



WELCOME TO "A WALK WITH THE 35TH"



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"FIRST BATTLE"

Alfa Co 1/35th Infantry, 3d Bde. 25th Infantry Division

15 MARCH 1966

"I was fortunate to have so many great grunts working for me – real pros that gave a lot more than they took." Cpt. Tony Bisantz, CO Alfa Co. 1/35th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division.

For its actions this day, Alfa Co. 1/35th infantry was awarded the Valorous Unit Award

Special thanks to Tony Bisantz for a copy of this report.

For a background leading up to this first battle, I am turning to an excerpt from John Carland's *Stemming the Tide*, Center for Military History, Chapter 11. The 3d Brigade and its Battalions were new to Vietnam, having arrived in the Central Highlands from its home in Hawaii with the 25th Division in the first week of January, 1966. Although, a small advance group preceded them over the Christmas season 1965.

"Stemming the Tide"

By John M Carland

Chapter 11: Spoiling Operations on the High Plateau (Early 1966)



General "Swede" Larson

While General Larsen concentrated his forces in the coastal lowlands during the spring, he could not ignore the less populated but strategically significant Central Highlands. After the bloody fighting in the Ia Drang the previous November, he believed that it was just a matter of time before Communist forces sortied across the border in strength and once again challenged allied positions in the western provinces. Already, intelligence findings were painting an ominous picture there, as General Man's B3 Front had grouped its forward command element and the three North Vietnamese regiments it controlled—the 32d, 33d, and 66th—into a potentially formidable unit, the 1st PAVN Division. Additional elements followed, among them the 24th and 88th PAVN Regiments, as the leadership in Hanoi easily matched the U.S. troop commitment.¹

The best that General Larsen could counter with in the three highlands border provinces—Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac—was the newly deployed 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, at Pleiku City, still an untested force. He informed the brigade commander, Col. Everette A. Stoutner, that the 1st Cavalry Division would support him in an emergency but, because of its duties on the coast, would only be available for limited periods of time. To hold the line in the highlands,

Colonel Stoutner would have to meet enemy threats as they arose. The spoiling attack would be his weapon of choice in the early months of 1966.²

The Highlands Brigade Enters Combat

Protected by the 1st Cavalry Division, the 3d Brigade settled into its encampment quickly and was ready by mid-January to undertake its first combat operation—a joint U.S.—South Vietnamese effort to secure Highway 19 from Qui Nhon to Pleiku. The work was routine, but it gave Colonel Stoutner's men a chance to gain practical experience in patrolling, establishing ambushes, escorting convoys, and setting up perimeter defenses.

On 22 January, shortly after the operation ended, General Westmoreland traveled to the brigade's base camp to welcome the unit. Although encouraging, he sounded a solemn note. The war would be long and hard, he told the troops. They would have to "work like hell and fight like tigers."³

Two weeks later General Larsen gave the 3d Brigade its second mission, Operation TAYLOR—a search and destroy expedition along the Krong Bolah River, about forty kilometers from the Cambodian border, where a North Vietnamese battalion reportedly was lurking. On 5 February, leaving Lt. Col. Edward F. Callanan's 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, behind in reserve, Stoutner moved his other two battalions, Lt. Col. Gilbert Proctor's 1st of the 14th Infantry and Lt. Col. George A. Scott's 2d of the 35th Infantry, along with direct-support artillery, twenty kilometers northwest of Pleiku to the hamlet of Plei Mrong. The following day he sent Scott's battalion north along the east bank of the Krong Bolah, where it received harassing fire from the opposite side of the river. Proctor's battalion responded by helicoptering to the west bank in search of the offending units. After two more days of patrolling, Stoutner pulled the battalions back to Plei Mrong on the eighth, and shortly thereafter his entire brigade returned to Pleiku City. Except for a few minor skirmishes and several mortar attacks that killed 3 Americans and wounded 12, TAYLOR achieved little other than providing the new brigade with firsthand experience in conducting ground and airmobile operations in the rugged interior.⁴

The next assignment, Operation GARFIELD, took the 3d Brigade to Darlac Province, south of Pleiku. Standing some two hundred meters above sea level, much of the area consisted of rolling terrain, but rugged mountains up to twenty-five hundred meters in height and heavy jungle characterized its southern and southeastern portions. Since the dry season was under way, low humidity, warm temperatures, and prevailing winds from the east and northeast provided good campaigning weather.

