

The **Battle of Ia Drang** was the first major battle between regulars of the *US Army* and regulars of the *People's Army of Vietnam* (PAVN / NVA) of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The two-part battle took place between November 14 and November 18, 1965, at two landing zones *Central Highlands of II Corps* Central Highlands of South Vietnam (approximately 35 miles south-west of Pleiku) as part of the U.S. airmobile offensive codenamed Operation Silver Bayonet.


The battle derives its name from the Drang River which runs through the valley northwest of Plei Me, in which the engagement took place (*Ia* means "river" in the local Montagnard language). Representing the American forces were elements of the 1st Battalion and 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Cavalry Division, facing elements of the B3 Front of the PAVN (including the 304 Division) and Viet Cong. The battle involved close air support by U.S. aircraft and a strategic bombing strike by the B-52s.


The initial Vietnamese assault against the landing 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry at LZ X-Ray was repulsed after two days and nights of heavy fighting on November 14–16, with the Americans inflicting heavy losses on North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas. In a follow-up surprise attack on November 17, however, the North Vietnamese managed to overrun the marching column of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry (1st Battalion's sister unit) near the LZ Albany in the most successful ambush against U.S. forces during the course of the entire war.

The battle was documented in the special report *Battle of Ia Drang Valley* by Morley Safer and the critically acclaimed book *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* by Harold G. Moore and *Joseph Galloway*. In 2002, Randall Wallace in the film *Hearts of Steel* starring Mel Gibson and Barry Pepper as Moore and Galloway, respectively.



Location Ia Drang Valley, South Vietnam
Result Inconclusive - both sides claimed victory

 United States

 North Vietnam

 Viet Cong

Commanders and leaders

Harry Kinnard^[1]

Chu Huy Man

Thomas W. Brown^[1]

Nguyễn Hữu An

Harold G. Moore (1/7)

Pham Cong Cuu (1/33) †

Walter B. Tully (2/5)

La Ngoc Chau (7/66)

Nguyen Van Dinh (9/66)

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Battalion

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66th PAVN Regiment:

Contents

- 1 Background
- 2 Landing zones
- - 3.1 Day 1
 - 3.1.1 Landings
 - 3.1.2 Herrick's platoon is cut off
 - 3.1.3
 - 3.1.4 Attack from the south
 - 3.1.5
 - 3.1.6
 - 3.1.7
 - platoon
 - 3.1.8 Americans dig in for the night
 - 3.2
 - 3.2.1
 - 3.2.2
 - 3.2.3
 - 3.2.4 Third push to the lost platoon
 - 3.2.5 Night attacks on Bravo
 - 3.3
- 2nd/7th Cav and the ambush near LZ Albany
 - 4.1 Events leading to the ambush
 - 4.2 2nd Battalion ambushed
 - 4.3 American reinforcements arrive
- 5 Result
- 6 Casualty notification
- 7
- 8 See also
- 9 References
- 10 Further reading
- 11

Background

Throughout 1963 and 1964 a series of political and military mishaps had seriously affected the capabilities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) main forces in South Vietnam. ARVN commanders were initially under Ngo Dinh Diem to avoid pitched combat at all costs, allowing the NLF (VC) forces (known around the world as the Viet Cong, or simply "VC") to train and grow without significant opposition, search and destroy squads which relied heavily on rocket attacks using helicopters. Even after Diem's overthrow in a 1963 coup, the new military leadership largely consisted of commanders put in place by Diem prior to the coup. They showed equal lack of interest in fighting the NLF, spending their time in a series of coups and counter-coups. In this unstable political climate, the NLF (VC) units were able to mount increasingly larger military operations. At first these were limited to building up larger formations (battalions and regiments), but by late 1964 they had evolved into an all-out war against ARVN units, which they outperformed in every way. By early 1965, the majority of rural South Vietnam was under limited VC control, increasingly supported by Vietnam People's Army (PAVN) regulars from North Vietnam, while ARVN units in the field were hopelessly outclassed and entire units were repeatedly ambushed and slaughtered. American advisers in the field had long been pushing for the ARVN forces to be "taken over" by U.S. commanders. In addition to actually getting the men to fight (something they generally seemed willing to do when well-led), the U.S. command's better training and leadership were expected to be more than enough to make up for the existing deficiencies in the ARVN command. However, the newly appointed commander of the Vietnam efforts, General William Westmoreland, felt the direct application of U.S. forces was a more appropriate solution; perhaps the ARVN units would not fight, but the same was certainly not true of the U.S. military. By early 1965, Westmoreland had secured the commitment of upward of 300,000 U.S. regulars from Lyndon B. Johnson, and was actively trying to get them into the field as soon as possible. Buildup of combat-ready forces took place throughout the summer of 1965.

