

'FINISH' EM'

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CHAPTER VI

Phase 3

THE "THẦN-PHONG 7" OPERATIONS From 18 to 26 November 1965 THE COUP DE GRACE AT IA DRANG

This time the main effort was conducted by the ARVN Airborne Brigade whose mission consisted of destroying the fleeing VC units and all their installations around the Ia Drang valley. The 1st Air Cavalry Division which had thus far borne the burden of the attack would continue to exert a pressure from East to West and to provide artillery support for the Airborne Brigade.

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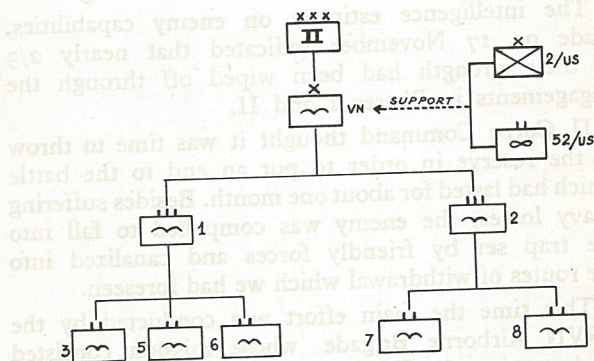
The intelligence estimate on enemy capabilities, made on 17 November indicated that nearly 2/3 of their strength had been wiped off through the engagements in Phases I and II.

II Corps Command thought it was time to throw in the reserve in order to put an end to the battle which had lasted for about one month. Besides suffering heavy losses, the enemy was compelled to fall into the trap set by friendly forces and canalized into the routes of withdrawal which we had foreseen.

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OPERATION THAN-PHONG 7

TASK FORCE ORGANIZATION



The operations—dubbed «*Thân Phong 7*»—began in the afternoon, 18 November when the brigade was helilifted to the area of operations, immediately upon arrival in Pleiku.

I should like to take advantage of this opportunity to cite the outstanding achievement of the C130's Squadron of the 7th US Air Force which within only a few hours had airlifted :

- The Airborne Brigade Headquarters,
- The Airborne 1st and 2nd Task Forces Headquarters,
- Five Airborne battalions : the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th.

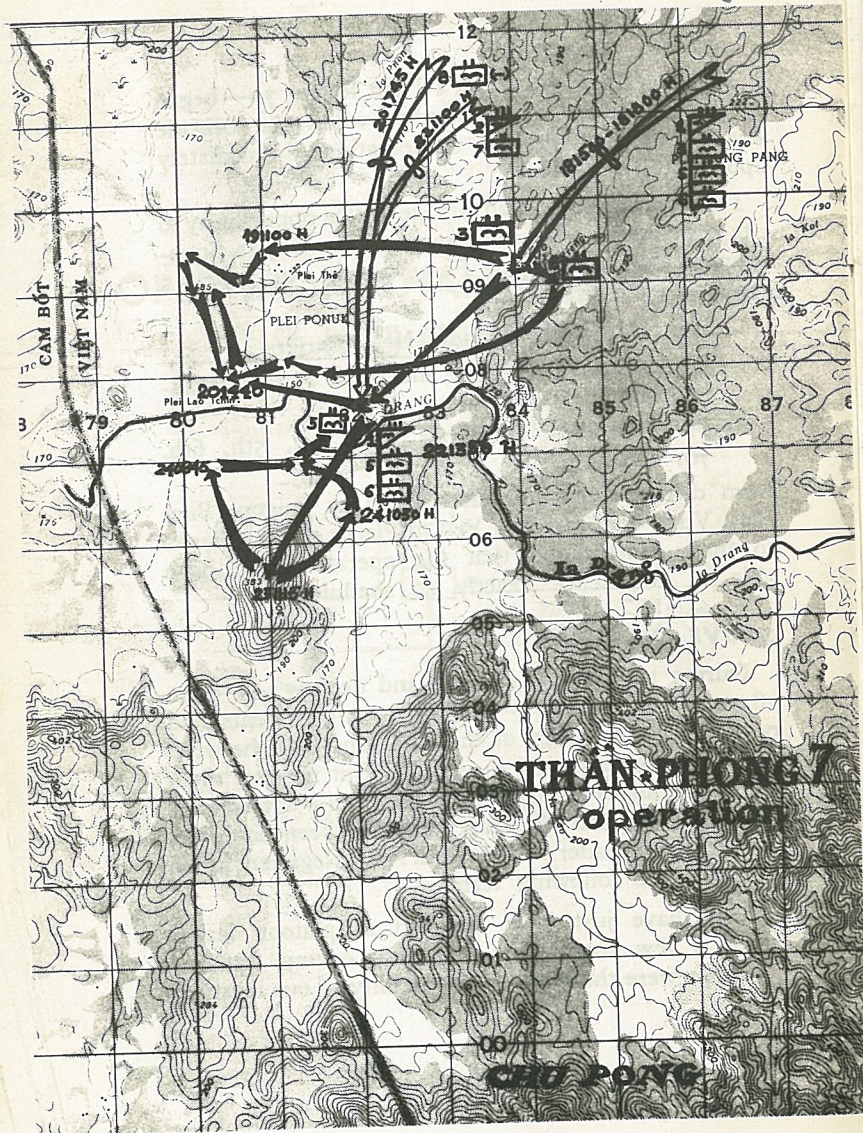
from different distant places, such as Saigon, Bien Hoa, Vung Tau and Phu Yen to Pleiku. It was thanks to their contribution that the operation had been able to commence exactly as sheduled.