The brigade was to search for North Vietnamese forces north and west of the province capital, Ban Me Thuot, in a large area bounded on the east by Highway 14, on the west by the Cambodian border, on the south by Ban Me Thuot,



Men of the 3d brigade, 25th Infantry Division, load artillery on a Chinook during GARFIELD.

and on the north by the Darlac/Pleiku boundary. Although the brigade's intelligence officer suggested that a North Vietnamese battalion might be located about thirty kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot, intelligence on enemy activities in the region was sketchy at best. Whether or not the operation achieved its primary goal of flushing the enemy out of a long-standing safe haven, the hope was that it would generate the sort of intelligence that would lead to productive missions in the future.

Operation GARFIELD commenced on 25 February, when C-130s began a two-day round-the-clock airlift of the brigade from Pleiku to Ban Me Thuot East airfield, where Stoutner established his command post. The South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 44th Regiment, 23d Infantry Division, provided security for the brigade headquarters, freeing Stoutner's maneuver elements for the hunt. From 28 February to 7 March his troops conducted numerous air assaults and saturation patrols, increasingly directing their attention to the area around the Mewal Plantation, a suspected infiltration way station about twenty kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot. Although sporadic firefights occurred, the largest force that Stoutner's men encountered was a squad.⁵

On 4 March General Larsen ordered Colonel Stoutner to shift his base of operations to Ban Brieng airfield, the site of a closed Special Forces camp fifty-five kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot and just west of Highway 14. After completing the move, Stoutner initiated a series of patrols between the eighth and fifteenth, mainly looking west of Ban Brieng along the boundary between Darlac and Pleiku Provinces. He was able to cover a great deal of ground this time because Larsen had made a number of Chinooks available to him to move his troops and artillery. Even so, one day was much like any another—air assaults into sterile landing zones, foot patrols into surrounding terrain, and no combat. The monotony was deceiving, however, because the enemy could appear unexpectedly. At 0320 on the eleventh one of Colonel Proctor's companies in a night laager received a pounding from between forty and sixty mortar rounds that wounded 11 men.⁶

From here we will go to the report of the fight as prepared by Cpt. Tony Bisantz, CO A Co, 1/35th Infantry.

First Battle

Combat experience submitted by Captain Bisantz for use by Project Share.

