



# WELCOME TO "A WALK WITH THE 35TH"



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## Recon 1/35th 6-24-66

By Michael Kellermeyer  
HHC 1/35<sup>th</sup> Inf. (Forward Observer, 4.2" Mortar Platoon)  
Jan 1965 to Dec 1966

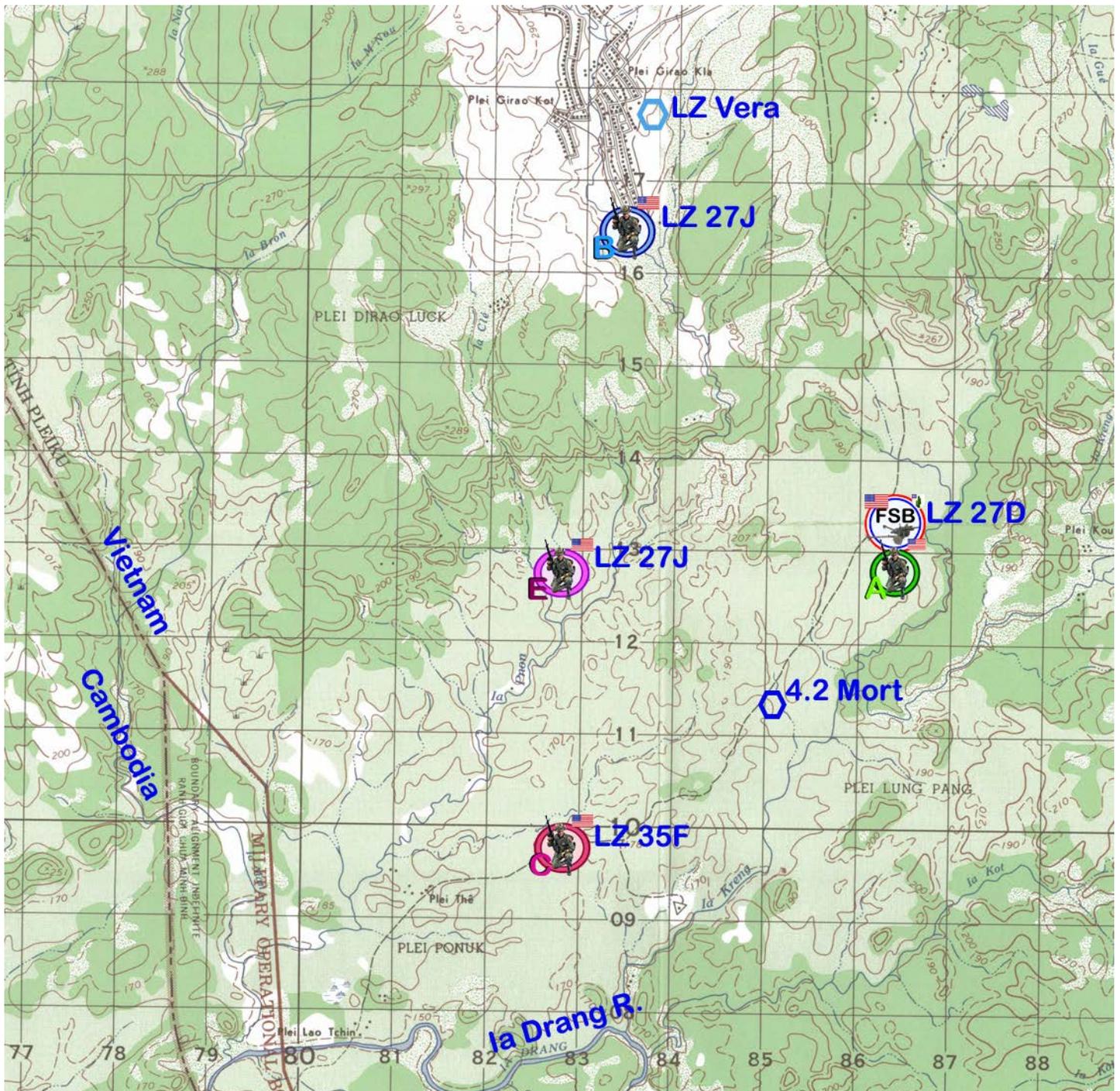
The following account of the action that took place in Kontum province on June 24, 1966 is as factual as I can make it, given the thirty five years between the events and this writing. The reason for writing this account is twofold: fact and fable. The fact is that a small band of brothers, Recon platoon, 1<sup>st</sup> of the 35<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Division distinguished themselves on the battlefield in the highest traditions of the U.S. Army to little or no recognition and the fable is that I have read accounts of this action that were so totally erroneous as to be written by someone who could not have been there. This is for Sgt Warren Knepper and his squad.

### June 23<sup>rd</sup>

A static recon mission. Are you kidding me? It was almost too good to be true. The 1<sup>st</sup> of the 35<sup>th</sup>, the "Cacti" was ordered to fan out along the Cambodian border in the province of Kontum, hunker down and observe enemy activity. Each position along the border was to be called a "cord". Never having seen this term in print, I wasn't so sure what it meant. It could have been short for "coordinates" or short for "cordon". Hell, it may have been the whimsy of some musically inclined planner and the name was actually "chord". I don't know. But there it was. We were all going to go out and hide in positions along the border day after day and spy on any incidental enemy troop movements. To a walking grunt, this was a very desirable mission.

