

Bob Bihari - Memories of the 5th of May 1968

(The Battle of An Bao)

For Jim Sheppard; Unit Historian for the 1/50 Mechanized Infantry

Jim; per your request, here's what I remember about what I learned recently to be called the Battle of An Bao. After almost 35 years, some of it is extremely fuzzy, but much of it is still crystal clear. A majority of it seems to fit with the reports you sent me (though I remember some a bit differently, but I can only relate things from my perspective).

I appreciate you sending me the After Action Reports and other information of the action, as it helps fill in a lot of holes that have become "lost" over the years. I,m afraid I don't remember many names of individuals, other than the few that I know for certain. As you are aware, there were men we worked with over there that we only knew by nicknames. I was also only with the 1/50 for a few months, so I was still basically an FNG ...To this day, I still have trouble remembering names (I wonder if it's related?)

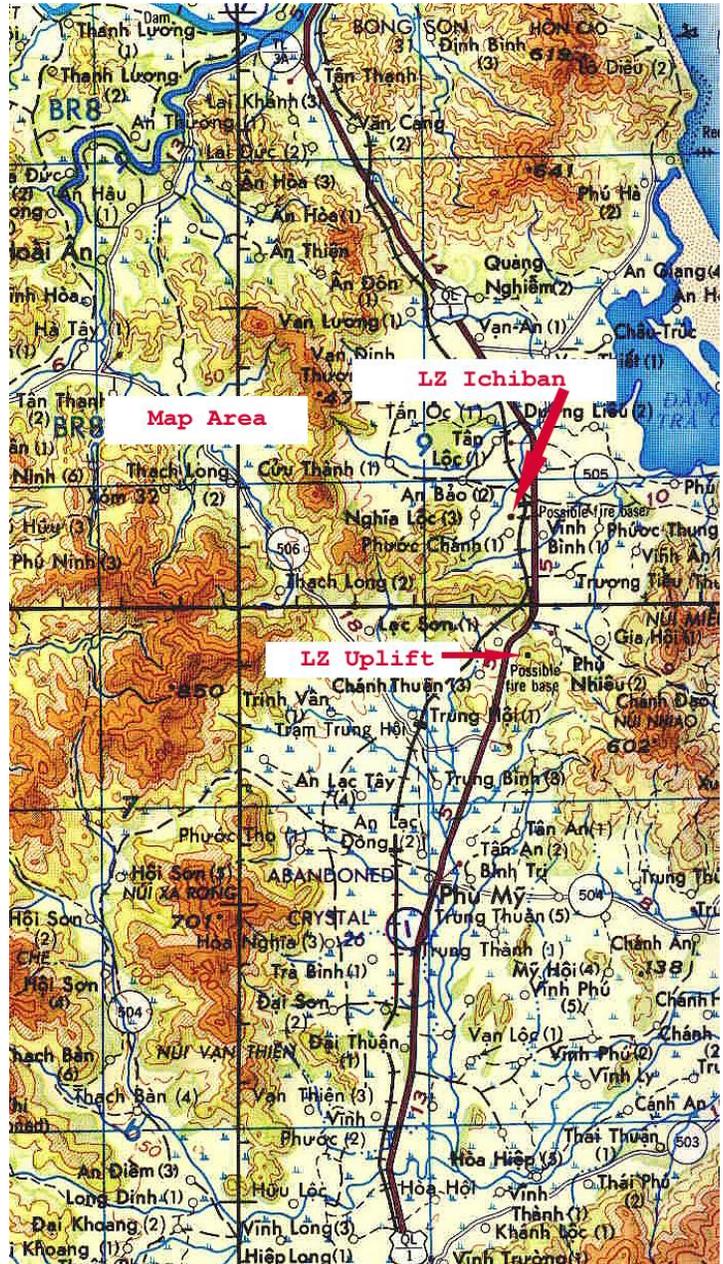
I was surprised when I found out later that our small company (actually, just a little over half of A Company, a few Headquarters types and a couple of Mechanics) ran into two Regiments of NVA and a Regiment of Viet Cong that day. I knew we were hit by a large force, but now I'm surprised any of us made it out of there at all. I'll try to fill in as much information as I can recall.

