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586 Salley - 1st Cav Div

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMOBILE)
Office of Information and History
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William S. Witters
William S. Witters
Major Infantry
Information Officer

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FIRST AIR CAVALRY DIVISION
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Office of Information and History

Unit Historical
Report No. 15

506 Valley

17 December 1966



Prepared by:

Steven M. Schopp
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THE BATTLE IN THE 506 VALLEY

17 December 1966

Our foreign policy is based on goals of freedom and justice. It is in the interest of these goals that we ask you to serve your country overseas. Your Nation depends on you and your colleagues, not just for the execution of American foreign policy, but for the embodiment of the spirit and ideals of our country.

John F. Kennedy

Author's Preface

A major battle can be described in a paragraph. This one is considerably longer, incorporating as much detail as is possible to do under combat conditions. Key personnel were wounded or killed, leaving narrative gaps; memories impressed with the struggle of the battle are only reliable to a subjective point leaving the overall picture as valid as the pieces comprising it. The purpose of this history is not to exalt or impeach, but rather to guide others who will follow.

Impress upon the mind of every man, from the first to the lowest, the importance of the cause and what it is they are contending for.

George Washington

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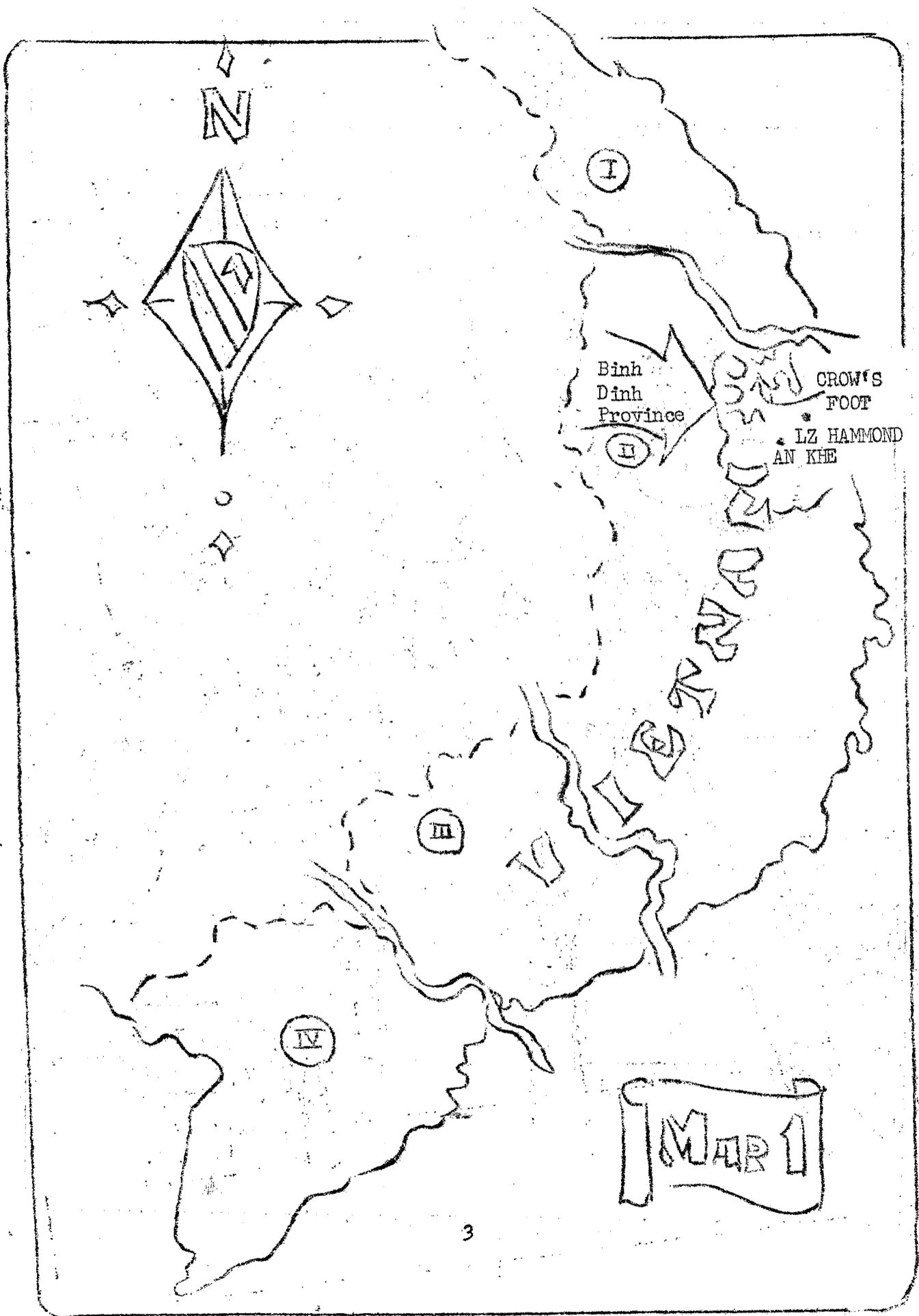
On September 13, 1966 the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) initiated Operation Thayer I which was continued in Operations Irving and Thayer II and Pershing. The mission of these operations was essentially the same: the complete pacification of Binh Dinh Province by moving into the area in force and staying there until the job was done. (Map 1) Thayer I concentrated in the Crow's Foot (the Kim Son Valley, also known as the Eagle's Claw), where the 18th NVA Regiment (Army of North Vietnam) was engaged and forced to withdraw. Irving was conducted principally in the mountains east of the Crow's Foot and west of National Route One. Irving kept the enemy off balance, seeking him out to destroy him in battle. Irving succeeded in driving the enemy further east into Binh Dinh Province, then Thayer II was kicked off to continue the mission of pacification in the Province. By December several large battles had been fought all over the Province and the enemy was forced to break up into small groups to exfiltrate back into the mountains to reorganize, rest and recuperate. (The most notable battle was fought in Hoa Hoi, where a large NVA force was surrounded and nearly annihilated.) Sporadic contact in the Crow's Foot (Map 2) indicated the enemy was hidden in the mountains around it and was getting some of their supplies from the Crow's Foot low lands.

Maximum use of the available Sky Troopers was made by spreading them out in all of the small valleys of the Crow's Foot, where platoons were operating separately and were self-sustaining for two or three days at a time. Not only could larger areas of ground be covered in this way, but a relatively isolated platoon usually enticed the enemy into making contact or holding to fight if engaged. The mission was simply to "find 'em, fix 'em, and fight 'em." A culmination of the complexities inherent in this deadly game of hide and seek manifested itself in the battle fought in the 506 Valley.

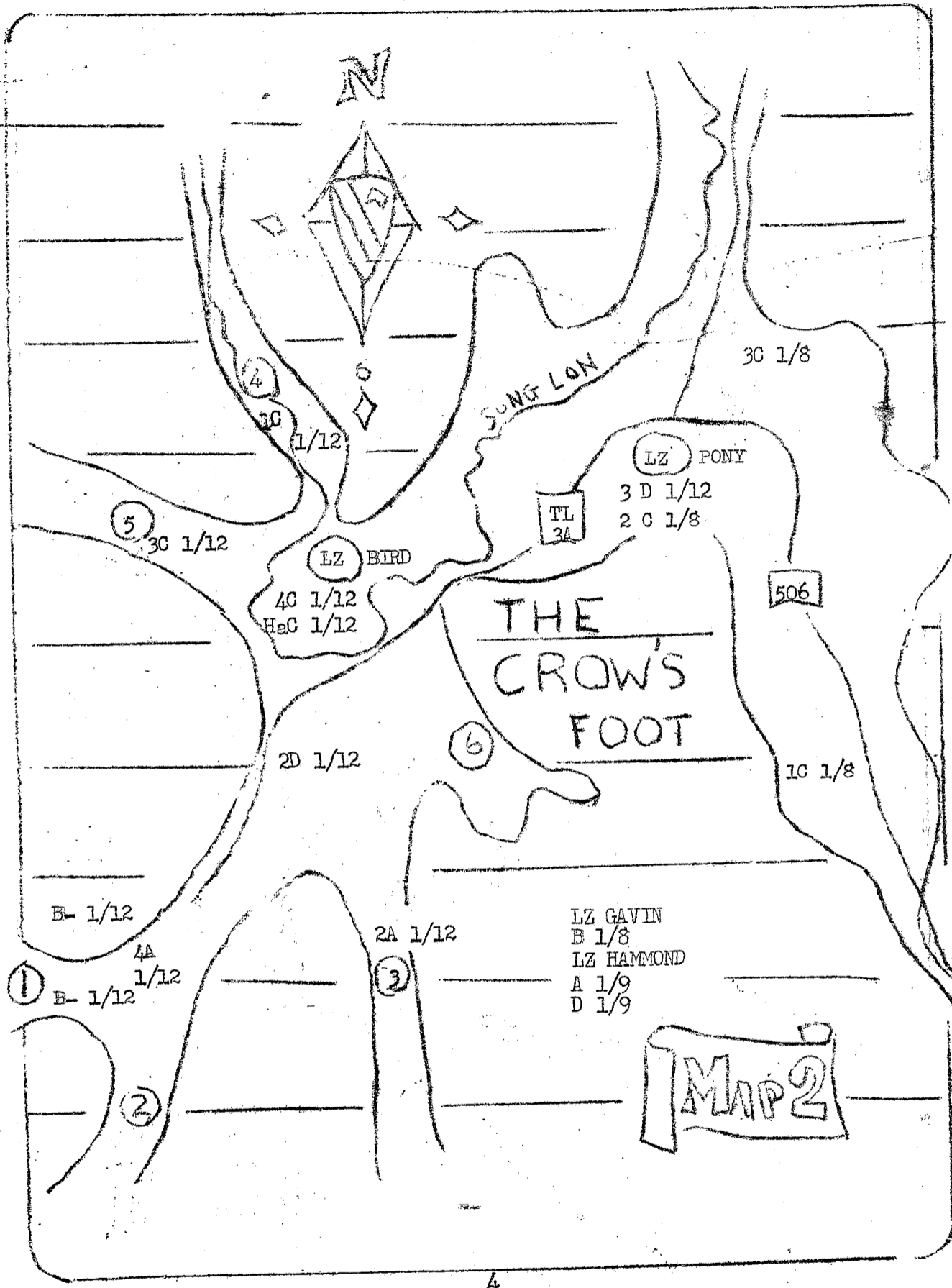
Two large Landing Zones (LZ) were in the Crow's Foot, LZ Pony and LZ Bird, both of which had tube artillery batteries which could fire supporting artillery into any part of the Crow's Foot. Spread around the Crow's Foot on December 16, 1966 were elements of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry (1/9), 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry (1/8), and 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (1/12). (Map 2) In various stages of progress were Search and Destroy missions, ambushes and reconnaissance. Lieutenant Colonel George D. Eggers, commanding the 1/12 had one company, Charlie 1/8, under his operational control (OPCON).

