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SPECIAL EDITION

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~ The Battle of the Slopes ~



Hill 1338

Air strikes attacking NVA who ambushed Alpha Company 2/503d on June 22, 1967. View from runway near SF camp.
(Photo by Earle "Doc" Jackson, B Med)



2/503d *VIETNAM* Newsletter / June 22, 2011 – Issue 29

Page 1 of 68

Battle of The Slopes



A U.S. soldier calls for a medic to help a wounded friendly as the 1st Battalion, 503rd U.S. Infantry battles for Hill 882, southwest of Dak To, November, 1967.

Date	June – November 1967
Location	Dak To, Kontum Province, <u>Republic of Vietnam</u>

Belligerents

 <u>United States</u>	 <u>North Vietnamese</u>
 <u>Republic of Vietnam</u>	 <u>Army</u>
	 <u>Viet Cong</u>

Commanders and leaders

William R. Peers	Hoang Minh Thao (military), Tran The Mon (political)
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Vietnam (ARVN) 42nd Infantry Regiment and Airborne units. The fighting was intense and lasted into the fall, when the North Vietnamese seemingly withdrew.

By late October, however, U.S. intelligence indicated that local communist units had been reinforced and combined into the 1st PAVN Division, which was tasked with the capture of Đắc Tô and the destruction of a brigade-size U.S. unit. Information provided by a PAVN defector provided the allies a good indication of the locations and intentions of North Vietnamese forces. This intelligence prompted the launching of *Operation MacArthur*, and brought the units back to the area along with more reinforcements from the ARVN Airborne Division. The battles that erupted on the hill masses south and southeast of Đắc Tô became some of the most hard-fought and bloody battles of the Vietnam War.



Aerial photo of Đắc Tô looking toward Laos.

During the early stages of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, several U.S. Special Forces Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camps were established along the borders of South Vietnam in order to both maintain surveillance of PAVN and National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF or derogatively, *Viet Cong*) infiltration and to provide support and training to isolated Montagnard villagers, who bore the brunt of the fighting in the isolated area. One of these camps was built near the village and airstrip at Đắc Tô.

After 1965, Đắc Tô was also utilized as a Forward Operations Base by the highly classified U.S. Studies and Observations Group (SOG), which launched reconnaissance teams from there to gather intelligence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail across the border in Laos.

The Battle of Đắc Tô was a series of major engagements of the Vietnam War that took place between 3 November and 22 November 1967, in Kontum Province, in the Central Highlands of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The action at Đắc Tô was one of a series of People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) offensive initiatives that began during the second half of the year. North Vietnamese attacks at Lộc Ninh (in Bình Long Province), Song Be (in Phước Long Province), and at Con Thien and Khe Sanh, (in Quảng Trị Province), were other actions which, combined with Đắc Tô, became known as "the border battles."

During the summer of 1967, heavy contact with PAVN forces in the area prompted the launching of Operation *Greeley*, a combined search and destroy effort by elements of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division, the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade, and Army of the Republic of

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Đắk Tô lies on a flat valley floor, surrounded by waves of ridgelines that rise into peaks (some as high as 4,000 feet) that stretch westward and southwestward towards the tri-border region where South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia meet. Western Kontum Province is covered by double and triple-canopy rainforests, and the only open areas were filled in by bamboo groves whose stalks sometimes reached eight inches in diameter. Landing Zones (LZs) large enough for helicopters were few and far between, which meant that most troop movements could only be carried out on foot. Temperatures in the highlands could reach 95° Fahrenheit (35° Celsius) during the day and could drop to as low as 55° Fahrenheit (12.78° Celsius) in the evenings.

Operation Greeley

In January, Lieutenant General William R. Peers had taken command of the 4th Infantry Division, which had responsibility for the defense of western Kontum Province. Prior to the onset of the summer monsoon, Peers set up blocking positions from the 4th's base camp at Jackson Hole, west of Pleiku, and launched Operation *Francis Marion* on 17 May. The 4th had on hand its 1st and 2nd Brigades while its 3rd Brigade operated with the 25th Infantry Division northwest of Saigon.

Throughout the middle of 1967, however, western Kontum Province became a magnet for several PAVN spoiling attacks and it appeared that the North Vietnamese were paying an increasing amount of attention to the area.

Immediately after taking command, Peers instituted guidelines for his units in order to prevent them from being isolated and overrun in the rugged terrain, which also did much to negate the U.S. superiority in firepower. Battalions were to act as single units instead of breaking down into individual companies in order to search for their enemy. If rifle companies had to act independently, they were not to operate more than one kilometer or one hour's march from one another. If contact with the enemy was made, the unit was to be immediately reinforced. These measures went far in reducing the 4th Infantry's casualties.

These heavy enemy contacts prompted Peers to request reinforcement and, as a result, on 17 June, two battalions of Brigadier General John R. Deane's 173rd Airborne Brigade were moved into the Đắk Tô area to begin

sweeping the jungle-covered mountains in *Operation Greeley*. The 173rd had been operating near Bien Hoa Air Base outside Saigon and had been in combat only against NLF guerrillas. Prior to its deployment to the highlands, Peers's operations officer, Colonel William J. Livsey, attempted to warn the Airborne officers of the hazards of campaigning in the highlands. He also advised them that PAVN regulars were a much better equipped and motivated force than the NLF. These warnings, however, made little impression on the paratroopers, who were about to become victims of their own overconfidence.

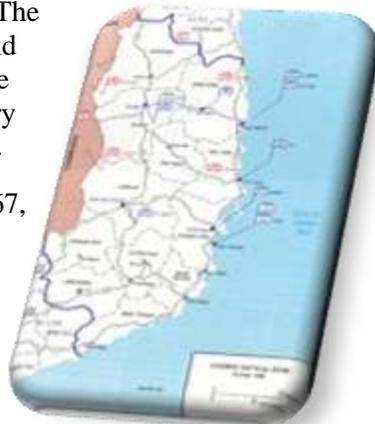


173rd Airborne troops during *Operation Greeley*

On 20 June, Charlie Company, 2nd battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry (C/2/503) discovered the bodies of a Special Forces CIDG unit that had been missing for four days on Hill 1338, the dominant hill mass south of Dak To. Supported by Alpha Company, the Americans moved up the hill and set up for the night.