I had been in-country for more than six months, having arrived with the rest of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade from Hawaii on January 5, 1966. I had been the RTO (Radio/Telephone Operator) for a Forward Observer in the 4.2 inch mortar platoon, Headquarters Company, 1/35, which entailed humping an AN/PRC25 radio up the hills, down the hills and around the hills in the aptly named Central Highlands region of Vietnam. My FO had rotated back to the states a few weeks earlier and so, for this mission (and the remainder of my time in Vietnam) I was promoted to FO which meant I had some other poor dumb grunt carrying the radio for a change.

I was assigned to recon platoon for this mission which was great because I knew a few guys in the platoon and it was a very good fighting unit. We called them "Dog" company because they were often assigned missions that usually entailed a company of troops. On paper, recon was an oversize platoon, consisting of some 60 infantrymen. In reality, recon was never much more than an ordinary infantry platoon in number. Some were wounded, some were sick, some had rotated home and the replacements hadn't yet arrived, others still were on some kind of leave or R&R. So as a unit recon was nearly always understaffed. Trained to ride in jeeps with mounted machine guns (like the rat patrol) they found themselves in Vietnam without any such luxury. If they didn't fly, they walked. I mention all this because the fight that they were ordered into on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June they were undermanned and under equipped.



Company positions on the morning of 24 June 1966

I don't remember how we got to the positions that we occupied on the eve of the battle. I assume that we were choppered to a nearby LZ (Landing Zone) and walked, which was the usual method. The platoon Leader, a lieutenant whose name I never knew, was not present and I was given to understand that he was off being paymaster, delivering pay to the sick and wounded in various hospitals. The acting Platoon Leader was a capable Sergeant, an E-6 or 7, of Hawaiian extraction.

When we arrived at our initial location in the late afternoon on June 23, the squads began preparing fighting positions in a thickly wooded area. I studied the maps and, with the acting platoon leader's permission called a fire mission in to the 4.2 inch platoon to establish a defensive concentration (DefCon) to our west. If we were hit during the night I needed only to call in that reference to have the heavy mortar platoon fire a salvo of High Explosive (HE) shells on that spot.



**LZ 27D was used by many units while working in the la Drang Valley. This photo was taken by Dick Beal while with the 1/14<sup>th</sup>.**

From there I could direct the salvos left, right, nearer or farther. It was a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for fighting from defensive positions. I carefully studied my map and called in coordinates that I knew to be at least 500 meters to our west. This would ensure our safety. The mortar platoon would know the coordinates of all friendly troops so as not to allow me to fire on some unsuspecting unit passing by. I received the "on the way" confirmation of a single round being launched and I waited confidently for the shell to explode. What happened next shook me to my very core. The round came rushing in sounding very much like a freight train and landed right between two of our fighting positions which were about 75 yards apart. The grunts in the holes sensed their immediate danger and flattened themselves in their holes just prior to the detonation. I, too, had hunkered down at the last second and stared at the smoking crater in disbelief. I quickly checked the map again, then grabbed the radio handset from Herb Daily, my FNG RTO (FNG = Fucking New Guy) and virtually screamed for some type of explanation for what clearly could have been a disaster. (No one was hurt by the shrapnel or debris thrown out by the 35 pound explosive) After reminding me about radio protocol (I tended to use colorful expressions when excited)

I was told that the round was used to settle the base plate of the mortar. This was unacceptable for two reasons:

1. Any dumbass mortarman with more than two hours experience knows that the base plate will move the mortar tube as it is being driven into the ground, thereby throwing the round off target by God only knows how far and,

2. My credibility was instantly shot with these grunts I was attached to, some of whom were calling me unflattering names during my heated conversation with mortar platoon's FDC. (Fire Direction Control)

I advised recon platoon to get flat in their holes and called for another round on the original coordinates. This round fell where it was supposed to and I "walked" two more rounds in closer until I was satisfied that:

1. They were no longer settling base plates and,
2. I could use the last shot fired as a registration point in case we were attacked.

The rest of the night passed without incident.

**June 24<sup>th</sup>**

As soon as I awoke, the salt sweat stung my eyes. It was not even 6:00 AM and already it was almost unbearably hot. Sleeping arrangements in the jungle were pretty simple at best. My own preference was to set up a little canopy using my poncho using strings, stakes and sticks. Then I would roll up in my poncho liner, a light thermal blanket, and pass out from exhaustion. We slept fully dressed with our boots on. We would find occasions during the daylight hours to remove our boots and dust them with drying powders to protect our feet. At night the boots stayed on, just in case.

The acting Platoon Leader, Sgt Hawaii I will call him, called a meeting of the squad leaders right away. Being part of the headquarters element of the platoon, I was invited to all such councils. Battalion had determined that we were not in the correct position. We needed to move a couple of kilometers further west to fill in the line of "cords". This was a little distressing to the squad members because they had spent so much time the evening before creating comfortable fighting positions in which they expected to languish for the next week or so. Also, our meager rations had diminished to the point that necessitated re-supply. Battalion promised to re-supply as soon as we had reached the new positions. We grumbled a little as we "saddled up" but it wasn't anything that we weren't already accustomed to so we checked each other's gear, assumed a march formation that would minimize ambush and moved out.

### **Sgt. Knepper's**

We moved out of the heavily wooded area into a region of rolling grassland strewn with large thickets. The grass was yellow from the blistering summer sun but the base of the grass was green and sweet to chew on. We took a course that would allow us the most cover, moving from one island of thickets to another. About an hour into the move we took a short break to sip a little water from what was left in our canteens and have half a smoke. In the thicket I was in there was Sgt Warren Knepper and a few members of his squad. Sgt. Knepper was one of the fellows that I knew in recon. I knew him in Hawaii, before we came to Vietnam. He was a natural leader and well-liked by everyone who knew him. His squad members felt lucky to have him as a leader in combat.