Generally in command of the tactical phase of Thayer II was Colonel James Smith, the First Brigade Commander. In turn, responsibility for a specific area of operation (AO) was given to Lieutenant Colonel Eggers. To assist in the overall mission, specifically in reconnaissance work, was the 1/9 Cavalry Squadron, who were responsible to the First Brigade. It wasn't until later in the afternoon in the 506 Battle that Lieutenant Colonel Eggers assumed complete responsibility for the conduct of the fight. Until that time elements of the 1/9 remained responsible to 1/9 and to the First Brigade. Coordination for various plans, therefore, passed through either the commanders or the operations officers (S-3) of the First Brigade, the First of the Twelfth, and the First of the Ninth.

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Late in the afternoon of the 16th Charlie Company 1/8 came into Landing Zone Pony in CH-47 Chinook helicopters. Major Leon G. Bieri, Operations Officer (S-3) of the 1/12 contacted Captain Paul C. Ogg, Commanding Officer of Charlie 1/8, and gave him a briefing on the situation. The 1/12 had elements covering the Crow's Foot except for the 506 Valley. C 1/8 would be OPCON to 1/12 because their missions were similar and designed to accomplish the same goal. Two of Captain Ogg's platoons were to conduct a reconnaissance in force of the 506 Valley, one on the west side and one on the east side of the road. Initially Captain Ogg asked to take his entire company into the valley because the area was new to them and the enemy situation was unknown. However, he had to provide one platoon as security for LZ Pony and Major Bieri felt the "reconnaissance in force" would be sufficient. Also the entire Crow's Foot was being searched in a similar manner, platoons spread out covering large areas.

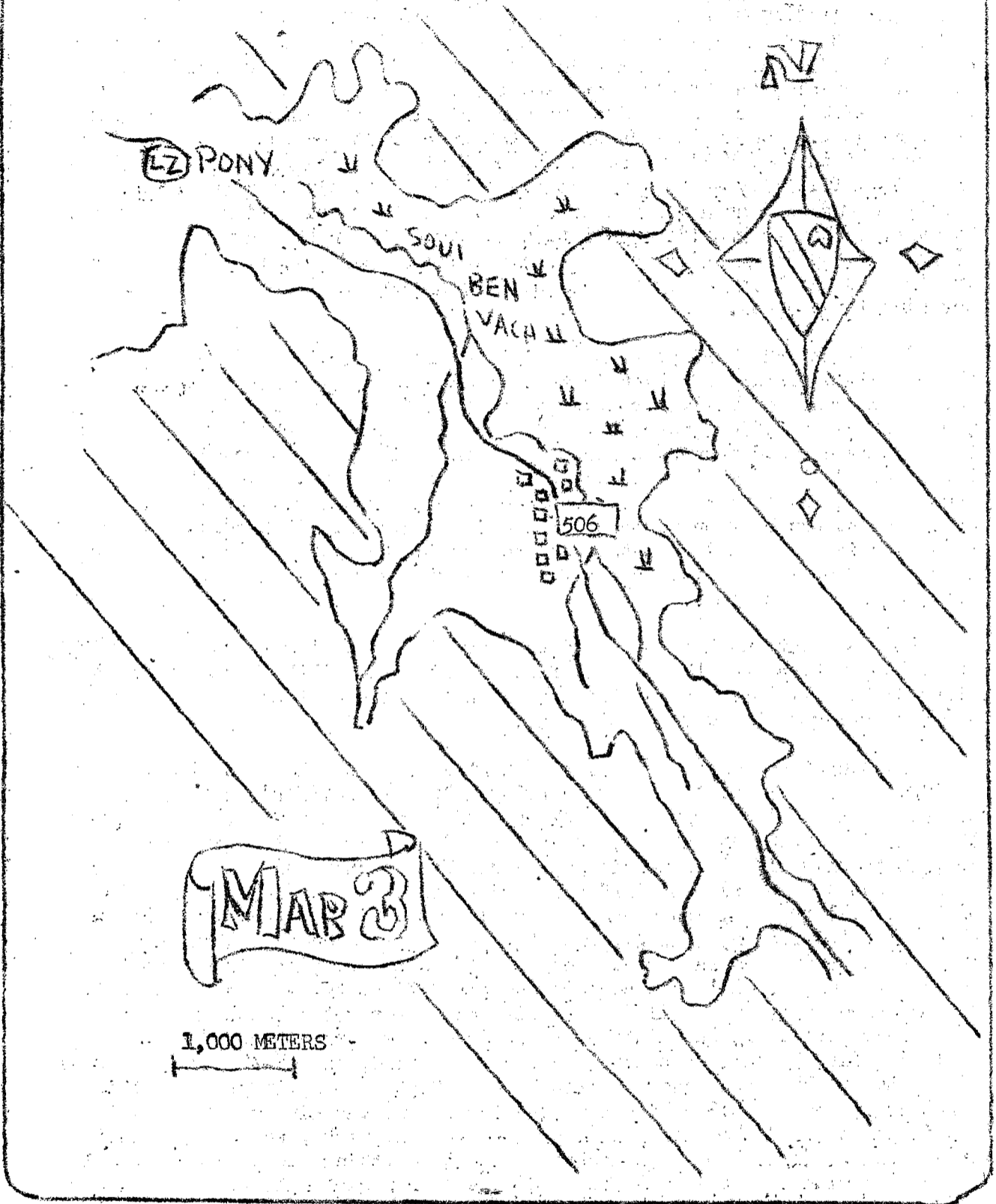
The first and third platoons, C 1/8, would search the 506 Valley, (Map 3), the principle feature of which is the communal fair-weather road, "Hiway" 506, which runs generally northwest to southeast. The valley floor is about 9,000 meters by 3,000 meters, watered by several streams which originate in the densely covered mountains surrounding the valley. Rice paddies with their attendant mud, water and dikes are readily evident. Coconut trees, bamboo and a few banana trees grow there along with numerous hedgerows. In one area the brush is quite thick, hindering movement. "A hundred meters in that terrain was just like a thousand meters in the average place," remembered a trooper from 1/8. Aside from a few small villages and hamlets, not much else appeared to be there.

The two platoons had moved off LZ Pony and set up together for the night, about 1500 meters from the LZ. At first light on the 17th, Sergeant First Class Richard T. Carmichael's third platoon took the east side, crossing the 506 and moving up to search out a draw.

Lieutenant Potter's first platoon went south down the west side following a ridge line. His point man was carrying a "people sniffer", a chemical device the size of a large back pack, weighing about 25 pounds. It measures the ammonia content in the air, which means it smells sweat. Like a hunting dog, it is only effective working up wind. That morning they were working up wind and the "people sniffer" was registering high readings. Potter's platoon, well trained, moved cautiously along the ridge. They were almost to the tip of the finger, (Map 4), when they spotted the enemy setting up hammocks and working around in the area. Potter set about deploying his squads to overrun the enemy. It's not certain who fired first but a fight broke out. Two or three enemy were killed initially and Potter got a little further into their position. The platoon had policed up several items of equipment, including five 30 caliber banana clips, one carbine, one AK-47 Russian assault rifle, twelve NVA packs and a switch board. Captain Ogg, informed of this right away, had an H-13 helicopter standing by and was airborne to assist within minutes. He knew they had engaged NVA, the packs, weapons and uniforms proved that. The telephone switchboard meant something else. It is normally associated with a battalion CP (command post) or regimental CP. Captain Ogg

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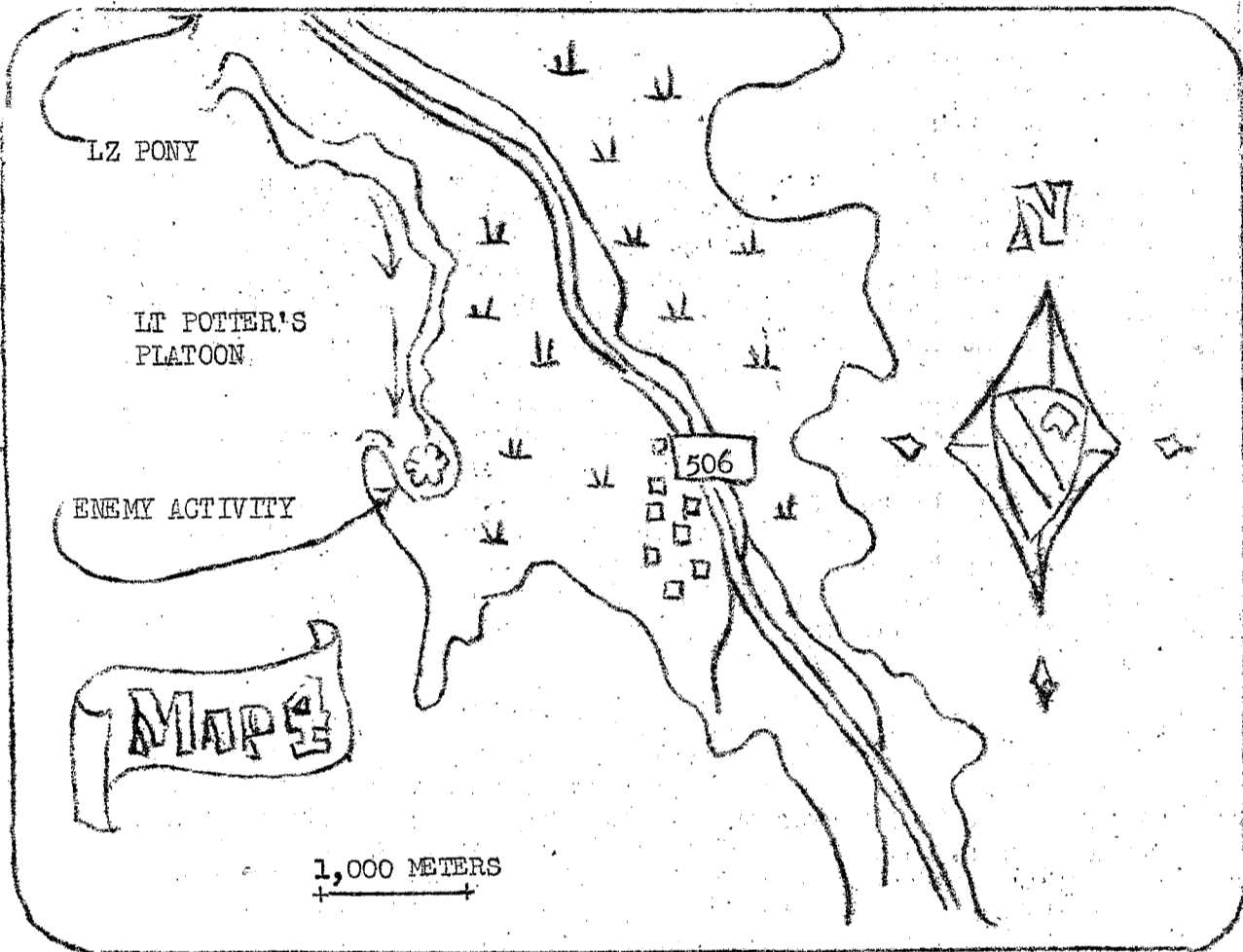
THE 506 VALLEY



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didn't know at the time it was a Regimental CP but he knew his first platoon had hit something big. He called Lieutenant Colonel Eggers, who was in the vicinity of LZ Bird at the time, and told

him of these developments, asking to air assault his entire company immediately. Major Bieri, S-3, gave the go ahead, providing one platoon from Charlie 1/12 to make up for the security platoon Ogg had to leave at LZ Pony.