By 1965, the VC forces were in nominal control of most of the countryside and had set up a major military infrastructure in the Central Highlands, to the northeast of the Saigon operated in this area during the previous decade in their war against the French

in 1954. There were few reliable roads into the area, making it an ideal place for the communist forces to form bases that were relatively immune from attack by the generally road-bound ARVN forces. During 1965 large groups of North Vietnamese regulars of the PAVN moved into the area to conduct major offensive operations. Attacks to the southwest from these bases threatened to cut South Vietnam in two. The U.S. command saw this as an ideal area to test their newly developed air mobility tactics. Air mobility called for battalion-sized forces to be delivered into, supplied, and extracted from an area of action using helicopters. Since heavy weapons of a normal combined-arms force could not follow, the infantry would be supported by coordinated , artillery, and aerial rocket fire arranged from a distance and directed by local observers. They had been practicing these tactics in the U.S. in the newly created 11th Air Assault Division (Test). The 11th was redesignated the , which had been in South Korea since the Korean War, it was redesignated the Infantry Division and its colors transferred to the 11th Air Assault (Test) at Fort Benning just before deployment overseas. The division's troopers dubbed themselves the Air Cav. Starting in July 1965 they began deploying to Camp Radcliff, An Khe, Vietnam. By November, most of the division's three brigades were in-field and ready for operations.

In early November, was sent into combat on a search-and-destroy mission to track down a force that had unsuccessfully the base at Plei Me, about 25 miles (40 km) south of the 3rd Brigade's base of operations at Pleiku. The 3rd Brigade had searched around the base for several days but had found nothing. Westmoreland sent word to continue the search westward toward the Cambodian border, but unsure of where to look, the 3rd's commander, Col. Thomas "Tim" Brown, returned to Pleiku in an attempt to gather additional intelligence. He learned of some sort of concentration

107°40'54"E

decided that this was likely the only lead they had and decided to test the intelligence with a reconnaissance in force.

Landing zones

Brown selected his 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, for the mission, with the explicit orders to not attempt to scale the mountain. There were several clearings in the area that had been
landing zones NATO phonetic alphabet.

Moore selected:

- **LZ X-Ray** at 13°34'4.6"N 107°42'50.4"E as his landing zone, a flat clearing surrounded by low trees at the northern base of the Chu Pong Massif and bordered by a dry creek bed on the west. The Ia Drang River was about 2 km (1 mi) to the northwest.
- **LZ Albany** to the north at 13°35'43"N 107°42'55"E
- **LZ Columbus**, just east of Albany at 13°35'20.8"N 107°44'29"E
- **LZ Tango** about 2 km (1 mi) to the north at 13°35'28.8"N 107°42'46"E
- **LZ Yankee** a similar distance south at 13°33'14.1"N 107°43'1.3"E. LZ Yankee was on sloping ground
- **LZ Whiskey**, 2.1 km (1 mi) south-east at 13°33'17.8"N 107°43'40.8"E
- **LZ Victor** at 13°33'33"N 107°43'47.8"E

Artillery support would be provided from firebase **FB Falcon**, about 8 km (5 mi) to the northeast at 13°37'22"N 107°45'51"E.