At 06:58 the following morning, Alpha Company began moving alone up a ridge finger and triggered an ambush by the 6th Battalion of the 24th PAVN Regiment. Charlie Company was ordered to go to support, but heavy vegetation and difficult terrain made movement extremely difficult. Artillery support was rendered ineffective by the limited range of visibility and the "belt-grabbing" tactics of the North Vietnamese. Close air support was impossible for the same reasons. Alpha Company managed to survive repeated attacks throughout the day and night, but the cost was heavy. Of the 137 men that comprised the unit, 76 had been killed and another 23 wounded. A search of the battlefield revealed only 15 dead North Vietnamese.

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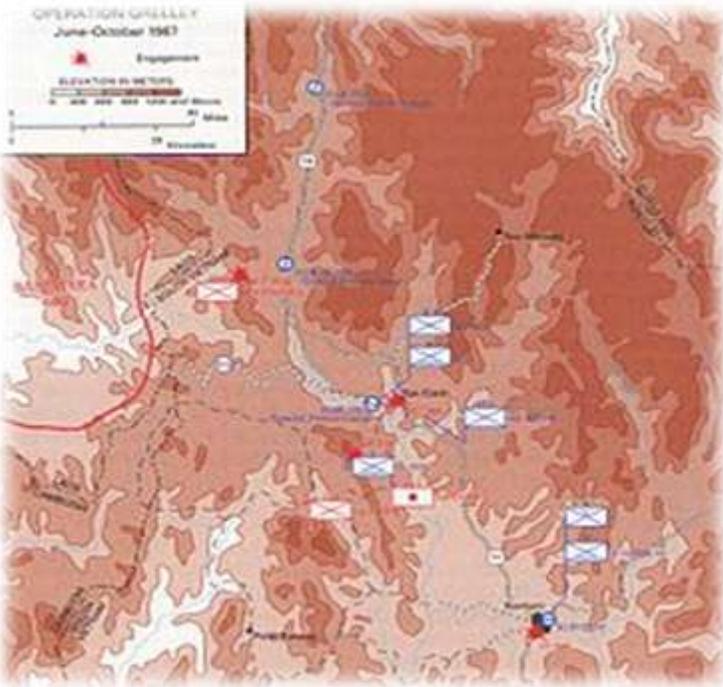


The II Corps Tactical Zone, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam



U.S. headquarters press releases, made four days after the conclusion of what came to be called "*The Battle of the Slopes*", claimed that 475 North Vietnamese had been killed while the 173rd's combat after action report claimed 513 enemy dead. The men of Alpha Company estimated that only 50–75 PAVN troops had been killed during the entire action. Such losses among American troops could not go unpunished.

The operations officer of the 4th Infantry went so far as to recommend that General Deane be relieved of command. Such a drastic measure, however, would only provide more grist for what was becoming a public relations fiasco. In the end, the commander and junior officers of Charlie Company (whose only crime was that of caution) were transferred to other units.



Operation Greeley and the Dak To area

In response to the destruction of Alpha Company, MACV ordered additional forces into the area. On 23 June, the 1st Battalion, 1st Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division arrived to bolster the 173rd. The following day, the elite ARVN 1st Airborne Task Force (the 5th and 8th Battalions) and the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division arrived to conduct search and destroy operations north and northeast of Kontum. General Deane sent his forces 20 kilometers west and southwest of Dak To in search for the 24th PAVN Regiment.

After establishing Fire Support Base 4 on Hill 664, approximately 11 kilometers southwest of Đắk Tô, the 4th Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry found the North Vietnamese K-101D Battalion of the *Doc Lap* Regiment on 10 July. As the four companies of the battalion neared the crest of Hill 830 they were struck by a wall of small arms and machine gun fire and blasted by B-40

rocket-propelled grenades and mortar fire. Any advance was impossible, so the paratroopers remained in place for the night. The following morning, the North Vietnamese were gone. 4/503 suffered 22 dead and 62 wounded. The bodies of three PAVN soldiers were found on the site.

North Vietnamese pressure against CIDG outposts at Dak Seang and Dak Pek, 20 and 45 kilometers north of Đắk Tô respectively, was the impetus for dispatching the 42nd ARVN Infantry Regiment into the area while the ARVN Airborne battalion moved to Dak Seang. On 4 August, the 1/42 encountered the North Vietnamese on a hilltop west of Dak Seang, setting off a three-day battle that drew in the South Vietnamese paratroopers. The 8th Airborne, along with U.S. Army advisors, was airlifted into a small unimproved air field next to the Special Forces camp at Dak Seang. The camp was under sporadic fire and probing ground attack by PAVN forces. This occurred when its Special Forces commander and a patrol failed to return and the camp received what appeared to be preparatory fire for a full scale ground attack by PAVN. The terrain was high mountains with triple canopy jungle. The importance of the Dak Seang camp was that it lay astride the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main infiltration route of the PAVN into the South.

About a kilometer from the camp, the Army advisors and the 8th Airborne came upon the bodies of the lost Special Forces patrol, all dead, including the camp commander. As the 8th Airborne moved up the mountain, the lead elements were taking small arms fire. Before long, it was obvious that the PAVN troops had filtered down on all sides. By noon of 4 August, the 8th Airborne with its advisors were in a fight that lasted several days.

When the unit finally overwhelmed the PAVN forces because of superior fire power in air and artillery, it reached the top of the mountain and found a fully operational PAVN Headquarters, complete with hospital facilities and anti-aircraft emplacements. During the three-day battle, the 8th Airborne Battalion alone withstood six separate ground attacks and casualties among all the South Vietnamese units were heavy.

By mid-August, contact with communist forces decreased, leading the Americans to conclude that the North Vietnamese had withdrawn across the border. The bulk of the ARVN Airborne units were then returned to their bases around Saigon for rest and refitting.

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On 23 August, General Deane turned over command of the 173rd to Brigadier General Leo H. Schweiter. On 17 September, two battalions of the 173rd departed the area to protect the rice harvest in Phu Yen Province. 2/503 remained at Đắk Tô along with the 3rd ARVN Airborne Battalion to carry out a sweep of the Toumarong Valley north of Đắk Tô and the suspected location of a PAVN regimental headquarters. After three weeks of fruitless searching, however, the operation was halted on 11 October. Operation *Greeley* was over.

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

By early October, U.S. intelligence reported that the North Vietnamese were withdrawing regiments from the Pleiku area to join those in Kontum Province, thereby dramatically increasing the strength of local forces to that of a full division. In response, the 4th Infantry began moving the

3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry and the 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry into Đắk Tô to launch Operation *MacArthur*.

On 29 October, the 4/503 of the 173rd Airborne Brigade was returned to the area as a reinforcement. The battalion was moved west of Đắk Tô to the CIDG camp at Ben Het to protect the construction of Fire Support Base 12 on 2 November.