I modified and inserted a few maps to help with the location and orientation of the area in which the battle took place. Thanks to Don Spaulding; Unit historian for the 1/69 Armor, (researching An Bao also). He did the drawing of the battlefield itself, with my input added.

The first map (Right) is a good overview of most of the general Area of Operations (AO) of the 1/50 Mechanized Infantry in early 1968.

The second map (Next Page) is a blowup of a topographical map showing the general area around the village of An Bao, and LZ Ichiban (I thought it was called LZ Ollie – I'm sure it's the same though).

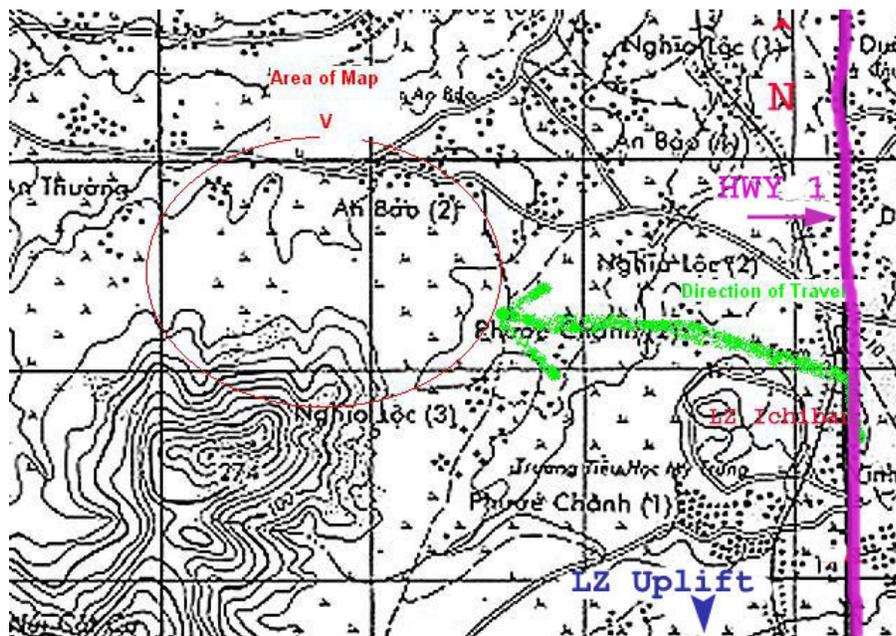
The third map (Page #3) is the battlefield itself (at least as well as Don Spaulding and I could put it together from various maps, and memory), I refer to all of them in the account to try to help clarify the narrative.



I remember leaving LZ Uplift in the morning of 5-5-68 (it was a Sunday), but I don't think it was the entire A Company...some of the guys remained at LZ Uplift during a stand-down from field ops. I don't recall being told exactly why we were going out, things had been relatively quiet for a few days around Uplift, other than a few minor contacts in the area, and all I remember was that they wanted us to head up to LZ Ollie (Ichiban?) to check out reports of activity in the area. We were getting bored sitting around Uplift anyway, so I remember the mood was pretty good as we headed out, but as "grunts" we really didn't have any intelligence information, and didn't know any better.

Again, this is the way things happened from my perspective after many years of blocking this stuff out of my mind, so it may not be totally accurate, but it's what came through the "fog" after all these years.

