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The Hump : a soldier's search for peace

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San Jose State University, 1993

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THE HUMP: A SOLDIER'S SEARCH FOR PEACE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Al Conetto

August, 1993

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

THE HUMP: A SOLDIER'S SEARCH FOR PEACE

by Al Conetto

This thesis concerns my successful attempt to come to grips with the memory of the Vietnam War. After a brief history of the war, it concentrates on three areas: a cordon and search mission that occurred in the fall of 1967, Operation HUMP in November 1965, and my return to Vietnam in January 1992.

The cordon and search operation illustrated the futility of the war and my lack of feelings for human life. Operation HUMP confirmed my stature as a man, allowed me to be accepted as a full fledged member of an airborne unit, and answered the questions that had haunted me since my participation in the war ended. The trip back verified that my war was over. Committing my memories to paper, corresponding with former associates, and returning to Vietnam allowed me finally to put the War in perspective.

Those of us who survived must have been spared for a purpose.

I choose to believe that we were chosen so as to serve as spokesmen for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

All of us--the living and dead--ask for nothing special in return for what we did. We merely ask that we be remembered by our countrymen as good and honorable men who did our country's bidding as had been done by our forefathers down through the ages.

COL John E. Tyler (ret)
November 24, 1991

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. PROLOGUE.....	1
2. GOING BACK.....	26
3. SERGEANT MCDONALD.....	39
4. THE HUMP.....	50
5. POSTSCRIPT.....	81
6. CONCLUSION.....	86

Appendix

I. GLOSSARY.....	88
II. KEY PERSONNEL.....	91
III. DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION.....	92

PROLOGUE

I graduated from San Jose State University on January 24, 1964, with a degree in Business-Industrial Management. In addition to my degree, I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army by the Professor of Military Science, Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Rios. Attending the ceremonies were my wife, Kathy, and my parents. I was the first in my family to graduate from college and the first to be commissioned an officer. As we left LTC Rios's office and stepped into the bright morning sunlight, SFC Raymond Leong, a staff NCO for the ROTC detachment, snapped off a salute and a sharp, "Good morning, sir." It was my first salute as an officer. I returned it with, "Good morning, sergeant," and handed him a silver dollar. It was military tradition. [See Glossary on page 88 for military abbreviations.]

Six days later I reported to Fort Benning, Georgia, and the Infantry Officers Basic Course. The next four and one-half years encompassed the most intense and satisfying events of my life.

Prior to that time, however, I had led a fairly normal childhood in San Jose. Born and raised in a first-generation Sicilian family, I went through the public education system. My parents were strong advocates of education and from an early age I was encouraged to go to college. It was not "if"

to go to college, but "when" to go to college. I was not a particularly good student, but I knew college was in my future. It was my obligation to my parents. As a young man I became fascinated by the military and warfare. I read popular war novels like Battle Cry, The Barren Beaches of Hell, The Angry Hills, and On the Beach. My favorite movies also were about war, especially the ones starring John Wayne. They included The Sands of Iwo Jima, The Flying Leathernecks, The Fighting Seabees, and Operation Pacific. Other favorites were Battle Cry, To Hell and Back, Battleground, and Retreat Hell!. I was entranced with the concepts of honor, sacrifice, daring, courage, glory, patriotism and military tradition that were extolled in these movies and books. Yet war and the military did not dominate my early life. Baseball did. My favorite team then was the New York Yankees--"the Bronx Bombers." I grew up with Joe DiMaggio, Casey Stengel, Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Billy Martin, Whitey Ford, and Phil Rizzuto. They dominated the game in those days.

Although I was born just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, I had no recollections of World War II and very few of Korea. The one incident, however, that I did recall was General Douglas MacArthur's return to the United States after President Harry Truman sacked him as commander of our forces

in Korea on April 11, 1951.¹ I remembered the tumultuous welcome he received from the American people, the parades and the adulation. It left a lasting impression on me.

At that time, in another Far East country called Indochina, the French were fighting a rag-tag peasant army called the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh's name came from Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or Vietnam Independence League, a Communist-led, anti-colonial organization.² In 1951, the French led by General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, one of France's most celebrated soldiers, scored a spectacular victory when they blunted General Vo Nguyen Giap's campaign in the Red River Delta. From January to May, the French repelled Giap's repeated attempts to secure the Delta's rich rice fields.³ I was ten years old at the time, and the most important thing to me was not Korea or Indochina, but the National League play-offs. In the third game, Bobby Thomson of the New York Giants hit the "home run heard around the world" off Ralph Branca and the Giants defeated the Brooklyn Dodgers for the pennant. In the World Series, my Yankees

¹Larry H. Addington, The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 258.

²Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, Setting the Stage in The Vietnam Experience, ed. Robert Manning (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981-1988), 174.

³Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: The Viking Press 1983), 186-187.

whipped the Giants in six games. Gil McDougald drove in 7 runs and Joe DiMaggio drove in 5. Those were the men and the statistics most important to me at that time.

In 1952, after his defeat by de Lattre, Giap moved back to harassing the French at every opportunity using guerrilla tactics.⁴ Less than one year after defeating Giap in the Delta, de Lattre died in Paris of cancer.⁵ By the end of the year, French casualties in *la sale guerre*--the dirty war--numbered more than 90,000.⁶ I began the sixth grade in September, and in October the Yankees and Dodgers battled in the World Series with the Yankees finally winning four games to three. Johnny Mize batted .400 and hit 3 home runs to spark the Yankees. Vic Raschi and Allie Reynolds won 2 games each and struck out 36 batters between them.

General Henri Navarre was appointed the new French commander in Vietnam in May 1953. He and his staff came up with the idea of establishing a mooring point, or base camp, from which the French and their native troops could penetrate the Viet Minh's rear areas. The site he chose was a remote valley, eleven miles long and five miles wide. The ethnic

⁴Edward Doyle, Samuel Lipsman, and Stephen Weiss, Passing the Torch in The Vietnam Experience, ed. Robert Manning (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981-1988), 50.

⁵Karnow, Vietnam, 187.

⁶Ibid., 188.

minority T'ai who lived there called the place Muong Thanh. To the Vietnamese it was known as Dien Bien Phu.⁷ In November, French paratroopers dropped into the valley and Giap moved thirty-three infantry battalions, six artillery regiments, and an engineer regiment to meet them.⁸ I graduated from grammar school in June and started junior high school in September. In the Fall Classic in New York, the Yankees continued their dominance over the Dodgers winning the Series four games to two. Billy Martin batted .500 with 12 hits and 8 RBIs and Mickey Mantle hit a grand slam in game five.

The Korean armistice was signed in 1953, and there was optimism in the world that the Indochina conflict could also be settled. Soviet leaders were seeking to relax tensions, the French were sick of war, and the Chinese favored a negotiated settlement. These trends troubled the anti-Communist Vietnamese who feared that the French would sell them out. American leaders were also alarmed. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, saw the U.S. policy of the containment of Communism crumbling.⁹

⁷Ibid., 189-190.

⁸Ibid., 191.

⁹Ibid., 191-193.

By December 1953, at Dien Bien Phu, the French began to conduct the offensive operations that Navarre had envisioned earlier. Giap, meanwhile, encircled the valley with two divisions. Soon French patrols venturing outside the garrison were in grave danger. By March 1954, the French had lost 1037 men with little to show for it. Dien Bien Phu had proven to be useless.¹⁰

On March 13, the Viet Minh attacked the base camp. Within forty-eight hours the French lost four battalions and three strongholds.¹¹ The French Chief of Staff, General Paul Ely, flew to Washington on March 20 to request U.S. support. He proposed American air strikes against the Viet Minh perimeter at Dien Bien Phu. Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Nathan Twining, Air Force Chief of Staff, endorsed the idea. But General Matthew Ridgway, Army Chief of Staff, had no faith in air strikes alone, nor did he desire to fight on the Asian mainland. He convinced the other members that the Indochina conflict was the wrong war in the wrong place for the United States.¹²

President Dwight Eisenhower further discouraged the French by insisting that he would authorize the strike only

¹⁰Doyle, Passing the Torch, 62.

¹¹Ibid., 67.

¹²Karnow, Vietnam, 196-197.

if Congress and our allies approved. After all, 1954 was an election year for Congress. On April 3, eight congressional leaders were called to a meeting. After their briefing all eight agreed that the United States should not support France alone. There would have to be multinational support or United Nations approval. With time running out, Secretary Dulles resorted to shuttle diplomacy, but France decided to negotiate a settlement at the upcoming Geneva Conference and England feared an air strike would sabotage the Geneva talks. Dulles returned home empty-handed.¹³ On May 7, Dien Bien Phu fell. French casualties were 2,242 killed; 6,463 wounded; 2,711 missing; and 10,754 taken prisoner.¹⁴

The next day, the Geneva Conference began discussions of the Indochina problem. Distrust and tension pervaded the conference. The Viet Minh avoided Emperor Bao Dai's representatives and boycotted the French. The Russians made degrading remarks about the Chinese. The French resented American attempts to use them as intermediaries. The Americans, under orders to shun the Chinese and the Viet Minh, criticized the French for secret maneuvering and were impatient with the British lack of toughness.

¹³Doyle, Passing the Torch, 69-70.

¹⁴Ibid., 72-73.

The Viet Minh, having prevailed at Dien Bien Phu and controlling over two-thirds of the country, came on strong. Led by Pham Van Dong, they insisted on a political settlement giving them all of Vietnam. The French were to withdraw from the country and let the Vietnamese solve their differences. The new French Prime Minister Pierre Mendes-France was appointed in mid-June and promised to resign if he did not secure a cease fire within one month. China's Zhou Enlai, seeking to keep the United States out of Asia, preferred a divided Vietnam with a French presence in the south, as well as independent governments in Laos and Cambodia. A partitioned Vietnam better suited the Chinese policy to fragment Southeast Asia in order to influence its states. With Zhou's assistance, Mendes-France met his deadline. On July 20, the Geneva Agreement called for a cease-fire. France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam agreed to a temporary division of the country at the seventeenth parallel with nationwide elections within two years. The United States reluctantly pledged to abide by the agreements.¹⁵

In June, Ngo Dinh Diem, a little-known nationalist, was appointed Prime Minister of South Vietnam by Emperor Bao Dai. Diem was honest, courageous, and dedicated. But he also believed in his own infallibility and expected obedience from

¹⁵Karnow, Vietnam, 198-204.

his subjects. He distrusted anyone outside his family and refused to delegate authority. From the mandarin class, Diem could not relate to the peasants in this agrarian society.¹⁶ His aloofness, rigidity, and narrow outlook would later be his undoing. But, I was in the eighth grade and was only concerned about how many games it would take the Cleveland Indians to annihilate the New York Giants. After all, Cleveland's top three pitchers had won 65 games between them during the season. But Willie Mays made a tremendous back-to-the-plate catch of a 440-foot fly ball in the first game, and Dusty Rhodes had 4 hits in 6 at bats, 7 RBIs, and 2 home runs. The Giants swept the Indians in four.

With the French departure from Vietnam in 1955, the United States began to funnel aid directly to the Saigon government. The American commitment in Vietnam began to harden, and Diem made it known that he did not expect to participate in the forthcoming country-wide elections called for in the French-Democratic Republic of Vietnam agreement.¹⁷ In April, Diem routed the Binh Xuyen, an outlaw gang of guns for hire. By October, Diem had deposed Bao Dai in a referendum and made himself President of South Vietnam.¹⁸ In

¹⁶Ibid., 213-218.

¹⁷Ibid., 219-220.

¹⁸Ibid., 223.

the north, President Ho Chi Minh sought and accepted aid from the Soviet Union and China.¹⁹ Meanwhile, I began my final year of junior high school and suffered as my beloved Yankees lost to the Dodgers for the first time in the World Series. Johnny Podres won 2 games for the Dodgers with a 1.00 ERA, and Duke Snider had 8 hits and 4 home runs to lead the offense. That year Graham Greene published his novel The Quiet American, a superb story that included a warning to Americans about Vietnam.

In early January 1956, Diem launched a drive in the south against the Viet Minh remnants left in the countryside. This action resembled the repression going on in the north where Ho set up Agricultural Reform Tribunals to liquidate landlords and other feudal elements within the society. Diem's actions crushed 90 percent of the Viet Minh cells in the Mekong Delta, while Ho's measures killed thousands of people.²⁰ But I was entering high school, and my hero was the Yankees' Don Larsen who pitched a perfect game in the World Series as the New Yorkers took Brooklyn four games to three. Yogi Berra had 9 hits, 3 home runs, and 10 RBIs to spark the Bombers.

