

UNLIMITED OFFENSE

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All the information received and the analysis of the situation converged in the same conclusion.

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CHAPTER V

Phase 2

THE "LONG REACH" OPERATIONS From 27 October to 17 November 1965 PURSUIT AND EXPLOITATION THE BATTLE IN THE CHUPONG MASSIF

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For the first time since the war broke out on the Indochinese peninsula, friendly forces had the opportunity to come to such a conclusion. Throughout the hostilities since 1948, the enemy has always been able to leave the battlefield and to withdraw safely, to give up the fighting at their own will.

Thus the chance which was offered to friendly forces had not to be overlooked: the two NVA Regiments were to be pursued because if not, the danger would persist and the enemy would have time to reorganize their units.

Besides that, the above decision could this time be made possible because reserve forces were available, with the presence of the 1st US Air Cavalry Division

stationed in An Khe, a major unit which possesses the highest degree of mobility all over the world and also the most up-to-date equipment and weaponry. (1)

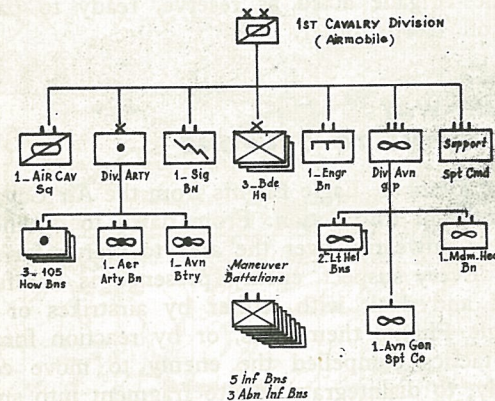
After two years of maneuver in the jungle of the South Carolina State, the Division has totally succeeded in developing and promoting new tactics. In a news conference on 16 June 1965, the US Secretary of Defense Mc NAMARA said,

« The tactics, the techniques, the procedures that will be employed by this new division will result in a markedly different approach to the solution of tactical problems. The use of aircraft to bring combat personnel directly to the battlefield, to remove them from the battlefield, provides a capability which neither we nor any other army in the world possess to day ».

The modest Eagle Flights have become Air Cavalry troops whose unlimited capabilities had been forecast by Samuel Johnson (1709 — 1784) in the following words : « Against an army sailing through the clouds, neither walls nor mountains nor seas could afford any security ».

The decision made by II Corps Command to exploit the results of the first phase and to pursue the enemy was fully concurred by the US military

- (1) After the testing period which started in 1963, the Division was officially activated in June 1965 and came to Viet Nam in September 1965. In comparison with the other US Divisions, the 1st Air Cavalry has less troops (15787 instead of 15900) and vehicles (1600 instead of 3200) but more aircraft (435 instead of 101). The displacement of 3000 troops over a distance of 160km takes only 59 minutes (US Army Information Digest, August 65, page 36)



• 15787 officers and men

434 Aircraft

1600 Vehicles

• One Bde Hqs and 3 Inf Bns will have an airborne capability

• Maneuver Bns will be assigned to brigades as required

(ARMY INFORMATION DIGEST, AUG 1965,
page 36)

were still brand-new and amounted approximately to a value of 40000 US dollars.

While the evacuation of the trophy was carried out by helicopters, a battalion size enemy force stealthily moved toward friendly troops and strove to surround their positions. The first engagement between elements of the 1st US Air Cavalry Division and the VC took place. It lasted for five hours until darkness. When the enemy finally broke contact and withdrew, it had been for them a deadly blow by the «First Team»: 99 VC were killed (Body count), 44 other VC regulars captured along with 40 weapons, But at least more than 200 other VC were probably killed and wounded.

The capture of the aid station was a major find for the Air Cavalry Division and besides the opportunity it provided for destruction of VC forces, it also yielded documents, including one particularly valuable map that revealed enemy supply and march routes. These, in turn were converted into intelligence that led to further successes :

- On 3 November, at 2100 hours, an audacious ambush in the very heart of the Chu Pong — Ia Drang complex inflicted to the 8th Battalion of the newly-infiltrated 66th Regiment : 112 KIA (Body count), more than 200 others estimated KIA and WIA, 30 weapons captured.
- On 4 November, a large arms cache was uncovered at 5 West of the Pleime Camp, in the vicinity of the Ia Meur river.