We headed up Hwy 1 for a while, then turned off to the west in the direction where the activity was reported (it wasn't that far from Uplift, but can't remember exactly how far it was). After the turn, we went cross-country for a few clicks, with the tracks in-line. I was in the second track in the column when we approached a rise in the terrain and we started spreading out into a line formation just as we approached the top of a hill. I distinctly remember coming over the hill and hearing the first track (or someone on the ground) open fire to the left (South) (I was in



the TC hatch on the 50 caliber right next to it). Someone yelled that there were gooks in the open - running away from us toward the tree-line. I didn't see them right myself, but we opened up on the tree line for a few seconds just out of reflex (my 50 Cal jammed after about 5-6 rounds). There was no return fire from the tree-line, and evidently nobody hit the individuals before they disappeared. The drawing from the After Action Report shows this as the initial contact point (A Hill), pretty much as I remember it. The other tracks came on-line on the crest of the hill even with us, and some of the guys on the ground found a fresh spider-hole with some black pajamas and equipment in it (I think it was Sgt. Davis who spotted it, he was dismounted with a few others, if I recall).

I only remember them saying that they saw two guys running toward the tree line, (I think the report said fifteen in black pajamas, but I remember only two), I also remember seeing a large amount of movement way off in the distance to my right front (West) in the direction of the "The Gap" in the diagram (there was a gap in the brush/trees there) but the "word" came down that it was just a bunch of villagers running from the area. As we were to find out later, it was obviously not so, but they were quite a ways off, and didn't raise any concern. We were not used to seeing the enemy out in the open, especially in large numbers, so I guess the assumption was that they were just civilians.

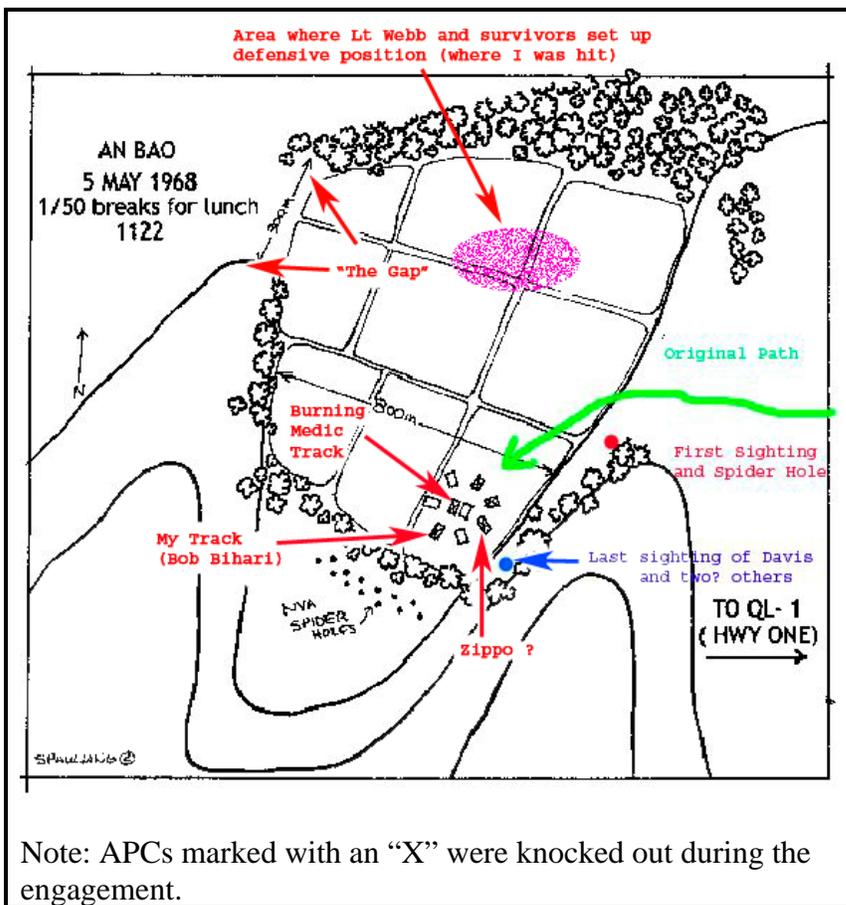
Once everyone was on-line, we advanced toward the tree line to the left (South) doing a recon by fire, but there was no return fire, or indication of anything unusual. I remember an artillery mission, or mortar strike being called in on the hills behind the tree line by Lt. Hinton at this point; I recall everyone being told to "button up" in the APCs during the strike since they were bringing it in very close. No response at all, everybody assumed we just caught a couple of VC irregulars out making trouble.