X-Ray was approximately the size of a misshapen football field, some 100 meters in length (east to west). It was estimated that only eight Hueys could fit in the clearing at a given time. The 1st/7th was typical for U.S. Army units of the time, consisting of three rifle companies (Alpha through Charlie) and a heavy weapons company (Delta), with about 450 men in total, of the 765 of the battalion's authorized strength. They were to be shuttled by 16 Huey transport helicopters, which could generally carry 10 to 12 equipped troops, so the battalion would have to be delivered in several "lifts" carrying just less than one complete company minutes. Moore arranged the lifts to deliver Bravo company first, along with his command team, followed by Alpha, Charlie, and finally Delta. Moore's plan was to move Bravo and Alpha northwest past the creek bed, and Charlie south toward the mountain. Delta Company, which comprised special weapons forces including mortar, recon, and machine gun units, was to be used as the battlefield reserve. In the center of the LZ was a large termite hill that was to become Moore's command post.

1st/7th Cav and the battle for LZ X-Ray

Day 1

Landings

At 10:48 on November 14, the first elements of Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion/7th Cavalry touched down at LZ X-Ray, following around 30 minutes of bombardment via artillery, aerial rockets, and air strikes. Accompanying Captain John Herren's Bravo Company were Moore and his command group. Instead of attempting to secure the entire landing zone with such a limited force, most of Bravo was kept near the center of the LZ as a strike force, while smaller units were sent out to reconnoiter the surrounding area.



Following their arrival, Herren ordered Bravo to move west past the creek bed. Within approximately 30 minutes, one of his squads under Sergeant John Mingo surprised and captured an unarmed soldier of the 33rd PAVN Regiment. The prisoner revealed that there were three North Vietnamese battalions on the Chu Pong Mountain – an estimated 1,600 North Vietnamese troops compared to fewer than 200 American soldiers on the ground at that point. At 11:20, the second lift of the battalion arrived, with the rest of Bravo Company and one platoon of Alpha Company, commanded by Captain Tony Nadal. Fifty minutes later, the third lift of American forces arrived, consisting of most of Alpha Company. Alpha took up positions to the rear and left flank of Bravo along the dry creek bed, and to the west and to the south facing perpendicular down the creek bed.

At 12:15, the first shots were fired on Bravo Company's three platoons that were patrolling the jungle northwest of the dry creek bed. Five minutes later, Herren ordered his 1st Platoon under Lieutenant Al Devney and 2nd Platoon under Lieutenant Henry Herrick to advance abreast of each other, and the 3rd (under Lieutenant Dennis Deal) to follow as a reserve unit. Devney's platoon led approximately 100 yards (91 m) west of the creek bed, with Herrick's men to his rear and right flank. Just before 13:00, Devney's platoon was heavily assaulted on both flanks by the North Vietnamese, taking casualties and becoming pinned down in the process. It was around this point that Herrick radioed in that his men were taking fire from their right flank, and that he was pursuing a squad of communist forces in that direction.

Herrick's platoon is cut off

In pursuit of the North Vietnamese on his right flank, Herrick's platoon was quickly spread out over a space of around 50 meters, and became separated from the rest of the battalion by approximately 100 meters. Soon, Herrick radioed in to ask whether he should enter or circumvent a clearing that his platoon had come across in the bush. Herrick expressed concerns that he might become cut off from the battalion if he tried to skirt the clearing and therefore would be leading his men through it in pursuit of the enemy. An intense firefight quickly erupted in the clearing; during the first three or four minutes his platoon suffered no casualties and inflicted heavy losses on the North Vietnamese who streamed out of the trees. Herrick soon radioed in that the enemy were closing in around his left and right flanks. Captain Herren responded by ordering Herrick to attempt to link back with Devney's 1st Platoon. Herrick replied that there was a large force between his men and 1st Platoon. The situation quickly disintegrated for Herrick's 2nd Platoon, which began taking casualties as the North Vietnamese attack persisted. Herrick ordered his men to form a defensive perimeter on a small knoll in the clearing. Within approximately 25 minutes, five men of 2nd Platoon were killed, including Herrick who radioed Herren that he was hit and was passing command over to Sergeant Carl Palmer. Herrick gave vital instructions to his men before he died, including orders to destroy the signals codes and call in artillery support. Sergeant Ernie Savage assumed command after Sergeant Palmer and Sergeant Robert Stokes were killed. The platoon was technically under the command of Sergeant First Class Mac McHenry, who was positioned elsewhere on the perimeter. Savage assumed command by virtue of being close to the radio and began the process of calling in repeated bombardments of artillery support around the platoon's position. By this point, eight men of 2nd Platoon had been killed and 13 wounded.

