

Chapter 3: Operation SHINY BAYONET

Delta's First Combat - October 10th through 14, 1965

Everyone remembers their first time. No matter how sordid, no matter how quick, or tawdry, it is always remembered. Often it's a little awkward and rushed, but with experience and adaptation, things begin to "click."

SHINY BAYONET would be the first time in combat for the soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry. The battalion had arrived in Vietnam on September 20, 1965, and since then had been busy building a base camp to be named "Camp Radcliff" at Anh Khe, in Vietnam's Central Highlands, guarding the "Green Line" (Camp Radcliff's perimeter), and escorting truck convoys on nearby Highway 19.

On October 10, the men of Delta, in the battalion's second lift along with C Company, waited in groups of six along Radcliff's "Golf Course" (the large area that accommodated the division's over 400 helicopters) for choppers to take them to the Soui Ca Valley (sardonically nicknamed "Happy Valley.") The first lift, consisting of companies A and B, had encountered enemy fire from the surrounding hills as they approached their Happy Valley landing zone.

Staff Officer's Daily Journal, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 10 October 1965

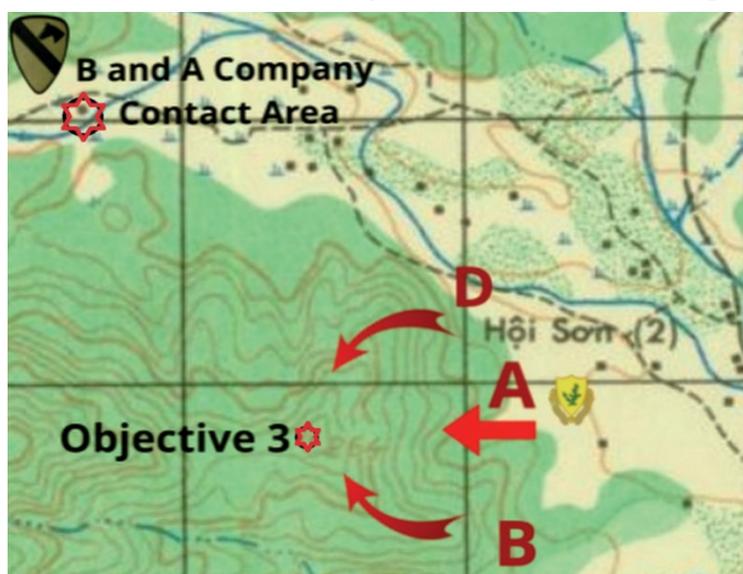
1155: SECOND LIFT TAKE-OFF FROM AN KHE AIRFIELD.

The troopers of D Company were on the way. The air assault was exhilarating; with 50 helicopters flying in formation over magnificent scenery, then hurtling 10 feet high over rice paddies, with water buffalo, palm trees, and farmers speeding past them at 100 mph. The young paratroopers could not fail to be confident with such a display of raw power, on their way to wreak

destruction upon the enemy. Other than a few senior NCOs and officers who had served in Korea, the troopers had never been in combat, were teenage F__g New Guys (FNGs). But they knew in their hearts there were no better troops in the US Military. They would have subscribed to General George Patton's words: "We're going to wade into them [the enemy], we're going to spill their guts.....I actually feel sorry for those poor bastards."

Delta's green troopers were about to trespass into the front yard of the highly experienced 93rd and 97th Battalions of the 2nd VC Main Force Regiment; units that had been instrumental in the destruction of the French Army, and had been in the business of war for many years. Captain John Gergulis, Delta's Commanding Officer: "We lifted from An Khe and flew with some dispatch to Happy Valley. As we were coming in to the LZ, we were taking enemy fire. What was prominent was the Battalion CP tent already set up in the middle of a rice paddy."

Company D was organized as a combat support company, comprised of the Battalion's Recon Platoon, a Weapons Platoon (anti-tank), and Mortar Platoon. On this day, however, it would operate as a line



Operation SHINY BAYONET Operation Plan

rifle company, with the Recon Platoon in the lead, the Weapons Platoon (as light infantry) following, and the Mortar Platoon set up in support with the battalion. Captain Gergulis and his command group positioned themselves immediately behind the Recon Platoon.

1234: COMPANY D PASSED THROUGH COMPANY A.

Company A had been securing the LZ. When Company D landed and then “passed through” the perimeter heading west toward a ridge line running to what had been designated “Objective 3,” a prominent area overlooking the LZ. (Map) The mission was to eliminate bunkers that had been spotted from the air and from which enemy fire seemed to be emanating.

Captain Gergulis: “We began moving forward. The Delta Command group was in the center of the company. Our Mortar platoon was still near the base perimeter, ready to provide support. Recon platoon was the lead element. We were to move forward up the hill, maintaining contact with A company on our left. Terry Wright was part of the flank security, near A Company. The idea was to move up the ridge to the top (Objective 3) and then flank the bunkers. B Company would do the same on the left ridge line, executing a pincer movement. Both B and D Companies had some cover. A Company was more in the open, in the center. (Map) “Well, when I was about half way up the ridge, Battalion told us to halt. That's when A Company started to fall apart. We observed the A Company Commander running to the rear with a trooper on his back. I could see Battalion Chaplain Billy Lord trying to organize A Company. Our Recon Platoon, in the lead, made it almost all the way to Objective 3.” Chaplain Lord received a Silver Star for his heroic efforts.

1240: COMPANY C BURNING HUTS 100M FROM ASSEMBLY POSITION

1241: BN CO SAYS NO BURNING OF HUTS

1300: ONE MAN FROM COMPANY D HIT BY SNIPER FIRE IN SHOULDER OR LUNG AND NEEDS MEDEVAC. BE AT LZ IN 15 MINUTES

July 5. Captain Gergulis: “It was also at this point that I got word that Terry Wright had been hit. I gave instructions to bring him down and a Medevac had been called in. Our troopers, the brothers, brought Terry down past us and I recall putting my hand on him. He was pretty well out of it at this time. Doc made eye contact with me and I learned that Doc could not stop the bleeding. I attempted to comfort Terry. I told him we would get him to the hospital and he would be OK.”

1330: MEDEVAC SHIP DISABLED, BELIEVED TO BE (DUE TO) SNIPER FIRE.

Captain Gergulis: “We were out of 105 artillery range initially. Our mortars, set up on the berm of the rice paddy, were not used and I'm screaming to Battalion to allow them to be engaged. Battalion, called in gun ships, then lost communication with them. Delta Company had an element of Morley Safer's film crew with us. The gun ships came in firing with ARA and landed a couple rockets among us. The film crew asked me 'are they firing at us?' I said: 'I think so, and you better duck because here they come again,' which they did. The film crew was pretty traumatized.”

They carried Terry Wright back to the LZ where the mortar platoon's SSG Perpetua and others tried to keep him alive. But he was unresponsive, and passed away before he could be medevac'd. He was 17 years old, and D Company's first KIA of the Vietnam War. It came as a shock to everyone.

1535: ARTY ADJUSTING IN A FEW HOURS AFTER THE ASSAULT. ARTILLERY WAS FINALLY BROUGHT IN AND DIRECTED AT OBJECTIVE 3.

1600: CAPTAIN DRAKE ASSUMED COMMAND OF A COMPANY A COMPANY'S PREVIOUS COMMANDER HAD DISAPPEARED TO THE REAR EARLIER IN THE AFTERNOON.

1602: ARTY HIT MEDEVAC SNIPERS STILL FIRING. ONE OF THE FIRST ARTILLERY ROUNDS HIT THE DISABLED MEDEVAC CHOPPER WHICH THEN ERUPTED IN FLAMES.

Staff Officer's Daily Journal, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 11 October 1965

11 OCTOBER 1965, 1225: BATTALION CO DIRECTS RECON PLATOON TO SEARCH VILLAGE HOI SON(2).

1900: D COMPANY REPORTS 1 VC KIA, 2 WIA.

Dwight Edwards: "We took some fire in the village. It looked like it was coming from the well. So, I dropped a grenade in the well. There was no more fire." D Company's Recon Platoon spent nights setting up ambushes around potential infiltration routes in the valley. In the dark they killed one VC suspect who turned out to be an old man, with no weapon. His status as a VC was dubious. This engendered a very hot radio "discussion" between the Recon Platoon leader, Lieutenant West, and Captain Gergulis. Recon troopers carried the body back to the Company CP. Dwight Edwards: "One thing..... every one of the Recon guys who touched that body was later KIA in Vietnam."

Staff Officer's Daily Log, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 12 October 1965

1350: B COMPANY HEAVILY ENGAGED. REPORTS EIGHT CASUALTIES, REQUESTS MEDEVAC ON STANDBY.

As always, this is a D Company story (it's our newsletter). However, B Company trooper Robert (R.O.) Martin, known by some as "Zero," was in Delta Company during training at Ft Benning, so has always been "one of our own." He distinguished himself during intense combat on October 12th when Bravo Company encountered a large enemy force while following a stream bed towards the northeast, near the end of a valley. So his story—and Bravo's—becomes our story, too. R.O.'s platoon was on point pursuing the VC up a stream bed. Suddenly a 50 cal machine gun pummeled the troopers and the enemy swarmed the high ground, firing down on them. Cut off from the rest of his company, R.O., at great risk to himself, treated the wounded and protected them, at times with his own body. He then organized an effective aggressive defense by those who could still function, blunting the VC attack.

1555: AIR STRIKES WILL BE CALLED IN FOR B COMPANY. BATTALION CO DIRECTED ACTION ON THE GROUND.

After the initial encounter and the running battle in the stream bed, R.O. and others pulled back towards the B Company location. But as they arrived they encountered VC who were firing on and throwing grenades down on a group of US personnel in a vulnerable position. R.O. came up behind the VC, to their surprise, and nailed them with semi-auto fire, once again saving friendly lives. It turned out that the Battalion Commander, LTC Shoemaker, was among those that were saved. He was rightfully impressed and awarded R.O. a well deserved Silver Star for gallantry. Originally he was put in for the MOH, but it was downgraded before it left the Division. R.O. was a Private E-2 at that time. Morley Safer, from CBS, was there as well. His hands were visibly shaking after the action, but he got some good footage.

Captain Gergulis: "An inquiring mind might want to ask what a Battalion Commander was doing there in the first place." A company also became involved in this action.

1650: B COMPANY REQUESTS THAT MEDEVACS COME IN.

1800: B Co MEDEVAC BEGINS USING TOC SHIP AND H-13'S

The Medevac would not pick up the wounded because the LZ was too "hot." Major Joseph Bellochi (Battalion Executive Officer) repeatedly flew an H-13 into "harms way" disregarding his own safety to bring out multiple wounded. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroic efforts.

Staff Officer's Daily Log, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (rear), 13 October 1965

0730: BTN CO. REQUEST CONFERENCE ON OPERATION.

Would like a week to work on methodically cleaning out the area. Refugees indicate a VC Battalion in the area, plus a hospital caring for victims of bombing. It was clear that much more could be done to vanquish the enemy. LTC Shoemaker wanted to pursue and engage the main body of the VC.

1925: BDE, OPERATION SHINY BAYONET WILL BE EXECUTED 14 OCTOBER WITH MODIFICATIONS.

The 1/12th returned to Camp Radcliff at An Khe. Now the "shiny" bayonet had been sharpened in the crucible of combat. A high level decision was made to terminate Operation SHINY BAYONET. The 1st Cavalry Division had other developing priorities.

In five days the NVA began their siege of the Plei Me Special Forces Camp, planning to capture the provincial capitol at Pleiku. The 1st Cav was called upon to participate in the counter-attack against the NVA and the 1/12th flew to Camp Holloway, near Pleiku. On 1 November D Company's Recon Platoon became heavily engaged near the Cambodian border in the "Battle of the Hospital."

Staff Officer's Daily Log, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (rear), 14 October, 1965

1025: COMPANY D AND A PORTION OF COMPANY C WAS EXTRACTED, RECEIVING HEAVY SNIPER FIRE THE ENEMY STILL HAD CONTROL OF THE VALLEY.

1400: SUMMARY OF EXTRACTION. 3 WIAs AND TWO UH1B'S WERE FORCED DOWN DUE TO DAMAGE RECEIVED DURING EXTRACTION.

Personnel in the two aircraft were transferred to other aircraft. Captain Gergulis: "We were one of the last to be extracted. And, thanks to the man upstairs, we were very lucky. Both of my RTOs took rounds to their radio back packs during the extraction. But to my knowledge, no one from Delta was wounded."

During the five day operation in the Soui Ca Valley, B Company suffered four KIA, A Company three, and D Company one. Forty Nine 1/12th troopers were WIA. Operation SHINY BAYONET was a "shake down cruise" testing the Battalion's operational capabilities in actual combat. There were important lessons, quickly learned, which became inculcated into future operations. Here are a few of them:

Carry more ammo. During future operations, at least 400 rounds would be carried, instead of 120. Full auto firing should be used judiciously to conserve ammo.

1. Careful cleaning of the M-16 was required to keep it reliable.
2. Reduce weight by leaving all extraneous gear behind. (Forget the air mattresses.)
3. Clothing: Corcoran jump boots are terrible in hot, wet environments, even worse than standard issue army boots. (No one had jungle boots.) Underwear should not we worn.
4. Supporting fires need better coordination. The commander on the ground should control.
5. Have artillery ready at the beginning, to prep the LZ, and to be available to support the attack.
6. Be aware of Medevac helicopters' landing restrictions.
7. Prepositioning supplies and overnight coordination is required for prompt morning resupply.
8. The enemy was a clever, determined, and disciplined adversary.

