

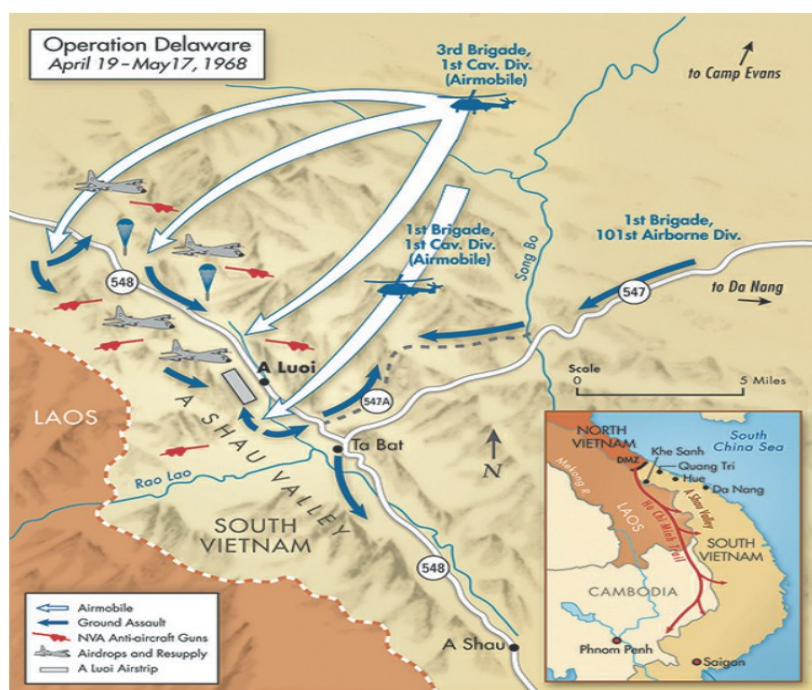
Cavalry Raid: Operation DELAWARE

by Thomas W. Kjos, Captain, Infantry

D Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, arrived at LZ Sharon, just outside the City of Quang Tri, on the morning of 15 April, 1968, marking the end of its participation in Operation PEGASUS, the relief of the Khe Sanh Combat Base.

A few days later, the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade moved by truck from LZs in Quang Tri Province to an assembly area in rolling hills outside Camp Evans, near Hue-Phu Bai. Two brigades of the 1st Cavalry, a brigade of the 101st Airborne, and the ARVN 1st Infantry Division were about to launch the greatest cavalry raid in history. Large scale raiding originated in the American Civil War when armies sent cavalry behind enemy lines to disrupt supply lines and depots, cut communications, destroy railroads, and generally raise hell.

Delta loaded into "deuce-and-a-half" trucks. The troopers sat on their rucksacks, weapons in hand, and the machine gunners stood with M60's resting on the canvas tops of the cabs. With Cobra gunships flying security alongside the convoy, we were in an oddly festive mood riding down Highway 1 toward a rumored "big operation." Vietnamese civilians along the road were waving, kids yelling, begging, as they always did, for goodies. The boys of Delta obligingly entertained themselves by tossing cigarettes and C ration cans to them. After a while, bored with that, a few threw not to, but at, the kids. We were just kids, too, of course, sometimes doing what kids do. Winning hearts and minds.



Operation DELAWARE Insertion Plan

was to be an airmobile assault into the valley by the 1st and 3rd Brigades of the 1st Cavalry