— On 6 November, the 6th battalion of the 33rd Regiment was almost annihilated after an engagement taking place North of the Ia Meur river : 77 KIA (BC), nearly 400 others estimated KIA and WIA.

Up to this point, the 1st Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division in its «ALL THE WAY» (1) deployment over an area of about 2500 square kilometers had given severe blows to the withdrawing VC units but through the contacts made and related above, no traces were yet found concerning the 32nd Regiment. Although the number of VC casualties amounted to 1500, including those suffered in the first phase, one more regiment — the 66th Regiment — had been added to the enemy order of battle.

There was strong suspicion that elements of the 32nd Regiment may have slipped off to the east.

On 9 November, the movement and shift in emphasis from west to east commenced and on 10 November, the US 3rd Brigade relieved the US 1st Brigade.

But in reality, the VC units were located by that time in the following places, as proved later on by subsequent operations launched into the very heart of the Chu Pong — Ia Drang complex :

- the three battalions of the 66th Regiment were strung along the north bank of the Ia Drang river.

(1) Name of the operations conducted by the Brigade.

— the 32nd Regiment was also up north in the same area.

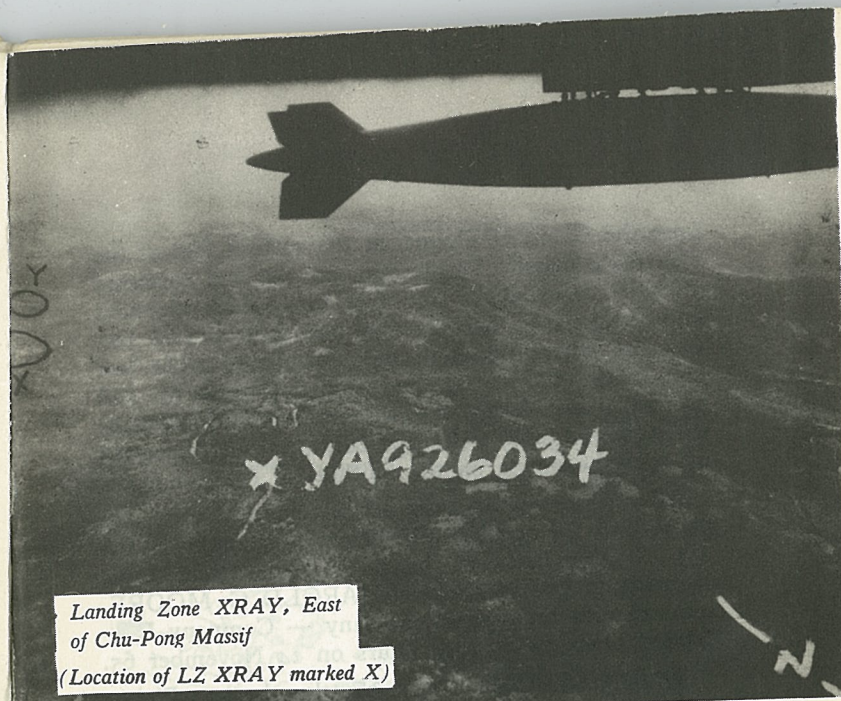
— the 33rd Regiment maintained its positions in the vicinity of the Anta village (VC appellation), east of the Chu Pong mountains.

Convinced that friendly forces had lost tracks of its units, VC Field Front quickly made a decision to regain its advantage with an attack. The target again was Pleime and the date of attack set at 16 November. The plan was known within the VC ranks as « the second phase of the attack of Pleime ». All the three regiments would be committed this time as well as a battalion of 120mm mortars and a battalion of 14.5mm twin-barrel anti-aircraft guns which were both en route down the infiltration trail and scheduled to arrive in time for the attack. According to the declaration of a surrendered political officer, the scheme of the new attack would have as primary objective the destruction of the camp.

THE VC SUICIDE, 14 November 1965.