The fight on the ridge started at three minutes after ten. Captain Ogg arrived several minutes later and picked out an LZ to the southeast of the ridge. From the H-13 Captain Ogg directed the gun ship's fire into the proposed landing zone, to clear the area before the troops landed. Second platoon C 1/8 followed shortly.

In the meantime. Captain Ogg flew back to Pony, got his CP group and fourth platoon and air assaulted. The time was now about eleven o'clock and Ogg had a full company on the ground, oriented and organized. His first platoon was still fighting on the hill, so Captain Ogg took his company up to disengage them and finish the fight.

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The general mission of finding the enemy had been accomplished by Ogg's first platoon. The next step was to fix them or to pinpoint the extent of the enemy limits. The First Squadron, Ninth Cavalry, 1/9, is specially organized for this type mission. It is composed of three basic teams, White, Blue, and Red. The White Team or Scout team is composed of two H-13 observation helicopters, highly maneuverable and capable of close-in flying. The Blue Team is an infantry platoon with their own organic UH-1D lift ships. The Red Team is aerial rocket artillery (ARA), Huey's fitted with 2.75 inch rocket launchers and M-60 machine guns. (Strictly speaking, ARA ships have 48 rocket pods and two mini-guns, while gun ships have 14 rocket pods each with two M-60 machine guns operated by two door gunners.) This combination of men and equipment was called upon to help exploit the situation.

Even though the fight was still in progress on the ridge, indications were that some of the NVA had fled east. The First Brigade S-3 wanted a platoon put in to the southeast to establish a blocking position to prevent escape in that direction. The call went from Brigade S-3 to the S-3 1/9, who in turn directed Major Thomas D. Mendenhall, the Commanding Officer of Alpha Troop 1/9. At that moment Major Mendenhall was heliborne north of LZ Pony, conducting a damage assessment of an artillery concentration that had been fired the night before in a suspected location of a VC battalion. Major Mendenhall described his activity, "we arrived in the area (of suspected activity, north of LZ Pony) and on our first pass over the area at ten o'clock my wing aircraft took a small arms round -- came up through the bottom of the aircraft and hit beneath the copilot's seat... We were in the process of adjusting artillery fire into the weapons position where we had received fire when I got a call that my operations officer had received a mission to go down into the 506 Valley and support the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry."

Major Mendenhall's infantry platoon, callsign Apache Blue, was at LZ Hammond, the Division forward logistical supply base, (Map 1), southeast of the Crow's Foot. Meanwhile the Scout Teams had flown up to the 506. Part of their job is to fly over the battle periphery and conduct a recon of the appropriate area. They were out over the valley, east of the ridge, reconning a village when they received automatic weapons fire. This was about eleven o'clock, the same time Captain Ogg landed his company 1500 meters to the west. Quite naturally it was difficult to ascertain who or what was doing the shooting but essential to find out. The Scouts reported killing two men and they could see others moving in trenches and bunkers. Major Bieri called Major Mendenhall and told him to put Apache Blue in to make an assessment of ("check it out") the activity the Scouts had turned up.

Very shortly two fights would be raging. One involving C 1/8, who was OPCON to 1/12; the other, Apache Blue, who were working for 1/9 and First Brigade. Thirty minutes earlier when the fighting crackled on the ridge another company (Bravo 1/8) had been alerted. The day before, Bravo 1/8 had come into LZ Gavin (another artillery fire base, south of LZ Hammond) and were given the mission of Brigade reaction force. So, when the possibility arose of committing them, due to contact with an unknown size force of NVA soldiers, they were alerted. Captain Raul G. Villaronga, commanding Bravo 1/8

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"got the word that one of our companies (Ogg's company) with 1/12 had made heavy contact and that we were being committed." He was alerted "somewhere around ten thirty."

The sequence of events was fast moving and complicated by unexpected happenings. At eleven thirty Captain Ogg still had his company on the ridge, finishing up the original contact there. Intelligence (the captured switchboard) suggested they had hit a battalion or regimental command post. Ogg had already made his decisions; he requested tactical air strikes. The infantry platoon from 1/9 would soon search the area where the Scout teams reported enemy activity. First Brigade had alerted a reserve force, Company B 1/8, and seemingly everyone was poised for the next phase of the battle.

The men of Apache Blue watched the valley falling away as their Huey's flew northwest at 85 knots. This was their normal routine. They spent every day air assaulting into some area to "check it out" or to "develop the situation". On occasion they had repeated the performance as many as four times a day. As they came in for the final approach the men standing out on the skids could see the distant firing at the Scout ships. As the helicopters brushed the ground the men jumped and scrambled out, running for cover, each man to a predesignated position so that by the time all men were down, a circle defense had been formed.

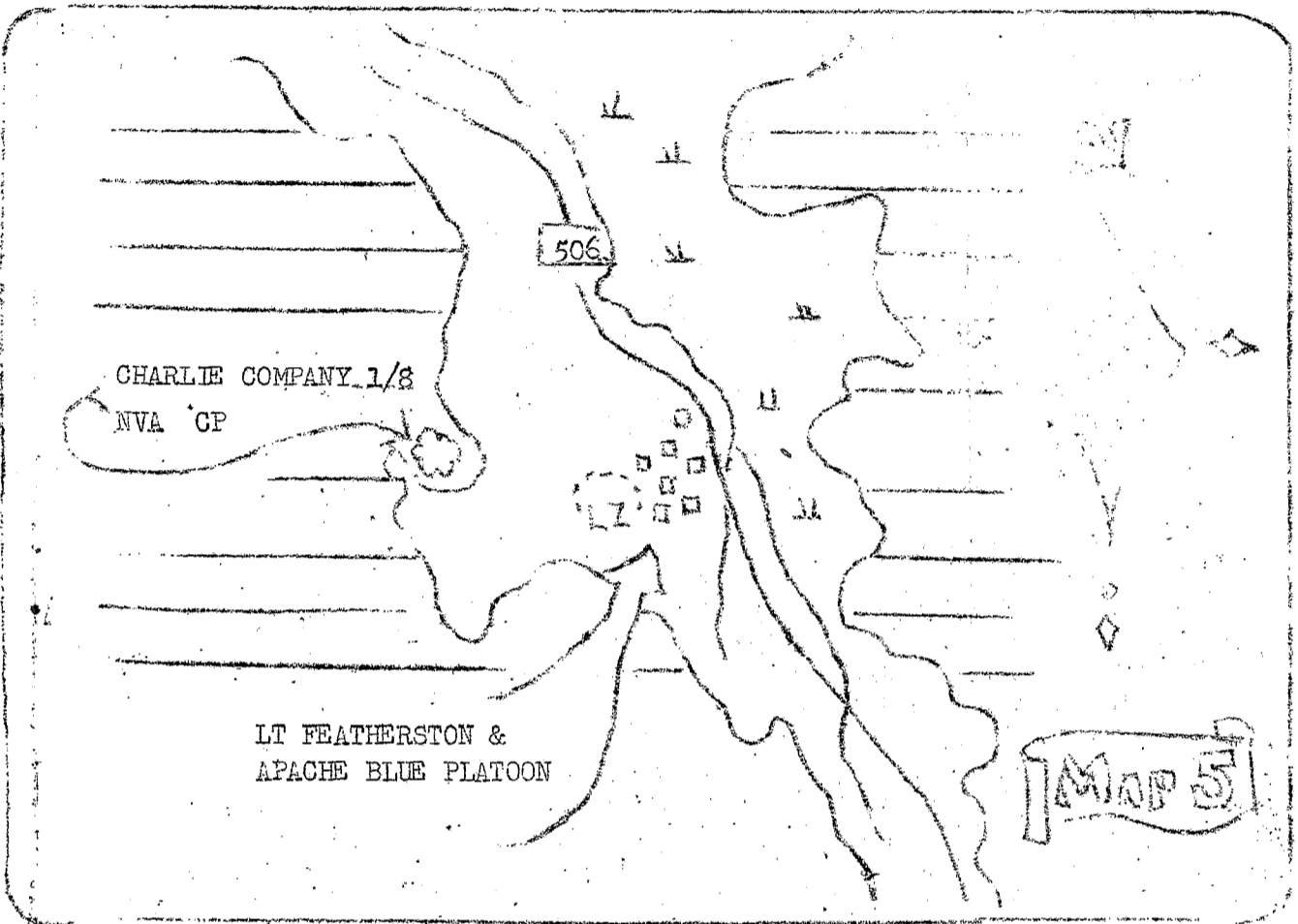
Once on the ground First Lieutenant Steven Featherston put his men into the platoon assault formation to move northeast. Essentially the formation was a two squad front with two squads behind for maneuver. Lieutenant Featherston took the third and first squads with him on the right, the third squad leading with a two man point team ten to twenty feet in front of the squad. On the left his platoon sergeant PSG James R. Petergal, had the second and fourth squads, fourth trailing the second. The second squad leader, Sergeant Ceaser Bryant, had a two man point out. PSG Petergal was supposed to keep in eye contact with Lieutenant Featherston and this he did in spite of limited visibility caused by the thick vegetation. The surrounding terrain was covered with coconut trees, palm trees, and thick, impassable hedgerows that were built up six or seven feet high. In between the hedgerows were small clearings that looked like old potato patches, but now relatively barren of vegetation.

As the first wave of the lift ships cleared the LZ they broke left or northeast, and received automatic fire 150 meters out. The second wave broke to the right and drew fire about 175 meters out from the LZ. So far the infantry had not been shot at. After walking 50-75 meters north and east the Blues came upon four small Vietnamese houses (hottches). Everything looked normal and nothing seemed unusual. Coming out of the tiny hamlet the second squad paralleled a hedgerow to the north. PSG Petergal recalled they "came up to real thick pine trees, bushes and shrubs. The lead element walked right up onto the enemy positions when they noticed three of them were out of the position and they jumped back into the positions, got their weapons, and came out shooting." They were about 150-200 meters from the LZ now. The men were

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aware that there were enemy soldiers in bunkered positions with automatic weapons because Major Mendenhall told them exactly that. But "they (the enemy) were so

well camouflaged that the only reason we saw them was because men moved and were out of their holes and jumped into their holes when the point element came up on them," observed PFC Petergal.