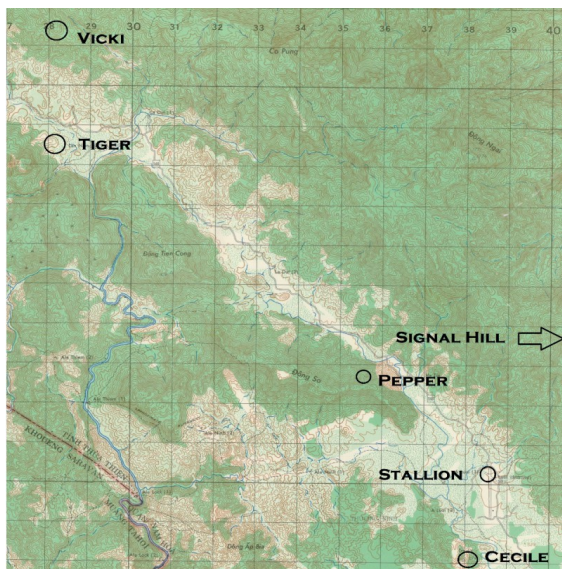
Operation DELAWARE had gotten underway during the last days of PEGASUS, with the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, flying reconnaissance in the A Shau, selecting flight routes, locating anti-aircraft sites, and identifying targets. From 14 to 19 April, B-52's, tactical fighters, and aerial rocket artillery [Cobra helicopters] attacked those targets.

The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the ARVN 1st Infantry Division moved into position for ground attacks and air assaults around the junction of Routes 547 and 547A, east of the A Shau, to interdict those routes of egress from the valley toward Hue. The main attack

Division. (The Cav's 2nd Brigade remained in the Khe Sanh AO, while the 196th Light Infantry Brigade was responsible for Camp Evans defense).

Since the 3rd Brigade was first in PEGASUS, the 1st Brigade would lead the way in DELAWARE, assaulting into landing zones around A Luoi to give the attack early control of the airstrip. However, reconnaissance encountered the heaviest anti-aircraft fire in that area of the valley, and assaults there would likely be very costly. Instead, the attack would be opened by the 3rd Brigade assaulting further north in the valley.

At 0730 on 19 April, 4 Hueys, 2 Cobras, and a C&C (Command and Control) Huey lifted off Evans through the overcast. The Hueys carried LRRP teams to rappel onto Signal Hill, a 4900 foot peak 5 kilometers northeast of A Luoi, to establish a radio relay station vital to the operation.



A Shau Valley LZ Sites

The main assault was underway at 0930, with 40 Hueys and 8 gun ships carrying the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, followed by Chinooks with the battalion's direct support artillery battery, into landing zone TIGER on the northwest edge of the valley, commanding Route 548, the winding road entering the valley from nearby Laos.

The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry went into landing zone VICKI on the slope north of Tiger. The first sorties were largely unopposed, but subsequent lifts received intense antiaircraft fire, with 23 helicopters hit and 10 destroyed. The antiaircraft fire and deteriorating weather forced one-third of the day's planned lifts to be aborted.

April weather was expected to be good. It wasn't. Not only were the conditions bad in the A Shau, but weather at Camp Evans forced the

helicopters to climb through an overcast on instruments, reassemble in formation above the clouds, be radar vectored to the valley, and then search for some sort of hole in the clouds to make a sharp spiral descent into an LZ. On some days the climb to clear the cloud tops was to 11,000 feet, a very cold ride. A twenty-minute flight often became over an hour of terror.

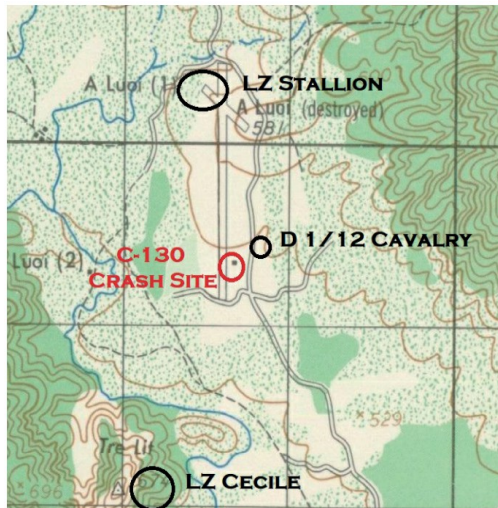
The first sorties of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry flew at 0900 on 20 April, headed into a third landing zone, PEPPER, 8 kilometers southeast of Tiger. It did not go well. After two Hueys crashed, "Blues" (an infantry platoon) of 1/9th Cavalry rappelled in with chain saws to enlarge the LZ. By the end of the day, only a single infantry company occupied Pepper.

