

"WEAVING THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT ON THE BONG SON COASTAL PLAINS"

1968 ~ 2007

BY: HARRY B. WILSON



3rd Platoon at LZ Uplift in December of 1967

Almost forty years ago, I served as an Infantry soldier with the US Army in Vietnam in the Tet year of 1968. In September 2007, I went back as a tourist. I write of both trips here. I hope, like my fellow vet Dick Guthrie who did the same thing, that what I write helps brings closure, both for me and those who read this, who see the photographs, and who also fought there, often desperately. The experience of fighting desperately and closely is the defining characteristic of combat infantry (including Marines). Perhaps some measure of closure may come also to those who are survivors of those who did not come back from that time. There were many.

At the very beginning, I say that finding the places I did, and putting together some of these old memories, would not have been possible without the very fine work that our Association Historian Jim Sheppard has done. Just getting good, high definition topographical maps of Vietnam is a real issue, to say nothing of having daily and radio logs, after action reports, histories written in real time, rosters, etc. Jim's work was invaluable for this trip. I could not have done this return trip in the way I did without Jim's work. I also want to thank COL Dick Guthrie for his encouragement to go and to get deep into it, such as interviewing COL Binh Ba Loc, our Viet Cong counterpart from that past time. And I thank the many members of the 1st of the 50th Infantry Association, who provide much support and encouragement also.

In what follows, I weave the old and the new, both 1968 and 2007. In 2007, I was traveling with my wife Ann and old friends Steve and Carol Higgins. Steve is also an Army veteran. He was with the Phoenix program working with the ethnic or Mnong tribes around Buon Me Thuot (Ban Me Thuot is our days) in the Central Highlands in 1969 and 1970. I also need to say at the outset that my recollections are those of one person except where I reference others or records that Jim has collected. My experience from reunions is that all of us have different perspectives, all of which are valid. In battle, perspective can change by a few feet in distance, by role, by access to radio and what channel, and by any other number of things.

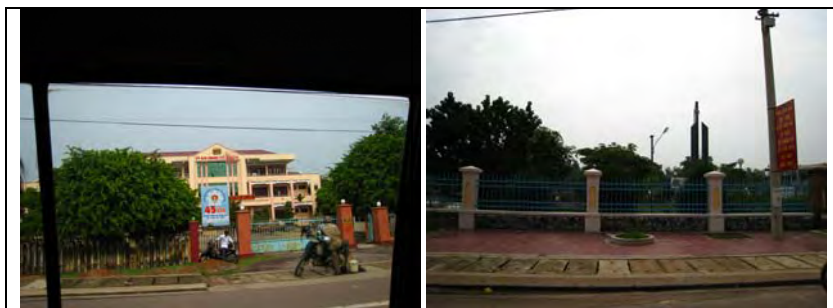
My service in Vietnam started with initial orders to the 1st Cavalry Division in late December 1967, and then immediate assignment to the 1st of the 50th. (Mech) Infantry. In very early January 1968, I succeeded Bob Driscoll as the Platoon Leader of 3rd Platoon, C Company, a position I held until mid-June 68. The Company COs in this period were CPT Herb Randall, who rotated in 2/68, CPT Jay C. Copley, who was CO from 2/68 until he was badly injured on 5 May 68 (I incorrectly thought until May 2007 that he died from those wounds), and 1LT John Martin. After mid-June 68, a large group of new replacements took over, as all companies were by then vastly reduced in number by casualties from battles like An Bao and rotations. But one example is that, in mid-May 68, B and C Companies were operating together with a combined strength of under 100 troopers. Later, I was the Company XO and then S-1. My platoon sergeant for a few weeks in January until wounded was SFC Wood. My squad leaders initially in Jan 68 were SGTs Norm Poage (later the Platoon Leader of the 1st Platoon under orders to have a direct commission – wounded badly in April- succeeded in 1st squad by Gerald Jablonski), Toby Hamon, Jerry Colquette, and Leon A. Jacque. I have a roster of the members of my platoon as of sometime in early January 1968 and I have added names as I remember them from photos. Unfortunately, I do not currently possess a roster as of May 1968.

Trip to the LZ Uplift Area

My wife Ann and I left our hotel south of Qui Nhon very early on 20 Sept. 07, with a guide, a translator and a driver. Traveling on QL1 was chaotic, as the Vietnamese population has increased by almost three times since 1975, and the economy is starting to boom with the abandonment of the communist economic system (it's rapidly becoming a capitalist system). We saw the Cham temples on the hill near Phu Cat, which I remembered.

I started noticing differences from 1968 very shortly into the drive up to Phu My, which started me on the path to realizing two revelations to a veteran about modern Vietnam. First, the Vietnamese government has eliminated any visual landmark that would reference either the American military presence or Republic of South Vietnam government presence, except for a few bases that the present government still uses, such as Camp Radcliffe at An Khe (a restricted area now), and airports, such as Phu Cat (itself sanitized) and Da Nang. Second, there are military cemeteries and monuments everywhere along QL1. This led me, along with some reading and interviewing, to an epiphany that I will discuss further below. The short version is the NVA and VC body counts that the American command gave back then were, in fact, wrong. They were low, and likely way low.