¹⁹Doyle, Passing the Torch, 104-105.

²⁰Karnow, Vietnam, 225-227.

President Eisenhower welcomed Diem to the United States in May 1957 hailing him as the "miracle man" of Asia; he had virtually annihilated the Viet Minh in the south.²¹ By early October, however, Hanoi had issued instructions to the remaining Communists in the south to organize thirty-seven armed companies.²² On October 22, three bombs detonated in Saigon in the vicinity of American servicemen. Eight were hospitalized, but none died. The bombings were part of a Viet Minh tactic called "armed propaganda."²³ I was now a junior in high school and thinking about the military and a career. But even then, the most important thing was baseball. Part of the Series was broadcast through the school's public announcement system. The Milwaukee Braves won their first World Series ever by beating the Yankees four games to three. Lew Burdette won three games and had an ERA of 0.67. Hank Aaron batted .393 and had 11 hits. The Braves had become my favorite National League team, and I could not decide which team I favored. Incidental to the Series was the announcement that the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants were moving to Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively, for the following season. I was delighted.

²¹Ibid., 230.

²²Ibid., 237.

²³Doyle, Passing the Torch, 146-147.

Now there would be Big League Baseball right in my own backyard. When the Soviet Union launched its first earth satellite that October, I was impressed.

The year 1958 was a quiet one in Vietnam. But this would turn out to be only a short, dormant interlude before the storm. The junior senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, began talking to his friends about a run at the Presidency.²⁴ This was also the beginning of my senior year in high school and thoughts of my future gathered importance. I began thinking more seriously of a professional military career and how I could become an officer. I flirted with the idea of going to West Point, but lacked the confidence to take the entrance examination. As my senior year began, I decided to attend San Jose State and join the ROTC, with a military career firmly in mind. Of course, baseball was still number one. The Yankees repaid the Braves by winning the Series four games to three. Hank Bauer led the Yanks with 10 hits, 4 home runs and 8 RBIs. This was the first time since 1925 that a team had rebounded from a 3-1 deficit to win the Series.

The new year dawned, and Kennedy prepared to run in the Democratic Party's primaries.²⁵ He knew a tough fight lay

²⁴David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), 12.

²⁵Ibid., 11.

ahead to the nominating convention a year and a half off. Richard Nixon was the Republican front runner. On July 8, six American advisors to South Vietnam's Seventh Infantry Division decided to watch a Jeanne Crain movie in their mess hall in Bien Hoa. Absorbed in the film, the men did not hear the six guerillas who approached their makeshift theater. As the first reel ended, Master Sergeant Chester Ovnand stood up and snapped on the lights. Rifle fire tore through the mess hall killing Ovnand and Major Dale Buis, who had arrived only two days before. The guerrillas slipped away undetected. In the countryside, assassinations of village officials rose sharply, doubling the number slain in 1958. Vigorous campaigns were mounted against schoolteachers forcing thousands of schools to close. Terrorism, sabotage, and subversion became continual, concentrated, and ominous.²⁶ The year 1959 marked my graduation from high school and entrance into college and ROTC. I was on course, and baseball was still important. The Los Angeles Dodgers, playing in Memorial Coliseum, won their first World Series over the Chicago White Sox four games to two. Unheralded Charlie Neal had 10 hits and a .370 average to lead the Dodgers.

In November 1960, three airborne battalions and one marine unit surrounded the Presidential Palace in Saigon and

²⁶Doyle, Passing the Torch, 151-152.

attempted to force Diem to reform his government. Loyal troops crushed the rebellion.²⁷ The American presidential election was also in November. John F. Kennedy won the Democratic nomination and Richard M. Nixon the Republican. For the first time, two presidential candidates debated each other on national television. I supported Nixon. As the election heated up, so did Vietnam. Insurgents attacked Can Duoc District, Tua Hai, Tay Ninh City, Can Tho, Kontum, and Long Hai.²⁸ In the closest race ever, Kennedy defeated Nixon to become the thirty-fifth President. In December, somewhere in South Vietnam, one hundred delegates representing more than a dozen political and religious groups attended a meeting that established the National Front for the Liberation of the South, the NLF.²⁹ Baseball became less important and school and ROTC took on a more serious note. But, I was still annoyed when Pittsburgh Pirate Bill Mazeroski hit a home run in the bottom of the ninth inning of the seventh game to defeat the Yankees.

President Kennedy was inaugurated on January 20, 1961. His moving speech stirred a generation. He told the world that "...the torch had been passed to a new generation of

²⁷Karnow, Vietnam, 235-236.

²⁸Ibid., 161.

²⁹Ibid., 168-169.

Americans," and that we would "...pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."³⁰ The meaning of those words were lost on me in 1961. Their significance would later move me to volunteer for combat.

Initially Kennedy continued the pattern the United States had followed through the years: he rejected withdrawal and balked at rushing into total war.³¹ In April, he agreed to send an additional one hundred American military advisors to Vietnam, bringing the total to nearly eight hundred. At the same time, he sent Frederick Nolting to Saigon as our new Ambassador, and later dispatched Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. Johnson hailed Diem as the reincarnation of Winston Churchill, but Diem at this time resisted the idea of American combat troops in his country. By October, however, when large Viet Cong forces attacked Phuoc Thanh and Darlac provinces inflicting heavy casualties on South Vietnamese troops, Diem reversed himself. He told Nolting he would welcome American troops as a "symbolic" presence.³²

³⁰Edward Lewis and Richard Rhodes, eds., John F. Kennedy: Words to Remember (n.p.: Hallmark Cards, Incorporated, 1967), 18-19.

³¹Karnow, Vietnam, 247-249.

³²Ibid., 250-251.

Also in October, Kennedy sent his military advisor, GEN Maxwell Taylor, to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission with Walt Rostow. Upon his return, Taylor proposed an initial commitment of eight thousand American troops. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara rejected Taylor's proposal as inadequate. He urged the deployment of six American divisions, some two hundred thousand men, to show the Viet Cong "we meant business."³³ I was beginning my third year at San Jose State, and it was to be the last one in which baseball held any importance at all to me. But what a year! Yankee teammates Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris competed all year in a battle of home run hitters. Babe Ruth's record of 60 homers in a season was in jeopardy as Mantle and Maris went head-to-head. After 162 games, Maris broke the Babe's record with 61 and Mantle had hit 54. The Yanks as a team had 240, and took Cincinnati in the Series four games to one.

The Military Assistance Command (MACV) was formed in South Vietnam in February 1962 with GEN Paul Harkins in command. By Christmas, American military men in the south had increased to 11,300.³⁴ Also in February, two South Vietnamese pilots bombed Diem's palace. He and his family

³³Halberstam, The Best, 169-173.

³⁴Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie (New York: Random House, 1988; Vintage Books, 1989), 38.

survived with only one minor injury.³⁵ The construction of the "strategic hamlet" program in the south also began this year. The idea was to deny the Viet Cong the support of the population by placing the villagers in fortified hamlets. It supposedly would give the peasants physical security and an opportunity for economic development. Protected by locally trained self-defense militia units, the hamlets would offer economic and social programs to win the hearts and minds of the people.³⁶ During the summer, between my junior and senior years, I attended the six-week ROTC Summer Camp at Fort Lewis, Washington. In October, the San Francisco Giants played in their first World Series against the Yankees. In the seventh game, with two on and two out in the ninth inning, Willie McCovey hit a line shot at second baseman Bobby Richardson. Richardson made the catch and the Giants' hopes died.

Turmoil marked the new year. On January 2, a South Vietnamese division was mauled at Ap Bac by a smaller Viet Cong force due to the cowardice of its officers. On this day, the Viet Cong decided to stand and fight although outnumbered ten to one.³⁷ In the end, South Vietnamese

³⁵Karnow, Vietnam, 263-264.

³⁶Terrence Maitland and Stephen Weiss, Raising the Stakes in The Vietnam Experience, ed. Robert Manning (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981-1988), 14.

³⁷Ibid., 50-51.

casualties were 80 dead and more than 100 wounded. Three American advisors were killed, eight wounded, and five helicopters were shot down. Eighteen Viet Cong were killed.³⁸ The American military advisor there, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, accused the South Vietnamese commanding general of being afraid to fight and choosing to reinforce defeat.³⁹

As the war intensified, disillusionment with Diem increased. South Vietnamese generals conspired to overthrow him with CIA support. Kennedy wired his current ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, "...that although the United States did not wish to stimulate a coup, it did not wish to thwart one either...."⁴⁰ Finally on 1 November, the generals moved against Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The Presidential Palace was surrounded, and Diem attempted to negotiate and gain time for loyal units to come to their rescue. But there were no loyal units except for the Palace guard. While the rebels took the Palace, however, the brothers slipped away through a secret tunnel. They fled to the Chinese suburb of Cholon, where they accepted from the generals a guarantee for

³⁸Sheehan, Shining Lie, 262-263.

³⁹Ibid., 259.

⁴⁰Halberstam, The Best, 287-288.

safe-conduct out of the country. Instead they were picked up and killed.⁴¹

Three weeks later, President John F. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. I spent endless hours in front of the television absorbing and trying to make sense of the unfolding events. I never did.

Up to November, the year had been a very good one for me. I met my future wife, Kathy, in January and married her on August 23. I completed my ROTC requirements in June, and had only two classes to finish in the fall semester before graduation and commissioning. My interest in baseball faded even while the Dodgers swept the Yankees in four straight. The Dodger pitching staff held the Yanks to only four runs in four games for an amazing 1.00 ERA. Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale, and Johnny Podres recorded the victories.

I graduated in January 1964, and still Vietnam was not a major concern of our government or our citizens. We had about 15,000 military advisors there, but no official troop commitment.⁴² As a brand new Second Lieutenant I did not know anything about Vietnam. Eight months later when the Tonkin Gulf incident involving the Maddox and Turner Joy occurred, I was so involved in my duties I paid little attention. I had

⁴¹Ibid., 290-291.

⁴²Karnow, Vietnam, 681.

no idea where Vietnam was. Wasn't it the country Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr sang about in The King and I?

But events changed my outlook and interest. I graduated from the basic course and was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division at Ft. Benning as the Communications Platoon Leader. This unit had a second designation: the 11th Air Assault Division (Test). The 11th was the unit designated to test and prove that airmobility worked.

The American military had used helicopters in combat since the end of World War II, but the Korean War accelerated their use in combat.⁴³ The United States Marine Corps conducted the first airmobile landings of troops. In the summer of 1951, HMR-161, the first helicopter transport squadron, airlifted troops into combat in Korea.⁴⁴ The Army, meanwhile, used helicopters to evacuate the wounded.⁴⁵ After the Korean War, LTG James Gavin wondered what had happened to the cavalry made famous by the likes of Jeb Stuart, J.F.C. Fuller, and Erwin Rommel. Commenting on GEN Walton Walker's withdrawal to Pusan in June 1950, Gavin asked "Where was the

⁴³Lynn Montross, Cavalry of the Sky (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 6.

⁴⁴Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵Frederic A. Bergerson, The Army Gets an Air Force (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 71.

cavalry? And I don't mean horses, I mean helicopters and light aircraft...."⁴⁶ In June 1956, MG Carl Hutton, Post Commander at Fort Rucker, Alabama, began to develop an armed airmobile force. He began armament experiments without the consent of his superiors because he feared the project would not be approved.⁴⁷ On January 15, 1960, the Rogers Board was established to investigate the Army's aircraft development plan and to receive industry proposals. The Board advocated immediate development of a new helicopter capable of observation, target acquisition, reconnaissance, and command and control functions. It also recommended a study to determine the practicality of an air fighting unit, and if an experimental unit should be activated.⁴⁸

When Kennedy was inaugurated as President, Robert McNamara was named Secretary of Defense. McNamara was determined to reorganize the Department of the Army and its methods of warfare. He felt that the Army aircraft procurement plan was inadequate, that there was no unified

⁴⁶James M. Gavin, "Cavalry, and I Don't Mean Horses," Harper's, April 1954, 54.

⁴⁷Jay D. Vanderpool, "We Armed the Helicopter," U.S. Army Aviation Digest, June 1971, 4.