No air assaults were flown on the 21st due to bad weather, though 14 sling-load sorties were flown to resupply Tiger. With improving weather on the 22nd, the remainder of 2/7th was lifted into Pepper. After four days, three infantry battalions with their artillery were finally firmly established in the valley. Delta, with the rest of 1st Brigade, remained bored and wet in the hills near Evans, waiting for better weather and for the upper part of the A Shau to be adequately secured.

On 24 April the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, led the 1st Brigade assault into landing zone Cecille, two kilometers south of the A Loui Airfield. The following day, 25 April, the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, lifted into A Shau, the final element touching down at the airfield at 0945, with 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry completing the brigade movement into the valley at 1115. First securing the area and beginning the build-out of LZ Stallion at the airfield, the Brigade began reconnaissance in force operations with 1/8th moving generally to the west and southwest, and 1/12th probing to the south and southeast along Highway 548.

Delta Company was moving south parallel to the road on the 26th, watching Air Force C-130s flying resupply missions. The turboprop cargo planes entered the valley from the east at a point south of us, then made a right turn, flying up-valley to parachute pallets of supplies and ammunition into Stallion at A Loui, since the airfield was not yet repaired adequately to land the big planes. As Delta moved slowly south, we could hear NVA 37mm anti-aircraft batteries engaging the C-130s from the vicinity of Ta Bat, about 5 kilometers to our southeast. Delta's Forward Observer, LT John Kirby, radioed that information in.

In the early afternoon we'd stopped for a break at YC 387995 when one of the C-130's was hit. As it came into sight and flew over us, we could see it streaming fuel and hydraulic fluid, part of its tail shot away, a hole in one wing, one engine gone. It was losing altitude, and as it reached Stallion, it made a turn back to the south. Now coming down fast, the big plane approached us directly from behind, and at the last second veered right and impacted in flames barely 100 meters to the southwest of us at YC 386994. Smoke rose through the trees as ammo cooked off.



C130 Crash Site

Did we see a crew member go out the back? We sent a patrol out to look, but found no one and nothing. Informed a recovery team would be sent out from Stallion, we moved out again to the southeast. With explosions continuing at the crash site, we moved quickly down the valley, reaching YC 403973 at 1425, where we found a truck radiator, leaf spring, and rear end, along with 300 gallons of fuel. It being an area of significant enemy activity, Delta continued to search through the afternoon, and established its night defensive perimeter nearby.

The following morning at 1015, we reported fresh tank and truck tracks. A scout dog working with us picked up a fresh scent, and we followed toward the south,

firing artillery ahead as we moved. Later that afternoon, a grease rack for vehicles, 200 gallons of gasoline, 500 gallons of diesel fuel, along with 37mm anti-aircraft and 12.7mm heavy machine gun ammunition were added to our list. Vehicle tracks were all over. Anti-aircraft fire from south of us continued through the day. We again dug in overnight in that same area.

On 28 April we found our “prize,” a truck with its radiator missing; we knew where to find one. The 1st Cavalry Division’s Daily Journal recorded “Element will extract and attempt to repair.” We did.

Continuing to search southeast along Route 548, Delta reached the junction with Route 547, running northeast toward Hue on 30 April. Moving up 547 into the higher terrain of the east valley, we found many signs of enemy activity before establishing a night defensive position at YC448974.

Lieutenant George Davey, 1st Platoon, remembers, “The company started off the main road and into the mountains. It was a new road made by NVA engineers with track and wheel marks in the fresh dirt. That night we set up along the mountain cut at a place the enemy had once had a big gun dug into the side like a u-shaped cave. Lieutenant Tom Kjos (3rd Platoon) and I explored it as the men made their night positions. Very scary in the gloom.”

The weather deteriorated into fog and rain, so our resupply that night was flown by volunteer pilots, the crew kicking out C rations and ammunition while hovering. At 2145 we observed lights of about ten vehicles moving east a kilometer west of our position. Lieutenant John Kirby,



First Prize of the Operation

Artillery Forward Observer, engaged with artillery. The targets, now apparently fewer, moved back toward the west. The following morning, a Brigade Scouts H-13 observed an unmapped road with evidence of heavy traffic within 24 hours in the area the lights were seen and engaged. At 0924, in the same area, Delta found a truck that had been destroyed by artillery. At 1138, the company came across an abandoned 37mm anti-aircraft position.