Jim Sheppard's bmp maps of the An Bao area and the Thuan Dao area are attached with my edits to show where I went at those two locations, with notes at An Bao indicating "VP_" for about where I shot photos. Other photos have descriptions edited onto them.



At Phu My village proper, I recognized almost nothing. The guide showed me what he said was the MACV HQ (Vicinity of the picture at the far-left), but I didn't recognize it, nor did I recall that MACV was there in 1968. The Australian compound I recalled was not there that I saw. Phu My village itself, at the intersection of

Highways 1 and 505 (which now has a traffic light), is a much larger and bustling village -- one might say a small city. Pictured above-right is a major military monument/cemetery there.



North of the Phu My intersection about 4K is the Highway 506 turnoff to the West so familiar to many of us -- the infamous 506 Valley. We could not go beyond about 75 meters because of muddy road conditions. The two photos at the right show this area, which was the first that I really

recognized from the perspective of almost 40 years. I remembered night laagers in this area near QL1, particularly in the April 68 and 11-13 May and 25 May 68 time frame. But a very muddy road prevented us from going further. Interestingly, it was the only muddy road issue I encountered, which was not the case 40 years ago.

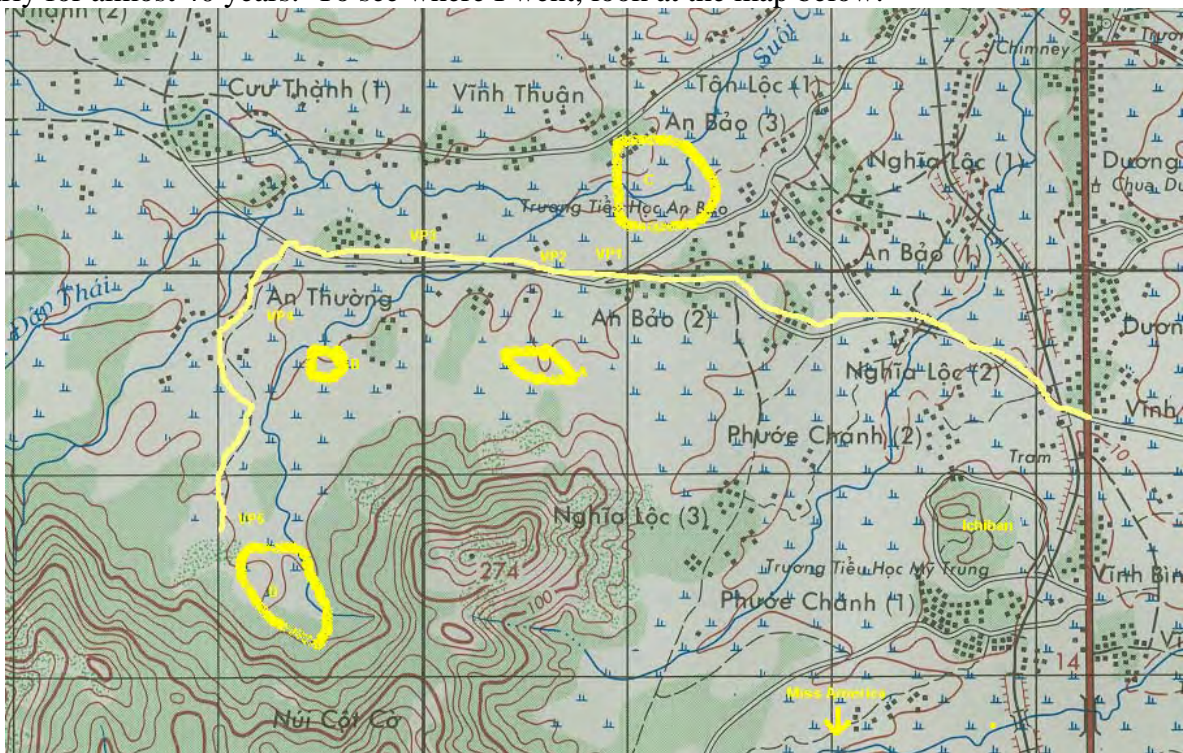


LZ Uplift (Above, looking west across QL1) is not recognizable except for terrain features. I hiked around where I could. Everything we knew as a base area is gone, replaced with a few shops and dwellings. Duster Hill is replanted with trees and I did not even attempt to climb it. It is obscured by vegetation. I don't remember where the company areas were, except that we were on the west side of the road. Those areas are covered by brush now. All that is visible now is the Vietnamese war monument (Pictured at left) on what was, I think, 8 inch hill. All that I saw from the old base areas was some old pavement and one old bunker east of QL1 and north of Duster Hill, where a 173rd company had a base.



An Bao

Next was An Bao. This was emotional, as I was there, as were some of you, and it and Thuan Dao were most on my mind going back. In fact, An Bao and Thuan Dao have been on my mind regularly for almost 40 years. To see where I went, look at the map below:



My route is outlined in yellow, with the view points where I shot photos (“VP __s”), and my approximation of where certain events occurred (yellow letters). Hill 274 is a reference point. Keep in mind that I circulated back and forth a bit on my route.