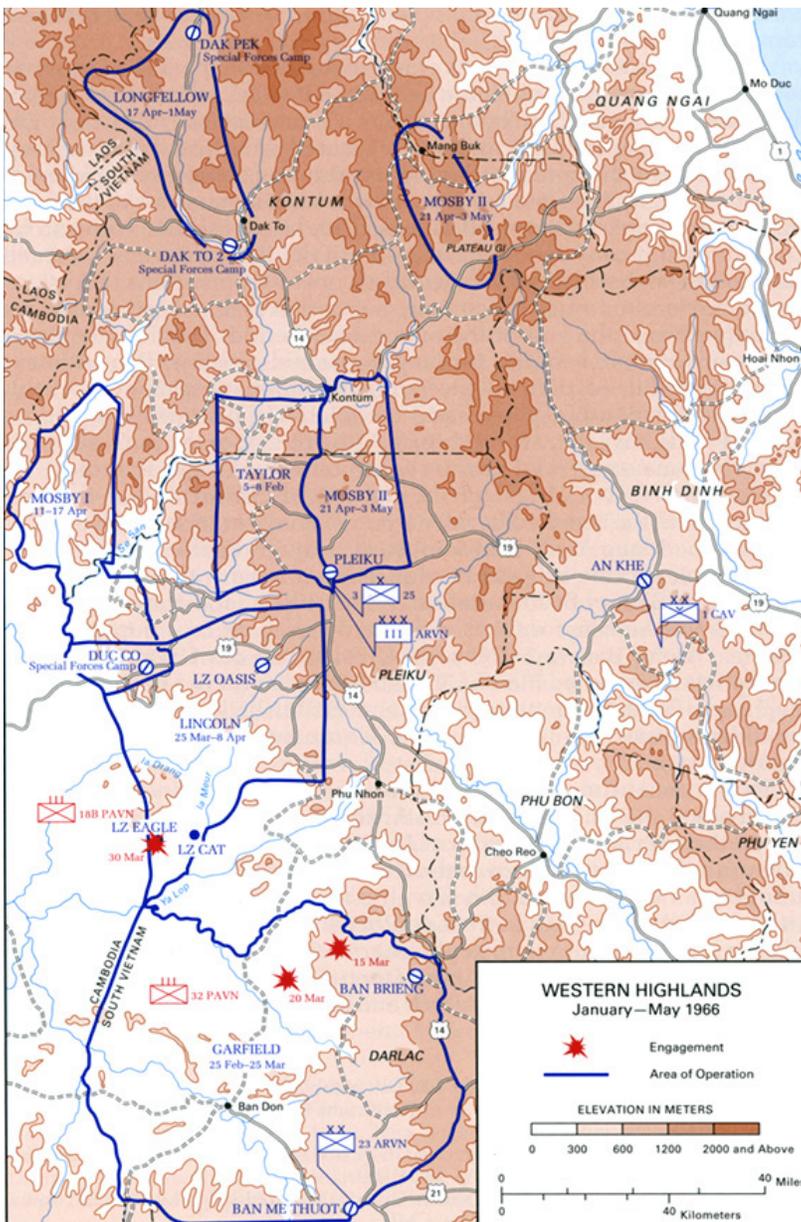
Introduction:

The 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division arrived in the central highlands during the 1965 Christmas Season. On 22 February 1966, following local base area security operations and extensive route security work along Highway 19, the Brigade jumped off on OPERATION GARFIELD. This was a search and destroy, border surveillance operation which was to continue, with a name change to LINCOLN, until 5 May 1966. Initially the Brigade air lifted from Pleiku to Ban Me Thout where a forward base was established. Working north, in the area bounded by Highway 14 on the east and the Cambodian Border on the west, the battalions met little resistance although there were extensive indications that NVA forces had been in the area recently. About 10 March the Brigade Base Camp moved north to the abandoned air strip at Buon Brieng.

On 9 March an Eagle Flight from Company A, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, received ground fire while reconning an LZ. Subsequently the entire company was lifted into the area, but contact was not regained. On 10 March the remaining elements of the 1/35th were lifted into the area; and extensive patrolling activity began. A battalion base consisting of the Battalion TAC CP, the Recon Plat, the 4.2 platoon and a battery of 105mm Howitzers was established. Company A was given the mission of securing the battalion base and providing the battalion's ready reserve force. Up to this time no element of the 3d Brigade had had any major contact with the enemy.

Narrative:

About EENT (Army acronym for as twilight ensued) on 14 March two reinforced squad size ambush patrols moved out of the perimeter and proceeded toward their previously reconned positions east and west of the Battalion CP along the trail complex adjacent to the EA WY. The patrol moving west had moved about 500 yards, halfway to their position, when the point man came face to face with an NVA patrol point man coming toward the battalion's position. Both men fired immediately and ducked for cover. The rest of the squad immediately came on line, initiated assault fire, and moved forward against sporadic enemy fire. The squad leader, SSG R. C. Williams, prudently halted the squad when he came abreast of the point man. By this time all enemy fire had ceased and it was completely dark. On the orders from battalion, the squad returned to the perimeter and prepared to occupy their ambush positions later in the night. There had been no friendly casualties, and enemy casualties were unknown.



Central Highlands Operations early 1966

Extensive mortar H & I fires were initiated in the contact area and continued through the evening. At approximately 0100 hours the base was hit with a heavy enemy mortar barrage. An estimated 125 to 130 mortar rounds fell in a tight dispersion pattern in the western, unoccupied end of the LZ. Counter mortar fire was immediately started with unknown results. There were no friendly casualties, and the enemy fire came no nearer than 50 meters to friendly positions. H & I fires in the area were resumed with new intensity, and the 3d Platoon of Company A was alerted to prepare to move out on a combat patrol at first light.