Under Savage's leadership, and with the extraordinary care of platoon medic Charlie Lose, the men held the knoll for the duration of the battle at X-Ray. Specialist Galen Bungum of Herrick's Platoon later said of the stand at the knoll: "We gathered up all the full magazines we could find and stacked them up in front of us. There was no way we could dig a foxhole. The handle was blown off my entrenching tool and one of my canteens had a hole blown through it. The fire was so heavy that if you tried to raise up to dig you were dead. There was death and destruction all around."^{[6]:117,118} Sergeant Savage later recalled of the repeated PAVN assaults: "It seemed like they didn't care how many of them were killed. Some of them were stumbling, walking right into us. Some had their guns slung and were charging bare-handed. I didn't run out of ammo – had about thirty magazines in my pack. And no problems with the M-16. An hour before dark three men walked up on the perimeter. I killed all three of them 15 feet away."^{[6]:168}

Fight for the creek bed

With Herrick's platoon cut off and surrounded, the rest of the battalion fought to maintain a perimeter. At 13:32, Charlie Company under Captain Bob Edwards arrived, taking up positions along the south and southwest facing the mountain. At around 13:45, through his Operations Officer flying above the battlefield (Captain Matt Dillon), Moore called in air strikes, artillery, and aerial rocket artillery on the mountain to prevent the North Vietnamese from advancing on the battalion's position.

Lieutenant Bob Taft's 3rd Platoon of Alpha Company confronted approximately 150 Vietnamese soldiers advancing down the length and sides of the creek bed (from the south) toward the battalion. 3rd Platoon's troops were told to drop their packs and move forward for the assault. The resulting exchange was particularly costly for 3rd Platoon — its lead forces were quickly cut down. 3rd Platoon was forced to pull back, and Taft was killed. Sergeant Lorenzo Nathan, a Korean War veteran, took command and 3rd Platoon was able to halt the PAVN advance down the creek bed. The PAVN forces shifted their attack to 3rd Platoon's right flank in an attempt to flank Bravo. Their advance was quickly stopped by Lieutenant Walter "Joe" Marm's 2nd Platoon (Alpha Company) situated on Bravo's left flank. Moore had ordered Captain Nadal to lend Bravo one of his platoons, in an effort to allow Herren to attempt to fight through to Herrick's position. From Marm's new position, his men killed some 80 PAVN troops with a close range machine gun, rifle, and grenade assault. The PAVN survivors who were not mown down made their way back to the creek bed, where they were cut down by additional fire from the rest of Alpha Company. Lieutenant Taft's dogtags were discovered on the body of a PAVN soldier who had been killed by 3rd Platoon. Upset that Taft's body had been left on the battlefield amidst the chaos, Nadal and his radio operator, Sergeant Jack Gell, brought Taft and the bodies of other Americans back to the creek bed under heavy fire.

Attack from the south

At 14:30 hours, the last troops of Charlie Company arrived, along with the lead elements of Delta Company under Captain Ray Lefebvre. The insertion took place with intense PAVN fire pouring into the LZ, and the Huey crews and newly arrived Battalion forces suffered many casualties. The small contingent of Delta took up position on Alpha's left flank. Charlie Company, assembled along the south and southwest in full strength, was met within minutes by a head-on assault. Edwards radioed in that an estimated 175 to 200 PAVN troops were charging his company's lines. With a clear line of sight over their sector of the battlefield, Charlie Company was able to call in and adjust heavy ordnance support with precision, inflicting devastating losses on the Vietnamese forces. Many PAVN soldiers were burned to death as they scrambled from their bunkers in a hasty retreat only to meet a second barrage of artillery shells. By 15:00 the attack had been quelled, and the PAVN ended up withdrawing from the assault approximately one hour after it had been launched.