We went into the An Bao hamlets via the dirt road shown on the map. Because of new housing and vegetation, it was almost impossible to see south until we got to VP1, where the vegetation cleared. Looking about 200-1000 meters south and east, we could see where first A Company (-) came into the battle area on 5 May 68, just west of Ichiban. This was before they got hit, but perhaps around the place where they first saw signs of enemy activity. This same area is where CPT Copley led C Company (-) through heavy fire into the battle area just short of an hour after A Company (-) got hit at 1145. This area is pictured below. As I recall, this area is now less vegetated than in 1968.



Going back to 1968, C Company was light a platoon when we pulled into Uplift mid-morning on 5 May 68, supposedly for a stand down after a long, hard time in the field. We got orders to mount up again after a very short period, with almost no knowledge of what we were doing other than that A Company was in trouble over Miss America. We went QL1 at top speed with CPT Copley continually radioing me (point platoon) for more speed. He was hammering for speed. Bill Roskilly (then 19 years old) remembers seeing a track with wounded coming back to Uplift. C Company then followed A Company’s track trail west of Ichiban. About a kilometer in, we where hit with heavy small arms fire in heavy brush about 5-7 feet tall (I could not see this area in 2007 because of brush). My point 3rd Platoon pulled up to return fire. But CPT Copley with the command track (following the point platoon as he usually did) just kept going past us through the incoming fire – without holding up at all-- and burst out into the dry paddies, and we followed. At that point, we continued to take fire for a brief while. Jay, and then we, just drove right through a serious firefight. It was a new experience. But once in the open paddies, my memory is that incoming fire ceased while we crossed to A Company. At some point around here, I remember seeing the black smoke columns from A’s burning tracks. Jeff Felder remembers this also.

With Jay’s command track still in the lead for about 1.5-2 kilometers, we got to the survivors of A Company at about 1245. We arrived there almost exactly an hour after A was first hit according to the Daily Log. Bill Roskilly and Jeff Felder and others remember that the incoming was subdued or non existent when we first started to pull up to A. I do not dispute this. But almost immediately thereafter major hell broke loose in terms of incoming fire. Bill and Jeff remember that, and they remember it happening as the last of our tracks pulled in.

What I remember is that all major hell broke loose, like I had never seen, and we were by then veterans of a number of significant engagements. I saw countless B-40 trails zipping through the air from both sides, and we had heavy small arms fire coming from the front and both sides. We started taking wounded almost immediately. Bill Roskilly remembers this also. Gary Quint, of A Company, recalls at or just before this moment that A Company was almost over run by NVA charging en mass with green vegetation rapped around them as cammo. Bill and Jeff remember having to jump back and forth behind paddy walls because the fire was coming from all sides.

The incredible incoming fire continued to be very intense until the tanks arrived about 20-30 minutes later, and then thereafter. At one point, amidst all this chaos and incoming fire and before the tanks arrived, CPT Copley was standing on the top of his track directing movement and fire – not in his track but on top of it. I was concerned with getting troopers other than the .50 gunners out of the tracks for their safety (the incoming barrage of RPGs which can cause multiple casualties with one hit on a track), and so they could more effectively return fire. A and C troopers were outstanding in returning this fire at this point in what became essentially a battle rage. A rage it was. We continued to take serious casualties. I remember a lot of my guys getting hit. Bruce Backes, my RTO was hit in the first few moments (my radio taken out also). The incoming did not back down at all, as I remember it, for a long period.

My memories of this period are blurred by time and by the absolute chaos of the fight, but I have some clear pictures in memories. When B 1/69th tanks arrived about 20-30 minutes after C Company, about 1300-1310 or so, the in-coming fire remained heavy for a while, long enough for all of the tanks to get into position and fire repeatedly. Only after repeated canister rounds from the tank cannons, our small arms fire, and many air strikes, artillery and gunship runs did the incoming slow down. The firing was so hot that even the tanks expended most of their ammo. So did we. In my memory, I can't tell you of the relief to hear those 90mm cannons firing canister rounds. Part of A Company had been overrun in the original position, the remainder had been virtually overrun when we arrived, and we in C were in danger until the tanks arrived. Gary Quint remembers tree snipers. I didn't see them, but I remember NVA uniforms almost on top of us.

Artillery and air strikes were coming in constantly throughout, along with gunship support. I had never had very close support from the ARVN Air Force with napalm until that day. They were flying Korean War propeller driven fighter bombers, A-1 Skyraiders I think. At one point I had to hide my head into a wallow hole to avoid the heat from the napalm. Incoming and outgoing fire continued to be heavy enough that battalion command could not get Medevac or ammo resupply choppers in until 1600 or so, over 4 hours after the battle started. They simply wouldn't fly in there from what I read in the After Action report and Daily Log, and my experience had been that Medevacs flew into fire a lot. They were very brave guys, as were our medics (my platoon lost two).

At one point in all of this, I don't remember when, one of the gunships that did fly exploded in a fireball in the air at about 30 meters up. Many soldiers in C Company were badly wounded, to say nothing of the A Company survivors who were all wounded. G.I. humor in extremis is always excellent. Bill Bontemps told me he went to help load the badly wounded CPT Copley, from the 301 track, on a Medevac chopper. With the firing turning quiet at that point, Jay, with a throat and sucking chest wound offered him a beer!