**Resupply chopper photo by Walt Shields**

While we were sipping water and sucking cigarettes he, Knepper, remarked that he would not live out the day. We stopped whatever we were doing and looked at him, waiting for him to drop the punch line of whatever joke he was playing. Somberly, he repeated his premonition. He even looked a little scared and that wasn't even his personality. I remarked that he was full of shit, that we haven't even seen a gook for a month. The others threw in their comforting comments as well. Sgt. Knepper just stared into space. We welcomed the chance to move out again. The sergeant had given us the heebie jeebies.

### **Re-Supply**

Shortly after the break we were moving toward a substantially wooded area when Battalion advised us that the re-supply choppers were on the way. We replied that we had not attained our assigned positions yet but we were told to accept the re-supply enroute. We moved to the grove of trees and when we heard the sound of rotors we contacted the pilots and advised them that we were popping a yellow smoke grenade. The pilots located the smoke and two UH1B Iroquois ("Huey")

helicopters landed in short order, sending the smoke in rapid spirals in every direction. It was remarkable that no matter where these choppers sat down, in desert or in a grassy field, they managed to hurl some kind of debris that stung our faces and arms as we approached.

Quickly, we off loaded a lot of jerry cans of water and cases of c-rations off of the helicopters who lifted off as soon as the last ration was relinquished. I remarked to my RTO, the aforementioned Mr. Herb Daily that Battalion must be expecting this hunkered down observation of the border area to last some time judging by the amount of rations that were delivered. There were so many, in fact, that we decided to set two guards on the rations while the rest of the platoon moved to the new positions where we would send back men to ferry the rations up to us.

I believe it was at this point that battalion informed us to detach a squad to ambush a suspicious trail to our northwest. A squad was picked and they moved out, taking a jerry can of water and a case of c-rations with them. The rest of us moved off to the southwest to establish the new positions about 800 meters distant.

### **Two NVA Strollers**

As we moved through the sparsely wooded grassland we came upon a huge field of grassland about 500 meters long and 200 meters wide. As we approached the sparse wood line at the edge of the field, the point man made a subtle signal and the entire platoon immediately went flat on its collective belly. I saw the acting Platoon Leader, Sgt Hawaii, crawling up to where the point man was and, after a few minutes, I crawled up there as well. Sgt Hawaii, kneeling by a bush at the edge of the field looked at me, pointed toward his own eyes and then in a direction across the field. I removed my powerful binoculars from their case and focused them across the field in the direction he had pointed. There, on the other side, very near the wood line, there were two NVA soldiers walking, hand in hand. In Vietnam, two men walking and holding hands was merely a sign of friendship, unlike American custom which would have branded such a couple as sharing an alternative lifestyle. The remarkable thing about the pair was that they were carrying no equipment whatsoever. They were not North Vietnamese troops on the move, they were bivouacked nearby!



**NVA patrol**

Of course we reported their presence to Battalion who advised us to recon by fire.

### **Recon by Fire**

I signaled Herb to join me and I got on the radio and called a fire mission in to the 4.2 inch mortar platoon. Beyond the two strolling NVA soldiers and to the right, was a heavily wooded knoll and I used it's coordinates to fire the first round. Amazingly, the round detonated in the center of the hill and I immediately corrected to "drop 100, left 100, fire for effect!" I was hoping that this would put a six round salvo on or near the wood line where the two NVA were looking with alarm at the plume of smoke remaining from the first detonation. To my delight the rounds came in and walked right down the wood line, 5 meters in and about 50 meters apart. Textbook.

In the midst of the yellow-orange explosions trees were toppling and tree limbs were spiraling up into the air. There were also distant screams accompanying the deafening explosions and we

could see brown uniformed people running among the trees. We were hitting a North Vietnamese unit, sure as hell. I called for another salvo on the same spot and then moved the next salvo to the left, hoping to cut off where it appeared the enemy was running. Then I moved the next salvo to the right of the first and then deeper into the wood line. I had an inkling that the NVA may have been using the far side of the little hill for a headquarters location so I sent yet another two salvos of three rounds each thundering into the far side of the hill.



**FAC (Forward Air Control) photo by TJ Blue**

Soon he was nowhere to be found in the sky either.

About this time an Air Force Forward Air Control (FAC) plane showed up and began to orbit lazily over the area where the rounds were falling. These pilots were amazing. They flew low, slow unarmed Cessna's or Piper Cubs and directed artillery onto targets. Books have been written on their courage. This one reported that he could observe fifteen bodies in a small clearing, certainly KIA (Killed in Action). I was still firing barrages and the enemy was still running and screaming when the Mortar Platoon advised me that they were running low on ammunition and would have to desist until resupplied unless there was an emergency. So the scene fell quiet except for the tiny

We reported to Battalion that we had struck a large NVA contingent and that we were, as yet, undiscovered. We were feeling pretty full of ourselves when Battalion called back and ordered us to physically recon the area that was hit by the shelling. Incredulous, we called back to advise Battalion that there were significant numbers of enemy troops in the area, trying to intimate that there were perhaps more enemy troops than our depleted platoon could handle, if push came to shove. Battalion was unimpressed by our subtle whining and once more ordered us to physically recon the area. Okey dokey. Another day in the life of a grunt.

