

BITTER FIGHTING IN QUANG TIN:

Operation Lamar Plain

BY ROGER ABLES with PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN KLUBOCK

Ten days after the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon, the communist leadership resolved to test his will and the will of the American people. COSVN Directive Number 71 ordered the North Vietnamese Army and its supporting local forces to maximize American combat casualties while disrupting lines of communications and disabling the pacification programs.

In 1969, more than 11,500 American servicemen (and one woman) died in Vietnam, nearly half of them in the first four months of Nixon's presidency. The year's best-known combat action was the battle for Ap Bia Mountain (Hill 937), known as the battle of Hamburger Hill. But over one hundred miles to the south in Quang Tin Province, a little-known but highly significant set of military events unfolded.

Shortly after midnight on May 12, 1969, under cover of a moonless sky, two regiments of the 2nd NVA Division with support of local and regional units, a force of perhaps more than 2,500 soldiers, launched an offensive in the eastern third of Quang Tin Province, now part of present-day Quang Nam. This enemy force quickly gained control of nearly 80 percent of the targeted area, and threatened to overrun and capture several key allied military installations, including the provincial headquarters at Tam Ky. The U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry Division, the Americal, was responsible for this tactical area of operation, but proved no match for the well-prepared, highly motivated, and determined enemy.

On May 14, a Tactical Emergency was declared when the Americal called for help.

In the pre-dawn hours of May 15, land lines were busily ringing and FM radios loudly squawking as the plea from the Americal began to be answered. The **101st Airborne Division** hastily prepared plans to send a brigade task force south to Quang Tin Province. Clerks, cooks, supply personnel, truck drivers, and other rear-echelon types were roused from their beds. At 4:30 a.m., division staff met with 1st Brigade staff. Aviation crews were called into briefings while two infantry battalions and the two artillery batteries that supported them were ordered to prepare for extraction from the field and transport to the Camp Eagle/Phu Bai area.

Dense early morning fog nestled in the valleys around fire support bases Pike and Lash in the southern end of the A Chau Valley near the border with Laos. As the sun began to illuminate the verdant peaks and ridges of the Truong Son Mountain Range, artillerymen readied their 105mm howitzers, shell canisters,

powder bags, and firing projectiles in huge rope nets to be slung beneath Chinook helicopters. Meanwhile, grunts from the 1st Battalion, 501st, and the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry regiments boarded Huey helicopters at landing zones around the area of operations. These units belonged to the 2nd Brigade, but were placed under operational control of the 1st Brigade. In turn, for the duration of Operation Lamar Plain, the 1st Brigade would become OPCON of the Americal.

Charlie Company, 1/501st, was on FSB Pike providing security. Around 9:25 a.m., Alpha Company arrived from the field, and within the next hour its sister companies were there as well. The men knew little, if anything, about the events that were unfolding. But rumors were rampant. Had the war suddenly ended? After more than three months in the A Shau Valley, were the grunts finally going to get that well-deserved stand-down at Eagle Beach on the South China Sea? Before long, the words “Tam Ky” and “Americal” began to circulate among the men. They realized that something big was going on down south.

In the east was the distant but unmistakable sound of in-bound helicopters. The men scrambled to their feet to put on their rucksacks. As they braced themselves for the wind and dust storm of rotor wash, flights of the big twin-rotor CH-47 Chinooks arrived at the firebases. Before long, the big choppers were headed east with their cargoloads of men, equipment, and supplies. Operation Lamar Plain was underway.

Meanwhile, folks in the rear prepared for deployment to Tam Ky as they loaded all available trucks and Jeeps with ammunition, tents, equipment, rations, and all things necessary to support an airmobile brigade task force. Support units also prepared for the trip to Quang Tin Province. These included a maintenance company, a medical company, a signal company, a company of combat engineers, and a forward support and supply element. Aviation crews, which had been working since before first light, boarded their helicopters and headed south. These included an air cavalry troop, a battery of aerial rocketry artillery, an assault helicopter company, an assault support helicopter company, the brigade aviation unit, and a company of medical evacuation helicopters. After arriving at the Phu Bai airbase, the infantrymen waited to board Air Force C-130 and C-123 transport planes. While they waited, they had hot showers, ice cream, cold sodas, and were entertained by Donut Dollies. The men were given new jungle boots, fatigues, and boonie-hats. They traded damaged weapons for good ones. The division’s top brass joined the XXIV Corps commander, along with the division band, to see the troops off.