⁴⁸Shelby L. Stanton, Anatomy of a Division (Novato: Presidio Press, 1987; Warner Books, 1989), 13.

aviation effort, and that officers with progressive airmobile ideas were not being heard.⁴⁹

On April 19, 1962, McNamara sent a blunt memorandum to Secretary of the Army Elvis Stahr ordering the Army to implement airmobility, telling how to do it, and stating who should be involved. Thus, came the formation of the U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board, the Howze Board.⁵⁰ McNamara insured that the board was not impartial in its views of the airmobile concept. All of the military personnel supported it, and the civilians were by and large positive about it.⁵¹

The Howze Board report was submitted in four months and recommended: formation of an air assault division with 459 aircraft, an air cavalry combat brigade with 316 helicopters, a corps aviation brigade with 207 aircraft to move reserves rapidly, an air transport brigade with 134 aircraft to provide logistical support to the air assault division, and a special warfare aviation brigade with 125 aircraft to support units in combat.⁵²

⁴⁹Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰Ibid., 15.

⁵¹Ibid., 16.

⁵²Ibid., 20.

When I arrived in the early summer of 1964, the 11th had been testing and training for eighteen months. The experiments were conducted in three-day and four-day operations, and this continued until the fall. Meanwhile, the war in Vietnam heated up.

American forces were still advisors supposedly with no combat role. American response to the attacks on the Maddox and Turner Joy in the Gulf of Tonkin began the slow escalation of our involvement. Aircraft from the carriers Ticonderoga and Constellation flew sixty-four sorties against four North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and a major oil storage depot. An estimated twenty-five vessels were destroyed or damaged. Two American planes were lost, including one pilot whose location was unknown. The missing pilot was Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez, Jr. from San Jose, California.⁵³

After the incident in the Tonkin Gulf, President Lyndon Johnson asked for and received authorization from Congress to take all necessary measures to repel attacks against American forces and to prevent further aggression. This Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed the Senate with only two dissenting votes and passed the House unanimously.⁵⁴

⁵³Karnow, Vietnam, 372.

⁵⁴Ibid., 374-376.

American actions tapered down after the initial attack, as President Johnson was not yet committed to the idea of war. He was, however, a believer in the domino theory and desired to stabilize the South Vietnamese government and remedy its military position in the field. He feared if Saigon fell, so would Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. As GEN Maxwell Taylor, the United States ambassador to Saigon, strove to attain these objectives the South Vietnamese government had a succession of coups and changes in leadership. From January 1964 to February 1965 this list included Khanh, Khiem, Minh, Oanh, Suu, Huong, Ky, Thieu, and Quat. These constant changes proved to Johnson that he could not count on the South Vietnamese to have the will or capacity to prevent Communist victory in the South. He had no choice but to Americanize the war.⁵⁵

After a landslide victory in the November 1964 presidential election, Johnson began to move relentlessly toward war. In January 1965 the U.S. began regular bombing of North Vietnamese bridges, railroads, and oil storage facilities.⁵⁶ In March, two battalions of U.S. Marines splashed ashore at DaNang to provide security for the huge air base there. They were the first American combat troops

⁵⁵Ibid., 386.

⁵⁶Ibid., 397.

to set foot on the Asian mainland since the end of the Korean War.⁵⁷ In May, the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade landed at Vung Tau. And in September, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) landed at Qui Nhon after thirty days at sea. By the end of the year there were more than 200,000 American troops in Vietnam.⁵⁸ We were at war. I was at war.

⁵⁷Ibid., 416.

⁵⁸Ibid., 682.

GOING BACK

New Year's Day, January 1, 1992, was a typical cold, clear winter morning in northern California. I boarded the American Airlines flight to Seattle at 8:45 a.m., and began the first leg on my trip back to my past. Just before take off the stewardess handed me a cup of coffee and without warning my hand began to shake. Why? Why now would I have uncontrollable tremblings? Whatever it was it ended at 9:04 a.m. as the Boeing 737 left the tarmac at San Jose International Airport and began the two-hour flight to Seattle.

I had not been in the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport since my return from Vietnam some twenty-three years earlier. On a warm, muggy July night in 1968 we had landed at McCord Air Force Base just outside of Seattle, grabbed our duffel bags, jumped into a cab, and headed for Sea-Tac and the first flight home. On that flight from Cam Ranh Bay I had vowed never to return to Vietnam. Never again did I want to step back into that country with its oppressive heat, unmerciful jungle, blood-sucking leeches, biting red ants, bone-soaking monsoons, and inscrutable people. But now I was going back. Now I was retracing my steps. First Sea-Tac, then Vietnam. How did I get myself into this?

It had started two years earlier. I had decided to return to San Jose State University for my master's degree in history. The first class I signed up for was History 161, the Vietnam Wars. This was the one class I decided I had to take in order to find out what really happened some twenty-five years ago. Maybe this class would help me understand why I had continual flashbacks and memories. I had run into a Veterans Administration counselor in 1983 who told me it was natural for Vietnam veterans to experience flashbacks ten to fifteen years after returning home.

Midway through the semester I asked the instructor to be my thesis advisor because I wanted to write about a part of the war. He agreed and suggested I go back to Vietnam and record my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions and compare them with my memories from the war itself. I said to myself: "Are you kidding? Go back? There is no way in hell I would go back!"

But time changes one's attitudes and perspective, and as the months passed so did my opposition to the idea. It started to make sense; then an urgency began to surround it. I had to go back! It was the only way to put the war behind me. I had to go back and confront whatever it was that was eating away at me. Maybe I could find that young captain and tell him his war was over; it was time to go home. Maybe then the flashbacks and memories would finally fade.

But right now I was on a jet bound for Seattle and trying to cope with my emotions. Forty minutes into the flight, with no warning or apparent reason, I began to cry. Cry? I do not cry! Why now? I did not know, but I was on my way to confront whatever was out there. And I thought I knew what it was.

At Sea-Tac I was met by my cousin Barbara who reminded me of my last trip to Vietnam in 1967. She and her husband, Sam, had driven me to Oakland Army Base for my flight to Southeast Asia. They then drove my wife, Kathy, and daughter, Krissy, to San Francisco Airport for their flight to Los Angeles, where they would wait out my twelve-month tour.

Now, we were in a Sea-Tac coffee shop reliving old memories. Guilt returned as Barbara reminded me how upset Kathy had been because I was going back to war. I had volunteered for Vietnam and had not told her. I had felt it was my duty to return. I had left Vietnam the first time after only six months in country. My two-year tour of duty had ended and I returned to the United States. But remorse for leaving my men, for not completing my obligation began to set in. I was an infantry officer trained to lead men in combat. I had to go back and finish what I had started. So I applied for extended active duty and was assigned to Ft.

Lewis, Washington, on 1 October 1966. In December I volunteered to return to Vietnam.

Kathy understood my sense of duty; she did not understand being left out of the decision-making process. I had hurt her and she was angry with me. She decided to return to school, finish her Bachelor's degree and get a teaching credential. While at Cal State-Northridge, she became an anti-war advocate. She backed Eugene McCarthy and then Robert Kennedy for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. She mailed me anti-war literature, including excerpts from McCarthy's and Kennedy's speeches. In addition, she sent me The Arrogance of Power by Senator J. William Fulbright and The Bitter Heritage by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. I was still pro-war, fiercely anti-Communist, and a believer in the "domino theory." Also, I was in the midst of the war fighting for what I believed in. The chasm developing between us reflected that which was dividing the country in 1967-1968.

I never did apologize or explain my actions to her before she died on June 4, 1972.

Those memories flooded over me as Barbara and I talked. But in time it was necessary to say good-bye and board my flight to Thailand. The flight across the Pacific was long and uneventful and I landed at Bangkok International Airport at 10:00 p.m. on January 2. Checking through customs was

quick and easy, and I was in my hotel within thirty minutes. Due to the time change and just plain anxiety I slept very little. Morning seemed to arrive quickly, however, and I was on my way back to the airport by 8:30 a.m. Then it was wait, move; wait, move. Wait in line to have your baggage x-rayed, move quickly to the check-in counter; wait in line to check in, then move quickly through customs; walk a long distance to Gate 46, then wait for eighty minutes for the plane; hurry up and board, then wait on the tarmac. It reminded me of the Army mentality: "hurry up and wait."

Ironically, even Gate 46 recalled the War. It was in the airport's remote wing, far off by itself, as if no one cared about it and wanted to forget it. The same way the American people wanted to forget the War's veterans. Push them off to the side. Put them someplace where they were not seen on a continuous basis, where they were not a constant reminder of a failed undertaking. Ignore Gate 46 and maybe no one would know it was there. Ignore them and maybe they would go away.

So I arrived at Gate 46 and waited. At 10:15 a.m. we boarded the Thai Airline jet and at 10:40 a.m. it took off from the friendly confines of Bangkok International destined for Ho Chi Minh City. I was really going to go through with this. But, at least, it would not be like the first time.

Twenty-seven years earlier I was on the troopship General Simon B. Buckner sailing from Charleston, South Carolina, through the Panama Canal to Vietnam. We were the first American Army division to be committed to the conflict. We had no idea what lay ahead.

I was with a few thousand other G.I.s, armed, cocky, and feeling in control of the situation. We had set sail on 15 August 1965 intent on winning the war by Christmas.⁵⁹ It was an exciting adventure for most of us. We were America's finest: charter members of the new 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). We had spent the previous four weeks packing our equipment for movement and searching surplus stores in Columbus, Georgia, for individual weapons such as K-Bar knives in case we had to kill "Charlie" close up. We had been organized originally as the 11th Air Assault Division (TEST) at the recommendation of the Howze Board report of 20 August 1962.⁶⁰

The test unit was activated on 15 February 1963 at Fort Benning, Georgia.⁶¹ We had trained for two years just waiting

⁵⁹1LT Al Conetto to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Conetto, 12 August 1965. Transcript in the hand of Al Conetto, San Jose, California. Subsequent references to personal letters in the author's possession will be designated [Conetto Letters].

⁶⁰LTG John J. Tolson, Airmobility 1961-1971 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 22.

⁶¹Ibid., 51.

for the opportunity to demonstrate our prowess. In March 1965 it was tentatively decided to convert the 11th Air Assault to a permanent component of the Army.⁶² Finally, on 1 July 1965 the 11th was officially activated as the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). On 28 July, President Lyndon Johnson announced on national television that he was sending the 1st Cav to Vietnam.⁶³ That was our chance. We packed, boarded the train to Charleston, loaded on to our troopship, and headed for Southeast Asia.

Thirty days at sea had us foot soldiers eager to get off that rusting, World War II bucket of bolts and get ashore. Our only previous excitement was worrying whether an enemy submarine might try to sink us before we arrived. The fact that the North Vietnamese did not have submarines did not enter our consciousness. We were bored with the lack of meaningful activity, stuffed with too much rich food, physically out of shape, but mentally ready to go. We were foot soldiers and we wanted our feet on terra firma, now!

Forty-eight hours from the coast of Vietnam, we began preparations for a "hot" beach landing. We were ordered to take the beach with necessary force, then air assault along

⁶²Ibid., 61.

⁶³John D. Pomfret, "Johnson Orders 50,000 More Men to Vietnam and Doubles Draft; Again Urges U.N. to Seek Peace," New York Times, 29 July 1965, p. 1, 11, and 12.

Highway 19 to secure it for the movement of our logistical support to the division's new base camp at An Khe. We were very aware that the French Mobile Group 100 had been destroyed by the Viet Minh on this same road on 24 June 1954.⁶⁴ Now we were going to secure it so that our road-bound vehicles would not meet the same fate.

At 0600H on the warm, clear morning of 13 September 1965, the first elements of the 1st Cav disembarked at Qui Nhon.⁶⁵ Similar to World War II landings, the troops maneuvered down rope ladders and into assault landing craft. Most of us carried more than fifty pounds of equipment on our backs and we were ready for anything the enemy might throw at us. The assault boats filled with their human cargo and headed for the beach. We passed the line of departure and locked and loaded our weapons. Our time was now. This was our hour, our moment. In what seemed an instant, the LCIs edged up to the beach, lowered their ramps, and thousands of America's finest charged forward amid shouts, screams, curses, and anticipation. As we surged forward looking for somebody to kill, anybody to kill, we were met by General William C. Westmoreland and the United States Army band. A

⁶⁴Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy, 4th ed. (Harrisburg: The Stackpole Company, 1961), 207.

⁶⁵1LT Al Conetto to Mr. and Mrs. James Mace, 19 September 1965. [Conetto Letters].

collective groan could be heard as we were lined up and channelled onto waiting Chinook helicopters and flown into An Khe. Highway 19 had been safeguarded, An Khe was secure, and we meekly filed in and out of Chinooks to await further orders. It was our first day in Vietnam, but none would ever be this easy again. I had not even seen a Vietnamese. We began to build our base camp, pull perimeter security, acclimate to the countryside, and prepare to meet the enemy.