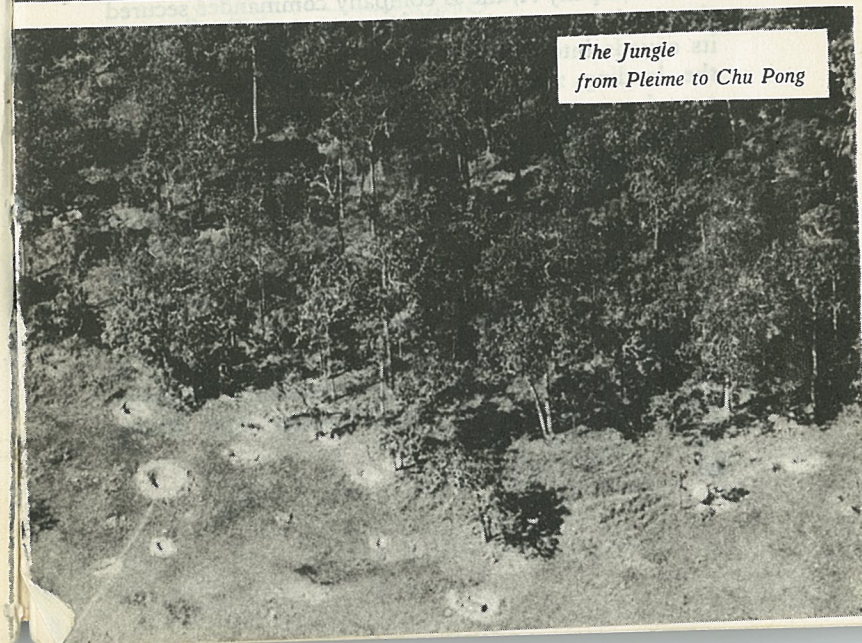
But the above plan would never be carried out because only some days later, the 3rd Brigade resumed pushing west. (Operation Silver Bayonet).

At noon on 14 November, helicopters disgorged troops and artillery from the 1st Air Cavalry on the very doorsteps of the Chu Pong mountains. Instead of launching an attack on Pleime, Field Front found itself engaged in a struggle to defend its own base. The landing zone called L.Z. Xray was about 25 km



Landing Zone XRAY, East
of Chu-Pong Massif

(Location of LZ XRAY marked X)



The Jungle
from Pleime to Chu Pong

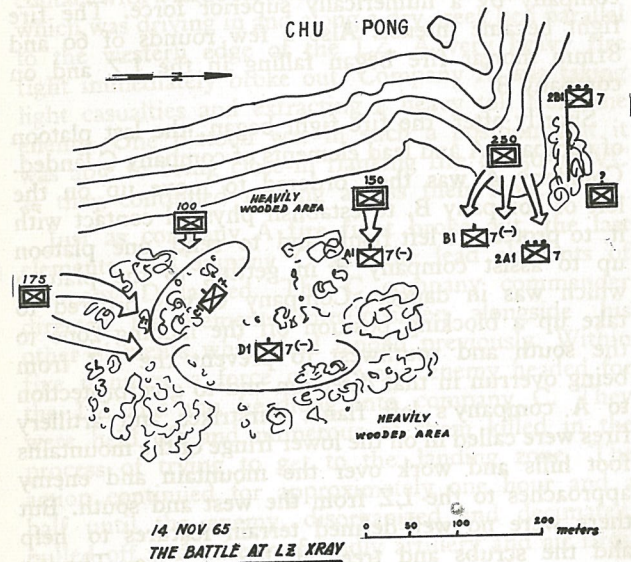
from the Camp of Pleime, at the eastern foot of the Chu Pong massif. The terrain was flat and consisted of scrub trees up to 100 feet high, thick elephant grass varying in height from one foot to five feet and ant hills throughout the area up to eight feet high with thick brush and elephant grass on and around them. Along the western edge of the LZ, the trees and grass were especially thick and extended off into the jungle on the foothills of the mountain.

After a 20-minute tube artillery preparation, and 30 seconds of aerial artillery fire, the landing of the 1/7 Cavalry battalion began. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel HAROLD G. MOORE, himself with the assault company — Company B — landed precisely at 1048 hours on 14 November 65.

While the helicopters were shuttling back to Pleime to lift company A, the B company commander secured the landing zone by having one platoon dispatch its squads into different areas, 50 to 100 meters off the landing zone to reconnoiter. At approximately 1120 hours a prisoner was taken. He stated that he had eaten only bananas for five days and that there were three VC battalions on the mountain.