Tam Ky lies about 40 miles south of Danang. Located in the coastal plain, the town is a market center where people come to buy and sell fruits, vegetables, and fish. By mid-afternoon on May 15, 1969, the little airstrip south of Tam Ky was the focus of activity as transport planes from Phu Bai touched down and

offloaded men, vehicles, and equipment. While old men and women squatted on their haunches, crowds of noisy wide-eyed children gathered to stare through the barbed-wire fencing that surrounded the airstrip. Young men and boys raced about on motorbikes spooking water buffalo and chickens. The air was clouded with red dust, diesel fumes, and smoke. Darkness fell, but planes continued to arrive throughout the night. As the first day of Operation Lamar Plain drew to a close, nearly 80 tons of supplies and equipment and 751 soldiers from the task force had been delivered to Tam Ky.

While men and materiel continued to arrive the next day, the Screaming Eagles wasted no time going after the enemy. Two 105mm howitzer batteries were transported from Tam Ky to fire support bases Young and Professional. By early afternoon on May 16, they began preparatory fires. As mid-afternoon approached, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, minus Alpha Company, made a combat assault north of LZ Professional and began to conduct reconnaissance in force to the south. Temperatures soared over 100 degrees, and there were many heat casualties.

As the infantrymen began their RIF, they began to find well-established enemy huts, hootches, bunkers, and trenches—some of which had been occupied as recently as the night before. The air cavalry and brigade aerial recon teams also discovered many enemy installations while facing withering fire from .51-caliber machine-gun positions. During the next two weeks, virtually every aircraft assigned to the operation received damage from ground fire, and many were shot down. Infantry contact with the enemy was light for the first two days in the field. However, it was only be a matter of time before that changed.

On the morning of May 18, Bravo Company, 1/501st Infantry began to climb Hill 187, north of LZ Professional. As the third platoon reached the summit, several enemy mortar rounds rained down. As the remainder of the company, joined by recon and mortar platoons, reached the top, a command post was established. Soon thereafter, enemy mortar crews had the CP bracketed. One round fell on each side and a third directly hit the CP. The company commander, Capt. John C. Pape, and the senior medic, Spec 4 Russell Lane Jett, were killed in the blast, while the commander's RTO and five others were wounded. Mortar rounds continued to fall on Hill 187 until late afternoon, eventually killing four men and wounding 18.

Shortly after Bravo came under siege, Charlie Company began receiving intense small-arms and machine-gun fire while following a trail north of Hill 187. The first and third platoons tried an assault on enemy positions atop a small hill. The second platoon was defending the company CP and also engaged with the enemy. The assault on the little hill failed; the men pulled back. There were wounded, and ammo and water were running low. It became essential to secure the area so that a resupply helicopter and medevac could come in.

Shortly after the men pulled back, a flight of Douglas A-1E Skyraiders, or “spads,” rolled in and passed directly overhead, dropping 500-pound bombs onto the enemy position. Charlie Company eventually secured the hilltop, and the dead, one seriously wounded, and heat casualties were evacuated.

As the men began to dig in for the night, they surveyed the surreal scene around them. Melted napalm hung from splintered, blackened vegetation. Tree stumps smoldered. Bomb fragments—ugly jagged chunks of steel—littered the landscape. The stiffening bodies of dead NVA soldiers lay close by. The air smelled of combat and death. The men of Charlie Company would call this hill Ghost Mountain.

The 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry entered the action on May 19 when they established a command post at Hau Duc. Meanwhile, their infantry companies and recon and mortar platoons conducted combat assaults by helicopter west of Professional and southeast of Tien Phuoc. The object was to seize the high ground surrounding Professional, and take the pressure off of the firebase and district headquarters at Tien Phuoc.

Contact with the enemy was generally light and sporadic until May 21 when 1/501 units, northeast of Hill 187, made contact in the early morning. Fighting continued throughout the day as two companies and the recon platoon were ambushed. The fighting was concentrated around a small hill where the enemy occupied well-concealed spider holes, trenches, and steel-reinforced concrete bunkers.

By mid-afternoon, Delta Company was scattered south and east of the hill. They were badly shot up and pinned down by heavy enemy fire. Worse, the location of one of their platoons was unknown. Recon also was hurting after losing its platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and several other men, leaving a Spec 4 rifleman in command. Bravo assaulted the enemy hill position from the northeast and sustained many casualties. They collected the dead and wounded, and set up a CP and aid station.

Charlie Company, in reserve, was ordered to assault the hill late that afternoon. The third platoon stood up on line, shoulder-to-shoulder, and before the command to charge could be given, the enemy opened fire. Immediately, second platoon was ordered into the fight and the two platoons charged across a rice paddy toward the hill. Several men fell wounded in the paddy, and more at the base of the hill as from above, the enemy fired mortar, machine gun, and rocket-propelled grenades. As the men leaped over a stone wall and began to advance up the hill, the first platoon and company CP also came under attack. The enemy tried to encircle them.

Murderous fire brought down several more of Charlie Company's men. But using grenades and fire and maneuver, they reached a second stone wall. Then they were fired on from every direction. Enemy soldiers wearing grass and tree limbs

as camouflage rose up from spider holes and trenches and charged from behind. The fighting became very close, often hand-to-hand.

There were many acts of personal courage. After taking out several enemy bunkers with light anti-tank weapons and spraying rifle and machine-gun fire into the trees where enemy soldiers had tied themselves with ropes, the 101st moved further up the hill toward a third stone wall, behind which there was a continuous line of spider holes interconnected by tunnels. To the left and right, behind the wall, were bunker and tunnel complexes. Each time a bunker was taken out, more enemy soldiers crawled through the connecting tunnels and trenches, pulled their dead away, and replaced them in the firing positions.

The beleaguered grunts finally fought their way to the top of the hill and destroyed the last of the enemy bunkers. They were exhausted, nearly out of ammo and water, and without radio contact with the CP. The two platoon leaders, Don Gourley and Dan O'Neill, made the decision to recover their wounded and withdraw from the hill. After getting the wounded off the hill, Gourley led a group back up the hill to recover the dead, but the tactical situation prevented their recovery efforts. Only with the help of guys from Bravo's third platoon were they able to police up their weapons and equipment, and get their wounded to a makeshift assembly area and aid station. Helicopters, under enemy fire, took out the wounded well into the night. Evacuation of the remaining wounded and recovery of the dead were the priorities the next morning. During the day's fighting, the 1/501st had 12 men killed in action and 49 wounded. Over the next dozen days, the enemy stalked the 101st units with well-placed mortar and sniper fire. Aircraft losses continued steadily. During this period, 18 men were killed and 54 were wounded. A 24-hour cease-fire was declared for May 30, Buddha's birthday.

On June 2, B Troop, 2/17th Air Cavalry inserted its aero-rifle platoon onto Hill 376, Tien Loc Mountain, for a reconnaissance mission. The undermanned platoon consisted of 18 men, including a medic and two Kit Carson scouts. They soon came under small arms fire and were ordered to turn around and go down the other side of the mountain. The two men at the lead were wounded in an ambush and the rest of the unit was pinned down. The medic, Joseph Guy La Pointe, rushed forward to help the two wounded men. La Pointe was hit but continued to administer aid until enemy grenades landed on his position, killing all three men.

As the battle continued into the afternoon, two more cavalrymen were killed and several others wounded. The C&C helicopter was shot down over the battlefield. The situation remained precarious. Bravo Company, 1/501st moved onto Hill 376 to relieve the beleaguered cavalry platoon. The next morning, June 3, two more infantry companies and the recon platoon from the 1/501st arrived. For the next nine days, the Screaming Eagles moved up and down the ridgelines assaulting enemy bunkers, often facing murderous machine-gun fire, mortars, and grenades. By the time they left Hill 376 on June 12, they had suffered 23

killed, 34 wounded, and one missing in action. In addition, a helicopter crew of four men from the 101st Aviation Battalion and a passenger were killed in the area, while elements of the 1/46th Infantry suffered casualties south of Hill 376.

After a month of bitter fighting in which neither side gained an advantage, Operation Lamar Plain reached a turning point. It became a game of chasing an enemy that avoided contact while moving toward its sanctuaries deeper in the interior. Operations intelligence identified possible base camps and other enemy locations. Some were the subject of combat assaults, only to find the enemy had moved out ahead of assaulting units. Other locations were the targets of B-52 air strikes.

Then, in late June and early July, the 1/502nd Infantry started to make contact around Hau Duc. They found many enemy trails and a large transportation route. They also located enemy huts and a medical complex in which supplies were cached.

On the morning of July 8, Alpha Company, 1/502nd Infantry made a grueling march to a location about 3 km northeast of Hau Duc. There, in a fallow rice paddy, they were supposed to rendezvous with a resupply helicopter. Capt. Chuck Scribner ordered his third platoon to move forward and recon the area before putting out two squads as perimeter security. As those two squads advanced, the lead squad discovered a line of comms wire. When they reported their finding, they were ordered to follow the wire, which led to a small hootch. With a man on each flank, the squad leader stepped forward and fired into the hootch, killing three NVA soldiers.

The lead squad then turned around and moved back down the trail. Suddenly they heard intense rifle and machine-gun fire. The second squad was caught in an ambush with the enemy positioned on the right side of the trail, and a pair of machine guns, one located on each side, firing directly down the trail. Enemy mortars located on higher ground supported the ambush.

Under intense fire, the ambushed squad maneuvered to form a small defensive position, and desperately fought amid a hail of mortar and RPG fire. Meanwhile, the enemy flanked the lead squad under cover of mortar fire. A fierce firefight ensued. During the confusion of battle, some of the men became separated from the squad while others fell wounded or dead. Late in the afternoon, Alpha's three dead and five wounded were evacuated by helicopter to Chu Lai. The enemy finally broke off the fighting at around 8:00 p.m. There was no radio contact with the two cut-off platoons. Thirteen men were declared missing in action.

During the night, the enemy searched some of the bodies of the missing Alpha Company soldiers; some were still alive and feigned death. Toward morning the enemy recovered and buried their dead, and began to move out of the area. They left behind some snipers and a small harassment force.

Early on the morning of July 9, **Bravo Company, 1/502** arrived to secure the area while members of Alpha Company began a search for their missing men. An air cavalry Loach pilot spotted Ted Brenner, Duane Scott, and John Hanie, three of the missing men. The pilot, Luther Lassiter, landed his chopper. Scott and Hanie crawled inside the cockpit while Brenner hopped onto a skid. The overloaded chopper labored to lift off, but Lassiter managed to gain altitude and fly the soldiers to Hau Duc. When Lassiter returned to the area, he rescued a fourth soldier, Julius Bray.

Troops searching on the ground found two men, Kenneth Walker and Nelson Lucas, alive but wounded. By late morning, the bodies of six soldiers were recovered. The body of the thirteenth missing man, Sgt. James Manning, was not found until the following day.

For the remainder of Operation Lamar Plain, the Screaming Eagles continued to chase the enemy and engage whenever possible. Most of the operation was by then confined to the southern portions of the tactical area. Because the enemy had mostly broken up into many groups of fewer than ten soldiers, the operational tactics changed from RIF to saturation patrols, many of them in the vicinity of Fire Support Base Boxer. These patrols revealed extensive bunker and tunnel complexes, hospitals, classrooms, and other enemy structures. Many graves containing enemy soldiers killed by artillery and air strikes also were discovered. During this latter stage of the operation, 24 American soldiers and airmen were killed and 58 were wounded.

Early in the afternoon of August 11 an Air Force C-130 departed Tam Ky with a load of grunts from the 1/501st Infantry. They arrived at Camp Evans and were taken home to LZ Sally via trucks. Over the next three days, transport flights, vehicle convoys, and helicopters continued to take the Screaming Eagles home, and Operation Lamar Plain officially ended at 8:00 a.m. on August 14, 1969.

Sandwiched between the fighting at Ap Bia Mountain during Operation Apache Snow and the siege of Firebase Ripcord during Operation Texas Star the following year, Operation Lamar Plain was one of the last extensive operations conducted by the 101st Airborne Division against the North Vietnamese Army. Lamar Plain received little media attention, however, even though 126 men died, 404 were wounded, and it occurred because of a tactical emergency.

Even today, few people outside of those who participated in Lamar Plain know anything about it. The families of many of the men who died in the fighting during Lamar Plain believed that their loved ones died on Hamburger Hill, and many of the soldiers' obituaries reflect that.

The men who fought in Operation Lamar Plain are proud that they came to the aid of another military unit in a time of crisis, allowing that unit to recover from its losses and eventually return to normal combat operations.

Roger Ables served with 1st Battalion, 321st Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in Vietnam from April 1969-70. His unit did not participate in Operation Lamar Plain. However, after five years' research, he wrote a manuscript, Under an Asian Sun: Screaming Eagles and Operation Lamar Plain, Vietnam 1969; this article condenses that work. He is seeking a publisher. Ables can be reached at redleg101@charter.net

Steve Klubock served with 221st Signal Company out of Phu Bai. He was assigned to document the assault on Hill 376, Operation Lamar Plain. He photographed the events from May 21 to June 3, when he was ordered to leave just prior to the main assault. He left on a relief helicopter with the KIAs he helped secure in the chopper. Klubock also is seeking a publisher. He can be reached at s.klubok@gmail.com