

Early News Articles Provided by John Fielding

Tropic Lightning News - 19 Jan 1966

3d Bde, 25th Infantry First VN Operation

PLEIKU, (25th INF-IO)—The 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade Task Force, located near this provincial capital in the central highlands of Vietnam, has completed its first operation since entering Vietnam.

Battery C, 2nd Battalion, 9th Artillery, under the command of Cpt. John Oliver, was given the mission of positioning itself some 7500 meters to the front of the outer perimeter of the brigade to conduct harassment fire into the mountains nearby.

Assigned to provide security for this 105mm howitzer battery was Company A, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, under the command of Capt. Anthony Bisantz.

The small task force departed its area at 9 a.m., January 19, and arrived at the destination an hour later.

The unit utilized infiltration route techniques and created a circular perimeter around its final position. The 1st platoon covered the right flank, the 2nd the rear, while the 3rd

platoon watched the (left) right flank. The 105mm howitzer created the front of the perimeter.

The Infantry company set out 81mm mortars and established its barrage. The mortars and the artillery pieces conducted harassment fire throughout the night.

Before the firing started, however, Captain Bisantz and an interpreter entered a village near their position, to explain to the village chief and his people what they would be hearing during the night and why the small force was so near.

The village chief reported to the infantry company commander that his village is hit by the Viet Cong nearly every night. He gave Captain Bisantz the location of the two suspected VC groups.

This information was in turn given to the battalion intelligence officer.

After the completion of the task force's mission, the motorized elements returned to the brigade area.

Hawaii Lightning News – 21 Jan 1966

'Operation Blue Light' Moves Tropic Lightning

Reprinted from The AIR Division Advisor (RVN) January 7, 1966.

The Air Force's "Operation Blue Light," a massive airlift of elements of the Army's 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division from Hawaii, is now beginning its second week.

Military Airlift Command (MAC), formerly known as the Military Air Transport Service (MATs), is carrying out the airlift of some 3,000 soldiers and 3,200 tons of cargo. This troop airlift, the longest in war times, began Dec. 24, when an advanced party of more than 100 members of the 3rd Brigade and 103 tons of equipment arrived at the Pleiku air base in the central mountain region, 240 miles northeast of Saigon.

Air Force Lt. Col. Russell J. Revel of Hutchinson, Kan., MAC airlift commander here, supervised the unloading of nearly 50 tons vehicles and 75 troops from the time the planes landed.

Colonel Revel is assigned to MAC's 22nd Air Transport Squadron.

The Air Force's C-133 jet turbo-prop and the C-141 jet transport are the primary air-craft being used in "Operation Blue Light." These aircraft are backed up by C-124 Globe-masters and C-130 Hercules transports.

More than 26 aircraft are involved in the operation. Throughout the airlift, a C-133 will be landing at Pleiku nearly every four hours, while the C-141s will touch down about every 10 hours.

Flying more than 6,000 miles across the Pacific from Hickam AFB, Hawaii, all airline crews make two stops enroute to Pleiku. The first stop for both the C-133 and C-141 crews is Wake Island.

From that stopover, the C-133 crews go to Kadema AB, Okinawa, and the C-141 crews fly to Clark AFB, Philippine Islands. The flight time, including the stopovers, is about 30 hours for the C-133 crews and 18 hours for the C-141 crews.

Colonel Revel explained that the stopovers are for refueling and servicing of the aircraft to enable them to have a quick turn around time in the combat area. While at Pleiku, the air-craft engines are kept in operation during an average 25 minute ground time.

Some 270 men from MAC units are directly involved in "Operation Blue Light." Also there are about 80 men from other major commands participating in the airlift. Most of the airlift command men and aircraft come from units in MAC's Western Transport Air Force (WESTAF) with backup support provided by the Eastern Transport Air Force (EASTAF).

Honolulu Advertiser – Late Feb 1966

Busy Day For Pleiku

By BOB JONES

Advertiser Military Reporter

PLEIKU—About 15 soldiers from the 25th Infantry Division were sitting in the candle-lit bar in downtown Pleiku when the Vietnamese Army youngster hauled out a grenade and pulled the pin.

"I will blow up this whole place," he said in Vietnamese, still holding onto the handle which activates the eight-second detonator on the little green bomb.

The Schofield Barracks soldiers of the 3rd Brigade Task Force didn't understand any Vietnamese, but they didn't have any trouble interpreting the drunken soldier's meaning.

Soldiers stampeded out the front and back doors, and the place was cleared in about three seconds. By that time, one of the girls in the bar had persuaded the Vietnamese to put the pin back in the grenade and everything returned to normal.