Attack on Alpha and Delta

At approximately the same time, Alpha and the lead elements of Delta (which had accompanied Alpha at the perimeter in the vicinity of the creek bed) were met by a fierce PAVN attack. Covering the critical left flank from being rolled up by the North Vietnamese were two of Alpha's machine gun crews positioned 75 yards (69 m) southwest of the company's main position. Specialist Theron Ladner (with his assistant gunner Private First Class Rodriguez Rivera) and Specialist 4 Russell Adams (with a-gunner Specialist 4 Bill Beck) had positioned their guns 10 yards (9.1 m) apart, and proceeded to pour heavy fire into the Vietnamese forces attempting to cut into the perimeter between Charlie and Alpha companies. Moore later credited the two gun teams with preventing the PAVN from rolling up Alpha Company and driving a wedge into the battalion between Alpha and Charlie. Adams and Rivera were severely wounded in the onslaught. After the two were carried to the battalion's collection point at Moore's command post to await evacuation by air, Beck, Ladner, and Private First Class Edward Dougherty (an ammo-bearer) continued their close range suppression of the Vietnamese advance. Beck later said of the battle: "When Doc Nall was there with me, working on Russell, fear, real fear, hit me. Fear like I had never known before. Fear comes, and once you recognize it and accept it, it passes just as fast as it comes, and you don't really think about it anymore. You just do what you have to do, but you learn the real meaning of fear and life and death. For the next two hours I was alone on that gun, shooting at the enemy." [6]:133

Delta's troops also experienced heavy losses in repelling the PAVN assault, and Captain Lefebvre was wounded soon after arriving to X-Ray. One of his platoon leaders, Lieutenant Raul Taboada was also severely wounded, and Lefebvre passed command to Staff Sergeant George Gonzales (who, unknown to Lefebvre, had also been wounded). While medical evacuation helicopters (medevacs) were supposed to transport the battalion's growing casualties, only two were evacuated by medevacs before the pilots called off their mission under intense fire from the PAVN. Casualties were loaded onto the assault Hueys (lifting the battalion's forces to X-Ray), whose pilots carried load after load of wounded from the battlefield. Battalion intelligence officer Captain Tom Metsker (who had been wounded) was fatally hit when helping his wounded comrade Ray Lefebvre aboard a Huey.

360-degree perimeter

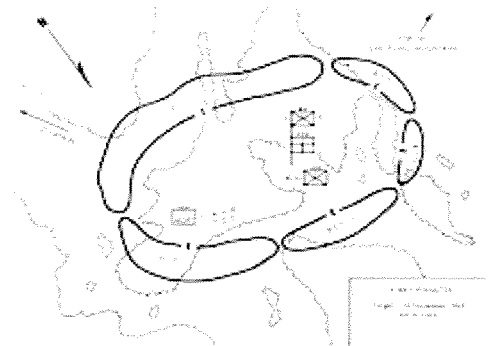
Captain Edwards ordered Sergeant Gonzales to position Delta Company on Charlie's left flank, extending the perimeter to cover the southeast side of X-Ray. At 15:20, the last of the battalion arrived, and Lieutenant Larry Litton assumed command of Delta. It was during this lift that one Huey, having approached the LZ too high, crash-landed on the outskirts of the perimeter near the command post (those on board were quickly rescued by the battalion). With Delta's weapons teams on the ground, its mortar units were massed with the rest of the battalion's in a single station to support Alpha and Bravo. Delta's reconnaissance platoon (commanded by Lieutenant James Rackstraw) was positioned along the north and east of the LZ, establishing a 360-degree perimeter over X-Ray. Had the PAVN forces circled around to the north of the U.S. positions prior to this point, they would have found their approach unhindered.