### **Skirting the Field**

We assembled and began to move down the wood line to the end of the field. We would have to walk along the end of the field (inside the woods, of course) to get to the other side. We felt that the open field left our left flank unprotected so we placed a machine gunner, a recent Hungarian immigrant by the name of Valentine, at the corner of the field so he could shoot across the field and protect our exposed left flank. Then we began to cautiously traverse the woods at the end of the field. It was slow going even though the woods were not that dense. We knew we were about to encounter the enemy and we were being very careful.

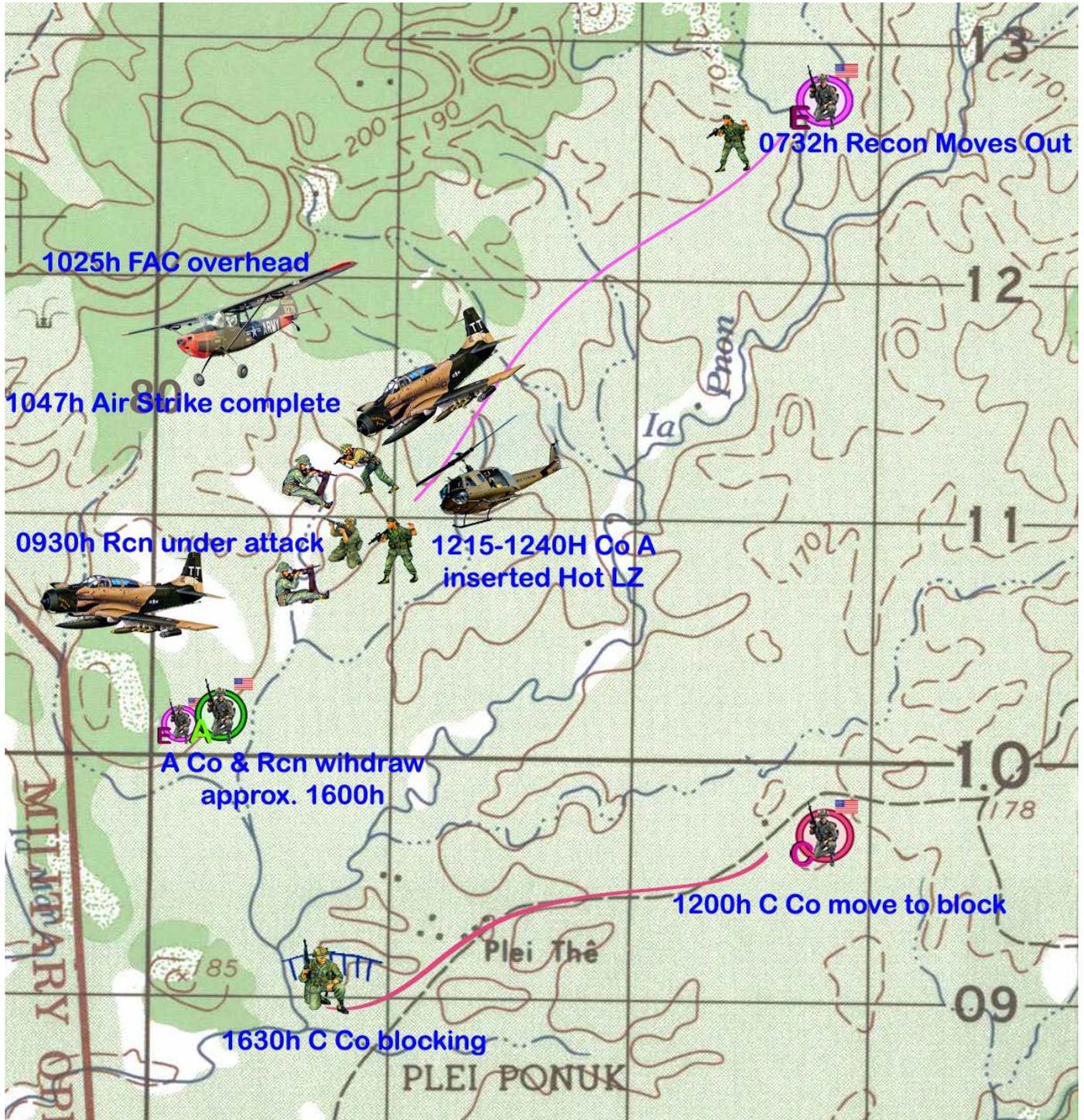
About a third of the way to the other side of the field we heard an airborne rumbling that caused us to dive for the ground just as three 105 or 155 millimeter shells crashed into the woods right on our location. We scrambled for whatever we could use for cover, in some instances, each other as another three rounds crashed among us. Sgt Hawaii was screaming on the radio and was told that it was an errant salvo from an artillery battery. In the distance I heard the tinny whine of the FAC plane and suspected that the son of a bitch mistook us sneaking around in the woods for an enemy concentration of troops and called in the rounds. We dusted ourselves off, grinned sheepishly at those we had attempted to use as shields from the whizzing shrapnel and moved on.

At two thirds the distance to the other side there was movement and shooting up front and to the right side. I wanted to shoot too but I didn't know where everyone was so I just hunkered down and awaited the outcome, one hand on my radio handset in case this was the "emergency" my mortar platoon would acknowledge. It turned out that an NVA medic was spotted to our front right, shot and

killed. He was loaded down with packs of bandages and medicine, none of which would ever do him any good. We searched his lifeless body for documents and moved on.