THAT, AND assorted little training accidents, is about all the excitement the Schofield Barracks soldiers are seeing here for the moment. Brigade medical teams reported that three soldiers have been shot accidentally, but brigade spokesmen so far have not released the soldiers' names.

Also, five men were hurt— one suffering a broken collarbone—when their jeep hit a rut and flipped over.

THE MEN are training for, the day when they will go out as combat assault teams, reportedly against regular North Vietnamese battalions which intelligence has pinpointed in the Pleiku area.

When they do move, they will be flown into battle by many former 25th Aviation Division pilots who have been flying with the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) since last fall.

Thirty-eight of the division's best-trained pilots were shipped over to Viet Nam last September and October to fill the flying needs of the new cavalry unit which uses armed UH-1 helicopters to land assault troops.

THERE WAS a movement of 24 pilots in September and 14 in October, which stripped the division of most of its seasoned chopper pilots.

Among the former Schofield men who now will be flying with the 170th Aviation Company here are: Capts. Art Finch, Pat Doyle, Dave Larcomb, Bill Snyder and Marty Reilly.

They are all part of the 52nd Aviation Battalion, which is supporting the Hawaii Brigade here with armed helicopters.

ON JAN. 17, the 1st Battalion of the 14th Infantry Regiment (Golden Dragons) came ashore at Cam Ranh Bay and was air shipped to the brigade position here north of the vital Pleiku airfield.

The 2nd Battalion of the unit is still at Schofield. Most of the other elements of the brigade came directly from Hawaii to Pleiku by Cross-Pacific airlift of men and equipment by the Military Airlift Command, formerly MATS. The arrival of the 3200 US troops has heightened commercial activity in the town of Pleiku, which is made up of Vietnamese and indigenous tribes-people called Montagnards.

WICKER baskets which once sold for as little 80 piastres (about 75 cents) now are up to \$1.80. Storekeepers charge U.S. soldiers as much as 75. cents, too, for a bottle of beer which normally costs 20 cents.

The Vietnamese Army officers' club downtown has a ballroom where only a few Vietnamese are seen since all the Americans came to town. Now GIs dance the twist and samba there with

Vietnamese hostesses who have taken to wearing Western dresses and skirts rather than the traditional ao dai costumes.

A DOZEN bars catering to the GI have sprung up in what were once houses. There is no electricity in most of them, and the only light comes from half a dozen candles around the room.

The bars have wire mesh over the windows and doors to prevent someone tossing a grenade in from out on the street, and the soldiers are told to go in town only in pairs or groups, never alone.

Curfew downtown for all U.S. troops is 11 p.m. There are no taxis in Pleiku, but little Lambretta motor-scooters with frames mounted on the back each haul about six soldiers back to the base. Sometimes, the GIs have to get out and help push the straining "taxi" up the stretch of hill toward Camp Halloway.

PLEIKU IS a dirty, town. Sewage sits in open ditches, and most of the GIs who eat and drink downtown eventually come down with a touch of diarrhea. But the people are friendly, and the red patches of Hawaii's "Tropic Lightning" division have come to mean prosperity to them.

Sometimes in small, almost unnoticeable ways, troops from Hawaii are making themselves some friends.

Sunday was such a day. Warrant Officers Ray Watson and Paul Lancy were sitting at a downtown bar sipping a beer.

EVERYONE WAS feeling pretty morose. In came an 8 year-old Vietnamese girl the men had met downtown earlier that day when she sold them some peanuts on the street.

"She's the cutest thing I've ever seen," Watson said. "Just like my own little girl."

Watson and Lancy accompanied the little girl, Phuong, down the street to a market and outfitted her with a new pair of the two-piece pajamas many Vietnamese children wear. It cost them only \$1.80.

Since then, the kids, have learned to flock around the "Tropic Lightning" troops when they come to town. They've got the message that these hard combat soldiers have an incurable soft spot for kids who remind them ' of their own youngsters back home.

The Sunday Star Bulletin & Advertiser – 3 April 1966

Everyone Got Sore When They Killed Sgt. Spears

By BOB JONES

Advertiser Military Writer

BAN BRIENG, Viet Nam—Everybody says that Sgt. Benjamin G. Spears was a great guy to have in the outfit and a scrappy little jungle fighter with an M-16 rifle.

He was going to come back to Honolulu and marry his girlfriend as soon as he could hang up the camouflaged fatigues he wore with the reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry (Cacti).

That made everyone twice as sore when a North Vietnamese infantryman killed Spears with a burst from an old Thompson sub-machine gun on a mountain trail near here.