Other accounts say there were either 2 NVA regiments there, or 2 NVA battalions and 1 VC battalion, specially armed with RPGs (B-40s and 70s) and recoilless to attack us. From the number of RPG and/or recoilless trails I saw in the air, the incoming RPG fire was extraordinary, as was the small arms fire and Chicom 12.6mm or .50 cal fire. Our air support was also extraordinary.

The Brigade Air Activity report for 1-7 May 68 states that 62 tactical aircraft flew in support of us on 5-6 May, and dropped over 80 tons of ordinance, to say nothing of the strafing with .50 cal and 20 mm cannon. That is a lot of air support. I don't have the statistics on the artillery or gunship support, but I know it was massive.

Back to 2007. Moving further down the road to VP2, the pictures below look south to Hill 274 where the battle site had moved east after the initial hit on A Company (which I have marked area B).



I recall that part of the actual site was a little west of the hamlet line you can see to the right in the distance. I could not find a trail to go back into that part of the site and I did not want to wander through yards and houses uninvited (unlike 40 years ago). I can say that the hamlet, which is called An Thuong on the map, seems to have expanded, as I could see houses that appeared to be of fairly recent construction. The area I have marked "A" is visible in these photos and is at least part of the battle site on the early afternoon of 5 May 68. From the Daily Log, it appears that C Company arrived at 1245 or so. Just south of that area is where A Company made initial sightings before they moved west and broke for lunch.

VP2 also appears to be where B Company, 1/69th Armor came into the action a little after 1300 on 5 May 68, moving southwest. There is a point between VP4 and VP5 on my edited map that also looks to the eye now a lot like where the tanks came in, and when I first saw that area it sure brought back clear pictures in memory. I could almost see those tanks again on that spot and hear that enormous boom of the 90 mm cannon. But VP2 is more consistent with the logic of the area and Dick Guthrie's After Action Report.

Returning to the year 2007, we moved past VP3 and took a small trail south to VP4 on the western edge of An Thuong. Here, looking back Southeast I could see the area where A Company was originally hit, if the coordinates on the Daily Log and in Gary Quint's memory are correct. Gary confirmed his visual recollection when we met a few weeks ago. I have marked this Area "B". The Photo below shows this area from a somewhat different perspective.



Keep in mind that the camera at this point is looking southeast, and at least C Company was not at this spot on 5 May 68, although we were here on 6 May 68.

Moving South of VP4, I came upon the slightly elevated ground to the west and south of both the original attack on A Company and the counterattack in the late afternoon of 5 May 68. I recall this ground as being wooded and not populated back in 1968. I also recall taking a lot of fire from this area during the counterattack, including either Chicom 12.6 mm or .50 cal fire. Gary Quint also recalls this area as the origin of the first recoilless round fired at A Company at 1145 on 5 May 68.

The counterattack on the late afternoon of 5 May 68 included maybe a handful of remaining troopers of A Company, C Company now at full (so to speak) strength, B Company, and the remaining tanks of B, 1/69th. CPT Timothy Grogan of B 1/69th was in overall charge on the ground. CPT Copley had been by then Medevaced out, along with many other troopers of A and C Companies. CPT Grogan launched this counterattack, and then after a while pulled it back after the dismounted infantry of B and C Companies incurred heavy casualties from small arms fire. This was maybe an hour or so later. Dark was also approaching. But we did put a lot of lead into the NVA positions. And the massive air support continued to pour it on.

To give you an idea of how heavy the fire was then, I recall that the M-60 gunners on our tracks were firing so intensely -- from mini-gun cans of 1000 plus linked rounds -- that the barrels of the M-60s grew red hot and spewed out hot melted metal from the barrels themselves along with the bullets. So the gunners were pouring motor oil over the breaches to keep the constant rate of fire, and then swapping barrels often. It was the first time I ever saw multiple 100+ round bursts from an M-60. But the return fire was fierce, too, including 12.6mm machine gun fire mentioned above, and we were taking casualties. So, ammo usage may have been wasteful, but go there with us to argue.



The slightly elevated area of the west of VP4 and 5 is now quite heavily populated. As you can tell from the house pictured upper left, built in 1997. All other houses back there are also new, and new houses were going up as I walked through there.

What I have marked as area "D" is partially shown in the picture at lower left, and is where A, B and C Companies, 1/50th, and B Company 1/69th, went on 6 May 68, the next day. It was covered with a lot of brush then, and now. Back then, I recall a lot of bomb craters back there, along with NVA KIAs. I also remember looking at the wallet of one of the NVA dead. It had a picture of his family. Grim. In 2007, I did not go too far back because the trail withered out into what appeared to be yards of houses.

Coming back to VP3, the photo below left shows the West side of the 5-6 May 68 night laager site, which I have roughly marked area "C" on the map. Moving back towards VP2, the photo below right shows the same night laager site, where B and C, 1/50th and B, 1/69th, set up night laager. That was a difficult laager because we pulled in late and we had had more wounded. We were very low on ammo, and we did not start to get loads from Hooks (Chinooks) until around midnight.



I recall diesel blivets also coming in the dark or maybe the next morning. Our artillery was still firing, as I recall, and we had Spooky support in the air for a while.