### The Opposite Corner, the Fight Begins

When we reached the opposite corner of the field we encountered a small clearing that ran nearly a hundred meters back into the woods. Turning this corner to the left would put us on the opposite side of the field from which we observed the 4.2 inch mortar fire. To go around this clearing would take time. It was decided that Sgt Knepper's squad would dash across the clearing while the rest of us were prepared to give covering fire if needed. We were not prepared enough.



A Company linked up with Recon at 1300h. This was followed by further airstrikes leading to withdrawal about 1600h.

Knepper's squad had reached the center of the small clearing when automatic weapons fire erupted from both the right and left side of the clearing. At first it was about four weapons using an interlacing crossfire concentrated on Knepper's now totally exposed squad. They didn't have a chance. They were struck down as a group by the hail of bullets converging on them. The rest of the platoon, still back in the woods immediately began firing into the enemy positions but to little or no effect. The automatic fire stayed concentrated on Knepper's squad, who had no place to hide from the withering fire. Within minutes the NVA position was being reinforced by more and more automatic weapons positions probing streams of bullets into our side of the clearing, seeking out our positions. We were rapidly forced to back down on our rate of fire for fear of giving our precarious positions away as well as depleting too quickly our ammunition supply.



**Giant Ant Hills were fairly common**

I had taken cover behind a giant anthill that measured some 3 to 4 foot high by 6 to 7 feet in length. On the left end of the anthill a tree, at least two feet in diameter was growing out of the anthill itself. I immediately dialed in the four-deuce (4.2 inch mortars) platoon and called a fire mission based on the data I had previously used on the far side of the big empty field. (It was the far side now that we were on the other side) I don't remember the sequence of events that occurred after that except that I ran the four deuces completely out of ammo then began spotting for an artillery battery. Even as the salvos crashed into the far side of the little clearing, the NVA continued to reinforce until our entire front and to both the left and right were filled with chattering automatic weapons fire, including a number of dreaded .51 caliber machine guns. Those are the kind of guns that you can dig in against and they will dig you right back out.

Sgt Hawaii was on the horn (radio) with battalion who claimed that a column of infantry had been dispatched to relieve our beleaguered position. 45 minutes later the recon ambush element arrived to our rear, claiming to have fought their way through heavy sniper fire. Thus we realized that the NVA were cutting off our only escape route to the rear. In the meantime, the FAC guy was back and he and I coordinated a myriad of aerial attacks on the enemy positions utilizing almost everything in the Allied arsenal. A helicopter gunship company arrived on the scene and, with 2.75 rockets and mini-guns attacked from South to North on OUR side of the little clearing. That made twice that we were attacked by our own forces and both times, by some miracle, we had not suffered a single casualty to the attacks. At different intervals more aircraft made strafing and bombing runs on the NVA positions, A1E propeller driven Skyraiders, Navy F4 Phantoms and other aircraft units were diverted to assist us. The jets dropped napalm so close that we could feel the searing heat, cluster bombs rumbled noisily across our immediate front so close that the shrapnel was whizzing through our positions. In between air strikes The FAC or I would lay down a barrage of four deuce mortars or artillery. There were several attempts by the NVA to mass their forces and overrun our positions but each attempt was thwarted by a combination of aerial bombardment and well-aimed rifle fire.

## Alpha to the Rescue...Sort of..

During the fight we were advised by battalion that the infantry column sent to relieve us was engaged with NVA forces to our south and a subsequent mechanized infantry relief force was ambushed enroute. At one point, an NVA squad was working its way down the tree line to our left front beside the big field. The lead soldier was wearing an American army helmet. One of recon's newer guys jumped up and waved at them, thinking it was the relief force at last. The recon squad on our left was not fooled in the least and immediately began to put effective fire into the NVA force dropping a couple and causing the rest to scatter back into the wood.

I began to realize what it must have felt like at the Alamo. We were running precariously low on ammunition and had completely exhausted our supplies of water and cigarettes. The sun was implacably beating down from a clear summer sky; the temperature had to have been over 100 degrees. We had been engaged with this vastly superior force of NVA for nearly three hours and some of the men were nervously fingering their "suicide" bullets they kept in their helmet bands. I'm certain it was because they were going to need one more bullet to kill one last NVA when they came to get us. A nearby M-60 machine gunner announced that he was now firing his weapon in one round "bursts".

About this time, when things could get no worse without our total capitulation, or fighting to the last man, we were informed that elements of Alpha Company were on the ground near our location and would be joining the fight within minutes. The NVA tried to mount another attack from our left front but Carlos Lopez and the boys in his squad fought them off with excellent marksmanship.

Then the point man from Alpha Company arrived at our rear. As it happened, the fellow was a Hawaiian of oriental descent and his appearance caused a little apprehension, given the fact that we had already seen the NVA wearing our equipment. Soon the men of Alpha Company began filling into our sparse ranks, passing around canteens and cigarettes and, oh yeah, extra ammunition. From my position at the anthill I watched with great joy as new faces joined us. I noted that there were not enough men to constitute the entire company, but maybe Alpha was depleted as well.



CA (combat Assault) 35<sup>th</sup> Inf Troops photo by Wayne Glass

What happened next was not only unexpected, but ghastly. The company commander, a captain who was carrying his M16 rifle by the handle, like a briefcase, walked right up beside the tree I had been peeking around for three hours and asked our little group for a situation report. Before we could answer, or warn him, he was hit several times by automatic weapons fire which knocked him down. He was flailing so hard with his arms and legs that he actually kicked himself back upright and was hit again. About eight of us watched in horror as this happened in the space of drawing a breath. Thankfully, he was not killed but he was severely wounded and spent the rest of the battle on a stretcher behind us at the anthill.