But for now I was on a Thai Airlines jet heading for Ho Chi Minh City. One hour and forty-five minutes after take off, the plane's tires made contact with Vietnamese earth and I was back. Unlike my first landing with a battalion, now I was alone, unarmed, apprehensive, and definitely not feeling in control. I did not have the protection of the United States Army and government behind me. I was an American citizen in a country not recognized by our government, and not authorized for visit by our citizens. An uneasiness settled in. I was alone in a Communist country ruled by my former victorious enemy.

We disembarked from the Thai Airlines jet at 12:31 p.m. January 3, 1992. I had returned after twenty-three years. As we left the plane, a bus met us for the drive to the terminal. Saigon was still hot and very sticky and humid, the way I remembered it, and the other thing that remained the same was the smell. The smell of Vietnam was unlike

anything I had ever experienced before or since. I recalled it from my first two times in country, and now it returned to me in a rush. The closest description would be the smell of something rotting, of everything rotting. We clamored aboard the bus for the short ride to the terminal, and as I got off I decided to take a picture of the Tan Son Nhut airport sign. I fumbled with my camera as the rest of the passengers moved towards customs. As I focused on the sign, a uniformed Vietnamese moved towards me and signalled for me to hurry up and join the others. I was in his country. I moved quickly.

Tan Son Nhut was desolate, dilapidated and dirty. It looked like it had not seen any maintenance for twenty years. There were scores of uniformed Vietnamese, male and female, just sitting around talking while we went through customs and waited for our bags. There seemed to be more of them than us, but most of them were doing nothing. The process of entering the country was tedious and long with an endless list of forms to be completed. When that was accomplished there was a delay in getting our baggage off the aircraft and through X-ray again. Automation had not yet replaced manpower here.

While I waited for my bags I noticed a remarkable lack of activity at this facility considering it was the main hub into the southern part of Vietnam. No other aircraft landed while I was there, and no foreign airliners could be seen on

the tarmac. Only a few Russian-made Air Vietnam jets lingered on the ground. The last time I had been in Tan Son Nhut was in 1965, when I was transferred from the 1st Cavalry Division to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Then the airport bustled with American servicemen coming and going to all parts of the country, or arriving from and departing for home. American and South Vietnamese fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft were continuously taking off and landing. It was hectic. But now there was nothing. The only reminders of an American presence were some unused helicopter revetments I spotted as we were making our runway approach.

An hour and a half after landing I exited the terminal area and was met by my guide for the trip into the city and to my hotel. The drive through Saigon, or rather Ho Chi Minh City, was uneventful, yet deeply significant in a personal way. The city was teeming with people, more than six million of them. Motor scooters, bicycles, and pedicabs were the major forms of transportation. And my driver constantly hit his horn to clear a way. What we would consider rude behavior, the constant blaring of a car horn, was acceptable to and expected by them. It would take some getting used to on my part.

My initial impression of Ho Chi Minh City-Saigon as we drove to the hotel was that it had certainly seen better days. There was an apparent lack of maintenance; the

buildings were filthy and in bad disrepair. The outskirts of the city were dirty and in a decaying state; I wondered what the main downtown area would look like. But there was no battle damage from the city's fall in April, 1975.

I checked into my hotel, unpacked, and thought about the last few days. I had left home in California, flown 10,000 miles, crossed the International Dateline, and just like the war years had landed in another country and another culture, without any transition period. I had to stop, take note of the past seventy-two hours, and sort out my feelings and impressions.

My first response was, "It's Saigon, it's Vietnam, but it's not the Vietnam I remember." The Vietnam I remembered was a Vietnam with a jungle, a Vietnam with hills, a Vietnam with the rhythm of war, endless patrols and air assaults. I didn't remember a Vietnam with Saigon and bars and restaurants and city.

As night closed on Ho Chi Minh City, I sat alone in my room thinking. It was Vietnam again, and it was dark. I remembered the blackness of previous nights in a hostile countryside. In November and December 1967, in the wee hours of the morning, usually 0100H or 0200H, I woke my troops and got them ready to move out on a cordon and search mission somewhere in the Bong Son Plain. We moved in total darkness, marched for hours through wretched terrain, then circled a

village located by itself somewhere in "Indian country."
There were countless missions like this. They all began in the complete darkness of the early morning, involved harrowing movement through enemy territory, and centered on a village that intelligence sources determined contained the enemy. They were all the same, except one.

SERGEANT MCDONALD

It was black. 0100 hours. The troops mumbled and bitched as they woke from a short, uncomfortable sleep. Equipment banging together broke the quiet, still night as they saddled up for a cordon and search operation. Thirty minutes after the wake up call, Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) moved out from its hillside encampment in the Bong Son Plain and headed towards its objective four kilometers away. Navigation in the 'Nam at night was difficult at best. The terrain was treacherous: full of marsh, swamps, rice paddies and, worst of all, booby traps. I had briefed my platoon leaders the afternoon before on this cordon and search operation, selected the lead platoon, and gave specific areas of responsibility for each segment of the assignment. We had done many of these operations in the past so minimal orders were needed to accomplish the mission. Additionally, my officers, NCOs, and enlisted men were highly professional, motivated, and knowledgeable.

The lead platoon always selected one of its best soldiers to be point man during these night operations due to the difficulties in navigation. He would be our "eyes and ears" until we got to our objective.

We moved out, single file, snaking down the hillside, each man two to three feet behind the man in front. It was not wise to lose contact after dark in Vietnam and get separated from your unit because "Charlie" ruled the night. Our progress was slow and most of the march towards our destination was uneventful. We moved quietly, slowly, and steadily along. The men were accustomed to this type of duty, so in many ways it was routine to them.

About 200 meters from our objective, however, in an area where the sand resembled fresh powdered snow, my point man hit booby traps. There was that muffled, sickening explosion and then the dreaded cry "Medic! Medic!" Sound seems to travel fast in the dark and I was on the radio immediately asking my lead platoon leader what had happened, what was the situation, injury report, etc. He replied that four men were down from shrapnel wounds, the severity of which were unknown. My company medic moved forward to help the injured men and I also moved forward to observe first hand the situation and determine my alternatives.

"Doc," as every company medic was called, indicated to me that although the wounds were not life threatening, they could become serious without proper and timely medical attention. I only had one decision to make: call for a medevac and hope some crew was crazy enough to fly "blind" in the darkness. Normally pilots would guide on terrain

features when flying during the day, but there were none at night, only instruments. And this was hostile country. It would take a daring team to fly in this situation, but Cav pilots were known to go the extra mile for one of their own. I radioed Battalion headquarters, informed them of my predicament, and requested DUST OFF. Sure enough, within minutes I could hear the familiar "whoop whoop" of chopper blades and the pilot was on my company frequency requesting light on the landing zone. We gathered flashlights, set security, and prepared an LZ for the Huey as close as possible to the wounded men. One of my men guided the pilot using the flashlights and in no time the bird was on the ground. It took only seconds for my troopers to carry the wounded to the chopper and for it to lift off and head for the nearest hospital unit.

Once again the advantages of being assigned to the Cav were evident: availability of rotary winged aircraft and the willingness to risk one's life for someone else in the same command. We were all 1st Cavalrymen and proud of it. It is doubtful that any other unit could have had those men lifted out before dawn, because no other division had a medevac unit as part of its TO&E.

My concern now was that our position and mission might have been compromised. It was necessary, therefore, to move towards the village as quickly as possible. Also, we

confronted a rapidly approaching sunrise. So speed was imperative. We hastily reorganized and headed towards the village at a quickened pace. Within minutes the silence of the still, early morning was shattered again, this time by M-16 gunfire. My lead platoon had observed three Viet Cong running from our objective and fired at them. They missed all three. Now it was clear we had been detected and any chance for a successful operation was deteriorating fast. But we continued on and the cordon was effectively in place just after 0600H. The sun had risen over the nearby hills, but we had stopped any more villagers from escaping. I radioed Battalion and informed them that three suspects had escaped, but that the cordon was now secure. It was turning out to be one rotten morning: four friendly WIAs and three escaped VC. I was not in a good mood. Frustrated and angry would best describe my disposition.

With the cordon secure, Battalion began the morning delivery of supplies to my company. Usually this meant fresh coffee and breakfast: dehydrated eggs, bacon or sausage, and toast all served hot in mermite cans. We ate and waited for the South Vietnamese National Police to arrive. They were the ones who conducted the actual questioning of the villagers and searched the village. My unit's responsibility was only to secure the cordon.

Within thirty minutes a CH-47 (Chinook) approached my position with the National Police on board. I briefed their leader as to what had happened earlier expressing my conviction that this was an enemy village and that these people knew something. I based these two accusations on our earlier encounter with the booby trap and the three escaping Viet Cong. As we continued to eat breakfast, the Police began to round up the villagers for government propaganda and questioning. Since the indoctrination and interrogation were always in Vietnamese, we had no idea what they said to the peasants, nor did we care. This process usually lasted a few hours, so cordon and search operations became pretty lackadaisical for us after the initial phase was completed. One half of my unit relaxed while the other half stood guard as the Police proceeded with their operation. With boots, socks, and shirts off my men soaked up the sun, read, wrote letters home, or caught up on sleep lost from the night before.

It soon became evident that the Police were meeting resistance from the villagers. This did not set well with me. I was convinced these people knew something. About mid-morning the South Vietnamese commander informed me that his unit had found nothing. I again emphasized my conviction that these villagers had information about the Viet Cong operating in the area. The villagers had to know where booby

traps were because they did not detonate them, just us. Also, there was guilt by association. If Viet Cong were in the village at night, the villagers had to know about them. He indicated he understood, but that his men could not turn up anything; the villagers were not talking.

At this time, without my knowledge, one of my NCOs, SFC Roger McDonald, grabbed a Vietnamese girl and dragged her behind a thatched hut. She was about thirteen, 5 feet tall, with a cherubic face. A face of innocence. Initially, McDonald was not sure of my reaction, so he kept her out of my view to do his own interrogation. Later he explained what happened.

McDonald lit a Marlboro cigarette with his Zippo lighter, took a deep drag on it to get the ash hot, and asked her in pidgin English where the VC were. When she said she did not know, he burned her inner wrist with the cigarette. Again McDonald asked her the VC's location, again she denied any knowledge, and again he burned her. After the third time, she volunteered the location of some Viet Cong. McDonald came to me with the girl in tow. He explained what he had done and what the girl had said. I rounded up a squad of my men, a couple of National Policemen, and we headed towards the area in the village the girl had described as the enemy's hideout. As we neared the hole, the South Vietnamese began yelling to the VC urging them to give up their arms and

surrender. Threats of gas, grenades, and rifle fire were used. Finally, three enemy soldiers came out of the hole, wearing black pajamas, with their hands up, but without weapons. The high-pitched, staccato screeching of Vietnamese on both sides dominated the ensuing interrogation. The Police would shriek a question and the VC would yell back that they were only villagers and did not know anything. Then the Police would kick, punch or slap them, and the VC would scream in pain. This continued until one of the suspects finally broke. It always was only a matter of time. He would begin to talk, and eventually lead us to another hole and more "Charlies." The routine process of interrogation, denial, torture, pain, breaking down, and talking continued until we had twenty-one Viet Cong suspects in our possession. I was now feeling happier. The loss of four men was easier to accept now that we had prisoners to send back to the rear. We had accomplished our mission.

Sergeant McDonald was an interesting story. He came to the Cav from the 173rd Airborne Brigade by way of the 101st Airborne Division. In the fall of 1965, he was in Saigon to identify some 173rd casualties. He told his driver to park the jeep, go have a beer, and meet him back at 1600H. When he finished his business and his driver did not show, McDonald went looking for him in the bars on Tu Do Street. He walked into the Asia Bar and saw three Vietnamese beating

his driver with bamboo poles. Mac drew his .45 pistol and shot them. One of the dead turned out to be Premier Nguyen Cao Ky's cousin. Mac's superior officer at the 173rd quickly gave him an Article 15 and shipped him out to the 101st at Phan Rang. The 173rd told the Vietnamese that Mac had been sent to the military prison at Fort Leavenworth.