About 0600 hours the 3d Platoon reached the point of the previous night's contact and found many blood trails in the area. Moving on a little bit further they found approximately 18 rounds of 81mm and 82mm mortar ammunition.

The platoon was directed to continue its patrol west along the trail complex adjacent to the stream. By noon they had moved about 2500 meters and requested further instructions. At the same time, as the Platoon Leader, 2LT Pat Lenz, was receiving orders to return to battalion, the point man, SP4 Hood, came upon some WD-1 phone wire laid along the edge of the stream bed. He passed the word back and cautiously moved forward. The

platoon leader ordered his trail squad to move up on the left side of the platoon to cover the other bank of the stream. Almost simultaneously the point element of the platoon opened fire on a squad of NVA soldiers deploying to their front.

The platoon leader immediately sent his platoon SGT, PSG Jones, and an RTO to check a clearing on the platoon's right rear. He deployed his platoon on line and began to assault the enemy. The volume of enemy fire increased greatly, and the platoon was almost immediately on the defensive. The platoon leader received a wound in the thigh, and several other men, including two squad leaders; SSG's Holbrook and Williams, were wounded and killed in the first few seconds. Realizing he was greatly outnumbered, the platoon leader ordered a withdrawal toward the clearing at his right rear.

Throughout this period radio, contact with the platoon leader's RTO had been sporadic at best, due to his location in the stream bed; however, the platoon's second RTO, who was with the platoon SGT, was able to relay messages between the platoon leader and company commander. At this time a FAC from a sister battalion was orbiting the scene, and after some difficulty he was able to locate the platoon and direct an air strike. Napalm and 20mm cannon was dropped within 50 meters of friendly forces and stopped the NVA assault just as it was about to overrun the platoon.



Combat Assault (CA) by 35th Infantry photo by Walt Shields 2/9th Artillery

When the initial contact was reported, 3d Brigade diverted all available lift into the battalion CP, and within 15 minutes there were sufficient helicopters to lift a platoon. The 1st Platoon, commanded by 2LT Richard Coleman, was loaded and lifted to the LZ. The 3d Platoon had been calling continually for reinforcements. The gunships had been unable to put down suppressive fire because of the intermingled forces at the edge of the LZ. The pilots of the 170th Aviation Company did not hesitate however, and at the cost of one pilot killed and three crewmen wounded, the 1st Platoon was landed. Two of its members were killed before they hit the ground. The platoon immediately attacked the enemy and secured the LZ, killing 15 NVA soldiers within 30 meters of the edge of the clearing.

The 2d Platoon, commanded by 2LT James Kelsey, was lifted in about 15 minutes behind the 1st Platoon. They immediately deployed to form half of a pincers against the enemy force which had

retreated into prepared positions. As the fight progressed the Battalion S3 had gone airborne in an OH-23 to coordinate the troop lift and supporting artillery fire. The area south of the contact was kept sealed off with steady fire from two 105 batteries. At about 1500 hours Company B 1/35 was lifted into an LZ about 2 kilometers west of the contact area and ordered to sweep east in an attempt to catch the fleeing NVA forces. They were successful in killing two and capturing one.

By 1500 hours it was apparent the enemy had decided to quit the battlefield under the cover of a cleverly concealed small stay-behind-force which was effectively slowing the advance of Company A. Reduction of these positions was a bunker by bunker operation requiring the use of M-72 LAW and grenades. The enemy positions were cleared by 1630 and Company B came from the west to link up at 1730 hours. By dark all captured enemy material had been evacuated, and a perimeter had been established. An analysis of the enemy positions and the number of enemy dead (48) indicated that the 3d Platoon had been opposed by a reinforced NVA company (approximately 150-200 men). Approximately 18 individual weapons (CHICOM carbines, AK-47) and 2 light machineguns were captured along with numerous packs, documents, and field gear. Friendly losses were 10 KIA and 20 WIA.

Analysis:

The ambush patrol, in its meeting engagement, apparently disrupted the enemy's plan to mortar the battalion base.