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



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

The communist actions around Đắk Tô were part of an overall strategy devised by the Hanoi leadership, primarily that of General Nguyen Chi Thanh. The goal of

operations in the area, according to a captured document from the B-3 Front Command, was

"to annihilate a major U.S. element in order to force the enemy to deploy as many additional troops to the western highlands as possible."

As the Americans quickly discovered, the area had been well prepared by the North Vietnamese. The number and elaborateness of defensive preparations found by U.S. and ARVN troops indicated that some had been prepared as much as six months in advance. As General Peers noted: *"Nearly every key terrain feature was heavily fortified with elaborate bunker and trench complexes. He had moved quantities of supplies and ammunition into the area. He was prepared to stay."*

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

By this time, the village and airstrip had become a major logistical base, supporting an entire U.S. division and airborne brigade and six ARVN battalions. The stage was set for a major pitched battle.

[Source: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia]



BATTLE OF THE SLOPES

Hill 1338



Battle of the Slopes Hill 1338

"The enemy had blown-up the ammo dump and three C-130 aircraft on the airstrip."

(Photo by Earle "Doc" Jackson, B Med)

Background Information:

Arriving early June in Dak-To proper, the Sky Soldiers of the 2/503rd Airborne Infantry were briefed. Intelligence reported an unknown enemy force had attacked U.S. and CIDG installations in the Dak-To area with mortar and rocket fire during the period of June 17-21, 1967. The enemy were estimated to be within the 2/503rd AO.

Mission: Search and Destroy

The 2/503rd Infantry was to conduct search and destroy operations against possible enemy forces and installations south of the Dak To Special Forces Camp. The concept was to deploy the A/2/503rd and C/2/503rd Infantry by helicopter and assault the area on 18th and 20th of June, respectively. B/2/503rd Infantry was to remain as the reaction force, and rotate with the line units when instructed.

From 18th through 21st, June, both Companies had negative contact, and on 211700H (June 21st, at 5 p.m.), A Company received orders to return overland to Dak To proper (Base Camp). The Commander of A Company chose a route that would allow him to close not later than 221500H.

Many are the facts of war that darkens the path of history. The Battle of the Slopes (dubbed by the Sky Soldiers) in Dak To, Kontum Province on June 22, 1967, is no exception. John L. Leppelman of C/2/503rd made this report, *"We moved through the hills of Dak To, not keeping track of time. It was an endless search for Charlie and occasionally taking sniper fire with no head on contact. These hills were actually mountains, steep, muddy and leech infested. We were usually under triple canopy jungles which made it appear dark and dreary."*

Intelligence information indicated that the enemy situation prior to the operation were elements of the 24th NVA Regiment, 304th VC Battalion, 200th VC artillery Battalion and H-15 LF Battalion. The enemy had the capability to attack in up to regimental strength, to defend and reinforce with above mentioned elements, and to withdraw at the time and place of his choosing.

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The Sky Soldiers arrived in the Dak To area with little or no knowledge of the North Vietnamese Regular Army or their capabilities. In early June there was solid indications that the B-3 front was moving the bulk of its regiments from Laos and Cambodia into the Central Highlands under the control of the 1st NVA Division. These were well trained and seasoned soldiers.

On June 21, A and C Company made their laager site in one common perimeter on a ridge extending perpendicular to Dak To proper about 2,000 meters away. As they were setting up their positions, both Companies sent out their clearing and reconnaissance patrols in front and around their respective areas. The patrols were an insurance that the area was clear of enemy activity prior to the Sky Soldiers digging in for the night. Shortly after the patrols returned, SP4 Cook of C/2/503rd accidentally strayed outside the safety of the perimeter and was cut down by friendly fire.

Some of the tragedies of war are at times unexplainable and much less justifiable. Some of the tragedies are leadership foul-ups, troops being jumpy from prior actions, or troops being tired and weary. There are many other factors that can be a major cause for such accidents. The well trained Sky Soldiers kept accidents to the minimum.

The morning of June 22, the Commanders got together for their briefing of respective AO's and final instructions for the mission ahead. C Company was to continue their search and destroy mission and A Company was to return to base camp by overland. Captain Milton commanding A Company had selected his route so that his Company could close at Dak To base camp NLT 1500 hours. The night before, the men were told they'd be returning to Dak To via the same trail they'd been monitoring for the past few days. It was gospel among the grunts to avoid repeat use of trails. The crafty enemy frequently booby-trapped them or set up ambushes along their length. Actually, Captain Milton had little choice in his Company's route of march. The ridge finger they were on had such steep sides, covered with the typical dense jungle growth, that any other route would have taken several days to traverse. He gave his Officers and NCO's their final instructions prior to moving out.

Milton assigned Lieutenant Judd's 2d Platoon to the point position. Next came 3d Platoon led by Lieutenant Hood. Milton's CP group would follow, and behind them would come Weapons Platoon. Lieutenant Sexton's 1st Platoon was given the task of spreading the CS crystals over the LZ and laager site before falling in at the column's rear.

At 0625 Lieutenant Judd started off. As the tail end of his platoon disappeared downhill into the jungle, Hood

started his platoon forward. The Weapons Platoon members, all eighteen of them, squatted along the trail waiting their turn to move. Lieutenant Sexton's platoon had donned their gas masks and were spreading the tear gas around the LZ.



**Ervin L. Burns, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

As the Companies moved out from their night laager site, SP4 John L. Leppelman became the point man for C/2/503rd. As his Squad moved out, he reported, *"As we moved and wound our way through A Company's positions we greeted our buddies with idle guff and chatter, many of whom we went to jump school with or came to Nam (Vietnam) with.*

We continued our search and destroy mission from ridge to ridge, while A Company moved down the slope towards base camp at Dak To, some 2,000 meters away. A few hours into our mission the point element started taking sniper fire and within a 20 minute period we had 3 WIA's. One was serious, he got hit through the neck.

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The area was triple canopy jungles and the lower ground area was heavy brush and foliage, just too thick to cut out an LZ so we had to transport him (the WIA) on a make shift stretcher. We made the stretcher by cutting two poles long enough to carry a person then rolling both poles around the edge of a poncho till it was wide enough for a person. We continued to move on our AO, then suddenly we got a radio call from A Company that they were in heavy contact with an entrenched NVA force. Shortly after we got another call from Colonel James Steverson, Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, to move out to assist A Company."