On 2 May we made our first in-valley air assault at 0840, to a “green” LZ 5 ½ kilometers west. Moving east we found a living area, tank parts, and tank repair facilities. Lifting off from 392963 at 1510, the company returned to its morning location north of LZ Lucy (Ta Bat). D Company was back in the air again on 3 May, landing at YC390942 at 0951.



Grass Hilltop - Air Assault 3 May - John Kirby Photo

Jumping into Tall Elephant Grass

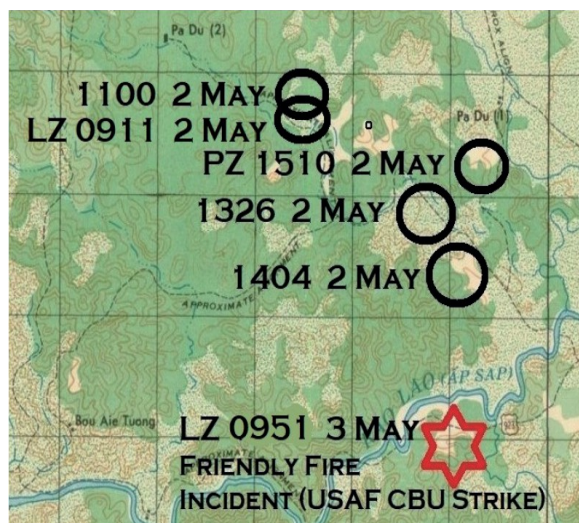
“We had been air assaulted into the (west) side of the valley to pursue an NVA unit that had been in earlier contact with A Company,” remembered Delta commander Captain Richard Kent in a

2003 letter. “I deployed 1st and 2nd Platoons on the ridges with the mission of moving quickly to cut off the enemy. I was moving with 3rd Platoon in the center to hit the enemy in the rear. Weapons Platoon (4th) followed in reserve. All was going well...”

FO John Kirby, in notes made after the 1st Cavalry Association’s 2007 reunion, “(Upon landing on a hilltop) we had to jump from the helicopters as the [elephant] grass was too tall for them to land. As we were moving down the fairly steep hillside (now out of the elephant grass into the open), a white phosphorus marking round (rocket) from a Forward Air Controller (FAC) hit about a hundred meters to our right front, further downhill. I was fearful of what might be happening, and immediately got on the radio and attempted to contact any FAC in the area or on the radio net...no response. I called my headquarters (2nd Battalion, 19th Artillery) to get help, just as a second WP round hit, closer than the first...”

Kent wrote, “Thinking it was an errant artillery round...I told the Artillery FO to call a ‘check fire.’ About 5 seconds later, I saw two F-100’s headed right at us.” Not unexpectedly, with multiple observers, and many years later, the story gets confused.

Kirby seems closest to consensus: “I looked in awe and horror...as a United States Air Force jet was making an attack run on our company as we moved down the hillside. The jet screamed in and dropped CBUs—cluster Bomb Units—in a wide swath that started just before our troops, and cut right through the middle of us. I remember seeing the earth exploding, and the swath of destruction cutting and rolling its way toward us, and then through us...”



Cluster Bomb Strike

attack run when one of our gunship helicopters flew right in its path, in a blocking maneuver, and the jet swerved off to avoid hitting the helicopter, and did not complete its bomb run,” remembers Kirby. That action undoubtedly saved many more troopers from wounds or death. We heard the crew was awarded for valor—Kirby wrote them up—we hope it was so. Lieutenant Kirby asked the gunship and aerial rocket artillery (ARA) choppers accompanying the air assault to help Medevac the wounded.

Captain Kent: “Suddenly, but as in slow motion...the F-100 released a cluster bomb right in front of the company. You could see the two sides of the bomb casing separate and hundreds of the yellow bomblets head right towards us. I watched in horror as there were hundreds of rapid explosions throughout the company.”