We then were ordered to pull the tracks back into the dry paddies in about the formation shown in drawing number three (I've indicated the track I was in). Then we broke for Lunch! I may have been just a

lowly grunt, but I remember thinking that this was about the most idiotic thing anyone came up with. As indicated by the After-Action reports however, it was fortuitous that we did so; otherwise, we would have triggered the prepared horseshoe ambush a little further down the valley.

The map is pretty much as I remember it, hills and a tall tree line to the South, large open area (dried up rice paddies and dikes) where we set up the first perimeter surrounded by scrub and vegetation, with an opening to the West (direction I saw the movement, Upper-Left in the drawing) and one to the North-East (Upper right in the drawing). From what I gathered from the After-Action reports, the real ambush was probably set to take place in "The Gap". It was a perfect place for an ambush. They certainly had us pegged.

When they told us to break for lunch, I didn't chow down right away. I remember taking a look at the .50 Caliber, checking the headspace and feed mechanism because of the jamming problems. I then I walked out in front of the track to take a look at the tree line and take a leak, and I spotted Sgt Davis and one or two others off to my left walking out into the tree line – I think they were going out to set up an LP.



The area around us was hard-packed dried paddies with a very tall tree line (Palms?) and scrub in front of us (where the people we spotted were running too). I don't recall why I walked back into the tree line that far – All I had with me was a .45, but I remember spotting something unusual, and feeling very uneasy; that feeling of being "in the sights". (Pretty stupid in retrospect...but who knows?) Anyway, I just stepped into the brush for a few meters, and it opened up into a cleared-out area that was full of spider holes. They looked like they were all empty (I looked in a couple of them briefly) but they didn't look "fresh" - they looked like they had been there for a while. I really started to get the "willies" (Hair on the back of my head started standing up). I turned around and headed back to the tracks to tell someone about the holes, but only got about even with the front of my APC when the surrounding area opened up with small arms fire, and the first rockets started coming in. The report said they were Recoilless Rifle rounds, but I distinctly remember rocket trails going by toward the CP area (center of the drawing).

Things get very confusing at this point (I remember "snapshots" of things that happened, not really a continuous flow, so it may not jibe with the reports). I jumped into my track and got on the .50 Cal, and the driver jumped in as well (Wayne Sodam), I,m positive it was the track that I identified in the drawing (Wayne remembers it as well). Wayne fired the track up, and started to back it up away from the tree line, and I started firing the .50, but it jammed again after just a few rounds. I cleared it, but didn't get too many more rounds off– not even a full belt into the tree-line. At this point, we were starting to get very heavy fire from numerous places; I remember feeling rounds hitting the back of my TC hatch (from the rear), and thinking it was friendly fire.

We had only pulled back a few meters when the track took a rocket or recoilless round in the front. The round must have exploded in the engine compartment, because luckily, no shrapnel came into the crew compartment (though the driver was burned, but alive). The concussion blew me out of the top of the TC hatch, bounced over the left side of the track, and I hit the ground hard. I don't know if it was the concussion from the explosion, or just falling from the track, but I was a little stunned for a few minutes.

When things started coming back in focus, I remember thinking I wanted to get back in the track to grab a sixteen and ammo (all I had on me was a .45 and a couple of magazines and a flak jacket, no helmet or shirt), but just at that moment, another couple of rocket rounds hit the track in rapid succession. I remember scooting around to the front of the track on all fours, and found the driver (Wayne). He was burned, but ok. We worked our way around to the right, and away from the track toward the West, and into an area of brush and a few low paddy dikes that offered a little cover. We saw the track that was originally to our right (far left track in the drawing) backing up under fire about thirty meters away. I don't think it was hit, at least it was moving. As far as I know, they got out of the area OK....but it was a sinking feeling watching them leave.