**Carlin Martin Campbell, Jr., A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

A Company's Point Squad moved down near a well used trail, shortly after they walked into five or six NVA soldiers crossing the trail, the startled NVA's opened fire. Contact was established with an estimated 5-6 NVA's at 0658 hours.

The area was steep with single to triple canopy jungles, thick bamboo, and heavy low foliage. The sun was just breaking through the tops of the jungles sending flowing eloquent rays of light down to the jungle floor. The peacefulness of the jungle turned into a chorus of automatic weapons firing, the sound sending vibrations throughout the Dak To mountains.

Captain Milton radioed Judd. The young lieutenant reported that his point squad had walked smack into ten to fifteen NVA coming toward them on the same trail. The NVA had opened up first, hitting some of Judd's men. He didn't know how many, or how badly. Judd had put his remaining men into a defensive perimeter.

After getting off the radio with Judd, Milton radioed the battalion TOC. He reported the contact to Capt. Ken Smith.

Colonel Partain and his executive officer, Maj. H. Glenn Watson, were also present in the TOC. While Partain and Smith plotted the coordinates in order to bring in supporting artillery fire, Watson stayed on the radio with Milton.

Major Watson was not overly concerned. Alpha seemed to have the situation under control. He advised Captain Milton to *"develop the fight and keep us informed."*

A Company's Point Squad was in the middle of a firefight, and the startled NVA's fire was ineffective at the moment, Capt. Milton ordered the 2nd Platoon to assist. As the remainder of the 2nd Platoon moved down to assist, they in turn came under heavy fire from the front and both flanks.

After a brief period, and sizing up the situation, Capt. Milton ordered the 2nd Platoon to withdraw, requesting heavy artillery fire to cover their movement back up the ridge. The artillery fire initiated, gave only minimum results, since the enemy was at close proximity with the Sky Soldiers. The 3rd Platoon was ordered to link up with the 2nd Platoon and assist them to move up the ridge to a more defensible area.

Then both elements began moving back up hill approximately seventy five (75) meters and forming a common perimeter along the ridgeline, with 2nd Platoon on the west and 3rd Platoon on the east.

At 0810 hours the elements of the 2nd and 3rd Platoon came under attack from the north by an estimated reinforced NVA Platoon. The attack was repulsed, but renewed with increased intensity. As the attack continued for the next half hour, Captain Milton reported to Battalion that his two lead elements were in heavy contact.

Based on the information he had, Partain called in an air strike. In order to bring in the jets, or fast movers, the artillery had to be shifted while the planes were in the area.

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Not everyone thought air strikes should be used. Because air strikes were less accurate than artillery, the NVA knew that the closer they moved to an allied unit, the safer they were.

Major Watson knew this, too. When the order for use of the fast movers came to him, he thought it was a mistake. "*Negative,*" he responded to the order to shift the artillery.

General Deane, who had arrived in the area, came up on the Battalion net. "*Shift the artillery,*" Deane ordered, overriding Watson.

From 0820 to 0825 the jets dropped their bombs along the east side of the ridge. At 0835 Huey gunships arrived on the scene. To help mark their Platoons' perimeter for the close-in support from the gunships' weapons systems, Lieutenants Judd and Hood had their men toss out smoke grenades, or "pop smoke" in the grunts' jargon.

Another reality about fighting in the highlands became apparent. The thick jungle dispersed the smoke so widely that the gunships couldn't get an accurate fix on the Paratroopers' location.

On the ground the effects were disastrous. The rising columns of smoke told the NVA right where the Americans were. Specialist Patterson noticed the increase in small-arms fire immediately. Seconds later NVA mortar rounds began crashing into the perimeter, tearing American flesh. Amid the renewed cries of "*Medic!*" Paratroopers were yelling, "*No more smoke. No more smoke.*" But it was too late. The NVA now had an accurate fix on their positions.

Even while the gunships were firing blindly into the jungle around them, the NVA were massing for another ground attack. At 0850 Lieutenant Judd radioed back to Milton, "*Six, we're bracing for an all-out attack. We're laid out well. About a hundred gooks are getting ready to hit us.*"

Before Milton could respond the roar of M16 fire filled the handset. He was starting to wonder if the two platoons would make it. They had been in contact for almost two hours.

The attack was repulsed with heavy casualties to the Sky Soldiers, despite the fact that the Sky Soldiers inflicted heavy casualties on the NVA. The NVA's kept moving through their own dead and wounded in a frenzied attack.

Air, artillery and gun-ships strikes continued throughout the firefight, to include napalm to the north side of the perimeter. At 0900 hours Captain Milton committed his 1st Platoon to relieve the pressure on the

besieged 2nd and 3rd Platoons, at the same time Capt. Milton had his Weapons Platoon assist in evacuating the wounded back up the hill to his CP (command post).

The 1st Platoon had to assault through the NVA's lines to get to the embattled 2nd and 3rd Platoons perimeter. The Weapons Platoon carrying party was unable to reach the battle area. By this time the NVA had the area surrounded and continued their attack on the perimeter despite heavy losses to themselves.

As the battle progressed with A Company's Rifle Platoons being surrounded with no resupply of ammunition or ground support, Capt. Milton reported that his units were in a desperate situation requiring immediate assistance.



**Darrell Wayne Butts, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

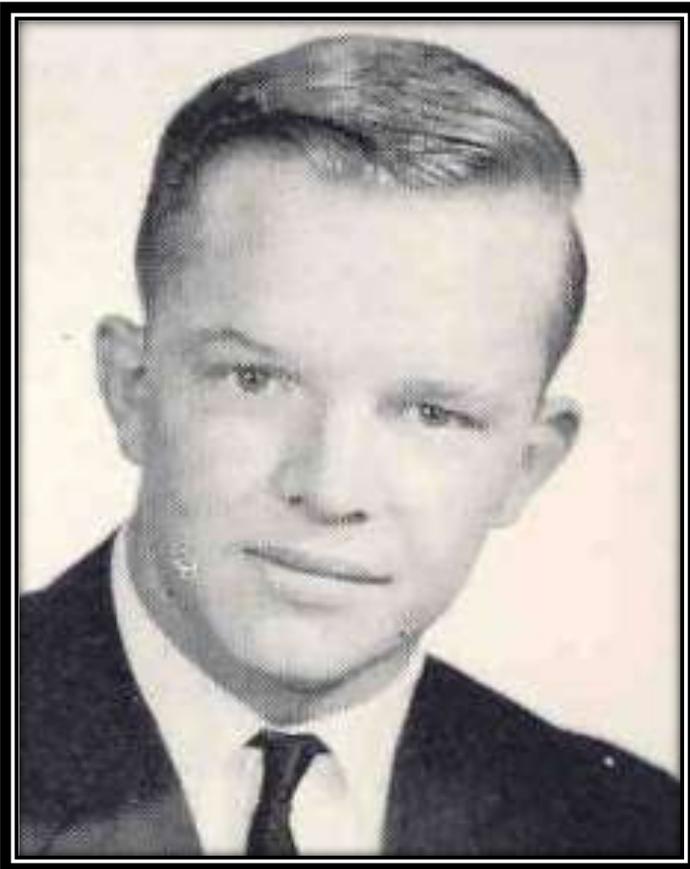
General Deane had arrived at the Brigade TOC by this time. Based on reports from Milton and from Partain's aerial observation, General Deane surmised that Alpha Company had not fallen into a prepared ambush but had stumbled into a moving NVA column of indeterminate size. Deane figured the main body of the NVA unit would continue its movement while holding Alpha at bay.