Then, at 0330 on 6 May 68, the NVA attacked again. It was more hell, and more casualties and KIAs. Adding to the merriment that night was that some of our resupplied ammo was hit by a mortar and was burning. Also, the Hook chopper pilots did not want to fly ammo and fuel to us because the area was too hot. Guys like CPTs Guthrie and Topper worked and screamed and yelled to make it happen. Thanks to them. This attack finally died down between 0430 and 0500. There was no sleep for anybody that night.

At morning light on 6 May 68, we resupplied again with no rest. B and C, 1/50th and B, 1/69th moved down into the area I have marked area D, and then west into the crescent west of An Thuong. Some A Company survivors joined us. We retrieved the dead and the burned out tracks of A Company. That was truly a truly horrendous sight that is burned in my memory and that I will never forget, ever. I recall little or no serious contact that day. We had a tense night again in the crescent west of An Thuong, with Spooky flying overhead, and a few in-coming mortar rounds. I had no problem getting guys to dig fox holes that night.

As I read the after action reports of May 68 in conjunction with being there in 2007, I get the clear sense that the battle of An Bao was a running battle that only started on 5-6 May 68. The first day and night were clearly momentous and critical. But after the day and night of 5-6 May, the banged up NVA units appear to have moved south into the notorious 506 valley. The 173rd Airborne units operating in the hills of Miss America and the Crescent west of there would have constricted their movement elsewhere. The 1/50th and 1/69th continued to operate in the area, especially up the 506 Valley for the next several weeks. The 3 or more companies of the 503rd Airborne also operated up in the surrounding hills.

Five days after 5-6 May, B and C Companies (under 100 troopers total) were up in the 506 Valley and encountered the same NVA regiment(s) on 11-13 May 68 in several firefights, with huge fire support, including B 1/69th. The After Action Reports call this the battle of Trung Hoi. The NVA problem was that they were by then exposed, as is discussed below. We (B and C 1/50th and B 1/69th) hit them again on 25 May 68, in what was called the battle of Trinh Van. Both are in the southern 506 Valley. My memory of this period is not good. I have only dim memories of being up in the 506 and of firefights. I recall that most of us were pretty jumpy. I also recall that we were very short on troopers, very tired, and probably dazed by all of the firefights. Plus, everybody had lost friends. It was a tough three weeks to be Infantry. But we did have a lot of air support, as well as artillery and gunships. For these battles, our casualties were far lower, and the NVA casualties were far higher, in the range of 250 KIA, according to the After Action Reports.

As Dick Guthrie wondered in the After Action Report, how could the NVA sustain these casualties? Having been back as I was in 2007, they did. That NVA regiment or regiments either were battered badly or essentially wiped out. In 2007, I heard of many VC or NVA units that met the latter fate. If you go to the military graveyards on QL1, or in the north, you will see what I am talking about. The present government has spent a lot of effort in recovering their MIAs from distant battlefields and returning them for a proper military burial near the hometowns of the dead. In the one cemetery we did spend some time in, we found that the first row of tombs are for women who are called something like Victory Mothers. Our guide in Hoi An told us these were women who lost three or more sons in the American/Vietnam war. There were a lot of these graves. The guide also translated the inscriptions on many of the soldiers' tombs. Most bore a note in addition to name and rank that they were undercover. So, yes, our suspicions about many of the men we passed in 1968 were probably right.

All tolled, we lost 22 soldiers on 5-6 May 68, including the crew of the gunship that went down. 92 were wounded. My company, C Company, and my platoon, lost Bruce Backes, and had 30 wounded. A Company had staggering losses. B, 1/50th and B, 1/69th had significant losses. The After Action report lists 117 NVA KIA. On 11-13 and 25 May, the NVA KIA numbers were considerably higher. NVA wounded are unknown. As I indicated above, the real number of NVA casualties was probably far higher. If you doubt me, read "The Sorrow Of War" by Bao Ninh, an NVA infantryman who served in the South from 1966 to 1975. It's available on Amazon in English translation. He fought the 1st Cav, among others. His accounts of the 1st Cav battles near the beginning of the book are significant. It is a highly autobiographical novel that was suppressed until the mid 90s. It's now common in Hanoi bookstores, and is available on Amazon for about a buck. On this same subject, our tour guide when we were in the Hanoi area told us that his father was a former NVA battalion commander who went down the Trail with his battalion to fight the Americans. The father returned, but told his son that almost all of the soldiers in his battalion did not. I also recommend doing to search for "Vietnam War Casualties" on Wikipedia. The Hanoi government deliberately suppressed casualty reports until around 1995.

Looking back on An Bao 39 years later, my trip and research lead me to the thesis that the NVA made a serious mistake in 1968 at An Bao. They chose the opportunity for a quick and deadly effective ambush on a Mechanized Infantry unit, but at the same time exposed the location of their very large unit. That happened rarely in Vietnam. Our reaction was very rapid and massive, which we could do. The result was that an NVA unit larger than us by several times suffered massive casualties and was rendered ineffective during that day, night, and the ensuing three weeks.

There is another point to add that might bear on this thought, but only might. I interviewed COL Binh Ba Loc the day before going up to An Bao in 2007 (described more fully below). He was the second in command of what we called the Viet Cong in Binh Dinh in 1968. I asked him through an interpreter about An Bao. He replied that he knew about it but was not there, yet the importance of An Bao was the reason he agreed to the interview (see below).