Early the next morning the combat patrol succeeded in gaining contact with the enemy, the first definitive contact the brigade had had on Operation Garfield. The results of this contact and other patrols in that area revealed an extensive, well established enemy infiltration route whose prior existence had not been known. Subsequent friendly activity resulted in the destruction of several enemy way stations, campsite, and training areas, the seizure of a large ammunition cache, and a battalion supply cache, complete with unit flags, history, and payroll documents.

Captured documents at the scene of the battle indicated that the NVA forces had been expecting US activity in the area to the extent that operation plans against US forces had been prepared. Why these plans had not been executed is open to speculation. Later analysis tended to indicate that the aggressiveness and firepower of the US units coupled with the relatively slow reaction time of the NVA units prevented their massing for attack purposes.

Lessons Learned:

NVA forces will not offer battle against US units unless they have a great superiority in numbers or are caught by surprise. In this particular case both conditions were present. As soon as the 3d Platoon began to receive reinforcements, the enemy main body withdrew under cover of a small holding force. The US troops had also found the enemy in what the enemy thought was their secure, undetected base. In fact, the area where the battle took place had been patrolled two days before with negative results.

Artillery alone will not prevent exfiltration of enemy forces from an objective area. The NVA ability to break down into small groups and slip out of the battle area under the protection of stay-behind covering forces is well known. In this case sufficient troops and lift were not available to completely encircle the enemy, and as a result, a large portion of the enemy force escaped.

Landing zones are critical terrain in this part of RVN. The existence of the landing zone and the platoon leader's immediate realization of its importance meant the difference between defeat and victory.

All bases must be protected by aggressive patrolling. The longer the base is occupied the more extensive the patrolling should be. In this case a small patrol completely nullified the effectiveness of an enemy mortar attack.

RTOs at all levels must be especially selected and trained so as to act intelligently and correctly under adverse conditions. For a period of about 20 minutes the platoon's only contact with the company and all supporting fires, including the FAC, was by relay through a relatively inexperienced junior RTO. Through his previous training and knowledge of SOPs for adjustment of artillery and TAC air, he was able to keep the company commander informed of the situation and influence the outcome of the battle.

Field wire laid along a trail or stream bed should first be followed by TAC air and/or artillery fire, and then by patrols. In this particular case the discovery of the wire and engagement with the enemy were almost simultaneous, but it was made SOP that in the future wire would not be followed until extensive fire support could be brought to bear on the suspected enemy location.

Special Honor is reserved for these men who gave it all this day.



VALOROUS UNIT AWARD



ALFA CO 1/35TH INFANTRY

15 MARCH 1966

General Orders No. 17

The ValorOUS Unit Award is awarded by direction of the Secretary of the Army to:

COMPANY A 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 3D BRIGADE, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION for extraordinary heroism:

COMPANY A 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION, distinguished itself by extraordinary heroism on 15 March 1966 while engaged in military operations against and armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam. When the 35th INFANTRY base camp was mortared in the early morning of 15 March, the 3D PLATOON, COMPANY A 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION set out to pursue and fix the Viet Cong force while the rest of the company prepared to reinforce it when contact with the insurgents was made. Just as the pursuit force was preparing to return to the base after a fruitless search, a point man discovered a communications wire and followed it into a hostile camp. The pursuit platoon was quickly engaged and found itself receiving intense fire from two Viet Cong companies. When this friendly unit had been under constant, violent attack for over an hour, another platoon of COMPANY A, 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION was helilifted into a nearby landing zone. Although the insurgents threw themselves into a suicidal, human wave attack as the reinforcing unit landed, the men repulsed them, inflicted numerous casualties among the insurgents, and began to support their sister platoon against the overwhelmingly larger Viet Cong force. A short time later, a third platoon of COMPANY A 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION arrived and gave the friendly force strength to overrun the still numerically superior insurgents. The men of all three platoons dauntlessly assaulted the enemy lines, penetrated the Viet Cong defenses, and drove the enemy from their positions. In coordination with the blocking artillery fire, the company then destroyed the two hostile companies. The men of COMPANY A, 1ST BATTALION, 35TH INFANTRY, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION displayed extraordinary courage and devotion to duty which were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon themselves and the United States Army.