At 1210 hours, as sufficient elements of company A had landed, the LZ security mission was given to that company and company B ordered to search the lower portion of the mountain area with emphasis on the finger leading down towards Xray.

Around 1245 hours, lead elements of company B began to engage in a fire fight of moderate intensity. Shortly afterwards, at approximately 1330 hours,



added

the company commander reported that he was being attacked heavily by at least two companies of enemy and that his right platoon (2B1/7) was in danger of being surrounded and cut off from the rest of the company by a numerically superior force. The fire fight became intense. Also a few rounds of 60 and 81mm mortar fire began falling in the LZ and on company B.

Shortly after the fire fight began, the last platoon of company A and lead elements of company C landed. Company A was then ordered to move up on the left of company B, to establish physical contact with it, to protect its left flank and to send one platoon up to assist company B in getting to the platoon which was in danger. Company C was ordered to take up a blocking position off the landing zone to the south and southwest to prevent the LZ from being overrun in that direction and to give protection to A company's left flank. Airstrikes and artillery fires were called in on the lower fringe of the mountains foot hills and work over the mountain and enemy approaches to the LZ from the west and south. But there were no well-defined terrain features to help and the scrubs and trees all looked alike. The air was heavy with smoke and dust. The fact that the separated 2B1/7 platoon was forward of companies A and B delayed delivery of effective fires in support of these two companies. However, using the technique of «walking» fires down the mountain from the south and west, fires were placed where they gave some help to these two companies. Despite all its efforts, company B reinforced was only able to get

to within 75 meters of the cut-off platoon and could get no further.

Concurrently, company A minus also made heavy contact with a large force of at least one enemy company which was driving in and along a dry creek bed parallel to the western edge of the LZ. A very heavy fire fight immediately broke out. Company A was taking light casualties and extracting a heavy toll from the enemy. One platoon was in such a position that it was able to bring close-in flanking fire on 50-70 (VC) as they continued moving across their front. *PAVN*

Just as company A fire fight broke out, the last elements of Company C and the lead elements of company D landed. The C company commander directed his elements into position alongside his other elements which had landed previously. Within five minutes, a force of 175-200 enemy headed for the LZ and ran headlong into company C. They were held off and numerous of them killed in the process of trying to get to the landing zone. The action continued for approximately one hour and a half until the enemy, disorganized and decimated, pulled off under heavy friendly artillery and air fires, dragging many of his dead and wounded.

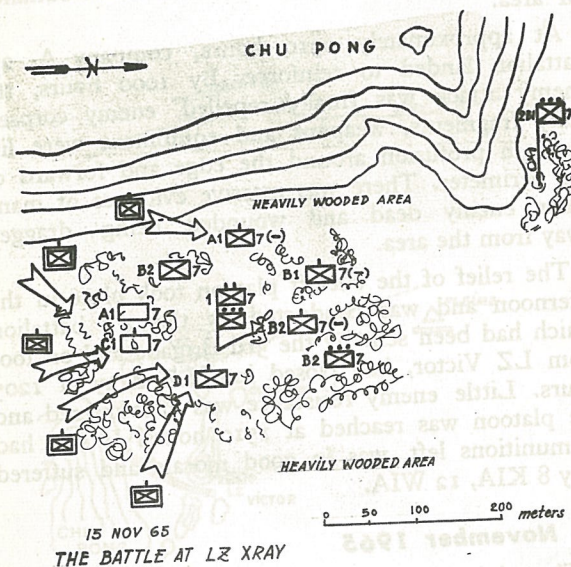
At 1500 hours, as the remainder of the tactical elements of the battalion finally landed, and the enemy fire had slacked off, due to companies C and D actions, the battalion commander could quickly give necessary orders for the redistribution of his troops. Afterwards, two attacks were launched to reach the surrounded 2B1/7 platoon. But they were

met by a greatly superior enemy force which from concealed positions was trying to cut off the attacking forces into parts. By 1740 hours, Colonel MOORE decided to pull back companies A and B under cover of heavy supporting fires to the fringe of the landing zone and set up a tight defensive perimeter for the night. The battalion was still in good communications with the surrounded platoon and it was ringed with close in artillery defensive fire. By 1800 hours, company B of the 2/7 battalion landed to reinforce the 1/7.