SAUVE QUI PEUT

During ten days of «*search and destroy*» — from 18 to 26 November — numerous engagements had occurred in the valley of the Ia Drang river between the Airborne units and the enemy. But most of them were only minor contacts with scattered VC elements. The disintegration of enemy units had been described by a platoon leader of the 32nd NVA Regiment in his diary in the following terms :

«*I have just been assigned as platoon leader for a few days when suddenly enemy airborne troops were thrown into the vicinity of our location.*

22 Chords

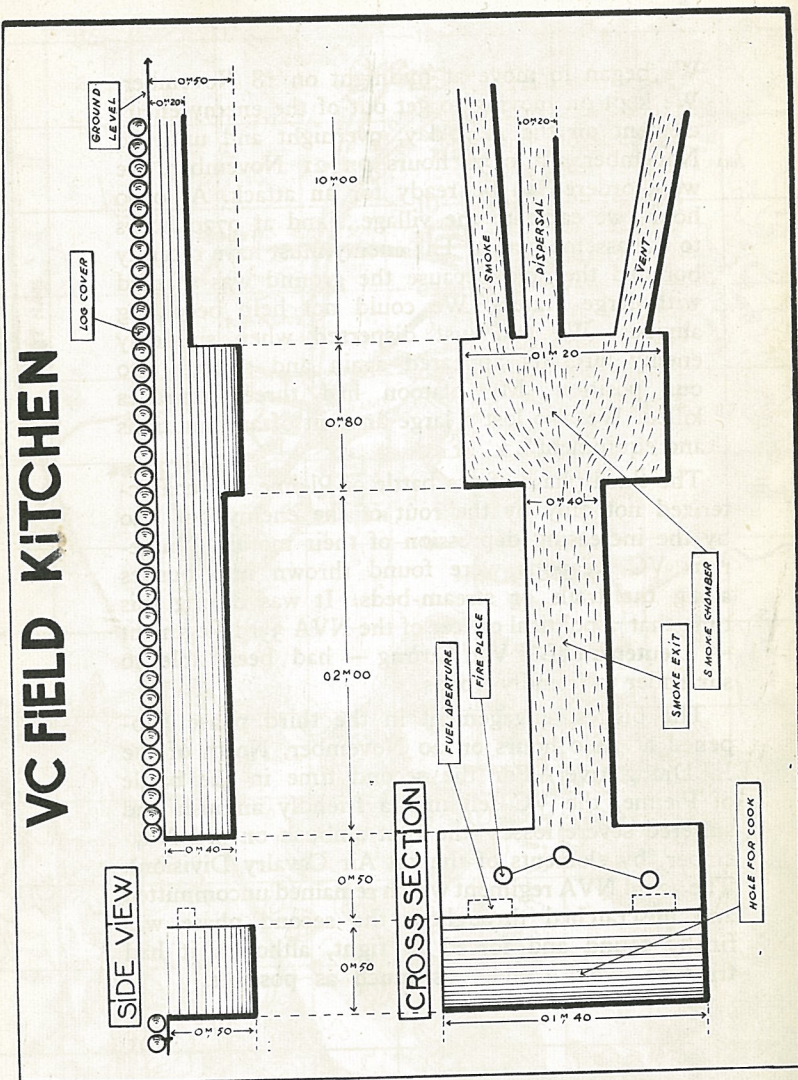


We began to move at midnight on 18 November. We kept on moving to get out of the enemy encirclement on the next day, overnight and until 20 November. At 0130 hours on 21 November, we were ordered to be ready for an attack. At 0700 hours we came to the village... and at 0730 hours to the assembly area. The enemy must have recently bombed the area because the ground was marked with large craters. We could not help becoming anxious. We had just dispersed when suddenly enemy aircrafts appeared again and strafed into our position. My platoon had three comrades killed. We also lost a large amount of ammunitions and equipment... »

The third phase of the battle of Pleime was characterized not only by the rout of the enemy but also by the increasing depression of their morale. Numerous VC weapons were found thrown into bushes along the trails or stream-beds. It was during this time that a political officer of the NVA 33rd Regiment — Lieutenant Bùi Văn Cường — had been able to surrender to friendly troops.

The biggest engagement in the third phase happened at 1440 hours on 20 November, North of the Ia Drang river. For the second time in the battle of Pleime, the VC fell into a friendly ambush and suffered severe losses (the first ambush on 3rd November, by elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division). The 32nd NVA regiment which remained uncommitted and unscratched throughout the second phase was finally found and forced to fight, although it had tried to avoid contact as much as possible.