McDonald was a career soldier, a master parachutist who loved this war. In his mid-30s then, he was old only in experience. He was the kind we called "hardcore" or "strac," a compliment meaning tough, strong, motivated, competent, and knowledgeable. He was a true leader, the type I always wanted with me when the going got rough. He had been in country for a total of three tours, only going home for 30-day leaves between the tours. Eventually, my Battalion Commander, LTC Wilbur G. Jenkins, refused to allow McDonald to extend in Vietnam for a fourth tour, and sent him home with the admonition to "Go see your wife and kids." McDonald may have been a little wacky, but he was one great NCO and his departure left a gigantic void in my unit. I had come to rely on his advice, and I missed him.

My troops tied up, tagged, and organized the suspects for pickup and delivery to the rear while I reported to my Battalion Commander. As it worked out he was flying over my position in his command and control chopper; so as I described the operation, he could see the village and the

surrounding terrain. Suddenly, as I was relaying the details of our success to him, rounds began cracking over my head. There were shouts and yelling, grenades, and heavy rifle fire. My commander asked what the hell was going on, and all I could muster was, "I don't know, sir!" I then threw my hand mike down and rushed toward the area of action. I could hear my heart beating in my chest and I was short of breath. The adrenaline was really flowing. I shouted "Cease fire, cease fire!" In a clearing, about twenty-five yards from my previous position, I came across a dozen National Police and one of my platoons. In between them lay the bodies of five Viet Cong. From what I could piece together from my men and the Police, the VC had emerged from a spider hole directly between the two friendly units. Evidently they were attempting to escape from our cordon. They emerged firing hand-held weapons and throwing grenades. Most of the grenades were duds, and their pistols were no match for my unit's M-16s and the Policemen's carbines. All five VC died in a hail of gunfire, some with their heads blown completely off. Fortunately, none of the friendlies were injured although bullets were going everywhere.

As a fitting end to this operation I coaxed one of my men to take pictures of me kneeling among the five dead bodies. I wanted a souvenir of this operation. I urged him to hurry with the snapshots as my stomach was becoming

unsettled. The stench was horrendous. The Army did not print this roll of film when I turned it in. It disappeared. I found out later that there was an unwritten rule not to print pictures of dead VC, especially if it looked like we had mutilated, tortured, disfigured, or in some way mistreated the bodies. Even then the military was concerned about our mission in Vietnam and in no way wanted to bring attention to anything resembling a massacre.

I have often thought back to this operation and have come to realize that in many ways this village and its reluctance to turn over the enemy to us epitomized the futility of the Vietnam War. We were not defenders of freedom, we were invaders. The Vietnamese peasant did not welcome us just because we were Americans. The only ones who did were the bar girls on Tu Do Street and the politicians whose offices we safeguarded. The peasants did not trust us or the ARVN because once we left the area "Charlie" was in charge again. They probably did not trust "Charlie" either, but he had a greater hold on them because of his constant presence.

I have also thought about McDonald's mis-treatment of that girl and, how I as a commander, could have condoned it or overlooked it. Obviously, McDonald was not sure how I would react because he did the torture out of my sight. The more I thought about it the more I realized that I wanted

satisfaction from that village for the earlier loss of four men. I wanted revenge, and if it was necessary to torture innocent civilians to obtain that end, then so be it. I felt nothing for that little girl, nothing. Today I find curious my absence of emotion. Although I had a daughter at home, I made no connection between the two and the plight of one Vietnamese teenager was unimportant in the war. She was not a human, just an object. I had lost four men and it was necessary to make up for that. Only killing and capturing the enemy was important to me. If a few innocent Vietnamese civilians became casualties because of my desire to kill the enemy, that was the way it would have to be.

Once a soldier makes the enemy human, he is finished as part of a killing machine. We were taught at the Infantry School at Fort Benning that the mission of the infantry is "...to close with the enemy and kill or capture him." The enemy is an object to be destroyed, not a human to be loved. So, I had absorbed that lesson, that basic rule, without realizing that just as I made others less than human, so did my men and I become less than human, too. Perhaps that is the saddest fact of war. Perhaps that is what makes war possible.

THE HUMP

After I decided to make a trip back to Vietnam, I listed the areas I most wanted to see. The most important was Bien Hoa, the former home of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the area of many of my most vivid memories: Bien Hoa and specifically Camp Ray, the Brigade base camp. Bien Hoa had been the site of a major American air base, and the 173rd had occupied a portion of its northwest perimeter. It was the center of my universe for only a few months in 1965 and 1966, but those were intense months: forays into the Iron Triangle, War Zone D, and Xuan Loc. We had made contact with and killed many enemy soldiers in that time. The biggest battle of my combat experience, as it turned out, was fought while I was assigned to the 173rd in Bien Hoa: HUMP.

I arrived in Bien Hoa on 6 October 1965 at 1700H, and reported into Company A, 1st Battalion (Airborne) 503rd Infantry, by 1800H.⁶⁶ I had been transferred to the 173rd from the 1st Cav as part of a new policy called the Officer Infusion Program.⁶⁷ Although I was proud to be a charter

⁶⁶1LT Al Conetto to Mr. and Mrs. James Mace, 17 October 1965. [Conetto Letters].

⁶⁷1LT Al Conetto to Mr. and Mrs. James Mace, 19 September 1965. [Conetto Letters].

member of the Cav, now I was with the Army's most elite unit: the airborne.

The 173rd had been activated on 25 June 1963 and assigned to the Ryukyan Islands with an authorized strength of 3530 officers and men.⁶⁸ Its mission was to be the Army's response force for the western Pacific theater. It would quickly drop onto an objective by parachute and hold it until reinforced by a larger force. The Brigade conducted extensive airborne, guerrilla, and jungle warfare training in Okinawa, Taiwan, Korea, and Thailand. It had received the nickname "Sky Soldiers," or "Tien Bing," from its many airborne exercises conducted in Taiwan. By the end of 1963 more than 10,719 parachute jumps had been made and six field exercises conducted.⁶⁹

On 5 May 1965, the 173rd became the first American Army unit assigned to Vietnam.⁷⁰ Its initial missions were to protect the Bien Hoa airfield and the Vung Tau seaport, to keep the enemy off balance until more American units arrived, to assist the ARVN, to protect the entry of U.S. units in country and orient them, and to open up and pacify the

⁶⁸Department of the Army, 24 Military History Detachment, 173rd Airborne Brigade History (APO San Francisco 96250: 30 April 1968).

⁶⁹Shelby L. Stanton, The Rise and Fall of an American Army (Novato: Presidio Press, 1985), 45.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 46.

countryside.⁷¹ One battalion was assigned to Bien Hoa and one to Vung Tau in order to accomplish the first mission. By early June, however, the Brigade was back together and incorporated the crack 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment to bring it up to its TO&E strength. It would now train for offensive operations.⁷²

After initially conducting movements around Bien Hoa and Vung Tau, the Brigade expanded its area of operations to War Zone D, Phuoc Tay, Pleiku-Kontum, Ben Cat (Iron Triangle), Phuoc Vinh, Di An, Phu Loc, and Phu Loi.⁷³ All were preludes to the first major unit engagement of the war between the American Army and the Viet Cong.

The Brigade Commander, Brigadier General Ellis Williamson, named the operation HUMP to signify the halfway point in the twelve-month tour for members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The unit had deployed to Vietnam on 5 May 1965.⁷⁴ HUMP began on 5 November.

The 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry and 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment would air assault into War Zone D

⁷¹MG Ellis Williamson interview by John Carland, January 1993, 1.

⁷²Stanton, Rise and Fall, 46.

⁷³Department of the Army, 173rd Airborne Brigade History.

⁷⁴Bob Breen, First To Fight (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1988), 103.

and search for the Viet Cong's Q762 Regiment and D.800 Battalion rumored operating in the area. Intelligence gathered prior to the operation revealed that the region was a Viet Cong stronghold. The Brigade S-2 estimated that the enemy could mass up to 8500 men within 48 hours. Their armaments reportedly included 81mm and 82mm mortars, 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles, and 50 caliber and 30 caliber machine guns.⁷⁵ The 2/503rd would remain at Bien Hoa.

At 1245H on D Day, the 1/503rd air assaulted into War Zone D near the intersection of two rivers, the Song Be and the Song Dong Nai. The LZ had been heavily saturated by intense artillery and helicopter gunship fire. We boarded UH-1D transport helicopters at the "Snake Pit," the Brigade's assembly area, for movement to the LZ. By 1335H the battalion was on the ground⁷⁶ at LZ King with no opposition and began sweeping north-northwest with the Song Be to our east and the Song Dong Nai to the south.⁷⁷ The terrain initially consisted of low paddies, but as the units moved, small hill masses came into view. These hills seldom

⁷⁵Department of the Army, Headquarters, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate), Combat Operations After Action Report, by 2LT Leo J. Mercier (APO U.S. Forces 96250, 19 December 1965), 2.

⁷⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷⁷Breen, First to Fight, 112.

exceeded seventy feet. The vegetation on the LZ was tall grass and reeds that stood six to ten feet high. As the units progressed, the terrain became semi-jungle with thick undergrowth near stream beds. The first layer of canopy was thick reaching a height of forty to fifty feet; the second was 250 feet high.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the 1/RAR air assaulted south of the Song Dong Nai at LZ Princess and prepared to conduct operations to the south and east.⁷⁹

We spent the rest of the day sweeping the immediate area around the LZ encountering only light sniper fire. Walt Disney nature photographer and noted outdoorsman, Chuck Keen, was on the operation with the 1/503rd. He remarked that "until now he would have called anyone a dam [sic] liar that told him it would take most of the day to cover 800 meters in any kind of terrain. But there we were, just 800 meters from where we landed and preparing to secure the perimeter for the night."⁸⁰

The Aussies swept south and east. Both units encountered jungle with "wait-a-minute" vines. These vines grow vertically as well as horizontally and invariably caught

⁷⁸Department of the Army, Headquarters, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate), Critique of Operation Hump, by BG Ellis W. Williamson (APO U.S. Forces 96250, 19 November 1965), 2.

⁷⁹Breen, First to Fight, 111.

⁸⁰COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

on pieces of equipment as we bent to go underneath them. They hooked onto almost anything; and as you moved forward, they restrained you then jerked you back. In other words, two steps forward, one step back. The point man in each unit used a machete to cut a path through the jungle, but he could not get all the vines. So for the rest of us it was two steps forward, one step back; two steps forward, one step back. Men cursed as the vines dragged them back, and it echoed up and down the column. Progress was very slow. The heat and humidity were oppressive. Sunlight seldom speared through the canopy, so the moisture never evaporated; the ground remained wet and soggy and the humidity high. Fighting 100 degree heat was one thing, but 100 per cent humidity was another. Sweat quickly soaked through our uniforms, burned our eyes, and dehydrated us. Water became a precious commodity. The jungle has never been a pleasant place for American soldiers with fifty pounds of equipment on their backs and steel pots on their heads. And it never will be.

On D+1, 6 November, we continued our north-northwest movement with platoon-sized patrols operating out of company patrol bases. We made only light contact.⁸¹

⁸¹Department of the Army, Critique of Operation Hump, 3.

After the order for Operation HUMP was issued, but shortly before the air assault began, the Brigade's Radio Research Unit held a special briefing with the Battalion Commander, the three Company Commanders, and the Battalion S-2 and S-3. They were told that if they received the code word "Applejack" followed by map grid coordinates, that area was to be reconnoitered and findings reported. American forces had used radio direction finding equipment to locate enemy command and control sites in War Zone D. "Applejack" meant that such a site had been found and Brigade wanted to know what was there. This information was not to be disseminated below the company commander level.⁸²

We neared the base of Hill 65 in the late afternoon of the 7th, (D+2), although we had been drained by the humidity, slowed by the terrain, and frustrated by the vines. We set up base camp just east of the hill in a dense jungle with a wide dirt road, equivalent to the size of an American two-lane street, running north-south through the eastern portion of the perimeter. The road would play a significant role later.

⁸²COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters]; COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 31 May 1993. [Conetto Letters].

Bravo and Charlie Companies secured defensive positions west of the road and Alpha Company deployed east of it. We hooked up with Bravo to the north and Charlie to the south.