Lieutenant Davey, whose 1st Platoon had landed first and quickly moved off the hilltop down a ridge and into a gully, remembers, “Suddenly a deafening blast knocked us down, shaking leaves off the trees and bushes around us. Due to our location I had but two hurt.”

Now the second jet was making a wide turn, lining up for the next run.

“Remarkably, the second jet was just starting its

Dick Kent recalls, “We had (many) troopers wounded, some horribly. I was heartbroken, but every available helicopter in the area came in quickly to evac them for treatment.” The “butcher’s bill” for that day was 22 wounded, 15 of whom were evacuated. Luckily – surprisingly – no one was killed.”

We have limited information about the wounded. 1st Platoon was apparently the least impacted. The disposition of the platoons at the time of the strike, and other information, points to 2nd Platoon, on the right flank of the company, being the most impacted, with the 3rd Platoon less so.

Gary Downs, in the 3rd Platoon at the center of the company formation, remembers, “I was in the middle of two hills and saw guys on one hill get hit.” That hill was likely the location of 2nd Platoon.

Three wounded that we know of were in the 2nd : James Neeley, lightly wounded, returned to the company the next day. Thomas Broome lost an eye. Chris Rush was seriously wounded.

This was no “short round,” the usual “friendly-fire” incident, in which “close support” becomes deadly. How could such a huge — and unusual — mistake occur?

Kent writes that, “We later found out that the FAC had been given a dump grid for the CBUs, which he could not use in close support. He had misread his map by 2 Kilometers and dumped on us without going down close enough to see what was there. He was also not monitoring guard frequency; because there were lots of calls warning him off before he told the jets to drop.”

Kent’s summary is consistent with the entry made 90 minutes after the errant strike in the 1st Cavalry Division’s Daily Staff Journal at its Camp Evans Tactical Operations Center: “FR: 1st Bde (Maj Olsen) A misplaced CBU strike landed in vic of D 1-12 loc at 392942. It was a diverted strike for dump at 385920. It was FAC controlled, and FAC missed the target by over 2000 meters. There were five serious WIA, and there were others wounded [less seriously]. Commo was solid between ALO [Air Force Liaison Officer?] and FAC. The FAC’ call sign was Rash 32, and the fighter call sign was Elect 03. Investigation being conducted at this time. Total casualties: 22 WIA (15 Medevaced). (Symington).”

Lieutenant Kirby postulates a different cause of this tragedy. He writes in his post-2007 note: “I believe that the most probable truth is that, in reality, the FAC thought he had enemy in the open—a target of opportunity, as the saying goes—but it was us; and he very erroneously attacked us.”

Kirby goes on to make his case; like all else about the incident – except the wounded – it might be compelling, but it’s not definitive. We’ll not likely ever know any more than we do now, and of course, what happened in the attack is of great importance to Delta; its cause is not. - TWK-

May 3rd, 1968 - The remainder of a day that had started so tragically courtesy of the United States Air Force only added to a wounded company’s misery. It was a day aptly called (in a SP4 Jamie Swidecki letter to Captain Kent in 2003), a “Bad Day in A Shau.”

No sooner had Delta evacuated its wounded than Kent was ordered to move the company five kilometers east to a position near Route 548, not far from the pick-up zone (PZ) it had left that morning. Many remember that move as “lost in the jungle,” but it was more “no easy way to get

there,” than “lost,” the latter a rarity in Vietnam, with so many ways to locate a unit, from maps to aircraft to artillery spotter rounds.

Kent described the trek, “The area we had to traverse was laced through with meandering



Brutal Trek to Route 548

streams and extremely thick vegetation. By going in a straight line or compass azimuth, you would cross the same stream multiple times as it wound back and forth. None of this could be seen from the air because of the thick overhead vegetation. Each time, you had to hack through with machetes, climb down the stream bank, cross by holding a rope and scramble up the far bank, which was steep, muddy, covered with roots and vines, and generally buggy and nasty. Then trudge through sharp-edged 12 ft high elephant grass for 100

meters until the next stream. I tried to move around the streams, but that proved impossible. Some squads got separated from the main body, but almost miraculously, we all got to the objective without running into the enemy in our exhausted, demoralized and disorganized state.” Lieutenant Davey had 1st Platoon on point for that trek across the valley. “It took most of the night to return across the valley,” Davey wrote recently. “It was very hot and absolutely no air much less breeze in the tall elephant grass and brush we were pushing through on a compass heading. I took a turn on point and it was exhausting. We crossed a narrow deep stream, and crossed it again. And then again.”