15 November 1965

Due to the heavy losses they had received in the afternoon, the enemy only made only some light probes around the perimeter at night. As for the cut-off platoon, it received three separate attacks from the enemy but thanks to the protection by continued close-in artillery fires, when daylight broke, numerous enemy dead were seen around the platoon.

But as first light came, the enemy reappeared and simultaneously attacked from three directions: from the south, south west and south east. By 0730 hours, the enemy had moved almost to the perimeter fox-holes despite taking severe losses from artillery, mortar and close air support. There was considerable hand fighting. At 0755 hours, all platoon positions were ordered to throw a colored smoke grenade to define visually for the air observers the periphery of the perimeter and all fire support brought in extremely close, because the enemy fire was so heavy



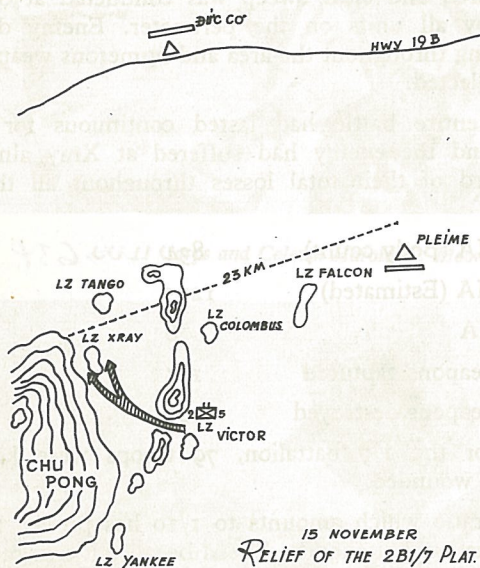
that movements towards or within the sector of defense resulted in more friendly casualties. Some friendly artillery fire fell inside the perimeter itself and two cans of napalm were delivered in the battalion CP area.

At approximately 0910 hours, company A, 2/7 battalion landed to reinforce. By 1000 hours, the enemy attack was finally repelled, enemy corpses, body fragments, weapons and equipment were littered in profusion around the edge and forward of the perimeter. There was massive evidence of many other enemy dead and wounded being dragged away from the area.

The relief of the cut-off platoon took place in the afternoon and was conducted by the 2/5 battalion which had been sent by the 3rd Brigade and on foot from LZ Victor, had closed into LZ Xray at 1205 hours. Little enemy resistance was encountered and the platoon was reached at 1510 hours. It still had ammunitions left, was in good morale and suffered only 8 KIA, 12 WIA.

16 November 1965

The night was relatively quiet until 0400 hours when a force of 250-300 enemy attacked from the south east. Flaeship illumination was called for and continuous until 0545 hours. The attack was beaten off by small arms and artillery fires. At 0432 hours, another attack by 200 enemy came in from the same direction but the artillery took a heavy toll. By 0500 hours, the weight of the enemy attack had



shifted more to the southwest but repulsed half an hour later. At 0627 hours, another attack came directly toward the CP. At 0641 hours, the enemy had been beaten off and was dragging off bodies under fire.

A search and clear sweep was conducted at 0810 hours by all units on the perimeter. Enemy dead were lying throughout the area and numerous weapons were collected.

The entire battle had lasted continuous for 48 hours and the enemy had suffered at Xray almost one third of their total losses throughout all three phases :

— KIA (Body count)	834	→ 634
— KIA (Estimated)	1215	
— CIA	6	
— Weapons captured	141	
— Weapons destroyed	100	