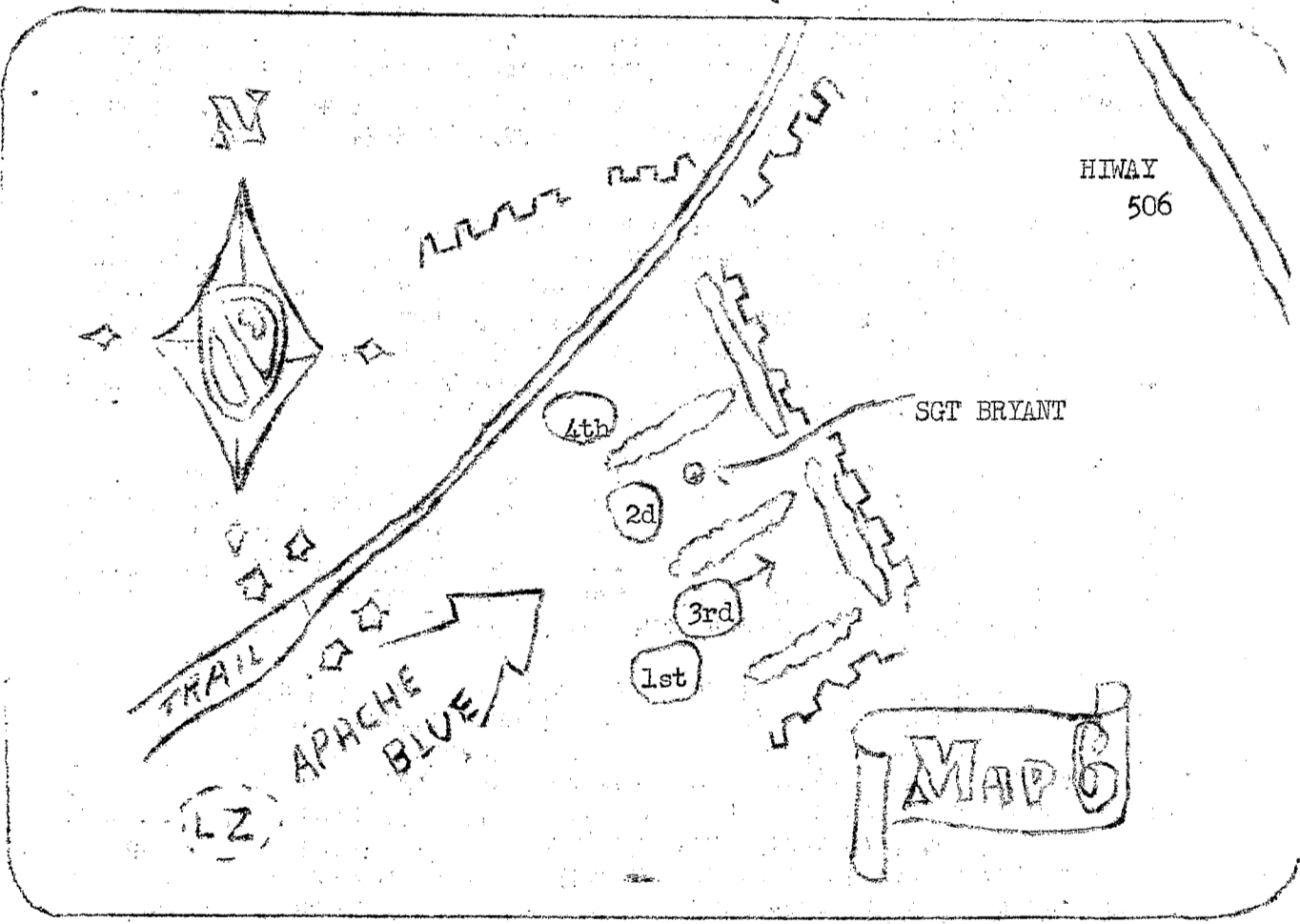


The second squad took the brunt of it. (Map 5) The two men on point were followed by Sergeant Bryant. The point team had actually gone past a few positions before movement was detected and the awful realization flew from man to man that they had walked directly into Hell. The firing broke out immediately then and in a few seconds everyone dove for cover as bullets crackled in the air all around. The point scam-

bled back fifteen feet to Sergeant Bryant. The squad leader set about deploying his men left and right. The fourth squad was to his left rear, near an open area on the left flank. Three or four automatic weapons fired from the far left thus keeping Petergal from attempting a flanking movement to the left to relieve the pinned second squad. A hedgerow in between second and third added to the already impossible task of

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communication and movement from the one to the other. Over on the right Lieutenant Featherston and the third squad were in a box of hedges of their own. All along their front a fusillade of bullets dropped them and kept them down, making maneuver a nightmare. Forward movement was stopped cold; the hedgerow blocked the left and then more automatic weapons churned the air from the right, denying movement in that direction. By hugging the earth the fourth squad had inched up even with the second. One of the men in front of Bryant was hit three times in the head, no more than fifteen feet from the enemy position. Then Sergeant Bryant was mortally wounded. Private First Class John E. Horn, to his left, was also killed. Third and first squads had begun extricating themselves slowly. Grenades were flying along the front, "it was so thick we just threw our grenades in the area hoping they would go into the holes because you couldn't see any flashes from the weapons or movement at all." By using white phosphorus grenades someone managed to recover the man in front of Bryant. But other than that the situation was so unfavorable the only maneuver the Blues could possibly make would be to withdraw. And with difficulty, they did. (Map 6)



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The Scout teams were still circling over the area. They were able to place the most effective fire on the entrenched enemy soldiers. They wheeled up and around, diving, pitching grenades out the doors, firing the door mounted M-60 machine guns, shooting directly into the holes and bunkers. The vulnerable 13's courageously hovered over the enemy, throwing everything they had. But even this brave display was somewhat futile. Most of the bunkers or trench holes had over-head cover. Off to one side of a main hole was another running 90 degrees, so the enemy could fire, pop down in his hole and actually fall back in a hole within a hole.

The Apache Blues had indeed run into a well-fortified, well-armed enemy prepared to wage a withering defense. His positions were intelligently built, mutually supporting and in some cases additionally covered by snipers in trees. The most people ever seen in a group numbered only nine. Only rarely were they seen, sometimes two or three together. The first estimate of the enemy, "during the heat of battle", was put at two companies.

Lieutenant Featherston was ordered to and withdrew 100 meters and secured an LZ. An attempt was made to adjust artillery fire. The first round came in hitting 100 meters to the east of the platoon. The second round was erratic and landed in the midst of the platoon. "Luckily no one was hurt at this time and we cancelled the fire mission," said Major Mendenhall. ARA was called in and made several passes over the area, followed by the FAC (Forward Air Controller) who directed air strikes into the village.

When the air strikes ended the Delta Troop platoon, 1/9, came into the LZ that Lieutenant Featherston's platoon secured. One of Featherston's squad leaders, Sergeant Bryant, who had been killed in the first action, was still in the area of the fight. Featherston and First Lieutenant Thomas K. Holland, platoon leader of the D Troop platoon, got the word to move back up and secure Bryant's body. Apache Blue would take the right flank, moving generally north, back to the area of their fight. Holland would move his platoon out to secure the left flank.

Apache Blue moved forward and was suddenly pinned down by automatic fire. A few men with the platoon sergeant, PSG Petergal, were over on the far right. They discovered they could still crawl forward without receiving effective fire. They crawled up to a hedgerow and could see Bryant's body laying 15 to 20 meters on the other side. Then they started receiving carbine fire. Petergal had one man drop back ten meters so he could pitch grenades over the hedge. One man up front would look through the hedge and adjust this hand-made artillery.

The carbine fell silent. As they started out to get Bryant the carbine opened up again. Petergal organized his few men into a base of fire and sent two of his strongest men out for Bryant. Under cover of this heavy friendly fire they pulled the body back into the hedgerow. The carbine opened up again. Petergal passed the word to withdraw; they had accomplished their mission. They carried Sergeant Bryant's body back to the LZ.

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Lieutenant Holland and his platoon ran into a little more difficulty. They had moved along side Apache Blue for about 75 meters. When the fire pinned the Blues down, fire pinned down "Lancer White", Delta Troops calling. They were in thick underbrush that grew over their heads. Visibility was limited to ten or fifteen feet. The lead squad had point and flank men out about ten meters. They were the first to make contact. Lieutenant Holland thought at the time it was a heavy caliber machine gun engaging them. Other small arms and snipers opened up pinning the lead squad.

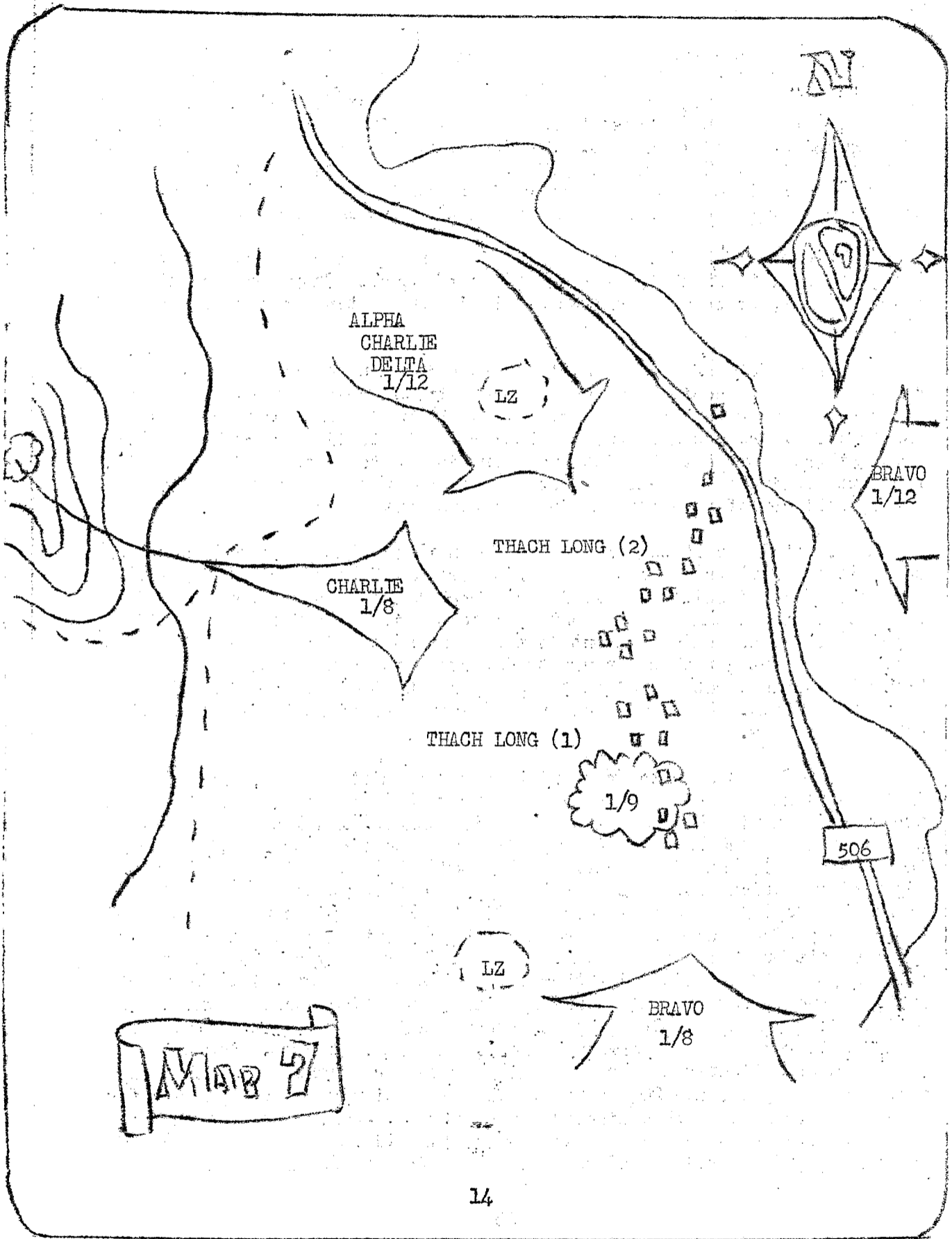
Lieutenant Holland took his remaining two squads and moved off to the left, or west, to flank the fire on his lead squad. They moved about thirty meters, crossing a north-south trail and getting on the west side of it.