As we set up our defensive perimeter, Brigade encrypted and transmitted "Applejack" to Battalion. With little daylight remaining, Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel John Tyler initiated recon patrols from B and C. They found nothing. Two platoon patrols from each company were dispatched the next morning to find and fix the Viet Cong position.⁸³

At first light, D+3, platoon-sized patrols from each company moved out to search for the enemy. My platoon was facing almost due east, so my patrol went towards the river. Bravo, led by CPT Lowell Bittrich, and Charlie, led by CPT Henry Tucker, sent patrols in the direction of the "Applejack" coordinates since their units were the closest. Charlie Company made contact first. Approximately one hundred yards beyond the point reached by the patrol the previous night, 1LT Ben Waller and his 2nd platoon came across a primitive Viet Cong village. It was 0800H. Waller ordered an immediate search of the area and found it was deserted.⁸⁴ He then moved his unit "forty more yards into the

⁸³COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

⁸⁴James M. Hutchens, Beyond Combat (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 101.

jungle when the whole earth seemed to erupt furiously" in front of them. Claymore mines exploded all around the platoon, and interlocking machine gun fire rained down with deadly accuracy. Young men, who only seconds before had been strong and daring, now lay lifeless, their bodies torn apart.⁸⁵

At about the same time, 2LT Sam Russ and his 1st platoon found a similar camp set up. He split his unit in half with one searching to the left, one to the right. His point man, PFC Julius House, began checking a clothes line. An NCO hollered to him to watch out for booby traps, and then 2LT Russ ordered the unit to join up again. SSG Andrew Matosky, a squad leader, then saw 10-15 enemy soldiers coming down a trail towards his position. They were talking and carrying weapons, but did not see him. He fired and got most of them on the first burst. PFC House was then hit in the arm by enemy fire.⁸⁶ Matosky fired the first shot of the battle; House received the first wound. The whole front then opened up with small arms, machine gun fire, and grenades. Waller and Russ were effectively pinned down, with Waller's unit surrounded. CPT Tucker moved up with his reserve

⁸⁵Ibid., 102.

⁸⁶Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993. Personal interview notes of 1/503rd officers and NCOs, January 1966, 9-10. [Conetto Letters].

platoon to join his battered forces and attempt to secure a company perimeter.⁸⁷ His unit ended up split into four elements, unable to link up with each other.

At 0830H LTC Tyler ordered Bravo Company to secure Charlie's right flank and Alpha Company to return to the Battalion patrol base. CPT Bittrich moved his company towards CPT Tucker's location, but was not able initially to link up with the beleaguered Charlie Company. All three of Bittrich's platoons came under enemy fire from heavily fortified positions. LT Mike DeFrancesco's 1st platoon reported incoming incendiary grenades just before his RTO was hit by automatic fire and killed. The VC then blew bugles and charged. 1st platoon cut them down. Three men in LT Bob Frakes's 2nd platoon were wounded by mortar fire, so he split his unit in half leading one group forward and leaving one to guard the wounded. His two elements were then hit by another bugle charge. Frakes reported that every one of his men had been shot at least once.⁸⁸ 2LT Clair Thurston, 3rd platoon leader, attempted to tie in with Company C. He observed a small group of eight men from C cut off from the rest of their unit. Thurston led an assault to get to the men and was shot in the head by machine gun fire.⁸⁹ As CPT Bittrich

⁸⁷Ibid., 19-20.

⁸⁸Ibid., 1-3.

⁸⁹Ibid., 4-5.

maneuvered his unit to link up with C Company, his paratroopers were now also split up and divided into four separate elements.

All during the morning and afternoon as Charlie Company found itself under a constant and intense enemy fire, one man distinguished himself above all others: SP5 Lawrence Joel, Charlie Company's senior medic. Wounded twice in the leg, he hobbled about in the heaviest fighting to aid his fallen buddies. He "...crammed battle dressings into sucking chest wounds, jabbed morphine syrettes to comfort those already drunk with pain, gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation amid blood and vomit as he breathed life into the near dead."⁹⁰

Joel's exploits on Hill 65 were not to go unrewarded. LTC Tyler recommended, and one year later President Lyndon Johnson bestowed upon him, the nation's highest and most coveted combat award: the Congressional Medal of Honor.

When he was told that he had been recommended for the Medal, Joel thought for a moment and said: "I sure hope I get it. That means my son can go to West Point."⁹¹

But before B and C linked up, and as the battle raged near Hill 65, it became apparent that not only were Bravo and Charlie pinned down, but that the artillery and air strikes

⁹⁰Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 112.

⁹¹Ibid., 113.

could not get close enough to dislodge the enemy force. They were surrounded. The situation was grave and reports from the Company Commanders were vague as neither wanted to broadcast his actual dilemma in case the enemy was monitoring the frequency. LTC Tyler had good reason to believe that both Company Commanders were wounded or dead as most radio traffic was between radio operators and not the Commanders themselves.⁹²

About 1300H, LTC Tyler decided to commit his reserve company--us. His orders to CPT Walter B. Daniel, Company A commanding officer, were short and to the point. You "...must take the pressure off B and C Companies....There is no help on the way, do not, I repeat, do not become decisively engaged."⁹³

LTC Tyler's list of options was short. The 1/RAR was already fighting the enemy and could not support us. General Westmoreland had designated the 2/503rd as the general reserve for all of Vietnam. So Company A was it; the battalion was on its own.⁹⁴

We were to move up Hill 65 and relieve pressure on B and C Companies so that they might move back towards friendly

⁹²COL Walter B Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

lines. 2LT Dave Ugland had 1st platoon, 1LT Bob Biedleman had 2nd, and I commanded the 3rd. CPT Daniel directed us to saddle up and move towards the west with 1st leading, 3rd next, and 2nd in the rear. We returned to our platoons and relayed the orders. Dave and I began moving our platoons from our defensive positions towards 2nd platoon's CP to pick up Bob's unit. But just before Dave and I reached Bob's CP, a mortar round landed while Bob was briefing his NCOs. It was devastating. The Platoon Sergeant and two squad leaders were killed and 1LT Biedleman and two other squad leaders were wounded.⁹⁵ I remember moving by their position seeing nothing but bodies and blood, and hearing moans, screams, and medics yelling orders.

Mortars also hit the Battalion CP wounding the S-3, the S-3 Operations Sergeant, the S-2 Operations Sergeant, the Battalion Sergeant Major, and one of the Battalion Commander's RTOs.⁹⁶

As we again moved towards the contact area, anxiety gripped me. This was my first action under enemy fire. How would I act? Would I do my duty? Would I panic or lead? Would one of my men die today? These questions gripped me not from a fear of dying, but because I had to do my duty. I

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶COL John E. Tyler to Al Conetto, 3 June 1993. [Conetto Letters].

needed to prove to myself that I could act like a man under trying conditions. I needed to earn acceptance by my fellow officers and respect from my men. I needed to know that I really belonged to this elite unit. As a teenager craves acceptance, so did I.

CPT Daniel brought our platoons on line with Dave on the right flank and my platoon on the left. We advanced up Hill 65 towards B and C. As we neared them, CPT Daniel halted the Company and ordered one patrol from each platoon to go forward to find out what was in front of us. Dave's patrol returned first and indicated that there was an enemy machine gun position to its front. My patrol returned later and reported making contact with a large number of troops from B and C. Daniel's plan was to take out the machine gun as quietly and quickly as possible, then slip to the left and up the hill to make contact with B and C.⁹⁷

As the platoons began moving again, I do not recall seeing anything near me or hearing any noise. It was eerie. Were we receiving fire? Were my men firing? Were we close? My only recollection was that everything was green, and I felt closed in. But then, Dave's unit was fired on by the machine gun nest and he was killed instantly. One of his NCOs later reported that Dave had commented just before being

⁹⁷COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

COMPANY A's ADVANCE TO RELIEVE PRESSURE ON B & C

hit: "What a beautiful place to die."⁹⁸ A squad leader took out the machine gun position with a grenade, and the whole hillside opened up. I began receiving fire, also, and CPT Daniel reported to LTC Tyler that he was heavily engaged and not sure he could withdraw. In addition, the enemy was attempting to surround Company A. LTC Tyler ordered Daniel to break contact and return to the Battalion patrol base.⁹⁹ Daniel radioed to me "Papa Lima Delta," which meant "platoon leader dead," and the order to break contact. My platoon was given the mission to support by fire as Dave's platoon moved to the rear. We laid down a base of fire as the 1st withdrew. I then fell back with 1st platoon, and with both platoons on line the enemy tried to assault us. Both units engaged the attacking enemy soldiers and "...really mowed them down."¹⁰⁰ We finally broke contact and both platoons returned to the Battalion perimeter.

When I reached the company area, I was told that Dave had been killed. One of his NCOs carried his body back and it lay under a poncho near the company CP. I slowly walked over, kneeled, and raised the poncho. To this day I do not

⁹⁸Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993, Rough notes, 3. [Conetto Letters].

⁹⁹Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993, Personal interview notes, 12-14. [Conetto Letters].

¹⁰⁰COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 31 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

recall what he looked like. I could see him alive; tall, blond, quiet, easy going. I could not see him dead. But he was the first American soldier I saw killed in action.

Dave was a graduate of West Point, class of 1964, just like Clair Thurston and Sam Russ. When Dave's body was brought back to the Battalion patrol base, the Brigade Chaplain, Father John McCullagh, wanted to remove his West Point class ring to insure "...that some ghoul in Graves Registration didn't get it." Because of the confusion, however, it has never been determined if Father McCullagh did what he set out to do.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, B and C Companies were rounding up their wounded and dead and repelling repeated Viet Cong attempts to flank and encircle them. Three times C was hit, and two attempts were made against B. Each time the fighting was close and fiercely contested.¹⁰² SP4 Jerry Langston, B Company, recalled that the enemy tied bushes and branches "...to their backs and they started blowing bugles and charged us from three sides. They came down off the hill behind us, from the flank, and across the creek to our front.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 111.

The fighting was close in, real close. We were really cut off and there didn't look to be much chance left."¹⁰³

Chaplain James Hutchens was with 1LT Waller's platoon. When he heard the enemy's bugles screech, he turned to a grizzled old sergeant lying next to him to ask what it was.

"That means they're going to eat us alive, if they can," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you'd better get ready, Chaplain. That's the signal for sending in the human waves....Just like Korea."¹⁰⁴

But the Americans held their ground and with supporting air strikes repulsed the enemy charges. It was after 1500H before CPT Bittrich was able to secure his company perimeter and tie in with C Company.¹⁰⁵ And finally, at 1630H he was able to lead a patrol to get 2LT Thurston's body.¹⁰⁶

I rejoined my platoon at our previous position and re-established our defensive perimeter. Since we did not know how badly we had mauled "Charlie," we were concerned that a counterattack would come during darkness. To make matters

¹⁰³Michael Casey and others, eds., The Army at War in The Vietnam Experience, ed. Robert Manning (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981-88), 28.

¹⁰⁴Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 104.

¹⁰⁵Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993, Personal interview notes, 6-7. [Conetto Letters].

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 3.

worse, it began to rain. It came in driven sheets all night, but no one complained.

The enemy usually attacked just before dawn. He had a great ability to sneak up undetected on American lines, penetrate defensive wire, reposition Claymore mines to detonate on friendly locations, and pinpoint defensive positions with deadly accuracy. One of our counter moves was to have a "mad minute." At a designated time, usually just before dawn, the whole perimeter would open up with small arms fire for exactly sixty seconds. If "Charlie" was out there, he was in a world of hurt.

The early morning of 9 November, D+4, was designated as a "mad minute." At the precise hour the whole battalion perimeter erupted with a crescendo of fire. For sixty seconds we raked the area to our front so that no living thing could survive. Fortunately for him, "Charlie" had decided not to counterattack. Or we had administered such a beating to him the previous day that he could not attack. Either way, there was no enemy to our front.

As dawn broke, LTC Tyler made another important decision. With no reinforcements available, he decided to break contact and evacuate the area. In order to do so, however, it would be necessary to cut out by hand a landing zone on the road that bisected the perimeter. Decades of uncontested growth had allowed the trees in the jungle to

overgrow the area above the trail so that choppers could not penetrate without damaging their blades. We had to cut down enough trees to allow at least three Hueys into the LZ. Tyler had power saws dropped to us, and units not in contact with the enemy selected men to clear the landing zone. Artillery, gunships, and air strikes continued to suppress and harass the Viet Cong. We began right after dawn. We faced two problems: cut the LZ, and do it fast enough to give us time to evacuate the complete battalion before dark. It would be close.