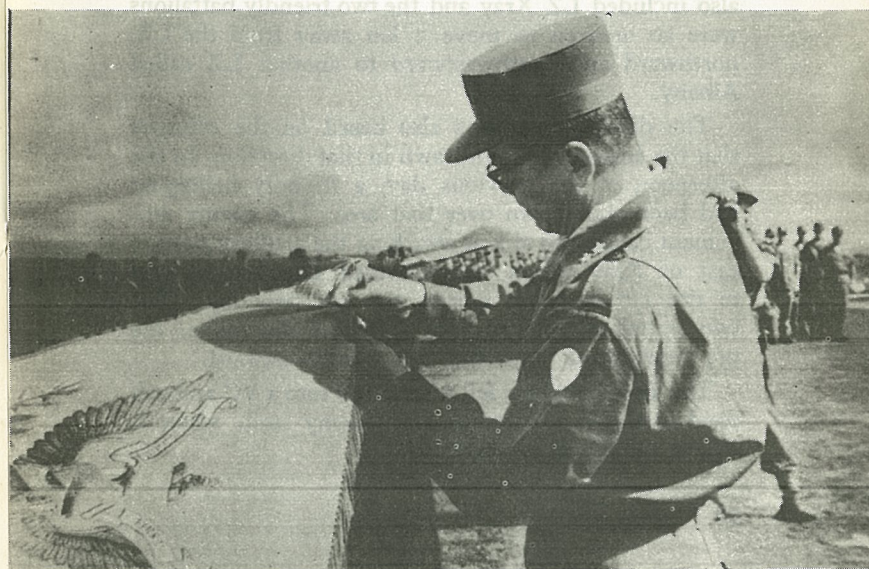
As for the 1/7 battalion, 79 troops were killed and 125 wounded.

The ratio which amounts to 1/10 has proved how lucky the 1/7 battalion had been because it was rather surprising that from the hills which dominate the LZ, the enemy did not position any crew-served weapons to support their attack. Such a situation could be explained only by the following reasons :

1) The enemy has lost nearly all their heavy crew-served weapons during the first phase.



CG 11 Corps and Colonel Harold G. Moore



The VN Gallantry Cross with Palm
to the Colors of the 1/7 Battalion

2) They had been surprised by the attack of the 1/7 battalion and their commanders had failed to make the best use of the terrain.

3) Their tactics relied mostly on the «human waves» and they were too confident that their attack would disorganize the 1/7 battalion very quickly.

The 1/7 battalion left LZ Xray at 1040 hours on 16 November and was replaced by the 2/7 and 2/5 battalions.

17 November 1965

It is worth mentioning that since the afternoon on 15 November, the B52 stratofortresses had also taken part in the battle with five daily bombardments of the Chu-Pong massif. On 17 November, the targets also included LZ Xray and the two friendly battalions were so ordered to move 3 km away from the LZ, northward and northwestward to another LZ called Albany.

The displacement was also based on the estimate that the enemy had withdrawn in that direction. In the afternoon of the previous day, a friendly helicopter had been shot down over that area. The enemy movement could also aim at attacking the artillery position east of Xray which had provided effective support to the 1/7 battalion during the last two days. The two battalions moved into different directions, the 2/7 northward and the 2/5 northwestward.

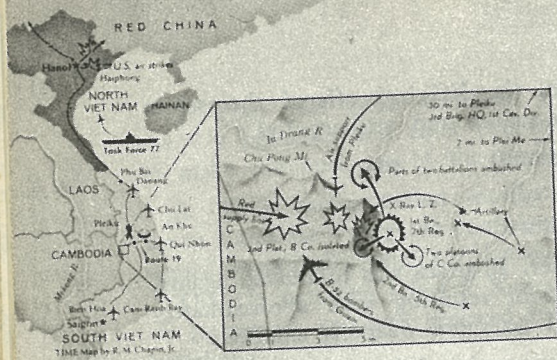
The first battalion fell afterwards into a VC ambush conducted by a battalion-size enemy unit, when it almost came near its objective.

But once again, the VC had offered themselves as targets for air-strikes and artillery fire :

— KIA (Body count)	403
— KIA (Estimated)	100
— Weapons captured	112

On 18 November, an attack was conducted against the artillery position, resulting with approximately 200 VC KIA and 20 more weapons captured.

Decimated by successive failures and losses and the base of Chu Pong being destroyed by B 52's, the VC finally gave up their attempts and dispersed into small groups, they withdrew in the direction of the border.