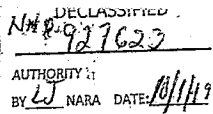
One squad led off moving north. The point man and right flank security ran smack into a machine gun bunker on the trail facing south. The left flank hit another bunker at the same time about fifteen meters west of the trail. There was also another bunker on the trail farther up covering the northern approach. Machine guns were in the two bunkers facing south. The next morning they counted twenty positions in the hedge ten meters apart, well camouflaged and dug in deep with overhead cover.

At least 10 or 15 weapons opened up on them. The point and flank men were hit ten feet from a bunker. Firing as they fell wounded, they killed one NVA. Holland pulled the lead squad back thirty meters from the hedge-row. He sent his platoon sergeant over to see if the first squad could rejoin them. They had a WIA out in the open and couldn't get to him. The platoon sergeant got close enough to determine the man had died so he brought the squad out to rejoin the platoon. On the way back they drew heavy fire again. It took about thirty minutes to fight their way to the other two squads.

Even before the Delta Troop platoon was committed and became embroiled in their fight, it was becoming increasingly obvious a force larger than two enemy companies had been located. Lieutenant Colonel Eggers was at LZ Hammond. He had been keeping up with the situation, then "while back there (Hammond), Brigade (First) got the word that this fight in the village was really getting hot. Based on this we came back up to the area and started to deploy the battalion." He first called Captain Ogg and told him to get to a pickup zone (PZ) so he could be committed but Ogg was in contact and couldn't break it at the time. Bravo 1/8 was ready so 1/9 dispatched four ships to LZ Gavin to pick them up and get them started in. Unexpected problems arose, for one thing only a platoon at a time could go in. Captain Villaronga, his CP group and second platoon could fit on the first load and they took off before lunch time. However, it was during this time that F4-C fighter-bombers were hitting the area north of Apache Blue with bombs, napalm, and 20mm cannon. The air activity was too intense for Villaronga to land so they circled for nearly one hour. It was during this time the basic plan was made. Also by the time Villaronga sat down C 1/8 had disengaged themselves and had come down off the ridge. Medical

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evacuation helicopters (medevac) carried out their wounded, a prisoner and some captured equipment. Apache Blue and Lancer White were holding their own for the present.

The 1/9 infantry platoons were up against more than two NVA companies, supported by a few 12.7 (50 caliber) machine guns. Lieutenant Colonel Eggers wanted to hold them there until he could muster forces to smash them. C 1/8 was ordered to seal off and block in the west and southwest. Considering the terrain and amount of area to cover it was a formidable task which took about two hours to accomplish. Captain Ogg wanted to move east all the way and get into the fight. In retrospect that might have been a valid move because he had a full company to fight with and was still oriented on the ground. Lieutenant Colonel Eggers was right in his plan because he couldn't foresee what would happen in the north.

Captain Villaronga and the second platoon B 1/8 came into an LZ south of the Cavalry Squadron's infantry platoons. He was to collect his company and extend east to Hiway 506 because it was felt the south "would be the most likely area through which the enemy would try to withdraw," said Colonel Eggers. It took an hour for the rest of the company to arrive and set up the block. The anvil was set.

Lieutenant Colonel Eggers still had his entire battalion to commit. His concept called for A, C, and D Companies to come into the north and push the enemy down into the block. B 1/12 would come into the east, thereby completing the encirclement. The plan was consistent with the situation but ran into trouble. (Map 7)

At 1:38 in the afternoon Major Bieri, S-3 1/12, notified A, C, and D Companies to move to a pickup zone (PZ) as soon as possible. The problem of consolidating platoons and companies on PZ's was great, due to their dispersion. The task of committing them as companies wasn't possible. This was to have its effect.

On the afternoon of the 17th, Delta Company 1/12 was composed of only two platoons. They had recently been reorganized from a heavy weapons to a light rifle company, current strength 62 Officers and men. The third platoon was at LZ Pony acting as battalion recon platoon. The second platoon was on a sweeping operation about 3,000 meters south of LZ Bird. At 1:38 pm First Lieutenant Chester G. Cox, the Executive Officer and acting Company Commander, received a call to locate a PZ and prepare for extraction because "somebody made contact". They sat on the PZ for nearly two hours and received no word of where they were going or what kind of contact had been made. Second Lieutenant Timothy W. Feiner, third platoon leader, had seven Huey's with which to move his platoon. At about 2:45 pm they air assaulted to the LZ that all of 1/12 eventually used. Lieutenant Feiner moved his platoon to secure the LZ while C 1/12 came in. Then First Lieutenant Paul R. Prindle's platoon, second of Delta, closed.

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At the same time, 1:38 pm, Captain Philip L. Blake, Commanding Officer of Alpha Company 1/12, was notified to "saddle up", meaning pack up and get ready to air assault. He was with his first and third platoons, the fourth north of them and the second northeast. Blake considered his disposition and decided to go out first with the third and first platoons because they were already together, close to a PZ. Then he wanted second and fourth to lift out in that order. It was thirty to forty-five minutes from the time he was alerted until the ships came in. They started into the 506 Valley and circled because of the air strikes. Rather than expend fuel they went back up to LZ Pony and sat down there. Sergeant First Class John M. Ketchen, the operations sergeant, came out and briefed Captain Blake on the situation as it was known at the time: an unknown sized NVA force was somewhere in the village south of the LZ where they would land. Major Bieri had said over the radio, "It looks like another Hoa Hoi."

On the way back to the 506 Valley Captain Blake called Captain Darrel G. Houston, the Company Commander of Charlie 1/12, on the radio. Houston had just come into the LZ and was unable to provide much information. Blake landed and began moving northeast towards the hiway. Just off the LZ he encountered Delta Company, which was forming into an assault line facing a hedgerow. The hedges were in a series, about two or three deep running parallel to the hiway for several hundred meters south. The hedgerows were thick and impenetrable except for where there were natural breaks or paths in them. Several houses, apparently vacant, lined both sides of the road. Delta had moved up to the first hedgerow and crouched there as Blake headed for the hiway.

About 150 meters from the LZ the third platoon and Blake came to the hiway, crossed, and wheeled into a line formation. Several automatic weapons cut the tense atmosphere, wounding a machine gunner, Specialist Four Chisholm. His squad leader, Staff Sergeant Ellis Espinoza, was shot dead. Three NVA were killed and their weapons, a Chicom light machine gun, a Russian AK-47 assault rifle and an M-16 rifle were captured in this first brief encounter. (Map 8, next page)

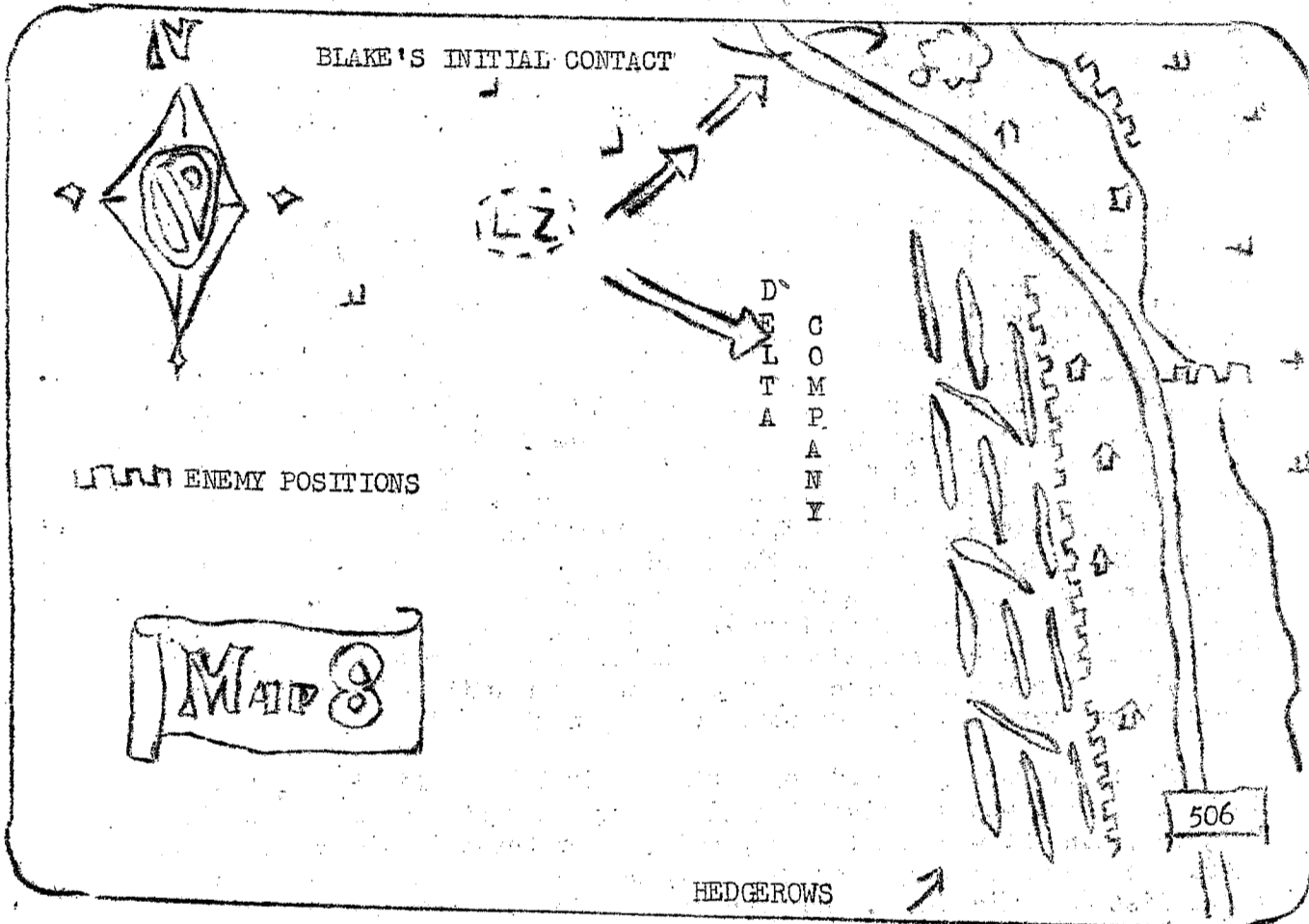
The first platoon, A Company, had just come into the LZ when the third platoon exchanged the opening volleys. First Sergeant Charles R. Hillis shouted over to someone in Delta Company, "Where's Captain Blake and third platoon?" Sergeant First Class Rogue Perpetua, Jr. told him, "go northeast where the shots are coming from." Hillis had spoken to his friend "Pet", as he was affectionately known, for the last time. Staff Sergeant David A. Garcia, the acting platoon leader, and Hillis gathered up the first platoon and went looking for Blake. When they linked up, Blake put first platoon on his left as they pushed on south, still on the east side of the road.