I asked him further about the NVA role at An Bao. Keep in mind that he is a Binh Dinh native, a Southerner. He only replied that the NVA came into Binh Dinh to help with the Tet Offensive. He seemed uninterested in further discussion of the NVA, although he described himself quite vividly as a Ho Chi Minh loyalist and confidant.

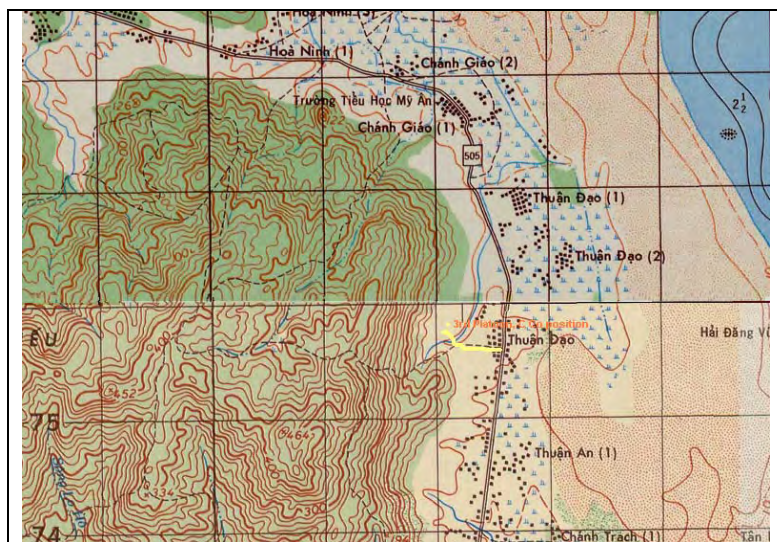
Thuan Dao



After coming out of the An Bao hamlets, we went north on QL1 about 2 K and turned east on Road 505 heading towards the coast. We never drove on this road in 1968 because it was mined. It is now a paved road and heavily traveled. The Photo below is a shot south at the Nui Mieu mountains. From Jim's

retrieved records, both were VC and NVA base areas in a big way. We didn't have time to go up to the shore of Dam Tra O, where we drove so often in 1968.

The Thuan Dao firefight was largely a C Company action covering several days, although we had assistance from artillery and from an aerial rocket artillery chopper unit from the 1st Cav. Those ARA choppers saved us on the morning of 2 Mar 68. To give background, I will write what I remember of this firefight. On the morning of 2 March 68, the 3rd and 2nd platoons of C Company were airlifted out of Uplift on air assaults to the immediate east of Thuan Dao next to the Nui Mieu rock pile (3rd) and to Chanh Giao (2nd), next to the beach. The plan was that these two platoons would hit their LZs just as the rest of C Company was arriving with tracks from Uplift in a kind of hammer and anvil op. The problem was that the two airlifted platoons went out of Uplift 2 ½ hours early, due to circumstances that I do not know of. CPT Copley told me in May 2007 that he knew trouble was brewing when he heard on the radio of the early airlifts out of Uplift while on his way out with the rest of the company in the tracks.



The Daily Log from Jim Sheppard indicates that 2nd platoon landed on a cold LZ. Not us. We could see the gunship prep from the air coming in. As we came close to the ground, it was obvious this was going to be a hot LZ. The slick I was riding on took some kind of hit at about 10 meters up, and we had a very hard landing. We scrambled off and formed a perimeter. There was sporadic incoming fire. After it died off in a few minutes, we moved out as light Infantry east towards Thuan Dao, parallel to, but not on, the trail, as called for in the plan. See my map (left) for our location, and

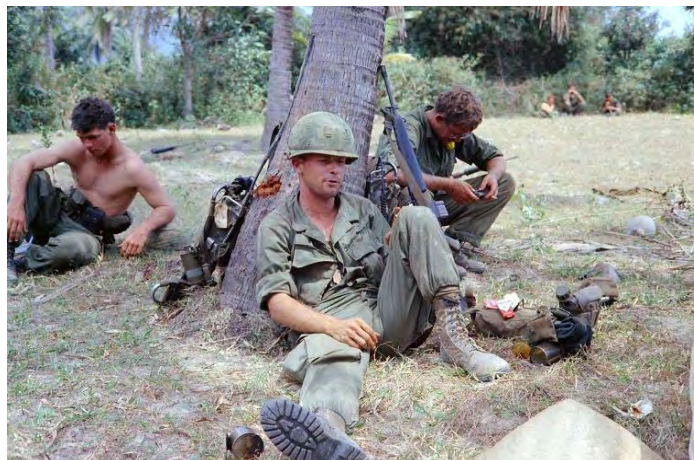
the trail. By the way, the trail on the map is inaccurate. It actually, at least now if not then, cuts north to cross the creek up to what was our LZ.