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He looked over his maps, identifying likely routes of movement, and then barked off the coordinates to the artillery liaison officer. The latter relayed those figures to 3/319th's fire direction center. The 105's poured howitzer shells into those areas, hoping to catch the fleeing NVA.

Colonel Partain reported his findings to General Deane. When Deane learned that Partain had had two choppers shot out from underneath him, he gave Partain his own chopper and crew and sent him back into the air. Before Partain departed, he ordered his remaining company, Bravo, to vacate its base security positions and chopper into an LZ north of where Alpha's three Platoons were fighting for their lives.



**Charles Orvis Deedrick, Jr., A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

The Commander of C Company was reporting heavy movements to their front and flanks, and were carrying dead and wounded with them, were thought to be moving too slow. Battalion ordered C Company to ignore the movements to his front and flanks and to proceed rapidly to the assistance of A Company.

Col. Stevenson had alerted Bravo Company 2/503rd who was the Battalion reserve unit, back at Dak To proper. They were making preparations and planning for their movement, since the contact area was not approachable by helicopter, nor were there any good landing zones close up to the embattled area.

At approximately 1000 hours, the forward elements of Alpha in contact with the NVA, reported they were in heavy contact and their elements were down to fifteen effective. All Platoon Leaders were killed, all Platoon Sergeants were wounded, some several times.

The 2nd Platoon Sergeant and ranking survivor directed that the wounded and the effective be moved back to the ridge, towards the Company's CP. Before action could be initiated on the request, radio contact was broken, and at 1034 hours Captain Milton reported that he had lost radio contact with his forward elements. At the same time he requested that Battalion terminate the airstrikes that were pounding the western approaches to the forward positions with napalm and rockets and to use artillery instead. At this time Captain Milton's CP was not under fire but all available personnel were helping to evacuate the wounded.

Company B 2/503rd Airborne Infantry was inserted into a one ship LZ. The process of this insertion was complicated by a fire in the high kunai grass (caused by smoke grenade). The lead elements (2nd Platoon B/2/503rd) moved out of the LZ towards the battle area about 300 meters south. They received small arms fire with no casualties. Other elements of Bravo Company landed, they moved to join their 2nd Platoon which was now directing artillery fire against the NVA.

Members of A Company reported to the CO that heavy movements were noted on the northwest portion of the perimeter. At 1030 and 1100 hours Capt. Milton made this report to Battalion and requested supporting fire in that area. He then dispatched a guide element back up the ridge to the old laager site to assist C Company 2/503rd back into A Company's perimeter. There was intermittent radio contact with the forward element of A Company and shortly after 1100 hours radio contact was permanently lost. While trying to make radio contact with his forward element, a group of survivors, led by the 2nd Platoon Sergeant reached the Company's CP.

The disposition of A Company 2/503rd was now about thirty-five wounded and thirty effective, a hasty perimeter was made around the wounded. Then at 1140 hours Capt. Milton decided to move the Company further up the ridge to a better defendable position. With heavy artillery cover fire, he moved all his wounded and personnel back to a more secure position.

The new position was assaulted from the northwest at 1220 hour and again on 1245 hours, then continued with sporadic small arms fire.

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As some defended others were feverishly cutting out an LZ as the situation permitted, Captain Milton was wounded during this action. A medical and ammunition re-supply was made into the partially completed LZ.

As Captain Willoughby's Bravo Company 2/503rd completed their insertion into their LZ the Company was ready to move out at 1205 hours and at 1240 hours they made contact with an estimated NVA Platoon, small-arms fire erupted around them before they'd covered much ground. Calling artillery support on the enemy, Willoughby also detected the NVA moving around his left, or east, flank and formed a defensive perimeter.

Airstrikes were called in, at 1335 to 1440 hours the A-1E Skyraiders pounded the suspected enemy area with 500 pound bombs, CBU (Cluster bomb units), napalm and strafing runs were directed against the NVA.

At about the same time the air strikes began for Bravo, Charlie Company reached Alpha's earlier LZ. The CS crystals sown by Sexton's platoon had a disastrous effect on Leonard's Paratroopers. They donned their gas masks, but most found the mask's filters had become wet in all the downpours and were no good. Soon, half the Company were on their knees, retching and with snot running from their noses and tears pouring from their eyes.

Company C finally made it to the old laager site where the B Company party met them, then led them back to the besieged perimeter of A Company 2/503rd. Company C 2/503rd was burdened with 2 KIA's from the night before and this made their progress to assist A Company more difficult. The link up with A and C Companies were effected at 1420 hours, and immediate attention was directed towards the completion of the LZ.

A team from Company C was sent out to the battle area to locate WIA's and to gain information on the enemy's situation. Their retrieval attempt was met with heavy sniper fire from the trees and surrounding area. C Company secured the area and got all WIA's and the remainder of A Company 2/503rd extracted to the Brigade main base camp, and the extraction was completed at 1850 hours.

Company C 2/503rd laagered on the ridge in A Company's perimeter with one Platoon placed on ambush. And B Company laagered in their area with one Platoon in ambush. Throughout the night artillery was directed against potential NVA routes of withdrawal.

On June 23, 1967 both B and C Companies 2/503rd linked up to clear the battle field, police the area for all members of their units, WIA's, KIA's, and MIA's. They discovered a horrendous situation committed by the

NVA, over half the KIA's (43 personnel) had suffered head wounds inflicted at close range, indicating that the NVA had executed the wounded during the night. One MIA who was recovered alive had survived the ordeal. The coup de grace had merely stunned him, however his head was split open exposing the skull. The Sky Soldiers that were never in a firefight were sick and horrified.