Second push to the lost platoon

As the PAVN attack on Alpha Company diminished, Moore organized for another effort to rescue Herrick's lost platoon. At 15:45, Moore ordered Alpha and Bravo to evacuate their casualties and pull back from engagement with the enemy. Shortly after, Alpha and Bravo began their advance toward Herrick's lost platoon from the creek bed. The force quickly suffered casualties. At one point, Bravo's advance was halted by a firmly entrenched North Vietnamese machine gun position at a large termite hill. After firing a light anti-tank weapon (LAW) into it with no effect, Lieutenant Marm attacked the position single-handedly. Under fire, Marm charged the Vietnamese gun,

eliminating it with grenade and rifle fire. The following day, a dozen dead PAVN troops (including one officer) were found in the position. Marm was wounded in the neck and jaw in the assault and was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his lone assault.^[7] The second push had advanced just over 75 yards (69 m) toward the lost platoon's position before reaching a stalemate with the PAVN. At one point, the PAVN were firing on Alpha's 1st Platoon (which was leading the advance and was at risk of becoming separated from the battalion) with an American M-60 machine gun that had been taken off a dead gunner of Herrick's platoon. The stalemate lasted between 20 and 30 minutes before Nadal and Herren requested permission to withdraw back to X-Ray (to which Moore agreed).

Near 17:00 hours the lead elements of Bravo Company of the 2nd Battalion/7th Cavalry (the "sister battalion" of the 1st/7th under Moore) arrived at LZ X-Ray to reinforce the embattled battalion. In preparation for a defensive position to last the night, Moore ordered Bravo's (2nd/7th) commander Captain Myron Diduryk to place two of his platoons between Bravo (1st/7th) and Delta on the northeast side of the perimeter. Diduryk's 2nd Platoon was used to reinforce Charlie Company's position (which was stretched over a disproportionately long line). By nightfall, the battle had taken a heavy toll on Moore's battalion. Bravo had taken 47 casualties (including one officer), and Alpha had taken 34 casualties (including three officers). Charlie Company was comparatively healthy (having taken only four casualties).



X-Ray perimeter, night of November 14

The American forces were placed on full alert throughout the night. Under the light of a bright moon, the Vietnamese probed every company on the perimeter (with the exception of Delta) in small squad-sized units. The Americans exercised some level of restraint in their response. The M-60 gun crews, tactically positioned around the perimeter to provide for multiple fields of fire, were told to hold their fire until otherwise ordered (so as to conceal their true location from the PAVN). The lost platoon under Sergeant Savage's command suffered three sizable assaults of the night (one just before midnight, one at 03:15, and one at 04:30). The PAVN, using bugles to signal their forces, were repelled from the knoll with artillery, grenade, and rifle fire. The lost platoon survived the night without taking additional casualties.

Day two

Attack at dawn

Just before dawn at 06:20, Moore ordered his companies to put out reconnaissance patrols to probe for North Vietnamese forces. At 06:50, patrols from Charlie Company's 1st Platoon (under Lieutenant Neil Kroger) and 2nd Platoon (under Lieutenant) had advanced 150 yards (140 m) from the perimeter before coming into contact with PAVN troops. A firefight broke out, and the patrols quickly withdrew to the perimeter. Shortly after, an estimated 200-plus North Vietnamese troops charged 1st and 2nd platoons on the south side of the perimeter. Heavy ordnance support was called in, but the PAVN were soon within 75 yards (69 m) of the battalion's lines. Their fire began to cut through Charlie Company's positions and into the command post and the American lines across the LZ. 1st and 2nd platoons suffered significant casualties in this assault, including Kroger and Geoghegan. Geoghegan was killed while attempting to rescue one of his wounded men, Private First Class Willie Godboldt (who died of his wounds shortly thereafter). Two M-60 crews (under Specialist James Comer and Specialist 4 Clinton Poley, Specialist 4 Nathaniel Byrd, and Specialist 4 George Foxe) were instrumental in

suppressing the North Vietnamese advance from completely overrunning Geoghegan's lines. Following this attack, Charlie's 3rd Platoon was soon met with a PAVN assault. Captain Edwards was wounded, and Lieutenant John Arrington assumed command of the company and was himself quickly wounded.