While we were moving, the sporadic incoming fire grew. After about 15 minutes, I decided to pull the platoon back to the original LZ, because the incoming was starting to be a problem, and because the original LZ was known to command and was a possible extraction point. Since I was in regular radio comms with CPT Copley, I am certain he agreed. We did that, got back to the original LZ, and then incoming fire got real hot from the hedgerow 10-15 meters in front of us and from the hillside close to the west of us. The two photos to the left show the NVA positions, and the panoramic photo below shows our location. We were returning fire with our only cover being low paddy dikes. It turned out, as we later learned, that we had landed right on top of a NVA headquarters company of a battalion. I tried calling artillery fire in support from Uplift, but the minimum stand off distance was 50 meters plus, and that was too far away to matter. The incoming and out-going was serious, and very close-in.



Within 10-20 minutes, Russell Haas was hit about 10-15 feet in front of me, and then our new medic Erwin Bruce Sims went out to give aid, and was killed also. Ask Chuck McAler about Sims. He was young and brave, as was Haas. Below is a photo taken in 1968 of what I think was Sims (left), KIA that day, 2 March 68, me (center) and Bruce Backes (right), KIA 5 May 68, taken by Toby Hamon in late February. 68.



We were saved because an aerial rocket artillery (ARA) unit of the 1st Cav happened to be coming through Uplift that morning heading north with the rest of the Cav, and was diverted to give us fire support. We called them to sweep in east to west, very low, and to unload 2.75 rockets right into the ditches shown in the photos. There were 8 UH-1 ARA choppers as I recall, and we had 2 on station at all times after they arrived about 30-45 minutes into this action. Between our ground fire and their door gunners, they had cover to come in at about 20-50 meters up, hover, and fire. Their rockets were impacting only 10 meters away from us, and sometimes on top of us. Each ARA had 48 rockets as I recall. CPT Copley had the pilots in direct radio contact with me. It was tight, but it saved the day. I and the platoon have many thanks to those old UH-1 gunship pilots and door gunners. After that, I never liked the new Cobra gunships that dove and had a 50 meter stand off distance. Given cover, the old and slow UH-1s could fire ARA at impossibly close distances. (The modern Army might want to reconsider this close air support issue. I think of the Air Force wanting to abandon the A-10 Warthog for the F-16. The stand off for an F-16 is probably 2-500 meters. That is not Infantry distance.)

After about 2 hours of this, CPT Copley arrived with the rest of the company mounted on tracks. By then, the NVA fire had quieted down, as many were dead and the rest had fled up the Nui Mieu (many picked off by our troopers and by the ARA door gunners). We were almost out of ammo and beat. Where we crossed the hedge row/trench line to meet CPT Copley is shown at the very bottom in Pic 224 (that's my wife in the pic). Norm Poage and I were out last. Norm insisted on going down into the trenches to look. He did, fired some final rounds at what he didn't tell me, and then found a pile of documents. It turned out that we got what was described in the Daily Log as an NVA "big shot".

After we rejoined the rest of the Company around 1130 that morning, we pulled back to the beach for artillery prep of the original contact area and surrounding areas. In the afternoon we went back through the area, and did draw and return some fire. A Company joined us for a while. The Daily Log for that day said we had a third trooper killed on 2 Mar 68. I am pretty sure from the In Memoriam page of the Association website that it was Todd Handy. Jim Sheppard and I are pretty sure he was with C Company, but I do not remember which platoon. Norm Poage remembers that Todd Handy was indeed with the third platoon.

South Coastal Nui Mieu and 18 Jan 68:



After leaving Thuan Dao in September 2007, my wife and I and our guides drove south on Road 505. I knew that there had been a C Company firefight on 18 Jan 68 down near the south eastern edge of the Nui Mieus where they face the beach with a rock pile face. We do not have Daily Logs or After Action reports that cover those dates, so I did not have coordinates. Between Xuan Binh (5) and (4), I saw a hill face that struck me immediately as the place of this firefight. (Photo at left) But this is only memory.

I remember this action as a C Company operation, starting from a night laager somewhere on the beach. We arrived at the base of the rock pile, and 3rd platoon assaulted up on foot. Others may have also, but I do not remember. About half way up in the big rocks, we started taking and returning fire, all small arms fire. SGT Jim Tilley, my FO, was hit close by me by an NVA (I think) who popped out of a cave entrance. SFC Woods tried to fire at the guy, but his old model M-16 misfired. SFC Wood was then wounded by a grenade, bad enough for a stateside evacuation.

We were firing up from a downhill, exposed position at NVA hiding in caves and behind the rocks. After some period of firing from this bad position, we withdrew down the hillside. CPT Randall called for fire support, including an air strike as I recall (probably accounting for the collapse on the hillside seen in the photos.) We then prepped the area with .50 cal's, and I went back up the rock pile with SGT Poage and about 7-8 others to retrieve Tilley's remains. As we were doing this, Norm Poage insisted on going down the tunnel that Tilley's gunner had popped out of. He did, alone, and it took a long time. When he emerged, he told me he had gone down to the bottom of the second level of ladders and had found a large room with a table, but no enemy. I thought then, and still do, that this was incredibly brave.