So far, his recall matches that of Captain Kent, but as is almost always the case in the recall of events in Vietnam so many years past, it diverges. “A little time after that, Capt. Kent called on the radio. He told me to take a 90 degree turn for 50 meters and then resume the original heading. I should have known enough to do it on my own—we were following a snake-like stream or sign-curve river. We didn’t see the water again after that move,” continued Davey.

“At dusk we came to a tank park. It was complete with bunkers and places to service them, like grease pits. The signs that they were there were recent.” After that miserable trek from the site of the Air Force attack, the company established a defensive perimeter at 425960, within sight of LZ Lucy, occupied by the 3rd Infantry Regiment, (ARVN). May 4th and 5th were spent at that location.

SP4 James Neeley, who was evacuated on the 3rd, said, “The next day I caught a helicopter out to D Company in the field. Luckily [James was still hobbled by his wounds] the company had stayed in the same location for about 3 nights. By the time we moved...I was able to walk well enough to keep up.”

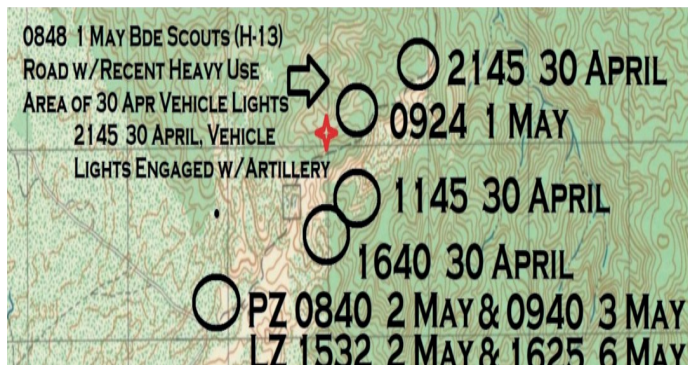
With the lightly wounded straggling into the company over the next two days, Delta had a kind of “in valley R&R,” with limited patrolling within sight of Lucy, not flying, not doing anything that would make the Division’s Daily Journal, and apparently not walking enough to leave Neeley behind.

April 5: After two days of this, the battalion was ready to get Delta back to work, telling the company on the 5th it would air assault the following morning to an area of reported enemy activity on the west side of the valley. Delta lifted off from near Ta Bat, which had become (and

would continue to be) its “home-away-from-home” in the valley shortly after 0900. Third platoon was in the lead, followed by the company command group. Was the flight large enough to get the entire company in the air? It seems so from what is remembered by Delta Troopers; the potential for contact on landing in A Shau was high, so not many air assaults were made that would require a “turnaround” to get more troops on the ground.

We’d gotten some of our wounded back from having been a target for our own Air Force, but it’s unlikely our foxhole strength was greater than 90 officers and men. Given the LZ was in the open area north of Lucy, it was able to land multiple ships; so two flights of six birds, or three of four would lift the entire company. The flight then formed up and headed west toward a one-ship LZ two kilometers from Laos. The two or three “V’s” in which we were flying would now dissolve, with the first Huey’s stacking up one above the other as they headed down into the LZ, the rest orbiting to join the stack in turn.

If you’re in that stack, it’s a very uncomfortable time, akin to being in the car of a Ferris Wheel, as it comes over the top, stopping to let out riders below, then moving again. Waiting for someone to use you for target practice. Each bird would fly into this little patch of ground among the jungle’ trees, this hole in the canopy, off-load eight infantrymen, and pull up and out.