THE WORLD

SOUTH VIET NAM The Valleys of Death

When the siege of Plei Me was lifted five weeks ago, the mauled Communist attackers faded westward into the uninhabited valleys of elephant grass and scrub-covered hills that for a long time have been their sanctuary. But this time a sanctuary it was not to be. The U.S. undertook what had rarely been attempted before in Viet Nam—a hunting expedition to seek out and destroy the retreating Reds rather than let them escape to fight again on their own terms. For a fortnight, the troopers of the 1st Air Cavalry got lots of blistered feet, fought some brief skirmishes and took some prisoners, but made no real contact with the enemy. The chance of real battle seemed lost until last week, when the U.S. abruptly found its foe in the shadow of Chu Pong Mountain (see map). The result was the first major encounter between U.S. and North Vietnamese regular troops—and the biggest, bloodiest and most brutal loss for both sides in the war.

A Hit & a Sniffle. The longest week began on a sun-drenched Sunday morning in a small clearing, designated Landing Zone X Ray, in the Chu Pong foothills. Intelligence had long suspected the Chu Pong massif harbored a large Communist base, fed from the Cambodian side of the border. X Ray seemed a likely spot to find the enemy, and so it was. No sooner had the 1st Battalion of the Air Cav's 7th Regiment rushed from its choppers in the landing zone than the shooting began.

Struggling to set up a perimeter near the base of a hill, the 2nd Platoon of B Company found itself under such severe shelling from mortars that it was soon forced up a fingerlike slope—

apart from the rest of the battalion and in the very midst of the enemy. Finally taking refuge on a narrow ledge, the isolated platoon fired at the khaki-clad North Vietnamese attackers from as close as five to ten feet. Sergeant Clyde Savage stood up to blast down three of them, found to his horror that his automatic rifle was empty. "I didn't know what to do," he recalls, "so I just said 'Hi' and snifled. All three of them stood looking at me, sort of confused. Then they began fumbling, but I had slipped in a fresh magazine by then and sprayed."

For 26 hours the fight raged on as Communist crossfire kept the little band pinned down. "Anyone who moved was hit," said Savage, as he described the bitter struggle in which first the platoon leader and then the platoon sergeant were mowed down. But the rest fought on as waves after waves of attacks was beaten back by the platoon's guns and pinpoint Air Cav artillery support. When the remnants of the 2nd Platoon were finally rescued and brought back to safety, they were dazed and jabbering, but still had discipline and—most amazing of all—ammunition to spare.

Glowing Red. The main battalion force soon had an even larger tragedy on its hands. At dawn, two platoons of C Company manning X Ray's southeast corner fanned out on patrol. The Communists cunningly sniped and retreated ahead of them, then sprung an ambush from the flanks and rear. Simultaneously a direct Red onslaught smashed head-on at the main C Company positions back at the landing zone, diverting both attention and possible aid to the two trapped platoons. Both were virtually annihilated. When relief forces arrived, they found several G.I.s who had been

taken prisoner, later shot with their feet tied. One was left hanging head down from a tree.

Four days and nights the battle around X Ray raged, while a remarkable concatenation of American firepower kept the estimated two attacking North Vietnamese battalions at bay. The 1st Air Cav's artillerymen poured more than 8,000 rounds into the area, firing so fast that their barrels often glowed red with heat. By day and night, tactical air pounded the enemy (see following story), and for the first time, in a series of ten raids, the giant B-52s from Guam were used in tactical support, blasting suspected enemy concentrations in the lowering mountains around X Ray. Bulwark after bulwark of Red infantrymen cracked down the slopes against the American defenses, only to be thrown back each time. By Wednesday, despite their own severe losses, the G.I.s had killed by body count some 890 North Vietnamese, and perhaps another 1,500 perished in the artillery and bombing barrages in the hills. It was far and away the worst Communist loss in a single engagement in the war.

Man to Man. Wednesday morning, X Ray proudly theirs, "the First Team" split into two units and moved on. For one unit, some 500 men from the 5th and 7th Regiments, it was a move toward near disaster. Barely three miles north of X Ray, the long column crossed the Ia Drang River. There lay two North Vietnamese soldiers sleeping in the grass, a sure sign that more trouble was not far away. It wasn't. Suddenly from all sides came a deadly hail of gunfire. The enemy seemed to be everywhere—along in trees, dug into anthills, crouching behind bushes. It was a classic horseshoe trap, the fields of fire obviously meshed in perfect ambush.

As the U.S. force scattered and took cover, a Communist battalion sliced through its middle, cutting the Americans into two isolated halves. "After that," said an officer later, "it was man-to-man, hand-to-hand fighting between

B-52 RAID