The SHINY BAYONET engagement between 1/12th and the 2nd Main-force VC Regiment was near the northeast terminus of an uncommon straight line split in the mountains connecting the Soui Ca

Valley on the east, with the Vinh Thanh Valley, 18 kilometers to the west. This natural jungle highway later was dubbed “The Oregon Trail.”

On May 21, 1966, elements of the 2nd Main-force VC Regiment, over-ran and wiped out C Company's mortar platoon at LZ Hereford, just one kilometer from the southwest terminus of the “Oregon Trail,” in the Vinh Thanh Valley.

When they engaged B Company in SHINY BAYONET on October 12th 1965, the VC were fighting a delaying action while the bulk of their unit escaped west up the “Oregon Trail.” Their tactics were well planned and implemented (Map).



Exfiltration of 2d VC Regiment Following Happy Valley

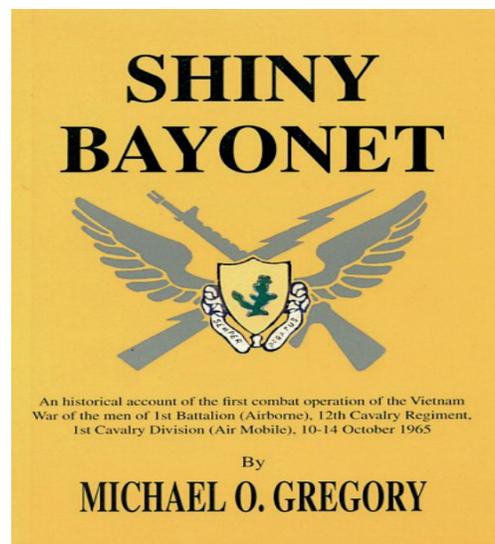
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GEOGRAPHICAL UPDATE:

The Soui Ca River Valley is now a lake. The Vietnamese built a dam at the south end of the valley, flooding the entire operational area. It's called Lake Hoi Son, after the villages that were flooded into oblivion. The detritus of war, including blood left behind by the 1/12th, is effectively buried in the past, under water. Objective 3, high in the hills above the lake, is still there, waiting. _____

BOOK REVIEW: “SHINY BAYONET” by Michel O. Gregory

Michael Gregory writes in his acknowledgments that, “When I sat down to write this book I soon became aware of how flawed my memory was.” Regardless, we’re thankful that, relying on interviews and the battalion’s After Action Report, he continued in his effort, because we are aware of no other published recounting of this first combat in Vietnam for 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (Airborne). As you will have seen in this issue’s feature article, R.O. Martin has written an as yet unpublished memoir (Spirit of the Warrior) that includes his experiences in SHINY BAYONET. That’s the only other account of which we are aware. Gregory’s book is split between history and memoir, somewhat more of the latter than the former. Where it becomes memoir is clear when the author occasionally offers - or infers - his opinion of events. That’s quite acceptable given the overall context of the book, and because the author was a “grunt,” and an on-the-ground participant. Footnotes are most often explanatory of events,



rarely documentation of sources. This is not a long book, just 85 pages plus photographs, so it can be easily read in a single evening. However, there's lots of information here within a somewhat convoluted style, made a bit more difficult by indifferent editing. I found it necessary to re-read sections to follow the story. A knowledgeable reader will find errors of syntax, spelling, or grammar on nearly every page, but rarely any apparent errors of fact. That latter characteristic is SHINY BAYONET's saving grace. All-in-all it's a reasonably good overview of SHINY BAYONET, and, as far as we know, the only one in print. That's more than enough for which to thank Trooper Gregory. [Gregory, Michael O., Trafford Publishing, 2006, paperback, \$12.21, available at Amazon.] -TWK

References: Gregory, Michael O., SHINY BAYONET, Trafford Publishing, 2006 Martin, Robert O., "Spirit of the Warrior" unpublished Warden, Doug, "Boot to Boot, the Story of Charlie Company" available through <https://www.charliecompanyvietnam.com> Interviews: Dwight Edwards, John Gergulis, R.O. Martin, Chuck Rose. Safer, Morley, "Baptism of Fire" CBS Video Battalion Daily Staff Officers Journals obtained from the National Archives, College Park MD Maps obtained from Vietnam Center and Archives, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.