**Ronald Cleveland Clark, A/2/503
KIA 6/22/67**

Search and destroy missions conducted on June 24th through 28th, by B and C Company, the Recon Platoon 2/503rd and augmented by E/17th Cavalry, produced substantial evidence of the NVA losses. Much NVA equipment was captured and U.S. equipment recovered. Intelligence findings produced documents and three NVA POW's captured by E/17th Cavalry. The enemy unit was identified as the K-6 Battalion, subordinate to B-3 Front (this unit was formerly the 6th NVA Battalion, 24th NVA Regiment and detached to the B-3 Front in August 1966).

173D AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEPARATE)

Subject: Combat Operations After Action Report –
Battle of The Slopes, Hill 1338

Task Organization: Companies A and C, 2nd Battalion; Company B,
(Reserve) 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade
Date of Operations: 18 - 22 June 1967.





Interview With LTC David A. Milton, Inf. (Ret) Company Commander A/2/503d, RVN (1967)



When we put out the call for ‘recollections’ from troopers who were in and around The Battle of the Slopes, LTC Dave Milton (then Captain), Alpha Company commander during that battle, offered to answer any questions we might have, and sent in this brief note. We then invited Dave to be interviewed for this special edition of our newsletter. Ed

Dave Milton, CO/A/2/503d

I go through the would of, could of, should of, a lot....here’s something maybe the guys don't know.

Following the fight and after General Westmoreland was briefed by all concerned, he asked all in the tent to leave except for me. He said, *"This battle will go down as one of the best examples of the American fighting men ever. Washington is looking for a scapegoat."*

Westmoreland went on to say, *"You brought 46 men down off that hill. This battle will haunt you and all of us for years. You were out-gunned but not out-fought. Washington will know what great soldiers we have. I will personally tell the president what happened here."*

He then saluted me and said, *"Good job soldier."* We left the tent and he got up on the hood of a jeep and addressed all who were there on how well they did.



SGM Deeb and LTC Milton at 173d reunion

~ The Interview ~

2/503d Vietnam Newsletter (VNL): Colonel, Dave, tell us about your military training and postings before the 173d in Vietnam. Also, did you specifically request assignment to the brigade or did you become a Sky Soldier by chance? If it was a requested post, why the 173d?

LTC David Milton: I joined the army in 1956 and served with the 82nd Airborne Division and the 503rd Brigade Combat Team on Okinawa. I was commissioned in 1964. After completing Ranger School I served as a infantry platoon leader and a infantry rifle company commander with the 82nd. I became a Sky Soldier in March 1967 by chance.

VNL: Please describe the circumstances surrounding the moment you were given orders to take command of Alpha Company 2/503.

Milton: I took command of A Company in War Zone “D” during Operation Junction City II. The previous commanding officer of Alpha was wounded that morning, and I was given command that afternoon by battalion commander (then) LTC Bob Sigholtz. His only words to me were, *"You are my new A Company CO. A Company’s CP is over there."* I saluted, then headed in the direction he had pointed.

(continued....)



VNL: Between Junction City II and when the battalion moved into the Dak To area in June '67, what were some of the more memorable operations you and A Company participated in? Also, what was the makeup of the company in June; was it staffed at all levels with tested, combat ready and experienced troops?

Milton: After I joined A Company we were placed in Battalion reserve while we continued the War Zone "D" search and destroy mission. We did uncover several small Viet Cong bunker complexes, all unoccupied. We received incoming sniper fire on a daily basis which gave the company an opportunity to practice fire and movement. There were no other events prior to returning to our base at Bien Hoa.

During the time leading up to Dak To, I had a solid NCO cadre, however, no one was in the proper grade. For example, my platoon sergeants were all E-6's, squad leaders were all E-5's, and the first sergeant was an E-7 instead of an E-8. I had two lieutenants, however, I needed the second one to run the rear detachment at our base camp in Bien Hoa. Our biggest weakness was in our platoon leaders' positions. I was assigned three brand new 2nd lieutenants during the move to Dak To. Alpha Company had been in several contacts with the enemy just prior to my arrival and I considered it a combat ready unit.

VNL: Now, you and Alpha Company and the battalion have received orders to move to Kontum Province and the hills of Dak To in the Central Highlands, terrain decidedly different than the generally flat "D" Zone jungles and the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta you were accustomed to, and where you would commence Operation Greeley. During briefings at Zinn what did you and the other company commanders learn from battalion/brigade leadership of this pending operation? Specifically, what were your objectives and what did they tell you about the opposing forces you would likely encounter?

Milton: Immediately after returning to Camp Zinn and after repacking all our gear and ammo, I was about to release troops to go to the PX, beer hall, etc., when a battalion runner told me to put Alpha Company on trucks, which we did. This happened so fast some of my soldiers didn't have time to shower after coming in from the field.

The trucks took us to the airbase where C-130s with their engines running were waiting. I was told to put as many soldiers on each aircraft as it could hold. If I remember correctly, all of A Company (136 troopers) was on one aircraft. I had not received a single word as to where we were going, nor had I received any maps.

Several hours later we landed and a guide led my company into a laager area where we spent the rest of the night. We spent two days in this place (still no maps), and then we again loaded aboard trucks. We proceeded to the SF airfield where the battalion CO and S3 briefed me. We were to make an air assault on a very small knoll which could only accommodate one Huey landing at a time -- the knoll was covered with elephant grass about 10 feet deep. I was also told of recent sightings of NVA troops believed to be moving into the surrounding hills.

The first Huey hovered as low as it could while 1st Platoon tumbled out into the high grass. I was given the task to move from the knoll and set-up ambush sites on suspected trail systems 500 meters east. Finally, we were all assembled and we started digging in. Still no maps -- but they were later airdropped to us.

I was told a RVN battalion had been wiped-out west of the SF camp located close to the airfield from where we had just left.

(continued....)



Camp Zinn, named in honor of LT Ron Zinn (KIA) B/2/503, home of the 2/503d, '65-'67. Alpha Company hooch's seen on left, Charlie Company hooch's at top.
(Photo by COL George Dexter, Bn CO in Vietnam '65-'66)



VNL: You stated A Company was moved to Dak To from Bien Hoa with no notice or preparation even to the point you were deployed to the field with no maps. Was this also the case with B and C Companies? If not, how was it that C Company was in the bush with you on 6/21 and B Company was held back in reserve at the airstrip? It sounds as if this entire move was one big clusterfuck on the part of battalion or brigade or others. Did anyone ask battalion or brigade any questions regarding this haphazard movement? Also, what were your orders for June 22nd and do you recall what C Company was ordered to do that day? What direction were they headed and where were they at 9 a.m?

Milton: Maps were issued on the 21st of June. I cannot speak to B or C Company's situations. C Company was put in approximately 2000 meters to relieve A Company's return to base camp. It was not my job nor would I ever question orders from superiors. Contrary to your remark suggesting this operation turned into a C..... F....., I don't agree, in spite of the push to get troops in the field to block any movement on that new trail system. My mission was to move by foot to base camp as fast as possible. C Company was to assume my mission of interdiction of the trail system. At 9 a.m. C Company was less than 2000 meters from us.

VNL: So, Dave, up to this moment you and your men, 136 of you, map-less up to a point, were dug in on that slope knowing (at least) an enemy battalion of four, five or six times your strength was likely in the same area – it would had to have been a battalion sized force or greater to wipe-out the RVN unit. Not much had changed since March '66 when the entire 2/503d was sent into the "D" Zone jungle (Operation Silver City), and intelligence knew it was likely we would be heavily outmanned and out-gunned by enemy forces. What were you told would happen once your company made contact with the enemy? What was the *strategy* behind placing Alpha Company at risk? Frankly, Colonel, it sounds to me as if you and your men were being used as nothing more than bait. Am I wrong? What were you personally thinking during the time before the battle commenced?



(Then) 1st LT Dave Milton, A/2/503 Recon Platoon Leader, with his NCO buddy enjoying a cool one in 1967.

(Photo by Les Fuller, A/2/503d)

Milton: Our mission was to interdict a large trail system. I had not given any thought to the size of enemy forces we had in the area. On 22 June we knew nothing of well-trained NVA forces. However, it did influence the types of ambushes laid out for my troops. Once positions were dug and overhead cover put in place, I started sending recon patrols in all different directions. My company sat in the middle of a huge trail system almost big enough to drive trucks down. On either side of the trail were individual bunkers. The bunkers were freshly dug with overhead cover.

(continued...)



Once I was briefed on the size of enemy forces we might expect, it really didn't make much difference – we had been given our orders. I instructed my platoon leaders on the importance of the locations of their claymore mines, trip flares and fields of fire.

It was common knowledge that the 173d Airborne Brigade was General Westmoreland's "Fire Brigade". It was routine for us to be moved all over the different AOs to establish contact then bring in additional regular troops. In this case the 4th Infantry Division was in support of our operations. Our mission was straight forward, it was to close with and destroy enemy forces - - not one time did it cross my mind that we could not do that. I had no knowledge of Operation Silver City, and those in senior command don't put troops out as BAIT. The plan for our forces was to interdict enemy activity with ambush tactics along that trail system. C Company had been inserted into an area 2 kilometers to our west, with Bravo Company at the ready in reserve. I felt good about what we were doing.



Sign posted at entrance to Alpha Company at the battalion's base camp in Bien Hoa.

Clem Green was "A" Company 2/503d Company Commander Capt. Jack Kelley's term used to describe the average, everyday, mythical, hardworking and downtrodden paratrooper infantryman who bore the brunt of every battle and the mistakes of leadership, and served as an example of what to do and what not to do by all. (As described by Capt. Bill Vose, A/2/503d)

VNL: Dave, we could debate the question of whether or not U.S. forces were used as bait, but we won't here, other than to say the answer to that might rest with one's personal perspective of the situation at hand. To move on. According to pre-operation reports, "Prior to its deployment to the highlands, (Commanding General) Peer's operations officer, Colonel William J. Livsey, attempted to warn the Airborne officers of the hazards of campaigning in the highlands. He also advised them that PAVN regulars were a much better equipped and motivated force than the NLF (Viet Cong). These warnings, however, made little impression on the paratroopers, who were about to become victims of their own overconfidence." What Livsey said seems to coincide with your own thinking at the time, namely, a strong sense of confidence or over confidence? Until June '67, and with few exceptions, combat of the brigade generally was with the Viet Cong in the south. You and your men are now positioned and ready to fulfill your objective; close with and destroy the enemy. Please tell us what happens next over the first couple hours after making initial contact, addressing your and higher-ups' initial understanding of what you and your men were facing.

Milton: On the morning of 22 June I put my 2nd Platoon in the lead with my Recon squad several hundred meters in front of 2nd Platoon. The 3rd Platoon trailed 2nd with the 1st Platoon in the rear putting out 55 gallon drums of CS crystals to keep our laager site from being used by the NVA.

At approximately 0700 in the a.m. of 22 June, 6 to 8 shots were fired. My Recon squad had spotted VC and exchanged fire. My Forward Observer immediately started to bring arty fire in. We had previously pre-plotted arty strike zones. The 2nd Platoon formed a small perimeter. It was not until after 0900 hrs. did small arms fire intensify. By this time 2nd Platoon had several men wounded. 3rd Platoon had also taken wounded. At that time the artillery was right on target and we were able to extract several of our wounded.

At that same time it was decided to lift all artillery and gunship support in order to bring in high performance aircraft. It took approximately 55 minutes to lift the arty and bring it back -- in the meantime the enemy managed to infiltrate our lines. By 1030 hrs. I had lost contact with both forward platoons. It seemed the enemy was relentless in pushing forward into our positions. No one, to include the battalion CO, had any idea of the exact size of the enemy unit. They were relying on my reports.

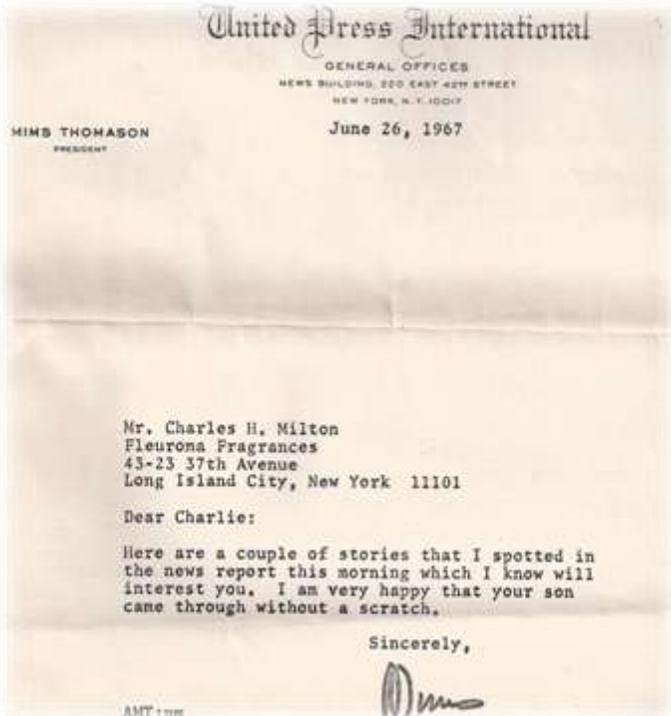
(continued....)



I had asked for help from battalion. C Company was ordered to move to our assistance at approximately 0900 hrs. from 2 kilometers away. At 1045 hrs. I was expecting C Company to arrive at any moment. They had twice told battalion they were moving.

I still had 3rd Platoon in reserve. I know I personally may have appeared overwhelmed. If only C Company had shown up, the outcome of the battle may have been different. Without C Company I had several courses of action to consider and then I had to make a decision. I could commit what was left of my company forward to the lost platoons -- that meant moving 22 wounded forward to lower ground into a force we didn't know the size of. Or, I could commit 1st Platoon to flank while carrying the last of the company's ammo reserves -- that would leave 22 WIA and approximately 16 men with very little or no ammo. At that moment artillery was again pounding the enemy -- in order for it to be effective it would have to be brought in on our positions. I had the FO bring it in closer.

My decision was to hold the Company CP where it was and commit 1st Platoon to flank and attempt to make contact with 3rd Platoon. I lost contact with 1st Platoon soon after they left the Company perimeter.



A letter from the president of UPI to Dave Milton's dad, Charles. The UPI story he refers to appears on Page 31.

VNL: If you engaged the enemy at 7 a.m. why did it take two full hours to request help from C Company? Was this your call or battalions' and if battalion, why did they wait? Also, during this two-hour interval had you lost contact with your two platoons? Did you have radio contact all day with C Company?

Milton: It took hours for the fire fight to develop. Once I knew we were out-numbered I immediately called for C Company help. No, I had not lost contact. It wasn't until approximately 1030 hrs. I seldom communicated with C Company, however, Battalion often did.

VNL: In talking with buddies who were there with you, the terrain in the Dak To area was brutal. What led you to believe C Company could arrive at your location within an hour and 45 minutes carrying two dead over at least 2000 meters? Did you know that they had this burden? Did you ever find out why C Company was not allowed to have their KIA removed from the field prior to moving out?

Milton: As I remember, the terrain between C Company and A Company was relatively flat. We had reconnoitered the area several days before, that's why this area was selected for C Company's first operation. When you have a KIA you wrap him in a poncho, tie the poncho to a long stick with one soldier at each end, and carry him. I can't answer why the KIAs were not removed from the field.

I want to interject the fact here, C Company men were some of the bravest men I worked with. The problem with C Company was with the 1st Sergeant and the CO. They, in my opinion, made a very poor decision -- they remained on the trail way too long because they thought we were in an ambush. That is why they didn't arrive until the firing had stopped or quieted down.

VNL: From your description you seemed to have been in a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation. In listening to the audio tapes of radio transmissions recorded at the airstrip during the battle, it seems there was some confusion as to the status of the two platoons under attack -- lost radio contact contributing to this no doubt -- and, of course, Charlie Company had not arrived on scene. In speaking with some of the C Company troopers who were there that day, and in spite of reports the CO of that company was later relieved of duty for 'not moving quickly enough to the aid of Alpha', they tell me they were in fact moving as quickly as the terrain would allow, although John Leppelman's report (see Pages 24-25) might be interpreted by some as indicating otherwise. Please continue the report on your activities, the decisions you were faced with and what your company would ultimately endure. Also, address the opposing views of bringing in arty vs. direct gunship support.

(continued...)



Milton: I want to make it very clear. When C Company men came single file through my Company location, they were crying because they didn't get there sooner but instead they sat on the trail for hours because the C Company 1st Sergeant convinced the C Company Commanding Officer we were in an ambush. It's 40 years later and too late to argue the point. However, if C Company had arrived in a more timely manner the NVA could not of continued executing my remaining wounded men.

After losing contact with the 1st Platoon, I had the remaining soldiers start to dig in and prepare for an all out enemy assault on our position. The walking wounded started helping the seriously wounded while all others started digging right away. Each soldier knew exactly what was about to happen. It's during times like this you learn what kind of soldiers you have. Every soldier there that day was a hero.

Not a single soldier questioned the fact they were going to die in the next hour. God, what a great bunch of soldiers.

I sent a small squad back to where C Company was located. They eventually linked up and were able to move much faster. Once C Company arrived, the exchange of fire had stopped and the enemy had disengaged. The decision was made the remaining troopers of A Company would be air evac'd to base camp. I personally challenged that order but was overruled.

Helicopter gunships were very effective. It took minimum time to set-up their runs. It was the high performance aircraft, the fast movers, I personally had a problem with. You had to clear the battle area of all artillery and gunships. The jets could only drop their bombs at least 1000 meters away from friendly troops, and all of these actions took at least 50-70 minutes to complete.

VNL: When was the CS gas brought into your perimeter? Did they bring you new gas masks? Could the tears you saw on the faces of the C Company troopers have been from the gas and not the frustration of being held back? (again, see Leppelman's account). Clearly these guys were also in shock at what they saw upon arriving your location.

Milton: The CS in 55 gallon drums were brought in the night before. 1st Platoon had the mission of spreading it to prevent enemy from using the area. No new gas masks were delivered and the ones we had been carrying didn't work very well. No, C Company men were NOT crying from the CS. They felt they let us down. None of them were able to see what laid below.

During last year's reunion C Company troopers, one after one, came by to offer regrets to 1st Sergeant Deeb and me because they personally felt responsible for not getting to us sooner.

VNL: Why was your company so spread out during this march which allowed easy isolation and destruction of a platoon at a time? Do you recall how Clarence Johnson (point team rifleman) survived that day?



A/2/503 trooper, Clarence Johnson, survivor of The Slopes.

Milton: The narrowness of the terrain at that point caused a large gap between 2nd and 3rd Platoons, I didn't know this at the first shot. Remember, I had two new platoon leaders who had joined the company the night before. However, I did have two strong platoon sergeants. The enemy rushed with 75-100 men not caring whether they lived or died. The first rush overran the lead platoon.

A second rush overran the 2nd Platoon. I believe once this happened and then because the artillery was doing a great job, the main force of enemy disengaged and moved to the west. A small force of enemy was left behind to mop-up and do away with 1st Platoon. I later learned Clarence hid in a very thick area of bamboo to keep from being discovered by the enemy.

(continued....)