It didn't take long before we were answering the NVA fire with a very invigorated response. The NVA countered our additional forces by adding more additional forces of their own. By this time there were at least three, and maybe four, .51 Caliber machine guns trained on our side of the little clearing. Alpha Company, by crawling in behind us, was now pinned down by the same fire we had been pinned down by for the last three hours. Nothing changed but the troop count.

### **Distasteful Report**

With Alpha company came an artillery forward observation team. The team was comprised of an Artillery Lieutenant, a Non-commissioned officer (Sergeant) and a PFC who carried their radio. They are trained to do the same job that I did as 4.2 inch mortar FO only with artillery pieces which results in no differences in how the job gets done whatsoever. These guys were completely freaked. (who wasn't?) The Lieutenant asked who had been calling in the arty and air strikes. I introduced myself and told him that I had been taking care of indirect fire support. He told me that I was doing an excellent job and to carry on. All three of them spent the rest of the fight with their faces buried in the grass, although the radio operator appeared embarrassed to be doing so.

Myself and several others were later debriefed by the Battalion intelligence officer about this incident although I have no knowledge of what became of the Artillery Lieutenant or his team. I thought we had been debriefed by Captain Anthony Bisantz who had assumed the intelligence position after successfully commanding Alpha Company for six months but in an email conversation with the Captain just recently I was told that he had been transferred to MACV or something and was no longer with the 1/35 on or after June 24<sup>th</sup>. Maybe the captain who debriefed us just reminded me of Captain Bisantz.

Sometime during the battle; Things that happened to me or around me during the fight but I don't remember when:

Before Alpha Company arrived, the M60 machine gunner at the anthill position was running low on ammunition. Someone noticed that there was a hundred round belt lying behind a tree five or six meters to our left rear. The space between the anthill and the ammo belt was fairly exposed to enemy fire. I waited for a lull in the fire and dashed the distance to the tree. The NVA opened up before I had reached it and I dove headlong the remaining distance. I gathered up the ammo belt and pressed close to the tree, waiting for the stuccatto automatic weapons fire to die down once again. The tree afforded me very little protection and I was petrified to make the return trip. I wondered if I could just throw the ammo and remain behind the tree for the remainder of the fight. But I was six meters from my radio and my RTO, Herb Dailey, was so new that he didn't know dick about directing artillery fire or airstrikes. I waited for the firing to die down, grabbed a deep gulp of air and bolted back to the anthill, the M-60 ammo belt flying in all directions as I carried it. Again automatic weapons fire erupted during my run but I arrived at the anthill safe and sound, proudly presenting the ammo to the M-60 gunner. A few minutes later I noticed a couple of holes in my fatigue pants leg where I had it loosely bloused above the boot. A bullet had pierced my pants leg during my adventure with the ammo belt without touching my flesh. This incident was the closest I came to doing anything "heroic" and I was scared shitless both ways.

At one point during an exchange of gunfire, I think this was late in the day, we heard Sergeant Padilla, in some brush off to our left, say, in an even tone, "Son of a bitch!" This was followed immediately by a call for a medic. Sgt. Padilla had been firing from a prone position and had been hit by multiple bullets in his right chest. The medic, whose face or name I remember not at all, scampered back and forth across our lines most of the day, often exposing himself to enemy fire. When we later had to disengage from the battle, I had a handful of the poncho that we were carrying Padilla in, and he pissed and moaned all the way out of the battle area about the rough treatment to

which we were subjecting him. If it weren't for all the automatic weapons fire and RPG's that were accompanying us from the field of battle, his incessant bitching would have been almost funny. Sgt Padilla later returned to Vietnam as a non-combatant, less one lung.

I don't remember if this happened before or after Alpha Company arrived, but throughout the fight I would peek out to determine were artillery rounds or bombs were hitting in order to give assessments and re-directions to the batteries or aircraft. This was done mostly at a point where the left side of the anthill sloped down to the big tree that was growing out of it. The anthill was well known to the enemy gunners and had taken lots of small arms fire and RPG hits during the course of the day. Once as I leaned to peek out I heard a loud explosion by my ear and shards of material stung my face. My first thought was that an RPG had hit and that my face had been torn to shreds. I clapped both my hands over my face and screamed for the medic. I couldn't lift my hands from my face for fear of seeing them covered with blood. The medic, once again braving enemy fire, found his way to the anthill and physically pried my hands from my face. Then he got about half pissed off for having to make this "house call". It seems that a .51 caliber bullet had grazed the tree, the ricocheting bullet passing very near my ear and throwing shards of tree bark into my face. I had a lot of red splotches on my face but no wounds.

### **"We gotta get outta this place..." 1600 or so**

As it became late afternoon and this fight was taking on all the appearances of being indecisive, someone higher realized that we had to disengage from this position and withdraw to one that might be more defensible for the night. It was decided that the best way to withdraw was under the cover of eight inch artillery bombardment on the enemy positions. Anyone who knows artillery at all knows that eight inch shells cause a wallop explosion, a substantial crater and a kill radius of upwards of one hundred feet. (Maybe more) The M-60 machine gunners would bring up the rear to cover the withdrawal as we bolted, carrying the wounded. I can't remember who called the eight inch in, me or the FAC or someone else entirely but when we got the word that it was on the way all the machine gunners and grenadiers opened up on the enemy positions while the rest of us grabbed the wounded and began running through the woods to our rear. The NVA opened up ferociously as well and RPGs smoked past us in the woods and trees were being smacked by bullets as we ran past them. The machine gunners were still firing as they ran, mostly backward, covering our rear when the small clearing was enveloped by huge explosions as the eight inch rounds found their marks. The barrage was long and loud and, not surprisingly, we were no longer being fired at.

The forest was rapidly darkening as we made our way, without further incident, to the place where the helicopters had re-supplied us so much earlier in the day that it seemed like weeks ago. The two troopers we had left to guard the rations were frantic but glad to see us. They had listened to the sounds of the battle to their south all day and knew that recon was in a desperate fight. Coinciding with our arrival were several "medevac" choppers who whisked the wounded off to emergency hospitals to be treated within minutes. Alpha company put out a defensive perimeter and almost everyone in recon collapsed in exhaustion. Seven or eight hours is a long time to have your adrenalin pumping.

### **June 25<sup>th</sup> 0600**

When we awoke the next morning we regarded each other with amazement. The members of recon (myself included) were a sorry looking lot. Our faces were nearly black from the accumulation of gunpowder on our sweaty faces. Our eyes were red rimmed from adrenalin burst capillaries in our eyes. Our fatigue uniforms were sweat-stained and tattered. No one looked young or cheerful, though our average age was probably 19 or so. Everyone looked gaunt and had a vacant stare. It was eerie. Soon we had a further reason to look glum. We were going back.

When we disengaged from the battle the day before, we had left Sgt Knepper and his squad in the little clearing. We simply had no choice. Now we would go and recover the bodies and fight a whole new battle to do it, if need be. U.S. policy was to leave no one behind, live or dead. We saddled up, checked each other's gear and moved out.

This time we were in a company size formation, much more formidable than two or three scant squads, with UH1D gunships buzzing overhead and predetermined artillery registrations. It wasn't long before we began to feel confident and mean again.

### **Remember Valentine? 0645**

We didn't. When we came to the first corner of the big open field, the point man motioned movement to his front. We bristled with expectation but it turned out to be Valentine, the M-60 gunner we had positioned at the corner of the field to cover our left flank the preceding morning. Everyone had forgotten all about him! He was pretty angry about it, too. He had spent the entire preceding day and night completely terrifyingly alone. He could see the explosions at the opposite corner of the big field and he had watched all the airstrikes but was powerless to help us.

### **Recovering the dead**

June 25<sup>th</sup> was a carbon copy of June 24<sup>th</sup>, weather wise. Hotter than hot, sun so bright that you had to squint to see without pain and as humid as a Turkish sauna. We approached the battle area with extreme caution. The NVA must have called it a day because we arrived without incident, spread a protective perimeter around and beyond the little clearing we had fought so desperately over and began to calculate the carnage. I stayed pretty much in the clearing where Sgt. Knepper and his squad lay in various repose of death. We had hoped, beyond reason I suppose, that perhaps one of their numbers was still alive but to no avail. The smell of human flesh fermenting in the relentless heat was one that I would not soon forget.



Shots rang out from time to time as searching soldiers in the woods put a round or two into suspicious NVA bodies. The NVA were famous for feigning death with a grenade curled up in their hand or some such ruse. As far as I know, all the bodies that were shot for good measure were already dead. Helicopters were dispatched to pick up the American bodies and any weapons that we could collect.

Because I knew him in Hawaii and held him in high esteem, I helped put Sgt. Knepper's body into a body bag. I didn't know the others, but I knew Warren and his death had a

particularly harder impact on me. He was a brave soldier and a genuine leader whose men would follow without question.

On the enemy side of the little clearing we found many bodies and Chinese made automatic weapons. The number 77 comes to mind though I don't remember if this was NVA bodies or

automatic weapons although it could have been either. There were an awful lot of both. There were also many blood trails which suggested that many NVA dead were removed from the scene by their fellows. There were enemy telephones and telephone lines present as well. This was interesting because it implied a very large coordinated enemy force, regiment or brigade size, perhaps.

### **Safe Haven**

With all the American bodies loaded and evacuated to a Graves Registration location and the weapons collected and evacuated to who knows where (minus a few that we fancied) we returned to the relatively safe haven of the Battalion Command Post (CP) for debriefing. I can't remember if we flew or walked but I do remember our arrival being greeted by the wide-eyed stares of clean shaven artillery and mortar men. We must have looked like ghastly specters in our tattered fatigue uniforms and gunpowder smeared faces.

### **The Rumor Mill**

In the days and weeks following the battle the rumors were flying. All of the survivors of Recon platoon were to be given the Silver Star, the second highest award for bravery under fire. Then it was downgraded to a bronze star and finally a battle streamer for the Company Guide On (The flagpole with unit designation and battle streamers behind which a military unit marches on parade).

### **Epilogue**

I had just turned nineteen when this battle took place. At this writing I am looking forward to my fifty-fifth birthday in a few months. There has hardly been a day when I haven't looked back upon that sun-drenched little clearing with mixed emotions. It was a defining moment in my life and a day of both death and glory for the brave troops of Recon Platoon. Being attached, I was not officially a member of Recon platoon but when I think back to my service and the war I think of the members of recon platoon as my brothers. Peace be to them all.