We ran into a small group of our people from other tracks in that area at that time. One of the guys was a driver from another track I knew as "Goat" (I think in second platoon). His arms were very badly burned, but I remember he just gave me a really funny smile, and said he was fine (like I said, I remember "snapshots" very clearly). We found out at that point that Lt Hinton had taken a gunshot wound to the head and was KIA (I don't know if it was Quint – his RTO, or not, but I remember he had a radio... again, I can't seem to put this all together in a smooth time line). During this time, the enemy fire was getting heavier by the second, and was coming in from all around us. They were maneuvering from various places up on the hillside down into our original positions from what I could tell. We were trying to return fire to keep them at bay, but most of us had been driven away from our tracks within the first few minutes, so we had very little to work with, just some M-16s, 45s, and a few grenades.

I think at this point, an air strike came in on the hills to the South, but can't be sure of the timing. I know there were some big air strikes and artillery that came in at various points in time, and they were coming in right on top of us. I could feel the heat and concussions as they rolled through. I'll never forget those air strikes – I'm surprised we didn't get nailed by them. I remember gun ships working the area at some point also, and one was shot down during the later part of the day, after I was hit. We were in this area for a while (it could have been just a few minutes, but I think it was longer, a lot of things were happening, and the adrenaline was definitely pumping). We could clearly see large numbers of NVA coming into what was originally the perimeter at the base of the hill (definitely NVA, and well equipped, new uniforms, I remember that distinctly).

There was a lot of confusion at this point; there was no coordinated response, just small groups of people trying to return fire and trying to keep from being overrun (there sure were a lot of NVA). We had a number of WIA, but I think the Medic track was one of the first hit, so I don't recall seeing any Medics at all.

The NVA were pushing in hard from the South and West, and I remember someone running up and telling us to pull back to the North to try to set up a defensive position behind the APCs to cover them (I think it was Lt Webb, but I can't be sure). A number of us took off to the North (toward the village of An Bao), I remember another vivid "snapshot" of a track on fire as I ran by, really burning hard, definitely not a normal diesel. I think it was the Medic track, because the Zippo (Flame Track) was on the other side of the perimeter. It was a probably a gasoline burning track (I know we still had a few of those) - the flames were burning really high, There was a Command track next to it (taller type) with what looked like an older guy standing in front of it (Sgt. Dulac ?), no shirt, just a steel pot, just standing there dazed, Strange how I remember that, just looked so out of place.

We worked our way back to an area to the North of where the original contact was (the defensive position indicated on the map). The area was made up of what looked like old dried-up paddy dikes that gave us a little cover to get behind. There was another tree-line about fifty meters behind us, and then the village of An Bao behind that. At this point I don't recall how many of us were in this position. I only saw about six others from where I was located.

We were spread out and aligned along a low East-West paddy dike, but still in the open. We could clearly see the remaining tracks to our front, with the NVA moving around them. I heard a couple of guys getting hit close by (a distinctive sound you never forget), and I heard someone to the right of me shouting that the NVA were running in the open to our right. I remember rolling on my back (we were prone against the dike) and looking to the West (the gap I mentioned before) and seeing a bunch of NVA running across the gap to get in behind us. I remember thinking that I had never seen them running out in the open like that before. I popped a few rounds toward them with the .45 (it's strange, but I remember watching those .45 rounds floating down-range as if in slow motion and as big as pumpkins)... and at that point I was hit. The round hit me from the North; so obviously, there were already enemy troops all around us.

Things got very confused at this point, some very strange feelings that I can't really describe, but one of my strongest memories is a very calm voice from my right front (east) telling me to gently put the .45 down (I think it was Lt Webb, not sure though). I drifted in and out of consciousness for a while, and at one point, I remember starting to pray out loud, and the same voice told someone to go over and help me out (again, I think it was Lt Webb, but I was pretty well "out of it" at that point). I was having trouble breathing (sucking chest wound), and someone came over to give me a hand. I would really like to find out who that guy was. I was on my belly, couldn't turn around, but I'm sure he saved my life. He stayed with me and held the flack jacket over my wounds so I could breathe, and we were still under intense small arms fire the entire time.