Also at first light, BG Williamson attempted to have his command and control chopper land near B and C so as to extract their wounded. First, however, additional trees had to be felled before a helicopter could get into the LZ. He dropped smoke grenades from his Huey to mark the area. He then directed his chopper back to LZ Ace where the artillery support position was located. There, General Williamson dropped off the co-pilot, artillery officer, two door gunners with their machine guns and ammunition, and his radio operator. In addition, he had fuel drained from the helicopter to make it lighter. BG Williamson, his pilot, and the general's aide would attempt the landing.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷MG Williamson interview by John Carland, January 1993, 12.

Back at the landing zone, the Brigade Commander's pilot began a 250-foot straight descent through a hole in the jungle. One small error on his part and the chopper would be down for good. But skill and daring prevailed, and they made it down.¹⁰⁸ General Williamson and his aide jumped from the chopper, loaded one casualty, and flew out through the funnel. The evacuation of wounded had begun.

Williamson was a tough, distinguished looking, white-haired, highly decorated, 47-year-old professional soldier. He had risen from the ranks as a private in World War II to regimental commander.¹⁰⁹ A former "mustang," and now Brigade Commander, he was highly respected by his officers and men.

On the ground, the general gathered his two company commanders together and realized they were both physically and psychologically exhausted. He directed them to take care of their wounded and account for all their men, while he took over command and began a close-in probing action to ascertain if the enemy was still on the battlefield.

As BG Williamson moved among his men, he was somber and unsmiling. "He paused for a long time before the rows of lifeless bodies wrapped in ponchos....Then, lifting his head

¹⁰⁸Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 115.

¹⁰⁹Breen, First to Fight, 10.

he looked about. He raised his hand to his helmet and saluted."¹¹⁰

He then directed the evacuation of wounded and searched for those unaccounted for. One of the company commanders reported three men missing, so the general went with a five-man patrol in the direction where they were last seen. They found all three. Two were dead and one was wounded in both legs and unable to walk. The general sent two men back to get help while he and the other two stood guard.¹¹¹

The evacuation begun earlier continued as the LZ had been enlarged. By 1000H all the wounded had been evacuated. With all the men accounted for, BG Williamson led his two battered companies on foot to the battalion patrol base where a larger LZ was being carved out of the jungle.¹¹²

The Battalion worked continuously under a hot, blazing sun to prepare the main LZ. With the help of ex-logger Chuck Keen, the LZ was finished before nightfall.¹¹³ Keen's actions influenced the Brigade to recommend that a special team be

¹¹⁰Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 116.

¹¹¹MG Williamson interview by John Carland, January 1993, 12.

¹¹²Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 116.

¹¹³COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

trained to cut LZs in the jungle, as he produced five times the results of anyone else.¹¹⁴

When the area was large enough, evacuation began. First the wounded and then the dead. And after the dead, B and C Companies were flown back to Bien Hoa. The pick up went smoothly until one of the Hueys went down on the LZ with a damaged rotor blade. Until the chopper could be repaired, the pick up zone capacity was reduced to only two birds.¹¹⁵ A replacement blade was available only in Saigon, and had to be flown from there to the battle area to repair the downed helicopter. Valuable time was lost, and it was later recommended that in future operations a decision be made immediately whether to evacuate the damaged chopper, attempt to repair it, or destroy it on the spot.¹¹⁶

After the Huey was repaired, there remained only fourteen men on the LZ: CPT Daniel; his XO, 1LT Gene Krause; 1SG Bill Workman; three NCOs; two company RTOs; the FO, CPT Gary DeBausch, and his RTO; three troopers and me.¹¹⁷ And it was 1745H, dusk. I was scared. There were only fourteen of us, and out there an unknown number of VC, an inhospitable

¹¹⁴Department of the Army, Critique of Operation Hump, 14.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁷Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993, Personal interview notes, 16. [Conetto Letters].

jungle, and no choppers. To make matters worse we were taking sporadic small arms fire from enemy patrols searching for their dead and wounded or fleeing to Cambodia. We huddled behind logs, large rocks, or anything else we could find for cover. We did not have much firepower: mostly .45 caliber pistols and some M-16s. Our one machine gunner had been hit earlier.¹¹⁸ But we did have CPT DeBausch. He called in fire from eighteen 105mm howitzers to support our little perimeter.¹¹⁹ I looked around and knew it would take a miracle to get us out of this mess and back to Bien Hoa.

But suddenly came the most precious sound to an American soldier: the "whoop, whoop, whoop" of chopper blades cutting the heavy, humid air. Three beautiful UH-1D troopships, with supporting gunships, appeared out of nowhere and descended into the hastily constructed LZ. A fantastic sight! CPT Daniel yelled out to everyone to head for the nearest bird when it landed, and to do it double time. As if we needed to be told.

As the three Hueys touched down, we scrambled for the nearest one. I remember running as hard as I could with two NCOs in pursuit, diving through the open door of the Huey,

¹¹⁸COL Walter B. Daniel to Al Conetto, 18 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

¹¹⁹Dick North to Al Conetto, 14 April 1993. Personal interview notes, 16. [Conetto Letters].

and nearly sliding out the other end as I skidded on the compartment's floor. The two NCOs were on my tail and jumped in right after me. The pilot did not wait for any signals, but immediately pulled the stick and began to ascend. I prayed we made it up and over the jungle's triple canopy without taking any hits from the VC snipers. Luck and alternating artillery and gunship fire allowed all three choppers to rise above the jungle floor and head south towards Bien Hoa and home. It was a short flight before we landed within the confines of Camp Ray. We had made it! A small reception committee from Company A welcomed us back. 1LT Bobby Oakes, who commanded our weapons platoon, was one of the official greeters. He never looked better.

That night the officers of 1/503rd met at the Battalion's officers' club, "The Teahouse of the August Moon," and reminisced about the events of the past five days. We discussed Dave, Clair, and the other fatalities, consumed great quantities of beer and whiskey, and toasted our lost comrades. Our bonds were forged. We were the Sky Soldiers, and proud of it. We had done our duty. We had met an enemy force three times our size and destroyed it. The enemy had decided to stand and fight, and lost. Only years later was it learned that Charlie's "...whole purpose was the destruction of a 'Named or Identifiable Unit of the U.S. Armed Forces.' He wanted this victory for the psychological

effect that it would have on the civilian population back in the U.S."¹²⁰

Newspapers picked up the story of those five days in War Zone D. *The New York Times* wrote that the Sky Soldiers inflicted major losses on the Viet Cong, reporting 391 enemy killed.¹²¹ *The Los Angeles Times* reported a smashing American victory in the "...first large-scale, stand-and-fight battle between nearly equal-sized Viet Cong and American forces...."¹²² *The Washington Post* reported that the "...toll of Vietcong known dead is one of the heaviest since American combat units were committed in March."¹²³ *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote the enemy "...employed, for what is believed the first time in the Vietnam War, flame-throwers and thermite grenades."¹²⁴ For the troops overseas, the *Pacific Stars & Stripes* also credited the 1/503rd with 391 enemy

¹²⁰MC Ellis Williamson to Al Conetto, 30 March 1993. [Conetto Letters].

¹²¹Neil Sheehan, "Vietcong Lose 391 In All-Day Battle," *The New York Times*, 9 November 1965, sec. 1, p. 1.

¹²²Jack Foisie, "391 Viet Cong Killed in Head-On Battle With GIs," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 November 1965, sec. A, p. 1 and 16.

¹²³John Maffre, "GIs Break 2 Traps, Kill 391 Vietcong," *The Washington Post*, 10 November 1965, p. A1 and A16.

¹²⁴Times-Post Service, "US Wins First 'Toe-to-Toe' Battle," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 November 1965, p. 1 and 13.

killed, and reported that it had defeated an enemy regiment.¹²⁵

On 12 November 1965, the Battalion held memorial services for its fallen comrades.¹²⁶ Those of us who were left stood in formation, at attention, to salute our departed colleagues.

"The sky again was dark with angry clouds. A gentle breeze across the open field played with the fluttering flags in their standards. It was time for solemn reflection, a time to worship, a time to remember. And then the roll call began."¹²⁷

The adjutant, CPT Dick Chegar, read the name of each man killed:

Aguilar, Rudolph Rene
 Belton, James
 Brayboy, Bryant Jr.
 Brown, Herman
 Campos, Magno
 Cannon, Henry Tucker
 Carlton, Lavalie Ernest
 Eidson, Samuel Arlan
 Elmore, Gary Lewis
 Foster, Byron James
 Goias, Everett William
 Goldman, Harold
 Graham, Kenneth Errol
 Greene, Lloyd Vincent

¹²⁵Joe Schneider, "Paratroopers Crush VC Camp, Kill 391," Pacific Stars and Stripes, 11 November 1965, p.1 and 6.

¹²⁶COL John Tyler to Al Conetto, 3 June 1993. [Conetto Letters].

¹²⁷Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 124.

Hamilton, Joseph Thomas
 Hannigan, John Edward III
 Harden, Robert Wesley Jr.
 Harrington, Clifton W.
 Hill, Leroy
 Holcomb, Rebel Lee
 Howard, Lawrence Paige Jr.
 Hughlett, John Albert
 Humphries, Wayne Warren
 Jones, Theodore R. Jr.
 Keel, David Latimore
 Lockett, Cleo
 Marquez, Valentine
 Mathison, Michael K.
 Medley, Michael Milton
 Mitchell, Charles Leroy Jr.
 Nathan, John Arthur
 Orris, Steve III
 Potter, Jerry Lee
 Russo, Michael Phillip
 Rutowski, Dennis David
 Smith, Harold McRae
 Sobota, Daniel James
 Spencer, Cordell
 Tate, Scip
 Thurston, Clair Hall Jr
 Tolliver, Samuel Stanley
 Turnage, Thomas Alfred
 Ugland, David Leonard
 Uptain, Davis
 Vincent, George
 Ward, Danny Russell
 Whitaker, Kelly Eugene
 Williams, Troy Byron¹²⁸

The 1/503rd did not fight this battle alone.
 Supporting artillery units fired 5352 rounds.¹²⁹ Army
 aviation flew the heliborne assault and provided armed
 helicopters, aerial resupply, airborne radio relay, command

¹²⁸Ken Gaudet to Al Conetto, 7 May 1993. [Conetto Letters].

¹²⁹Department of the Army, Combat Operations After Action Report,
6.

and liaison assistance, and medical evacuation support: a total of 1747 sorties. The Air Force flew 117 tactical air sorties and expended 158.5 tons of ordnance. In addition, Air Force H-43 helicopters flew 60 medical evacuation missions.¹³⁰

For this engagement on 8 November 1965 the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism by President Lyndon B. Johnson.¹³¹ We had officially killed 403 enemy soldiers. "The largest kill, by the smallest unit, in the shortest time in the war in Vietnam to date."¹³²

"About three months later the 1st U.S. Infantry Division captured the records of an enemy field hospital that recorded that the 8 November battle was backed up by not one but TWO field hospitals and that just one of those hospitals had received over 700 bodies, dead on arrival."¹³³

PSG Sylvester Bryant, C 1/503rd, probably articulated the American victory best. He was asked about the number of

¹³⁰Ibid., 7.

¹³¹Headquarters, Department of the Army, Distinguished Unit Citation, General Orders Number 40, (Washington, D.C.: 31 October 1966), 1.

¹³²Department of the Army, Headquarters, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) Combat Commander's Note Number 85 (APO U.S. Forces 96250, 14 November 1965), 4.

¹³³MG Williamson interview by John Carland, January 1993, 13.

enemy killed. "I don't know how many they lost," he answered wryly, "but I can tell you one thing, old Charlie could hold his morning roll call in a phone booth."¹³⁴

American casualties were 49 killed and more than 100 wounded.¹³⁵

One week later the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley began, and America quickly forgot the HUMP.

¹³⁴Hutchens, Beyond Combat, 117.

¹³⁵Breen, First to Fight, 121.

POSTSCRIPT

I left Ho Chi Minh City for Bien Hoa at exactly the same time that Company C made contact in War Zone D some twenty-seven years earlier: 8:00 am. As we drove, I looked at the city before me and searched for reminders of my past. But there were none here, my Saigon was gone. Only Ho Chi Minh City remained.

As we left the city and moved through the countryside, I knew it would be different. This is what I remembered Vietnam to be: rice paddies, water buffalo, villages, thick vegetation. Now I knew we would find my past, my Vietnam.