## DEDICATED TO THESE MEN - CACTI REMEMBERED

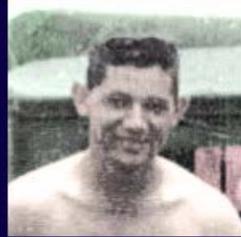
### RECON 1/35TH



**Aaron Hopkins**



**Allan Altieri**



**Octavio Febus**



**Billy Green**



**Gordon Skyles**



**Warren Knepper**



**Richard LaBarbera**



**Robert Reid**



**Jerry Williams**



**Carroll Tuthill**

### CHARLIE COMPANY 1/35TH



**Kenneth Kaaihue**



**Horace Rogers**

### ALPHA COMPANY 1/35TH



**William Ellis**

William's company was on a support operation in Pleiku Province to assist in the withdrawal of a reconnaissance platoon on June 24, 1966. The Recon platoon had been engaged with the enemy. As Alpha Company moved from their landing zone to the vicinity of the recon platoon, William saw a wounded soldier and returned to the LZ to get help. William then disappeared. Friendly forces evacuated the area; however, William was not seen again. The man William was trying to help was removed with the group during withdrawal. Searches were conducted for three or four days and into July with no trace of William. He was classified as Missing In Action. William was officially declared dead on 10/31/1977

DAILY STAFF JOURNAL OR DUTY OFFICER'S LOG				PAGE NO.
(AR 220-346 & FM 101-3)				3
ORGANIZATION OR INSTALLATION		LOCATION	PERIOD COVERED	
HEADQUARTERS 1st Bn 35th Inf 3d Bde 25th Inf Div		YA 865133	FROM 24 Jun 66	HOUR 0001
ITEM NO.	TIME IN OUT	INCIDENTS, MESSAGES, ORDERS, ETC.		ACTION T
28	2330	Sit rep neg.		
29	2400	Log closed.		
SUMMARY				
Bn CP and A Co remained at LZ 27D 865133, B Co at LZ 27J 834165. C Co is at LZ 35F 829097, 4.2 plt between C Co and Bn CP and stk plt is at LZ 27J 828128, 3/4 CAV & CoA and Bn CP stk plt patrolled assigned areas. 4 3/4 Cav vehicles struck mines during the day one 3/4 Cav loc 2 months old Bn or Regt positions with 2 bodies approx 1 wk old at 809088 and spotted 2 men in Mkhakies who withdrew at 808088. 3 EM 3/4 Cav KIA and 1 M48 tank destroyed by enemy mines.				

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(AR 220-346 & FM 101-3)				1
ORGANIZATION OR INSTALLATION		LOCATION	PERIOD COVERED	
HEADQUARTERS 1st Bn 35th Inf 3d Bde 25th Inf Div		YA 865153	FROM 24 Jun 66	HOUR 0001
ITEM NO.	TIME IN OUT	INCIDENTS, MESSAGES, ORDERS, ETC.		ACTION T
1	0001	Log opened.		
2	00030 0530	Sit rep neg.		
3	0615	2d plt C Trp 3.4 Cav departed Duc Co at 0630 enroute to C Trp loc.		
4	0630	2d & 3d plt of ACo have departed to relieve OP		
5	0645	A Co has patrol around LZ 27D 500 meters out.		
6	0730	A Co 3d plt loc 846143.		
7	0732	Recon on the move.		
8	0735	A Co 2d plt loc 851136.		
9	0740	C Co 1st plt left to clear road.		
10	0758	ACo 2d plt elem loc 878135.		
11	0820	Request VR from 9504 to 9507 to 8397 to 8004 with emphasis on NS stream.		
12	0835	A Co 2d plt loc 847127.		
13	0840	Stk saw 3-5 enemy in wood line at 808109.		
14	0900	B Co 3d plt moving.		
15	0905	A Co 2d plt loc 857125.		
16	0930	A Co 3d plt loc 855125.		
17	1000	Stk plt made contact with 3 NVA carrying wpns at 0930 are now engaged w/5-6 enemy with AW wpns 808109 request air stk.		
18	1025	Forward air controller in contact with stk.		
19	1046	Requested air stk A1E arrived in area.		

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ITEM NO.	TIME IN OUT	INCIDENTS, MESSAGES, ORDERS, ETC.		ACTION T
39	1645	3/4 Cav under enemy mortar attack.		
40	1725	Medevac in route this loc w/4 WIA.		
41	1745	In 1630 battle 3/4 Cav tank was abandoned to be destroyed by friendly air.		
42	1800	Capt Fielding now in Cmd at A Co.		
43	1930	Bn requested all units loc.		
44	2030	Stk loc 803102, A Co 803102, 1st plt A Co LZ 27D, B Co elem loc 831179, 1 elem B Co 828057, OP2 833062, OP3 828067, OP4 828085, OP5 828094, OP6 828101.		
45	2100	Summary of friendly Casualties for today WIA 23, KIA 4, MIA 11. (10 of the 11 missing are know to be dead but their bodies have not been recovered.		
46	2130	Sit rep to bde neg.		
47	2140	Est 90 NVA KIA 25 body count est size of enemy force a reinforced Bn, this was for the action the Bn had earlier today.		
48	2220	Maj D called for air support for A Co need this at 0615 hrs in the morning.		
49	2330	Sit rep neg.		
50	2230	Requested C&C at CP by 0600 hrs.		
51	2245	C Co called and requested FAC after resupply		

TYPED NAME AND GRADE OF OFFICER OR OFFICIAL ON DUTY in the morning passed on info from it to 48. SIGNATURE