From the road east it is about 75 meters to a creek bed but further south the creek and road come closer together in a bottle neck. NVA soldiers were dug into spider holes along the creek bed with good fields of fire onto the hiway and the adjacent ground. The point squad of the first platoon was nearest the creek when automatic weapons cut them down, hitting all but

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one man. Immediately several men rushed forward to aid their fallen comrades. Specialist Four Antonio Sanchez fired his M-16 as Private First Class Gerald E. Swanson and Specialist Four Fred-ericco N. Lee ran out to pull back wounded men. Then Swanson rapidly fired his M-79 grenade launcher point blank into enemy positions while Sanchez braved the

fire to drag back more wounded. When the casualties had been pulled back they got the word to come back themselves because an ARA strike was coming in on the stream bed. Not wanting the enemy to retrieve the weapons dropped out in the open, the three soldiers teamed, covering each other as they ran out and gathered up the weapons.



First Lieutenant Robert L. Robbins, the second platoon leader of A Company had landed and moved over towards the hiway and the sound of heavy firing. They stayed on the west side of the road and pushed down about even with Blake and Hillis. Blake wanted to close the gap between himself (third platoon) and Robbins (second platoon) who was across the road. Robbins couldn't maneuver to the flank because Delta was severely engaged there, so Blake told Hillis to push the first platoon forward and cut right to the flank. As the first drove in they hit determined resistance and became

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virtually stopped dead. Hillis grabbed a radio hand set and called in ARA runs across his front. Rockets and machine gun fire swept through the enemy positions relieving the pressure so the first could move again and Blake took the advantage to move the third over towards Robbins. Once again enemy fire prohibited movement but Blake had firmed up his line so the first, third, and second platoons were linked together in an "L" shaped battle line facing the enemy inner security belt. Shortly before Blake's fourth platoon, the weapons platoon, had landed on the LZ. As they made their way south following the sound of the increasing battle noises, they came up on Delta Company's left flank, who had just become engaged in a fierce fight. The fourth platoon managed to keep moving left and wound up in with Lieutenant Robbins's second platoon. Blake had just found out his mortar platoon sergeant, PSG Donald Leemhis and the fourth platoon medic, Private First Class Alton R. Kennedy were dead and Sergeant Sherman Fuller was seriously wounded. Later when a perimeter had been established First Lieutenant Donald Grigg, mortar platoon leader, was wounded. Blake had lost KIA or WIA two platoon leaders and five sergeants.

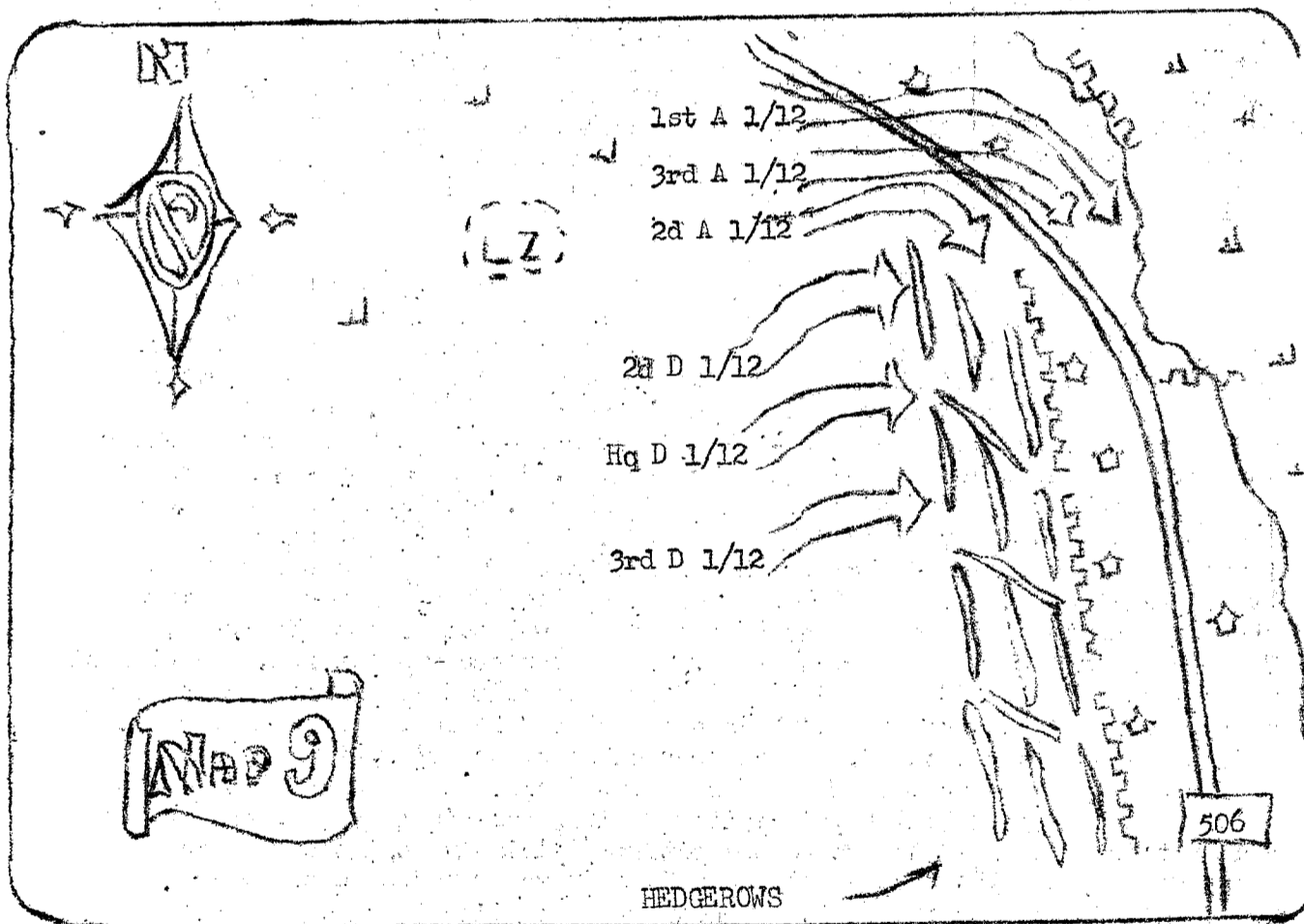
In between the time when Hillis and the first platoon had landed and when Robbins and the second platoon had landed, Delta Company had become engaged. They had been on an assault line facing a hedgerow, Lieutenant Feiner's third platoon on the right or south end, Lieutenant Frindle's second platoon on the left or north end. Feiner was with his first squad on the extreme right. Back with his second squad was the company headquarters, Lieutenant Cox and First Sergeant Gene O. Helgerson. To their left was Frindle's platoon, each squad on line facing the hedges. The NVA lay just beyond the second hedgerow but no one was aware of that. The enemy positions were of the cleverest camouflage, impossible to detect. However, one of the men in Sergeant William D. Cook's first squad did see an NVA through the hedge. Feiner and the first squad started through and moved across the open up to the next hedgerow and went through that. Once out in the open again, not ten feet from the hedge, the enemy at last revealed their presence with a fusillade of bullets. The surprise was more than effective for now the Americans were in the open with no place to turn to except back over more open ground. (Map 9, next page)

The first burst knocked down Private First Class Timothy Ewing. Corporal Jack J. Deaton, who was right behind Ewing, was shot and fell wounded. The NVA, realizing he was still alive, put another burst in him and there he died. The squad leader, Sergeant Cook, was hit and fell fatally wounded. Specialist Four Michael J. Anderson, the medic, moved forward immediately and got up to Ewing. A lung had been punctured and Ewing was having trouble breathing so Anderson tried mouth to mouth resuscitation. Just then an enemy bullet hit across his hand. Anderson patched Ewing as best he could and crawled back to work on other wounded. Later in the afternoon Feiner and Anderson were able to pull Ewing back for medevac but he died before reaching the hospital. Anderson continued his job all afternoon and into the night. It was nearly one o'clock the next morning when he stopped to patch his own wounded hand. The knuckle was broken, not a serious wound, but as Lieutenant Feiner described it, "a very painful one."

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Close to the first squad, machine gunner Private First Class Roger K. Hattersley, was pinned down in the open, apparently in a blind spot because enemy bullets kept churning the dirt on both sides of him. He fired all his ammo from there. Then he ran out to where Deaton was laying, picked up 200 more rounds, and ran back. Hattersley shot up three fourths of this then he got up and charged the bunker, killing at least one. A bullet hit him in the right shoulder. Somehow he made it back and was later medevac'd. The next day his machine gun was found right up by the bunker.

For almost five minutes the killing continued unabated. The enemy was well hidden in a bunker about two and a half feet high, concealed in the thick bushy hedgerow. The NVA had waited until the Americans were very close, too close, in fact, for them to hope to move after being pinned down not twenty feet from the bunker. Hattersley had finally seen the bunker, then Feiner saw rifle smoke but couldn't pinpoint the firing aperture.



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The mortar Recon Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Harry R. Forsythe, and Lieutenant Feiner wanted to call in artillery, but neither was certain of their location. They both had a good idea but couldn't say definitely. Nor were they the only ones disoriented that day. For one thing the map was inaccurate just enough to make pinpointing futile. Visibility was limited by the vegetation and terrain features were no help on the valley floor. Furthermore they were fiercely engaged in a fire fight. Under the circumstances Sergeant Forsythe made the best decision. He plotted a concentration using common sense and a little guess work and called for two smoke rounds. Nobody ever saw the smoke but by then it made little difference. Lift ships, gun ships, command and control helicopters, and H-13's were constantly in the area. Also Charlie 1/12 was moving again; exact location unknown. Sergeant Forsythe had to give it up for the time being.

To say the least, their position was highly unfavorable. They were in close to the enemy position - too close for friendly artillery or ARA. They were in the open, by and large, and boxed in by hedgerows. The AK-47 kept them down while snipers in the trees began picking them off. Feiner, realizing this had his men spray the trees, hoping to kill the ones up there but the camouflage was nearly perfect so it was impossible to know the results of this shooting. All the bunkers were interlocking and mutually supporting, further protected by well concealed snipers. There was a bunker or spider hole every 15 to 30 meters, camouflaged and hidden in a hedgerow. Friendly fires were essentially blind, having no specific targets that were recognizable.

