

## Michael Conrad

### PROLOGUE

The Anonymous Battle was significant for at least two reasons. First, it confirmed the increasing belief that the major headquarters for the communists, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) had shifted its primary infiltration routes in War Zone C to the northwestern sector, which, in early 1970, was part of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's Area of Operations (AO). The reasoning was that most, if not all, of the known infiltration routes and trails in neighboring Phuoc Long and Binh Long provinces had been identified forcing the North Vietnamese to use new trails in an area where distances were shorter. The extreme northwestern part of the border formed an oddly shaped "elbow" as the border bent back sharply to the east before plunging south to the enclave called the Parrot's Beak. The outline of the elbow in northwest Tay Ninh Province resembled the head of a dog, and was known as the Dog's Head. The North Vietnamese had established a sanctuary that was referred to by us as Base Area 707. The cutting of the infiltration routes had backed up an enormous amount of supplies in Base Area 707 as well as Base Area 354 which lay just south of BA 707 straddling the border and extending about 10 kms into both Vietnam and Cambodia. The North Vietnamese decided that if they could improve the existing network of trails in this remote area of Tay Ninh Province, the transportation battalions could avoid the lengthy detour all the way around the Dog's Head, a distance about 40 kms. The straight line distance between the two base areas was about 15 kms. Further, the North Vietnamese were undoubtedly aware that the 25<sup>th</sup> Division was shifting its forces south and east to cover the redeployment of the 1<sup>st</sup> ID. The North Vietnamese, sensing a vacuum in northwestern War Zone C, moved to exploit it. The second reason the Anonymous Battle was significant was that it proved to the CG, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, that he was correct in assessing that his units were creating many difficulties for the North Vietnamese.

In early February 1970, General George Casey, Assistant Division Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, began to move elements to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade into areas that had not been occupied by U.S. forces. The changing tactical situation and the extension of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's AO by headquarters, II Field Forces, allowed the Cavalry to make some internal boundary adjustments in early 1970. The adjustments included placing the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade into the northwestern area, north of Tay Ninh with the other two Brigades to the east. The 11<sup>th</sup> ACR was also given a piece of the northwestern War Zone C. Casey decided that he wanted to begin employing the division's infantry battalions in a manner similar to the way it had been done in the past. That is, do not occupy fortified bases for lengthy periods of time, but take advantage of the inherent mobility of the Air Cavalry and remain only a few days in each base prior to moving to another. Casey hoped to keep the North Vietnamese off balance and not offer tempting, static targets to them. My battalion, the 2/8 Cavalry, moved into a new base in the middle of February, 1970, and during the next four weeks opened and closed five more before moving to FSB Illingworth on March 17<sup>th</sup>. Most of the operations were raiding missions with the goal of trying to tear up some of the North Vietnamese bases as well as interdict east-to-west movement below the Cambodian border. The other two battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, the 2/7, and 5/7 Cavalry were also moving locations rapidly.

During March, the three battalions were hopscotching their way into the extreme northwest corner of Tay Ninh Province. The 2/8 Cavalry hit the jackpot on the first of March, when it found a large rice cache less than 5 kms from the border, evacuating over 125 tons during the next two days. But the U.S. forces were vulnerable to the North Vietnamese regulars who could strike quickly and then easily move back across the border before the Cavalry's gunships could catch them in the open.

After a couple of other bloody battles, the 2/8 moved out of FSB Drum into newly selected Fire Support Base (FSB) Illingworth, named after a young soldier, John Illingworth, who had been killed in action a week earlier. Illingworth was located right in the middle of the neck of the Dog's Head, directly astride the main trail system leading to Base Area 354. The following day, the 2/7 Cavalry moved into an area just 6 kms south of Illingworth into another temporary FSB, named Jay. During the next several days, contacts with the North Vietnamese increased. One of the toughest fights occurred on March 26, when Charlie Company, 2/8, searching an area just 5 kms northeast, ran into a major bunker complex containing the 2 Bn 272<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. At first, it was estimated that Charlie Company was confronting less than a company size unit but the enemy quickly reinforced and soon Charlie Company was fully engaged and pinned down in a fairly tight perimeter. The battle continued into the late afternoon hours surprising me since the North Vietnamese normally broke contact after a relatively short period of time.

Since the battle was continuing and Charlie Company was beginning to run short on ammunition and they had taken casualties, I ordered John Poindexter, the experienced and confident commander of Alpha Troop, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> ACR to return to Illingworth (I had received OPCON of Alpha Troop previously), with the purpose of joining his unit with my Alpha Company and attempt to reinforce Charlie Company. I didn't have many options. My biggest concern at that time was to get help to Charlie Company. While air and artillery were continuing to support, the terrain was extremely tough making it difficult to pinpoint enemy targets. While the distance to move was about 5 kms, it would cause John Poindexter and his valiant going to bust jungle the entire way. Darkness would come soon.

While I was becoming more concerned with Charlie Company's situation as the day wore on, I was confident that placing Alpha Company and its experienced company commander, Jim Armer, under John Poindexter and his Alpha Troop would provide the best force possible to reach Charlie Company's position and provide the necessary relief.

John Poindexter and I had been working together in the past several weeks and I had come to rely on his judgment. He was a tenacious commander, who led by example. While not cocky, he certainly exuded a certain sense of confidence that his men believed in. By this time, they knew that he would do his very best to accomplish the mission and, at the same time, ensure their survivability. Above all, he was not reckless.

After reading the details of this battle, I believe most, if not all, will agree with me that John Poindexter and his men performed valiantly. His Troop and Jim Armer's Company fought magnificently, individually and as a team. As the text indicates, there were a number of very heroic acts performed in rescuing and extricating Charlie Company under tough conditions. My pride in their exploits is only surpassed by my eternal thanks for the final outcome.