgeon administering emergency aid in this tiny blood-soaked landing zone.*

**At 2225, Captain Rykowski was evacuated from the LZ.**

**The first and second platoons from Company "C" entered the LZ at 2235. The battalion commander reorganized the forces into a task organization. Company "A" secured the perimeter. Lightly wounded personnel from Company "C" were employed as litter bearers. The battalion command group became the landing zone control team.**

**The extraction of all seriously wounded was completed by 0130, 22 March 1967, and the battalion command group departed the landing zone for the battalion FSB.**



Company "A" and the remainder of Company "C" organized the perimeter and established security for the balance of the night. Only sporadic sniper fire was received throughout the night. At 0627, some 25 rounds of 82mm mortar fire fell around the perimeter. No casualties were sustained

At 1030, Company "B" made a combat assault 300 meters south of Company "C" (-) point of contact. Company "C" moved to the LZ and was airlifted to the battalion FSB. They assumed security of the battalion FSB and began reorganizing their forces.

**Charlie Company KIAs 21 March 1967**

				
Juan Aviles-Aviles	Guye Benson	Scott Bowcutt	Carl Anthony	Daniel Newman
				
Charles Emory	Henry Matthews	James Hopson	Joseph Champion	Robert Kaster
				
William Lund	Johnnie Mayo	David McLemore	Lewis Milam	Thomas Minogue
				
John Odierno	Percie Edward Owens	Robert Reinke	Dennis Stockwell	Michael Sudborough
		Unknown Dustoff Crewman	Unknown Dustoff Crewman	
Timothy Easley	Hayzell Turner			

# Helicopter pilot risked his life to save soldiers

By Fred L. Borch  
and Robert F. Dorr

Special to the Times

Thomas Merrill Reeves risked his life amid a prolonged action to save soldiers battling the North Vietnamese. Flying during both daylight and darkness, he inspired troops in a beleaguered company and prevented it from being destroyed by the enemy.

Reeves participated in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps in college and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Transportation Corps.

After finishing officer orientation at Fort Eustis, Va., Reeves served as a platoon leader before leaving active duty. He joined the Tennessee Army National Guard and became an aide to the assistant commander of the 30th Armored Division.

In October 1965, Reeves volunteered for active duty. After undergoing aviator training and receiving his wings in June 1966, then-1st Lt. Reeves deployed to Vietnam. There, he flew helicopters in the 1st Cavalry Division and later joined the 170th Aviation Company, 52nd Aviation Battalion.

On March 21, 1967, the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry, was in a firefight with North Vietnamese in Kontum province along the Cambodia border. When the ground unit's operations officer needed to be flown into the battle site, Reeves vol-

unteered to perform this difficult and dangerous helicopter mission. Despite intense enemy machine-gun fire and automatic-weapons fire, he delivered the officer, enabling the battalion command group to quickly assume control of a difficult situation on the ground.

Shortly after completing this mission, Reeves volunteered to fly reinforcements to a company that was heavily engaged with the enemy. According to official records, he "defly maneuvered his aircraft into the tiny landing zone, overcame dense foliage, limited visibility and intense enemy fire to deliver the badly needed replacements."

As the battle continued for 12 hours, Reeves made repeated trips into the area to provide critically needed ammunition, medical personnel and supplies. He also acted as an aerial radio relay for four ground companies, continually flying at low level through the crossfire. Reeves also repeatedly landed to pick up critically wounded men who needed immediate evacuation. When the North Vietnamese unleashed mortar attacks on his stationary helicopter, Reeves responded by flying to an altitude where he could spot the mortar position, and called in a helicopter gunship to attack and destroy it. Reeves then successfully completed his evacuation of



COURTESY OF FRED BORCH

**Then-Capt. Thomas M. Reeves**

the wounded.

For his heroism, Reeves was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor for combat gallantry.

After his second Vietnam tour ended in 1971, he left active duty and rejoined the Tennessee Guard, where he served in various assignments until 1990. For the remainder of his 33-year career, Reeves was deputy director for mobilization and readiness, Weapons Systems Readiness Directorate, Redstone Arsenal, Ala., retiring as a colonel in 1996.

Today, Reeves lives in Tennessee. □

Fred L. Borch retired from the Army after 25 years and is now working as the regimental historian for the Army JAG Corps. He is the author of "Kimmel, Short and Pearl Harbor," an analysis of the 1941 Japanese attack on Hawaii. His email address is borchfj@aol.com. Robert F. Dorr, an Air Force veteran, lives in Oakton, Va. He is the author of "Air Combat," a history of fighter pilots. His e-mail address is robert.f.dorr@cox.net.