By now the second platoon was heavily engaged in a similar situation. Feiner radioed his platoon sergeant, PSG Willie Earnest, who was with Sergeant Rochelle Simms third squad, and told him to maneuver over to try and relieve the second platoon. Lieutenant Cox went along and they picked up a 90mm recoilless rifle from A Company's weapons platoon. Over in the eastern sector of second platoon-Delta, they attempted to knock out an enemy bunker. The gun crew, Specialist Four Percy B. Goodeagle, Specialist Four Arcadio Sanchez and Private First Class Charles R. Boodleman were emplacing the 90mm when an enemy grenade bounced off Sanchez' back and exploded, wounding Sanchez and Goodeagle. The breech block on the 90mm was damaged by the blast and was now worthless. However, Boodleman did manage to lug the gun back to Alpha Company as he fought his way out of that hot spot. Time had lost meaning in that one small area, sequence was blurred. Lieutenant Cox had been shot. PSG Leemhis crawled over to help Cox. As Leemhis lifted up a sniper bullet found its mark in his neck and he fell dead next to Cox. Private First Class Alton R. Kennedy was close by treating other wounded and dragging them back out of the fire swept field. Kennedy made two trips braving the spray of bullets, in spite of pleas for him to stay back. He couldn't bring himself to ignore the pitiful, plaintive cries of "Medic, help, Oh God, help!" Moving out again Kennedy was wounded on his third trip. His fourth was the last. Kennedy gave his life to save others. Sergeant Simms had one man still alive from his squad. Together they endured the afternoon and evening until darkness afforded a chance to get out of their private Hell.

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The second platoon became engaged right after third. On their left flank Alpha Company was hard pressed, on the right Feiner was taking many casualties. Private First Class Eleazer F. Trevino started through a small hole in the hedgerow. A sniper bullet cut him down. Specialist Four James W. Jeffers, close behind, could see him and started out to him but Trevino motioned him back. He could hear someone yell, "stay back, there's snipers all over." At this time the platoon sergeant, PSG Rogue Perpetua, and Private First Class Angel Luna went through another hole. Perpetua spotted a machine gun bunker and charged for it. He was right up on it when he was hit. His helmet had eleven holes in it and he was shot in the chest and head. He had recently extended for duty in Saigon. He volunteered to go out that day - above and beyond the call of duty. Luna was shot and killed by a sniper as Perpetua fell.

The fighting was reaching a peak in their area. Incoming rounds were everywhere, the fire accurate. Men were pinned down with no where to go. ARA was called in and eased some of the pressure but because of the exceedingly close proximity between friend and foe, exploding rockets spewed fragments everywhere, some of which hit the Americans.

Lieutenant Prindle was over farther to the left on the other side of the hedgerow. He was blocked by a barbed wire fence. He cut through two strands and was working on the third when a bullet went through his helmet, knocking it to the ground. Prindle ran over to a wounded machine gunner, grabbed the M-60 and got up firing but it jammed. He was then pinned down with his platoon. All forward progress was dead. They moved no further forward from where the fight erupted.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Feiner was still trying to extricate his first squad. He sent the second around to the left to flank the bunker facing him. They maneuvered over to a break in the hedgerow and went through. As they came up on line an NVA bunker engaged them. The first burst hit two men. Specialist Four Joseph Lemon ran over and jumped in the bushes to conceal himself, unwittingly only two meters from a spider hole. His body was found the next day in the same place. The whole squad was pinned down when snipers in trees opened up. Sergeant Antonio Garcia was killed, along with the rest of his squad. Most of them were shot through the neck or head with deadly accuracy.

Lieutenant Feiner called the second squad on the radio. He wanted to tell them to hold up because Charlie 1/12 was moving somewhere on his right and he didn't want second shooting that way. The RTO (radio telephone operator) Private First Class Michel E. Noone, lone survivor of the squad, told Feiner that Garcia was dead and everyone else had been hit. At the time he thought a couple were still alive. Feiner asked him where the fire was coming from. "I don't know, sir, we're getting picked off!" said Noone. A medic tried to get over to them but it just wasn't possible. A large open area that lay in between was covered every step of the way by enemy fire. For the rest of the afternoon and evening Noone lay there alone, wounded and unable to move. Just after dark he saw 15 or 20 NVA come out to where

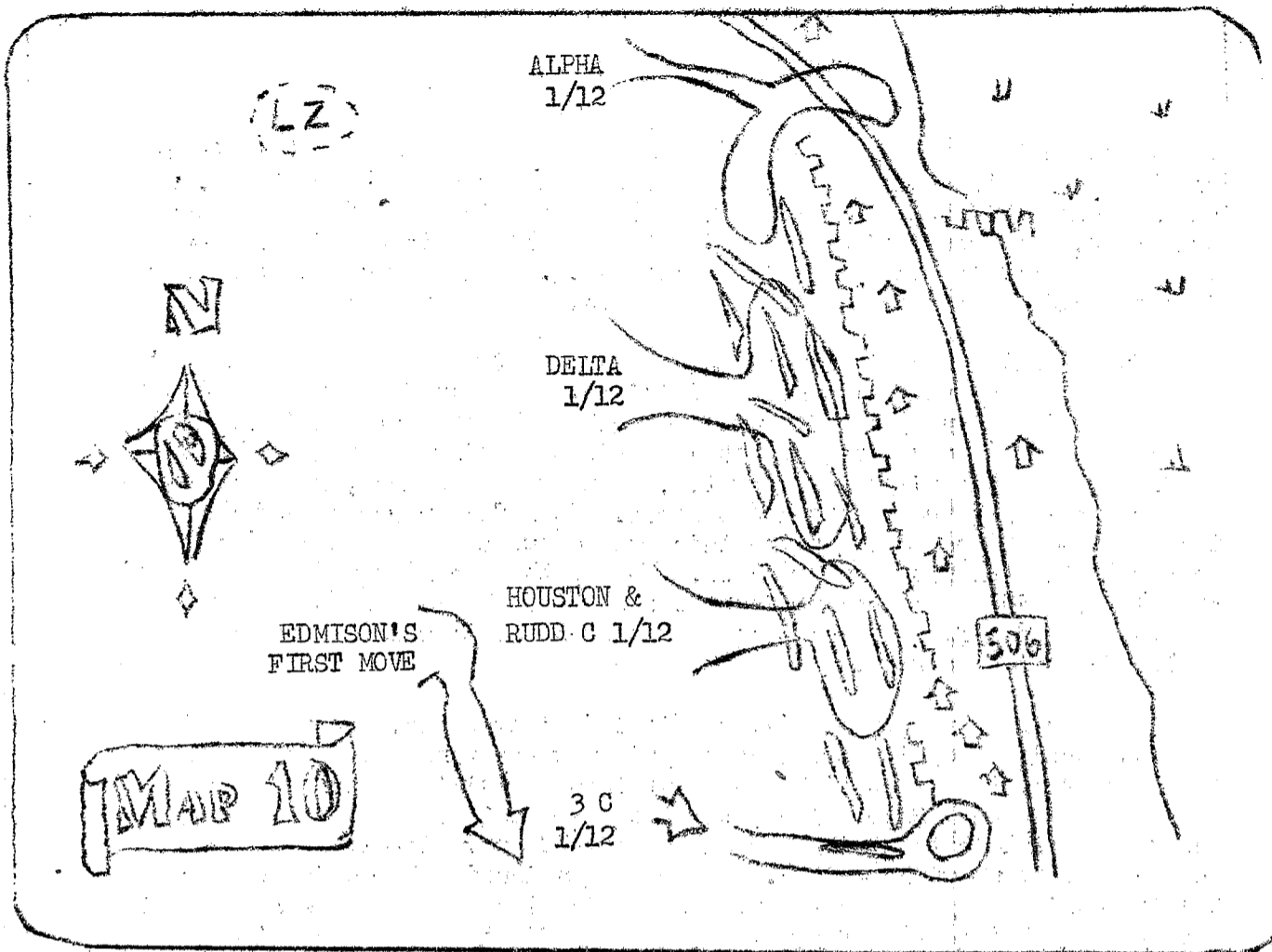
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his squad lay. When a man moaned they sprayed him with automatic fire. Noone was wounded again by one of these bursts. A bullet hit his back and came out his stomach. Amazingly he was still conscious. He opened his eyes and saw the enemy had taken two or three ponchos which they used to carry off their own dead. They also searched the dead Americans. When they got to Noone one enemy soldier grabbed his belt and picked him up. Seeing his stomach hanging out they figured him dead and threw him down. He landed on a red ants nest. Three hours later a medical evacuation team found him covered with ants, but alive. Noone was one of three survivors from Delta Company that had actually seen a VC or NVA that day.

Delta Company's First Sergeant Gene O. Helgerson led the medical evac team that located and saved Noone. For several hours they crept around looking for American wounded, treating them and pulling them back for evacuation. There can be no doubt that Helgerson and crew put life back into men who otherwise would have surely died from their wounds. The urgency of their work retrieving wounded men forced them to leave the dead where they lay forlornly. With the morning sun the next day these men would begin their last trip home.

Charlie 1/12 had come into the LZ while Delta secured it, and before Alpha landed. Captain Houston had only two platoons to command, one was security platoon on LZ Bird, the other had been committed earlier in the day to assist Charlie Company 1/8. First Lieutenant John J. Rudd's third platoon stayed with Houston while First Lieutenant William R. Edmison's first platoon was sent to the southwest to link up with Captain Ogg's company. Edmison moved his platoon about 200 meters southwest, making no contact with either the enemy or Captain Ogg. Meanwhile Captain Houston had moved south with Rudd's platoon and they had been fiercely taken under fire, the NVA waiting once again until the Americans were at point blank range before opening up. Edmison was ordered back to help. He wound up behind Rudd's platoon but then corrected himself and came up on the right flank to relieve the pressure. Edmison called Rudd and told him he would push out 150 meters and then cut left to flank the enemy positions and hopefully neutralize the automatic fire cutting them up so badly. (Map 10, next page) They crossed a fairly open area where two men were slightly wounded by a concussion grenade. As they neared the edge of the village the firing increased a little but they kept advancing. Once inside hell broke loose and Edmison was taking casualties fast. The two men leading the drive into the village became pinned down when their M-16 rifles jammed up. Edmison and his RTO went running up to see what the yelling was about. Enemy fire dropped them. Lieutenant Edmison saw the lid lift off a spider hole not ten feet to his left. An enemy armed with a light machine gun came up firing. Edmison pitched a grenade in the hole, killing the Vietnamese Communist and destroying the weapon. He spotted two more NVA armed with AK-47's and shot them with his M-16. He realized he had to pull back then. The fortifications were well made, the camouflage nearly perfect. The positions were fairly new but no fresh soil indicated their presence. It was only a rare stroke of luck that he had seen the spider hole and AK position.

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Edmison gave the word to pull back and re-establish contact with the company. Then he found they had been cut off so he pulled up in a tight perimeter. He heard over the radio that Captain Houston had been wounded by a grenade fragment and that Lieutenant Rudd had been hit in the leg. Both of them continued to direct their elements. Rudd's platoon wasn't moving but he continued to direct effective fire. Captain Houston stayed until late that night, controlling his company.