C Company and 3/C had three other significant firefights (i.e. serious casualties) in this period between January and June 1968, and perhaps more. I remember firefights in the southern Nui Mieu where a track was destroyed and burned, with our KIAs, up the 506 in April where Norm Poage was badly wounded, another unremembered location where Bill Sims was killed on 12 Feb 68 by a B-40, and on the Bong Song plain where we assisted a Cav company in a firefight (some MP tried to give us a ticket for speeding up QL1 to get there until John Geghan backed him off with his .50 in the middle of that pass north of Uplift leading to Bong Song.) I don't remember the places, and Jim's fine but not complete Daily Logs don't report them that I can yet find. I do remember having to do security for LZ Geronimo for week with just a short platoon – an uncomfortable task in Indian country with so few troops -- also doing daytime reach out patrols. We also had a lot of just engagements (i.e., some exchange of firing) between January and June 1968. But I do generally remember the serious firefights, the tense times and the very brave 1/50th soldiers, however fleeting in memory are the times, but indelible are the pictures in my mind.

My recollection of these events is imperfect and reflects my limited perspective, and my descriptions are inadequate. I would welcome other 1/50th comments, and particularly from C Company. Combat infantry is “indescribable”, as former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said a little more than a century ago. Justice Holmes was a Civil War Infantry veteran.

Interview with COL Binh Ba Loc



In choosing to make this return trip to Vietnam, I was influenced by a lot of factors, not the least being Dick Guthrie's two trips before (guys, go to reunions!) and my desire to do it with a very old friend and fellow Vietnam vet, Steve Higgins (Army, Phoenix, Central Highlands 69-70, scary stuff, too), who would understand if I or he or wives got moody.

After I had the trip set in terms of flights and in-country stuff, I talked to Dick both at the May 2007 reunion and over this Summer about his experience in meeting former senior Viet Cong officers. Dick encouraged me to meet at least one of these guys who were across the battlefield from us 39 years ago. So, with the trip designed, I emailed our travel agent in August 2007 and said I wanted to meet the VC Colonel Dick correctly identified as the number 2 VC commander in Binh Dinh in 1968, COL Binh Ba Loc. After 3-4 weeks, I got back an email saying he was a very senior government official and an interview would probably be impossible (Vietnamese for “no”). I realized the travel agent knew little more than that I was a vet, so I emailed back telling my agent to say that I with the 1/50th and at An Bao on 5 May 1968. A couple of days later that I got an email back that the Colonel would meet me.

We met at our hotel near Qui Nhon. I had a translator and a number of topo maps, as well as gifts to exchange. My wife Ann was with me. COL Loc was very gracious, as he had been with Dick Guthrie and his group some years earlier. He was the second in command of what the translator called the Army in Binh Dinh in 1968. He was later the top commander of the People’s Liberation Army (VC to us) in Binh Dinh. He knew about An Bao, and knew it was a large action, but was not there himself. What he personally remembered were the tracks of the 1/50th, and firefights up on the Bong Song plain and down near Phu Cat with the ROK forces. He did say that his forces were very strong around Dam Tra O Lake.

COL Loc likes to talk, and I let him go. He is a Binh Dinh native. He joined what the West called the Viet Minh, or Ho Chi Minh’s national liberation army, in 1946 when he was 16 years old. He fought with the Viet Minh against the French in the French Indochina War until that war ended by treaty in 1954. As the country was then partitioned into North and South, he went north to Hanoi. He described meeting frequently with Ho Chi Minh, of whom he spoke with high reverence and about whom he talked for some length. While he was speaking about the French War, I opened a stitched-together topo map of Highway 19 from Qui Nhon through An Khe and on to Pleiku. At one point while he was talking, I put my finger on the Mang Yang Pass. He stopped, and before I could say a word, he spoke to the translator. The translator looked at me and said “French Regiment 100?”. I was impressed. I had read Bernard Fall’s “Street Without Joy” and knew that the Battle of Mang Yang Pass was the coup de grace for the French war effort in Vietnam. It happened about a month after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The French unit that was ambushed in the Mang Yang Pass was Groupe Mobile 100.

In 1959, COL Loc was sent back to Binh Dinh with two others to recruit for the Viet Cong, or the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. He worked under cover using aliases, but said the South’s government knew who he was and searched for him. His wife and younger son were imprisoned periodically. His older son joined the VC also. Within a year, he said, he was able to pay his soldiers, who mostly worked under cover. By 1968, he said that the VC compromised two regiments in Binh Dinh.

After the American War, as they call it, in 1975, COL Loc left the military for a year to study. Then he rejoined to fight in the war against the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and served as an advisor in Laos. He retired to Qui Nhon in 1990, and has been active in the effort to recover VC MIA remains in Binh Dinh ever since.

Speaking of us, he said that he remembered the 1st Cav, and knew that McNamara had played a role in its formation. He also remembered the 4th Division and the 173rd Airborne. When I showed him where we were going the following days, he told our guide to take us anywhere we wanted to go. He did warn us that his forces had heavily mined the area on the coastal front of Nui Mieu Mountains, with the implication that we should stay on established trails.

At the end of the interviews, we exchanged gifts. I gave him my hunting knife from back then, a gift from my father, and he gave me the book he wrote “Nui Ba Khu Dong Thoi Ay”. Part of this is the name of a mountain near Phu Cat, I think. I will try to get some translation done. He described the book as not political, just war stories. He picked Dick Guthrie out from a group photo that our guide was carrying of Dick’s trip back in 2001, and asked that my wife and I convey his best wishes to Dick and his group. I did.

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