As we entered Bien Hoa, I could not find any familiar sights. The Bien Hoa I remembered was a small town with a village square. It was not here now. We drove to the air base and walked inside, and nothing was the same except a couple of old, rotting conex containers left by the American Air Force. In 1965 the air base had been barren, all vegetation had been destroyed in order to give the security excellent fields of fire in case of attack. Now everything was overgrown. We drove completely around the air base searching for Camp Ray, but nothing matched my memories. All my signposts, guides, landmarks, and beacons were gone. Nothing was the same; nothing was familiar. I left Bien Hoa disappointed. For some reason I expected everything to be

the same after twenty-seven years. Of course, it was not.
But then neither was I.

On January 6, I went to Cu Chi with my guide to see the tunnels that the Viet Cong had built right under the nose of the 25th Infantry Division. They were never discovered by our side after all those years, a real monument to the efforts and dedication of the Viet Cong soldiers. There were over 250 kilometers of tunnels, first constructed by the Viet Minh against the French in 1948. It took twenty years to complete them. As we neared the complex, the sign out front should have been an indication to me of something peculiar. It was like going to an amusement park in the States.

RESTAURANT

CU CHI TUNNEL REMAINS

LOCAL SPECIALTIES

by THE RIVERSIDE, WITH

FRESH AIR, NATURAL,

ROMANTIC ATMOSPHERE

WELCOME

The sign was in English and no other language. We paid an admission fee of 2000 dong, or about \$.17 American each. The first thing we did was sit through a fifteen-minute lecture on the tunnels, their history, construction, layout,

size, location of the 25th and ARVN units, and battle sites. Then we went on a tour of various tunnel construction styles including a mess hall, conference room, water storage area, and general's quarters.

But the most interesting episode happened next. At the end of the tour we sat eating fruit when I noticed a stack of shoulder weapons next to some Vietnamese soldiers. I asked my guide to inquire if I might handle the weapons. The soldiers in turn asked me if I wanted to fire them. Hell yes I did!

We took the rifles to a range they had built away from the tunnel complex and for \$US1.00 per round I was allowed to fire an M-16 and AK-47.

I fired ten rounds from each rifle. As I did so, it struck me that here I was in Vietnam, with a rifle in my hand and my former enemy was standing only a few feet from me. I could easily just turn the weapon on him. Up to now, this whole tunnel area had a carnival atmosphere: the sign, the admission charge, the tour, and now a firing range. But with this rifle in my hand and my former enemy close by and vulnerable, this was reality! What if I shot him? Would I get a teddy bear? What if I went back and killed them all and stole the weapons and ammunition? Would I win free passes for the season? Or another idea. Since this was a set-up to lure American tourists (why else is everything in

English?), how about another range facing this one? The Americans on one side, the Vietnamese on the other! All for \$1.00 a round. Or how about B-52s on call? For maybe \$25.00 you would have the option to call B-52 strikes in on the other range. Is this what has happened to war? Has it been made into an amusement park for the almighty dollar?

I had changed.

I came home from Vietnam in 1966 and 1968 unable to talk to anyone about my experiences there. No one wanted to hear what I had to say. No one was interested. We were outcasts from society. There were no welcoming committees, no receptions, no pats on the back. America wanted us to just slip into anonymity so we would not remind anyone what happened over there. And so I shut up and became anonymous. But now I had to talk and tell my experiences and fears and doubts. I had changed.

My experiences overseas, plus the snubbing by my own people, caused me to build up a great hatred for the Vietnamese. I wanted nothing to do with them. As more and more of them migrated to Santa Clara County, I stayed away from them. I did not associate with them, I did not eat at their restaurants and I did not want to learn their culture or history. But now I found them warm, friendly, open, hard working; just like all people. They had been at war for more than thirty years straight and had defeated two major Western

powers. Yet they harbored no ill feelings toward us or the French. I wondered if a Vietnamese tourist here would experience the same reception as I did. Now I was interested in them and their country. I had changed.

I went back to Vietnam after twenty-three years searching for that young Captain, but he was not there. He had gone home, and now I knew it. I had changed.

I returned from Vietnam in 1992 and continued to search for an organization that represented the 173rd Airborne. I had found the 1st Cav Association, but in three years had not found anything about the 173rd. Finally in March 1993, I talked to Jim Knight at the Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. I had requested information on HUMP from him; as an aside, he asked if I had talked to Mark Ludlow of the Society of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I nearly jumped through the telephone wires with my excitement.

"The 173rd Society. Hell, I have been looking for them for three years!"

Jim gave me Mark's phone number, and I called him early the next morning. From Mark I obtained COL Walter Daniel's number. On March 16, 1993, at 4:36 pm. I called COL Daniel.

"Sir, this is Al Conetto. Do you remember me?" I wanted to talk to COL Daniel and discuss the war and old comrades. I had changed.

CONCLUSION

I have found that I miss the war and my time in it. I miss it because for the first and only time in my life I felt I was doing something important, that the decisions I made really mattered. For a very short period of time I held the fate of more than 150 American soldiers in my hands. My decisions determined life and death for them and an unknown number of Vietnamese. I was authorized by my rank and command to take lives and preserve lives. That is power and responsibility. And coupled with the constant fear, the unknown, the excitement, and the intensity of combat, Vietnam and especially the Vietnam War, have been forever etched in my mind. They will always be there. The war was the highlight of my life. Each day was an adventure. Each day brought new doubts, new fears and new challenges. Decisions and actions were demanded immediately. Nowhere in civilian life, except maybe the police, does that kind of intense relationship with life exist. My nerve ends were constantly on edge. I touched everything, smelled everything, saw everything with more intensity. I am extremely proud of my service there. I did my duty, as did those who served with me. America has never come to grips with the war, but I finally have. I crossed over many humps there. I passed the test of combat at Hill 65 and earned membership in the

1/503rd. I passed the test of leadership as a company commander and platoon leader. I passed my own personal test of competence as a man. And finally, after the Cu Chi experience I realized I am done with weapons, I am done with war. I am over the hump.

GLOSSARY

1/503	1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry.
1LT	First Lieutenant.
1/RAR	1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment.
1SG	First Sergeant. An E-8.
2/503	2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry.
2LT	Second Lieutenant.
AK-47	Standard rifle used by the Viet Cong and NVA.
Alpha	Company A.
ARVN	Army of Vietnam (South Vietnamese).
Base camp	Usually a brigade or division sized headquarters.
Bde	Brigade.
BG	Brigadier General.
Bird	Any aircraft, but usually a helicopter.
Bn	Battalion.
Bravo	Company B.
Cav	The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).
CH-47	Chinook.
Chinook	CH-47 helicopter, used to carry cargo or troops.
Claymore	Anti-personnel mine.
CO	Commanding Officer.
COL	Colonel.
Company	Included four platoons, plus a headquarters unit of eight men for a total of 180 men.
CP	Command Post.

CPT	Captain.
Charlie	Company C or could refer to the Viet Cong.
D Day	Day of assault.
D+1	Day of assault plus one day.
Delta	Company D.
Dust-off	Helicopter medevac.
FO	Artillery Forward Observer.
GEN	General. Either four-star or used generically.
H	Used in conjunction with the 24-hour military clock. For example, 0100H equals 1:00 a.m. while 1300H equals 1:00 p.m.
H Hour	The hour of the attack.
Huey	UH-1B or UH-1D helicopter. B model was usually a gunship, D model was a troop carrier.
LCI	Landing craft infantry.
LP	Listening post.
LT	Lieutenant.
LTC	Lieutenant Colonel.
LZ	Landing Zone.
M-16	Standard rifle used by U.S. and ARVN forces.
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam.
MAJ	Major.
Medevac	Medical evacuation by helicopter.
MG	Major General.
MSG	Master Sergeant. An E-8.
Mustang	A former enlisted man who is commissioned an officer.

NCO	Non-commissioned Officer. A sergeant, E-5 or above.
OP	Observation post.
PFC	Private First Class.
Platoon	Four squads plus a platoon leader, platoon sergeant and an RTO.
PSG	Platoon Sergeant. An E-7.
ROTC	Reserve Officers Training Corps.
RTO	Radio-telephone operator.
S-1	Battalion or Brigade Staff Officer, Personnel.
S-2	Battalion or Brigade Staff Officer, Intelligence.
S-3	Battalion or Brigade Staff Officer, Operations.
S-4	Battalion or Brigade Staff Officer, Logistics.
SFC	Sergeant First Class. Usually a platoon sergeant. An E-7.
SGM	Sergeant Major. An E-9.
SGT	Sergeant. An E-5, or used generically for all sergeants.
SP4	Specialist Fourth Class. An E-4.
SP5	Specialist Fifth Class. An E-5.
SP6	Specialist Sixth Class. An E-6.
SSG	Staff Sergeant. Usually a squad leader. An E-6.
Squad	Ten men including a squad leader.
TAOR	Tactical area of responsibility.
TO&E	Tables of Organization and Equipment. Specified the number of men in a unit and what equipment each man would be authorized.
XO	Executive Officer.
VC	Viet Cong.

KEY PERSONNEL
1ST BATTALION, 503RD INFANTRY
OPERATION HUMP

<u>TITLE</u>	<u>NAME</u>
Battalion Commander	LTC John E. Tyler
Executive Officer	MAJ Albert C. Butler
S-1	CPT Richard D. Chegar
S-2	MSG Thomas Clark (acting)
S-3	MAJ William L. Mitchell
S-4	CPT Pete Sharber
Company Commander, A	CPT Walter B. Daniel
1st Platoon Leader	2LT David L. Ugland
2nd Platoon Leader	1LT Bob Biedleman
3rd Platoon Leader	1LT Al J. Conetto
Company Commander, B	CPT Lowell Bittrich
1st Platoon Leader	LT Mike DeFrancesco
2nd Platoon Leader	LT Bob Frakes
3rd Platoon Leader	2LT Clair H. Thurston
Company Commander, C	CPT Henry B. Tucker
1st Platoon Leader	2LT Sam Russ
2nd Platoon Leader	1LT Ben Waller
3rd Platoon Leader	LT Lawrence Hurst

GENERAL ORDERS

No. 40

HEADQUARTERS
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
WASHINGTON, D.C., 31 October 1966

DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION—Award-----	I
PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION—Award-----	II
VALOROUS UNIT AWARD—Award-----	III
MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION—Awards-----	IV

I. DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION. Award of the Distinguished Unit Citation by the President of the United States of America to the following units of the Armed Forces of the United States is confirmed in accordance with paragraph 194, AR 672-5-1. The text of the citation as announced by President Lyndon B. Johnson on 20 June 1966 reads as follows:

"By virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States and as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States I have today (20 June 1966) awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation (First Oak Leaf Cluster) for extraordinary heroism to:

THE 1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY, 173D
AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEPARATE) UNITED STATES ARMY

and the

Attached Units----

HEADQUARTERS AND HEADQUARTERS COMPANY

COMPANY A, COMPANY B, AND COMPANY C

of the

1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY, 173D

AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEPARATE)

THE 1ST TEAM OF THE 3D RADIO RELAY UNIT

THE COMPOSITE SQUAD OF THE 173D ENGINEER COMPANY

The foregoing companies of and units attached to THE 1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY, 173D AIRBORNE BRIGADE (SEPARATE) distinguished themselves by extraordinary heroism in action against hostile forces in the vicinity of Bien Hoa, Republic of Vietnam, on 8 November 1965. The morning after the Battalion had conducted a search operation and learned from patrols that a strong hostile element was in the general area, COMPANY C, the lead Company, encountered a well-entrenched and camouflaged Viet Cong force. When the insurgents opened fire with a volume of automatic weapons fire, the United States forces retaliated. As the battle grew in intensity and it became evident that COMPANY C had engaged a battalion-size Viet Cong element which attempted to surround the flanks of this American unit, COMPANY B was committed to secure the right flank of COMPANY C. Simultaneously, elements of COMPANY A attacked the left flank of the insurgent force. Although COMPANY B met strong resistance and fought at close range in a dense jungle area, it succeeded in penetrating the hostile circle around COMPANY C. Then, as COMPANY B's open flank was being enveloped, the brave men of this Company broke a hostile encirclement for the second time. Despite the constant Viet Cong assaults, their continual attacks in human waves, and the many casualties sustained by the American units, the gallant and determined troops of the 1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY repulsed the Viet Cong and inflicted severe losses upon them. After a battle which raged throughout the afternoon, elements of THE 1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY defeated a numerically superior hostile force and, on the following morning, counted four hundred and three Viet Cong dead in the immediate area. The devotion to duty, perseverance, and extraordinary heroism displayed by these members of THE 1ST BATTALION (AIRBORNE), 503D INFANTRY and the attached units are in the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflect great credit upon themselves and the armed forces of their country."

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