SO SORE, in fact, that they went to some unusual lengths to kill the Vietnamese and to recover Spears' body at a time when it looked like the platoon was going to be lucky to get out of there with only one dead.



Note: Sgt Knepper was later KIA 24 June 1966

S/Sgt Damien K. Kaaihue, 29, of Lahaina, was with Spears. So were two other Hawaii GIs attached to the flank squad: S/Sgt Sergio T. Gatpatan and Sgt. Warren Knepper, 23, of Hawaii. (addresses deleted)

"We'd just cleared a village and were heading to the landing zone where the helicopters were going to pick us up," Kaaihue said. "It was about 10:30 in the morning and sudden] we ran smack into those two PAVN (North Vietnamese) crossing the trail and going down to get water.

"THEY TURNED around and ran like hell. One was faster than the other, but I fired my M-79 (grenade launcher) and got the one. The other got away in the jungle.

"I yelled to the platoon sergeant that the guy was coming his way, but he couldn't find him.

"It turned out hh had a buddy who had Stayed behind with their packs. They had dug into a Montagnard grave because it was soft dirt and made a foxhole out of it.

"Then they pinned down the platoon with fire from those damn machineguns. We couldn't see them to fire back.

"SGT SPEARS came over to where we were. We were going to try and work our way around their position. I turned and yelled to the guy on my right and when I looked back, Spears wasn't there.

"Then I saw him. He was laying on the ground and had been hard to see because of his camouflage fatigues. The first shot had got him right through the head.

"I crawled over and dragged him behind a log, but the Thompsons just cut right through the dead log and they hit Spears again.

"I WANTED to get him back, but I couldn't. The bullets were hitting right behind my heels as it was and so I just played dead for a while until I could crawl out of there under some protective fire.

"Capt. John Fielding, the battalion Intelligence officer, asked me if I was sure Spears was dead and I said yes. He said we'd better get out of there.

"But that's when we decided we had to get Spears out, too. We were going to call in an air strike all over the area, but we figured that would get Spears' body too..

SO ONE of the guys went up and marked the place where the PAVN were dug in with a smoke bomb, and then we called in the air.

"The first bomb run by the A-1s (Skyraiders) landed right on the spot and got both PAVN right in their hole. And they didn't even touch Spears. So we dragged him out and just left the PAVN there."

SPEARS AND Kaaihue had been over here last at Vinh Long, as shotgun riders on U.S. helicopters. They had hoped to get back home together, too.

Kaaihue takes it all philosophically. Some of his other shotgun buddies have been killed here, too.

"Only about nine months to go over here," he said as we talked about the war and about dead friends under the shade of a tree.

"But like a pregnant woman who's going to have a baby, you feel that's a long wait."

The Army Reporter – 29 April 1966

Broncos Return To Base After Weeks In The Field

PLEIKU, (25th INF DIVIO) — After almost seven continuous, dusty weeks of combat operations, the "Broncos," 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade, have returned to their Pleiku base camp.

Following a massive airlift of most of the brigade south to Ban Me Thuot on February 25th, the men of the brigade fought to the north and west on operation Garfield.

Garfield ended on March 24th. At that point the brigade's base was located at Buon Brieng, a small Montagnard outpost 60 miles north of Ban Me Thuot.

Without a break, the "Broncos" linked up with the 1st Cavalry Division for operation Lincoln on March 25th. The "Tropic Lightning" soldiers Continued to strike at the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.

On March 31st, the brigade again shifted its base north. The new base of operations was a Special Forces camp, 100 miles northwest of Buon Brieng, at Duc Co, five miles from the Cambodian border.

The moves from Ban Me Thuot to Buon Brieng to Duc Co were made by road. This was the first time highway 14, the north-south route through central Vietnam, had been opened by US Forces.

During the two consecutive operations the "Broncos" posted an impressive record of communist harassment.

On operation Garfield the brigade accounted for 103 North Vietnamese and eight Viet Cong killed. Air and artillery strikes in support of brigade operations accounted for another twenty North Vietnamese killed.

Twelve Viet Cong were captured and 78 suspects were also detained by the brigade.

The brigade posted one of the highest captured weapons-to-enemy killed ratios to date in the war. A total of 65 weapons were taken, including 47 small arms, 16 automatic weapons, one American M-79 grenade launcher, and one 75mm recoilless rifle.

Large quantities of ammunition were captured during Garfield. This included 102 hand grenades, 38 B 40 rockets, 1200 12.7mm rounds, 27,300 small arms rounds, and 3 Claymore-type mines.