Edmison was in a perimeter about 100 meters almost directly

in front of third platoon. "Every time they fired the rounds would come over our position, every-time we would fire, vice versa." They were trying to be careful amid all the confusion. Edmison decided since he couldn't pull back they would try forward again to see if they couldn't do more damage in there. Private First Class Bruce H. Crowthers was killed by a sniper, one shot through the head. He never knew what hit him. Staff Sergeant Julius Great-house, the third squad leader, was killed by a burst coming from a hedge. Private First Class Harry T. Poland, a new man in the com-

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pany, was shot in the chest by a Communist soldier not ten feet in front of him. Poland's squad leader, Staff Sergeant Edward J. Dehnert, Jr. went up and pulled him back, but Poland succumbed to his wound before he was evacuated. Edmison decided this time to consolidate in a small hollow and prepare to wait it out. They couldn't move. He had wounded to take care of and couldn't afford to lose any more men.

Enemy small arms fire coming from hidden defensive positions was taking a dreadful toll of American soldiers. Captain Houston elected to try ARA again, even though it would be risky. Lieutenants Edmison, Rudd and Feiner were ordered to mark their positions using smoke grenades to guide the gun ship pilots on target. Two passes were made, running down a narrow corridor between Rudd and Edmison. Then Feiner was called by his third and second squads. In the third squad two men were still alive. They said the ARA was awfully close. Noone, the second squad RTO, wounded and alone, said it was coming in on top of him. By mutual agreement the ARA was called off. The quarters were too close, it was too dangerous and no longer worth the risk.

In a battle some events will remain indelibly clear, others indefinitely fogged. During the time Lieutenant Edmison was moving his platoon across the open area, the first time they went into the village and before they made heavy contact, Major Bieri, the Battalion S-3, showed up running across the field after them. He had a .45 (US Army pistol) in his hand when he caught up with Edmison. The move continued without Major Bieri telling Edmison why he was there, nor did Edmison ask. Both were pre-occupied and had no time for talk. When the first platoon got pinned down and found they'd lost contact with third, Edmison noticed Major Bieri had been wounded in their assault. He was hit in the shoulder and was later hit in the side. By then Edmison had only one PRC-25 radio that was operable so they split the use of it. Edmison stayed on his company push, coordinating with Captain Houston and Lieutenant Rudd. Major Bieri would then come up on battalion frequency to coordinate with the surrounding companies. Major Bieri played a significant part in the third phase of the battle, the perimeter after dark. He had landed when he heard that Captain Houston was wounded, but apparently, once on the ground, he found out Houston was still capably in command but not moving. Upon learning that the first platoon was going to try and roll in the flank he raced over to Edmison and was later wounded. That night he was medevac'd.

Just before dark Bravo Company 1/12 landed on the LZ north of the fighting. Captain Roy Benson, Jr. led his company south, encountering little resistance and linked up with the remnants of Houston's company. By then the remains of Delta Company had moved together with Charlie Company, largely through the efforts of First Sergeant Helgerson. A composite perimeter consisting of Bravo, Charlie and Delta Companies consolidated for the restless night.

As Bravo 1/12 was landing, Bravo 1/8 began its long move northward. Captain Villaronga's company had been static all afternoon south of the village in a blocking position. At 6:00 pm they were ordered north to fill

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the gap between A and B (plus C & D) Companies. A tense trip was made up Hiway 506, during which two downed helicopters were recovered from the road, and lifted out by Chinooks. By ten o'clock Bravo Company 1/8 had covered the 1500 meters up the hiway and was infiltrating Alpha Company's 1/12 lines and moving westward. But it was nearly three o'clock in the morning before Villaronga had established his own perimeter somewhere between Alpha and Bravo, almost right where Delta had fought so long and hard.

In the south another composite perimeter was formed from the infantry platoons of Alpha and Delta Troop 1/9, and the third platoon, A Company, 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, which had air assaulted around 6:30 that evening. To the west Captain Ogg's company was in a perimeter of their own. Repeated attempts to link up with the group in the north or south had failed so Ogg sat tight rather than risk any more casualties. (Map 11)

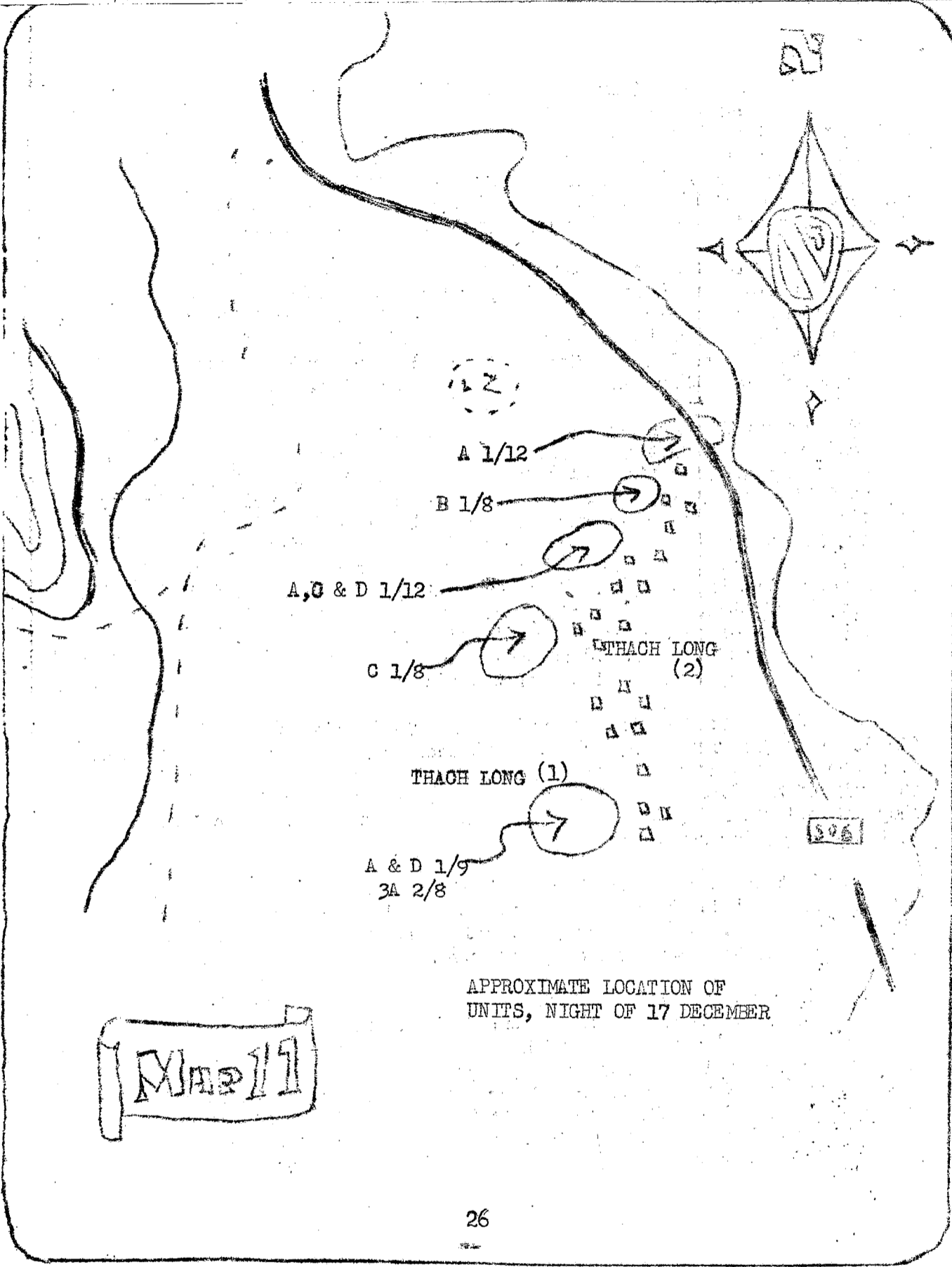
Throughout the dark hours, (actually brightened by continuous illumination rounds that cast an eerie, spiriling, shadowy glow over all parts of the widely spread battlefield) in each perimeter, a dramatic scene was repeated time and again. Numerous men had been wounded during the brutal fighting and needed to be evacuated. Several helicopter pilots, of whom Captain Twiggs and Lieutenant Marabello of the 229th Aviation Battalion are only two, made continous flights bringing in sorely needed supplies and carrying out the wounded. Flying conditions were the worst imaginable, a veritable nightmare of impossibilities but these men heroically dedicated their efforts to saving men's lives. ~~And they did. All together~~ seven helicopters were damaged so badly they had to be grounded for extensive repairs, mite testimony of the sacrifices made and horrors endured.

As early as 6:00 pm the NVA had begun exfiltrating the village battlefield. In small groups they slipped out according to a pre-arranged plan. Even though medevacs and resupply attempts were harassed by enemy fire, the bulk of the defenders had left the area. Later intelligence revealed they escaped generally to the east, but spread out in all directions up in the surrounding mountains.

At first light each unit began policing up their immediate area. Patrols were sent in the village to recover bodies or to locate Americans missing in action. Oddly enough, several civilians emerged from the war torn village as the Americans swept through.

For the next few days elements of the Cav chased the fleeing NVA into the mountains. Division Artillery poured artillery rounds into likely avenues of egress to interdict and harrass the beaten enemy. By the 19th of December ninety-five enemy had been killed by body count, an undetermined number wounded. Three prisoners of war had been captured who revealed that it was elements of the 7th and 9th Battalions, 18th NVA Regiment who were engaged by the 1st Cav. Twenty individual weapons and three crew served weapons (57mm recoilless rifle, machine gun, 60mm mortar tube) were captured.

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APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF
UNITS, NIGHT OF 17 DECEMBER

MAR 11

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The price came high, especially for Delta Company 1/12. They started the day with 62 men and ended it with 35. All together 34 Cavalrymen were killed in action, another 81 wounded. Three helicopters were shot down and four more damaged by ground fire.

The conduct of the battle was hampered somewhat by chain of command difficulties. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that all responsibility was passed to Lieutenant Colonel Eggers, the CO of the 1/12. Prior to that the First of the Ninth and the First Brigade Commanders had elements working for them, which only served to decrease effective coordination. Since so many different elements were involved, effective, concise, clear communication wasn't possible. Reports passing through several hands back and forth only got more confused.

The committment of nearly seven companies from all over the Crow's Foot in a relatively short time was just shy of remarkable, possible only because of the airmobile capability. But it wasn't good enough. Strained coordination resulted in poor scheduling; helicopters circling until TAC air ceased, platoons sitting on PZ's for one or two hours, and companies committed to hellish battle a platoon at a time. The American Forces consistently walked right up to the camouflaged enemy positions, only to be decimated in the initial burst. And then the unfortunate mistake of trying to help a wounded buddy without getting the gun that got him first, was made over and over.

Many, many examples of individual heroism were performed. In the worst conditions honorable men acquitted themselves with exemplary conduct beyond the call of ordinary duty. Many soldiers were later decorated for their actions of the 17th of December.

In spite of the confusion, the adverse fighting conditions and the beating taken by part of the Cav, the enemy was defeated. The First Team proved once again it can defeat the Communists, almost regardless of the circumstances or conditions. The Battle in the 506 Valley was a hard fought victory for the First Cavalry Division.

Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die. And it is youth who must inherit the tribulation, the sorrow, and the triumphs that are the aftermath of war.

Herbert G. Hoover

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