I was drifting in and out of consciousness from that point forward. There are lots of other "snapshots", but they are pretty jumbled up. It was a pretty intense situation for a while. I felt like we were there for quite some time, but from the later reports, it was only about an hour or so before C Company and the 1/69th Armor broke through to get us out. It felt like it was a lot longer before they got to us. I remember talking to the guy with me off and on. I wish I knew who he was, and if he made it out. I lost contact with him when two guys from C Company came along, threw me in a poncho, and dragged me over to one of their tracks and threw me in the back. I never even saw his face, but if anyone deserved a medal, he did.

C Company got there just in time – we could see a large number of NVA getting ready to assault our position from our front just as we heard the tracks and armor coming in the distance. If they had gotten there just a few minutes later, I doubt that any of us would have survived.

After being picked up, I remember lying on the floor of the track with a number of other A Company guys that they had picked up, thinking about all the B40/70 rockets flying around, when one of the M60 gunners on top of the track opened up, and all the hot brass started falling all over us inside the track and landing on my lower back. I think that was more painful than the gunshot wound. Strange what sticks out in my mind? Anyway, after bouncing around for a while in the APC, they brought us back to an area where they were doing the Dust-Offs. That's when I realized how bad the situation was, the dust-off was a Chinook, and it was filled with WIA and KIA. I don't ever remember seeing that many casualties in one engagement, where they needed such a large bird to get our wounded out.

The chopper took us to the aid station at LZ Uplift, and it was a mad-house. There were a lot of casualties, and a line of bodies covered with ponchos with their feet sticking out near the door as they took me in. Bad scene. I remember seeing a few other WIA that I recognized, but can't remember names. There was a wounded guy on the table next to me at the triage station that I knew, an older black E-7, but again, I can't remember names that well. I remember working with him on the Sweep with the ROKs (Republic Of Korea troops from "Operation Cochise"?). I don't know if he made it or not, I think he lost his leg though, all very "muddled up" once they started hitting me with Morphine. That was really the first time we received any real medical attention, all our Medics were out of action pretty early on.

I'm afraid I don't have a lot more to add, with all the medication that they gave me, I was basically in "dreamland" for quite some time. I was in the aid station at Uplift for a while (I remember coming too at one point and having a Priest performing Last Rites on me – I was in pretty bad shape).

Later that evening, I was transported to Qui Nhon, and had a couple of surgeries there, then off to the Philippines for another surgery, then up to Camp Kue Hospital in Okinawa for another surgery or two. I spent about four months in the hospital learning to walk again, then went Stateside.

They did a great job of patching me up, considering I was originally told that I may never walk again (the bullet took the top of two vertebrae off in my backbone). I spent my last year in the Army at Ft. Carson, Colorado (as an MP of all things!) if you knew me, you'd know how funny that is!

I'm sorry I can't remember much more than that. I should have probably written a lot of this down many years ago when it was still a little fresher, but I think I've spent most of my life trying to consciously forget about what happened in Nam, not remember it. I'm really surprised at how much I wrote, but once I got started, it just came rushing out. There are a lot of other little bits and pieces that seem to pop up now and then, but to be honest, I can't really put them into perspective, or even be assured that they really happened on that particular action – I've found that the combat experiences all tend to blend together over time. There's so much of what I do recall that's still fragmented and a jumbled mess, that it's difficult to keep it all straight. Thanks for the opportunity to clear my head somewhat. Over the years, I always felt that no one really gave a damn about what happened in the Nam, only those of us that were there, and, like I said, I'm afraid most of us have spent the time trying to forget, not remember.

Thanks Again.

Bob Bihari: July 4, 2003, Edited: August 19, 2008. An addendum: Photo of the An Bao battlefield taken by former CPT. Harry Wilson on his return trip to Vietnam in 2007:



Copyright 2004, Bob Bihari. All rights reserved.
rbihari@cfl.rr.com