A complete field hospital was also captured by an element of the brigade. The find resulted in over 100 pounds of drugs and a large assortment of surgical instruments captured.

A total of 400 uniforms, 234 rucksacks, 11 telephones, a switchboard, and 150 pounds of documents and photographs were also captured. Three hundred enemy structures were destroyed.

After Lincoln, Colonel Everette A. Stoutner, the 3rd Brigade Commander said, "I think the greatest benefit to us on this operation was the fine experience we gained working with the battle-tested 1st Cavalry Division."

The Army Reporter – 29 April 1966

52nd Avn. Supports Tropic Lightning

DUC CO, (25th INF-IO)---Sitting on the apron of this small Special Forces camp are many UH-1 "Huey" helicopters of the 52nd Aviation Battalion which are being used to support the 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade.

The 52nd Battalion's choppers helilift units ranging from sections to a battalion of infantry or more.

On combat assaults, the infantry unit boards the choppers and heads for a landing zone (LZ) which has been "prepped" by Air Force strafing or bombing, artillery fire, or by armed "gun" helicopters.

The "prepping of an LZ is usually done by the Air Force jets or by 105mm howitzer fire from the "Bronco" Brigade's 2nd Battalion, 9th Artillery. However, the proposed LZ might be out of artillery range and there might not be any aircraft available from the Air Force. In this case, the battalion's "gun ships" are called upon to prepare the zone for the infantry element.

Once the choppers set down and the troops are off-loaded, the "Hueys" head for home.

Meanwhile, the word "dustoff" might be heard on one of the radios. This means someone has been wounded and must be evacuated to the hospital at the brigade's command post. This type of mission often means that the time taken in retrieving the wounded man could mean the difference between life and death.

Using a different type of helicopter, the CH-47 "Chinook," the 52nd has heli-lifted the 105mm howitzers of the "Mighty Ninth Artillery into inaccessible terrain on several occasions so that they could readily support the infantry elements on the operation.

Another mission the aviation battalion is called upon to do is aerial observation.

Using small, single-engine planes of the "Piper Cub' variety, the pilot and one passenger head for the wild blue yonder to see if they can spot any enemy troops or emplacements. Many times they do, and almost always these sightings are taken under fire by artillery, Air Force jets or by friendly troops on the ground. These small aircraft provide an "eye in the sky" for the brigade commander and the battalion commanders.

At the forward command post of Company A, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, there is now a landing zone.

When the helicopter pilots were given the job of re-supplying the forward company of the "Cacti Green" Battalion, they would have to take the supplies in by slinging them in nets and dropping them in, literally, from a height of 80 to 100 feet, because of the tall trees that covered the area. The answer was to cut down some of the trees.

The infantry company, along with some engineers from D Company, 65th Engineer Battalion, cut down trees and used explosives to blow up the tree stumps.

Then they built a "crib" out of logs to allow the helicopters to land. The landing is still a bit tricky.

Tropic Lightning News – 29 April 1966

3rd Brigade Fetes Montagnards

Bearing gifts of soap and candy, members of 3rd Brigade recently moved into Dak Ri Lang, a remote Montagnard village about 65 miles northwest of Pleiku, to show the villagers there how Americans battle the other war.

Based five miles east of the village on operation Longfellow, the reconnaissance platoon from Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, mounted, their gun jeeps for the trip.

Other jeeps from the battalion carried not guns but supplies for the villagers. One bore the cases of soap and candies contributed by Zonta International Club, of Meriden, Conn., while another was laden with medical supplies.

After a 20-minute ride, the group pulled up outside the village. Security guards moved into position and Captain John F. Field, battalion intelligence officer, from Cromwell, Conn., entered the village.

Battalion Surgeon Captain Jack P. Baldwin and his assistants immediately set up shop. Through interpreters, they explained they were there to help the sick and diseased Villagers. In an hour, the medics had treated more than 30 villagers, who were suffering with anything from infected sores to mild pneumonia. Treatment ranged from swabbing with soap solution to massive doses of penicillin.

PFC Joseph H. Peavey, of Bangor, Me., and Specialist Five Alford B. Childres, whose family is living in Korea during his tour in Vietnam, handed out vitamin pills to the crowd.



Meanwhile, Capt. Fielding asked his interpreters to have the village chiefs gather the rest of the more than 350 Montagnards in the village square, where he distributed gifts of soap and candy to the assembled villagers.

According to Capt. Baldwin, the disease and infection rate in the village would be halved if the people had soap available and used it regularly.

Cpt John Fielding handing out candy to Montagnard villagers