6 May, Hot LZ

Except we didn’t get that far. As the first Huey’s approached the LZ, hanging nearly motionless, one above the other, they presented too good a target for an NVA gunner on a Heavy Machine Gun [12.5mm, 51 cal]. He opened fire on the formation before the first of the lift had gotten into the LZ. That was a big mistake – two, in fact. First, good tactics

were to let the first few birds get in and out, putting a platoon or so on the ground, then engage the later lifts, driving off reinforcements, and concentrating heavy fire on the small unit on the ground.

By engaging the lift before any infantry hit the ground, the NVA lost their opportunity for what they would call a “big victory.” Second, the enemy gunner did not know that third platoon machine gunner Danny Thomas was aboard one of those Hueys. With the helicopters taking hits, Danny, sitting in an open doorway above the jungle, spotted the enemy gunner, brought his M60 up—and freehand—put suppressing fire on the enemy gun, allowing the flight of Hueys to pull up and out, ending the attack.

For this, in an “impact award” ceremony, Danny was later pinned with the Air Medal with “V” Device for heroism in aerial flight. He never received the medal. Jamie Swidecki recalls there was a photo, now lost, of the award ceremony. Three helicopters were hit by fire, a pilot was killed and another crew wounded. Ed Johnson, 3rd Platoon’s Platoon Sergeant was in the early part of that lift, and remembers, “I was on the helicopter that was hit and the copilot was killed by the 51 cal.”

The Division's Daily Journal recorded the incident: "0935 D 1-12, YC 331961 hot LZ, diverted to present LZ 1500M to south At Hot LZ had 1 pilot KIA, 1 crew WIA, neg contact at present LZ From that alternate LZ."

Delta worked its way back toward the north, and at 1425 reported it was following commo wire along a trail near the site of the morning's contact. We found nothing further. The company was extracted at 1602 hours from 338954, returning to 422961, north of LZ Lucy. On 7 May, 1968, Delta assumed defense of Lucy from the 3rd ARVN Regiment. A battery of the 2nd Battalion, 19th Artillery (105mm) displaced from LZ Stallion to Lucy. On 11 May at 1351 hours one of Delta's platoons air assaulted to 457914, lifting back to Lucy later without incident. The afternoon of



Air and Artillery Strikes on Enemy Convoy

12 May Lieutenant Richard Parker's second platoon was lifted to 454916, south of Lucy, to assist B 1/9th Cavalry in recovering the crew of a Cobra gunship shot down while covering a 1/12th air assault recon.

Artillery Forward Observer Lieutenant John Kirby went along, and recalls "We recovered one pilot; I helped carry him to the recovery helicopter. He was a young man, like so many of us; and was cold and lifeless. He was lying on the floor of the Huey as we lifted off and rode out of that area to begin his journey home." It was an emotional, tragic, moment.

D Company remained on " firebase defense duty," for the remainder of its time in the valley. Delta, along with the rest of 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry was lifted out of the A Shau to Camp Evans on 15 May 1968, reporting extraction complete at 1213 hours. By 1240, Delta was on its way up Highway 1 to LZ Sharon by truck, reversing the trip it had taken less than a month before.

The 1st Cav Journal: "1/12 has assumed base defense responsibilities for LZ Sharon and LZ Betty eff 1815H.

In true raid tradition, the Cavalry had "ridden" deep into the enemy's rear, ripping up his roads, destroying his material, and generally raising all kinds of hell. The scorecard included 6 tracked vehicles, including a PT-76 tank; 67 wheeled vehicles, from jeep to deuce-and-a-half; over 200,000 rounds of ammunition, from 7.62mm rifle to 122mm artillery; 2,600 individual and crew-served weapons; 31 flame throwers; 72,000 pounds of food; and 90,000 pages of documents. -TWK-

Notes

1. Contributions to “Cavalry Raid” from Richard Kent, George Davey, Ed Johnson, John Kirby, Tom Kjos, Ron Redalen, Ken Goff, Jamie Swidecki, James Neeley, and Gary Downs
2. Daily Journals of the 1st Cavalry Division and 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry
3. B Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry
<http://www.eagerarms.com/khesanhashauvalleyoperations.html>
4. Pearson, Willard, LTG, “War in the Northern Provinces 1966-1968,” Department of the Army
5. Vietnam Center & Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas