

Viet Jungle Sweep: the Surprise That Wasn't

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The company of American airborne troops dumped their packs in the bushes or perched them on the stumps of chopped-off rubber trees and waited in front of the long line of military trucks that would carry them to Bien Hoa airbase outside Saigon.

Down the road came a battered truck. In the back was a Vietnamese rubber plantation worker.

"He's making a fast count," one of the privates said. "Then he goes behind a bush and calls Charley." Charley is the paratrooper word for the enemy — the Viet Cong Communists.

It was 11:30, and the atmosphere was one of apprehension and impatience. The green-fatigued paratroopers had been told they were to be dropped into the middle of a Communist stronghold, where two regiments could be collected against them within eight hours.

The Viet Cong strength—by conservative estimates—was at last 2,000 somewhere within the jungle called D Zone, which covers parts of six provinces. The intelligence reports of the exact strength within their precise landing zones was not known.

REDS KNEW

More disconcerting, however, U.S. intelligence sources had discovered that the Viet Cong already knew about the paratroop operation.

The operation, meant to start at 8:30, was already three hours delayed. The artillery units had moved east of the objective the night before and were prepared to bombard the area where the paratroopers would be landed, but the heavy cloud cover prevented a pre-strike by B-57 jet bombers and A-1 Skyraiders.

The paratroopers had taken all the textbook precautions for battle. Each had taped his two dog tags together to avoid clanking; green tape had been slapped across the white airborne insignia on their shirts; officers had torn off their ranks to avoid becoming a special target for sniperscopes ("But it doesn't help much," one of them explained. "The Viet Cong know that the officers walk beside the radio operator and they always aim to get those two").

The most distinctive thing about the troops was their youth—most had not reached their 20th birthday. One recalled that Hanoi radio labeled them the "teen-age brigade." Even the officers who would lead the operation on the ground—the captains and lieutenants—were in their late 20's or early 30's.

The combat experience of the units rested with the non-commissioned officers — the senior sergeants — almost all of whom had been in Korea.

FLY-IN

The sky soon became dotted with helicopters. One flight of 12 hovered far above, then a second and a third.

The first heli-lifts of the two Vietnamese airborne battalions had been placed into position; now the paratroopers loaded into the trucks, which followed the red clay road to Bien Hoa air base. Five rubber plantation workers watched as they drove by.

At the airbase, the helicopters were parked in three meticulous lines, each copter only inches from another. An American helicopter pilot guessed there were about 150.

In the middle of the runway, two American generals from Saigon reviewed the operation and talked with the pilots.

One of the soldiers automatically hummed a favorite Saigon tune:

Oh, dear, what can the matter be;
Nineteen generals and no strategy.

1:30 p. m. The paratroopers picked up their gear and loaded onto the helicopters, which took off one by one. A sheet of fog and rain engulfed them.

2 p. m. The helicopters padded down into the landing zone, a large plain filled with waist-high elephant grass, rimmed on one side by the charred skeletons of houses that had once been a government fortified hamlet but had been deserted months ago.

The northernmost para-

trooper units immediately encountered Viet Cong mortar and small arms fire. They countered with M-6 machine-gun fire. The exchange lasted about five minutes, with no casualties reported.

In the middle of the landing zone, the paratroopers set up a mortar position. Each paratrooper rushed by and dropped his one round of mortar ammunition and then fanned out with his respective unit to establish a defensive perimeter for the oncoming waves of helicopter troops.

Soon the American mortars began firing. An officer called out the calibrations; a young private repeated them and adjusted the sights and positions; a pfc called out, "Round on the way." The mortar unit braced for the boom; minutes later the valley reverberated as the shell hit the ground several hundred yards away and a giant puff of white phosphorus smoke rose.

2:35 p. m. The second wave of paratroopers arrived, then the third. Within an hour the two American airborne battalions had been heli-lifted into the landing zones.

There were some mix-ups. One company commander said the helicopters had not placed the units in the right places, and sometimes landed in the wrong direction so that the troops got out of the helicopters not knowing which way was north. He raced through the landing zone to pull the platoons and squads together.

HQ LOST

A six-man reconnaissance unit wandered about the defense perimeter. The sergeant explained, "We're the reconnaissance for our platoon—half of the ears, eyes and nerves of the platoon. Now we're looking for the other half of the nerves and the platoon leader."

The headquarters company for one of the two battalions was lost somewhere in the jungle. It was not located until almost 18 hours later.

5 p. m. Most of the units were proceeding to where they would camp overnight. The company commander ordered the troops off the road and into the jungle.

"This is a real Hollywood war," one private chirped. "So far, nothing serious has happened."

Suddenly, a sniper shot rang out. The private shut up and cocked his gun.

After walking through the jungle for 1,200 meters, the company set up headquarters around a clay mound that Vietnamese natives had once used to make charcoal. Helicopters supplied the troops with food and water for the next day.

7:30 p. m. It was now dark. The platoons fanned out into their assigned defensive perimeter positions; all had eaten and erected in form or another miniature tents by spreading their water-proof ponchos to tree limbs.

TOO CLOSE

The paratroopers' artillery was landing only 25 meters ahead of the company's position—a little too close for comfort. The company commander radioed "to advise of our location."

6:30 a. m. Before dawn, the entire company was swarming about. They ate cold C-rations of lima beans and ham or cold beefsteak with sticky juices.

"That was excellent ham and eggs," the company commander joked.

The company was scheduled to be on the march by 8:30, but at 9:15 "we're still here and are going to be here a long time yet."

The headquarters company was still lost. Three American helicopters raced overhead to try to locate it.

"That headquarters com-

Last week, for the first time since the Korean War, an American ground combat unit was officially employed in an offensive operation against Communist forces. The move marked a formal beginning to a new phase in the "dirty little war" in South Viet Nam. It was followed by a similar "search and destroy" operation last Tuesday.

Troops of three nations—the United States, Australia and South Viet Nam—joined in combined offensive action for the first time in these operations, which were among the largest ever carried out in Viet Nam. Neither, however, succeeded in making significant contact with the enemy.

Herald Tribune correspondent Beverly Deepe gives an eyewitness account below of the first operation, involving 120 to 150 helicopters and 2,800 soldiers, on June 29. The results were: one American killed and 22 wounded; four Australians wounded; one Communist guerrilla confirmed dead and 17 estimated dead; 300 tons of rice—in American surplus food sacks—seized.

mandant had better stay lost," a private mused. "I'd hate to be him if he's ever found."

9:50 a. m. The radio operator reported that the headquarters company had been located by the helicopters and a Vietnamese airborne unit had "made physical contact" with them.

"The colonel's telling the headquarters commander, 'Will you please go north with the Vietnamese. Will you please do that,'" the radio operator laughed.

An hour later the operation continued—two hours behind schedule.

The company commander was ordered, and in turn ordered his platoons, toward the next objective, called Golf 600 to 700 meters southwest.

As the company moved through the dense jungle, the

first sergeant barked, "Keep looking to the left and right. There's no sense going out like we own this jungle."

1 p. m. Objective Golf was reached and secured while the company awaited further orders. The advance company called in artillery fire on a suspected Viet Cong company; no results were reported.

Soon the company was ordered to move to the next objective, India, another 600 to 700 meters to the southwest. At 3:20 that objective was reached, and it began to rain.

As the rain poured down, a private said, "This operation is part of the big war here. I can't see it does much good. We Americans should learn to send small three or four man teams into the jungle to live there for three months, like the British did in Malaya. I don't think the generals will

ever do that, though. They think of the big war only."

Two sergeants appeared. They reported that once the headquarters company had been located, it promptly proceeded to get lost again.

3:45 p. m. The company commander was ordered, and in turn ordered his units, to move toward Objective Lima, about 1,200 to 1,500 meters ahead. This objective, which lay on a hilltop and across flooded but abandoned rice paddies, was a one-time government strategic hamlet.

As the company moved forward and was joined by other companies, a mortar unit laid down a blanket of white phosphorus on top of the objective.

"That white phosphorus kills any living thing that's up there," one private explained.

The troops labored through the waist-deep paddies and

then started up the slope. The first sergeant carried his rifle in his right hand; with a machete in his left hand he hacked out a path. The troops followed him, single-file.

By 5 p. m. the objective was reached. The troops passed the wooden fence that had once protected the hamlet. The shells of four burned-out thatch huts loomed ahead.

"Okay, this is it," the first sergeant barked. "You have two hours to get dry."

The troops checked each other for leeches and began to light fires in the jungle, which one of them called "the green hell."