VC FIELD KITCHEN



In the morning of that day, the 3rd Airborne battalion was ordered to move southward to link-up with the 6th battalion. Both units had on the previous day conducted a thorough search on two different axes from the landing zone westward. During its displacement the 3rd battalion was stealthily followed by a battalion-size enemy. But once the link-up was made between the two friendly battalions, the VC unit on its turn was caught within the field of fire of the 6th battalion and the very center of an ambush. Nearly 200 VC were killed in this fortuitous engagement.

In their search for enemy installations in the area of operations, the Airborne Brigade destroyed 3 training centers, a cache of equipment and 75 houses.

The search and destroy operations were also conducted south of the Ia Drang river but only small skirmishes with scattered VC elements happened.

On 24 November, as no more contacts were made with the enemy, the Airborne Brigade withdrew from the area of operations, terminating the third phase of the Battle of Pleime with 265 VC killed (BC), 10 others and 58 weapons captured.

The battle in the Dien Phung massif

The battle in the Dien Phung massif, a rugged mountain range in central North Vietnam, has been one of the most intense and costly in the history of the Vietnam War. The fighting, which began in late 1967 and continued through 1968, was a result of the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) strategy to capture the strategic high ground of the Dien Phung massif, which would provide a base for operations in the surrounding area.

The battle was a tactical success for the NVA, as they captured the Dien Phung massif and the surrounding area. However, the battle was a strategic failure for the NVA, as they were unable to hold the area for more than a few weeks. The South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and the United States military were able to recapture the area by late 1968.

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