Three-pronged attack

At 07:45, the PAVN launched an assault on Crack Rock, near its connection with the beleaguered Charlie Company. Enemy fire started to penetrate the battalion command post, which suffered several wounded (including Moore's own radio operator, Specialist 4 Robert Ouellette). Under heavy attack on three sides, the battalion fought off repeated waves of PAVN infantry. It was during this battle that Specialist Willard Parish of Charlie Company, situated on Delta's lines, earned a Silver Star for suppressing an intense Vietnamese assault in his sector. After expending his M-60 ammunition, Parish resorted to his .45 sidearm to repel PAVN forces that advanced within 20 yards (18 m) of his foxhole. After the battle, over 100 dead North Vietnamese troops were discovered around Parish's position.

As the battle along the southern line intensified, Lieutenant Charlie W. Hastings (USAF liaison forward air controller), made the decision (based on criteria established by the USAF) to transmit the code phrase "Broken Arrow", which relayed that an American combat unit was in danger of being overrun. In so doing, Hastings was calling on all available support aircraft in the country to come to the battalion's defense, drawing on a significant arsenal of heavy ordnance support. On Charlie Company's broken lines, PAVN troops walked the lines for several minutes, killing wounded Americans and stripping their bodies of weapons and other items. It was around this time, at 07:55, that Moore ordered his lines to throw colored smoke grenades over the lines to identify the battalion's perimeter. Aerial fire support was then called in on the PAVN at close range – including those along Charlie Company's lines. Shortly after, Moore's command post was subjected to a friendly fire incident. Two F-100 Super Sabre jets approached X-Ray to drop napalm inadvertently on American lines. Seeing the approaching F-100's about to drop their bombs dangerously close on the American positions, Hastings frantically radioed for the two jets to abort the attack and change course. The pilot of the second approaching F-100 complied and disengaged, but the ordnance from the first F-100 had already been dropped. Despite Hastings' best efforts, several Americans were wounded and killed by this air strike.^{[8][9]} Reporter Joe Galloway who later died, to an aid station tried to attach a name to the death occurring around him, discovering that this particular soldier's name was PFC Jimmy Nakayama of Rigby, Idaho, noting "[a]t LZ XRay 80 men died and 124 were wounded, many of them terribly," and that the death toll for the entire battle was 234 Americans killed and perhaps as many as 2,000 North Vietnamese soldiers.^{[10][11]}

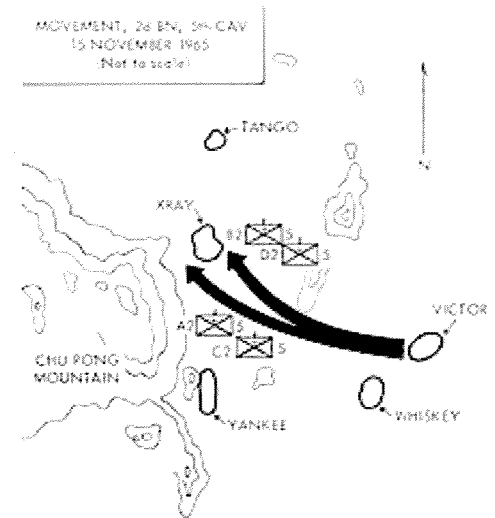
At 09:10, the first elements of Alpha Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry under Captain Joel Sugdinis arrived at X-Ray. Sugdinis' forces reinforced the remains of Charlie Company's lines. By 10:00, the North Vietnamese had begun to withdraw from the battle – although occasional fire continued to harass the battalion. Charlie Company, having inflicted scores of losses on the PAVN, had suffered 42 (KIA) and 20 wounded in action (WIA) over the course of the two-and-a-half-hour assault. Lieutenant Rick Rescorla of Diduryk's Bravo Company later remarked after having policed up the battlefield in Charlie Company's sector following the assaults: "There were American and PAVN bodies everywhere. My area was where Lieutenant Geoghegan's platoon had been. There were several dead PAVN around his platoon command post. One dead trooper was locked in contact with a dead PAVN, hands around the enemy's throat. There were two troopers – one black, one Hispanic – linked tight together. It looked like they had died trying to help each other."^{[6]:215}

Reinforcements

Given the tempo of combat at LZ X-Ray and the losses being suffered, other units of the 1st Cavalry Division planned to land nearby and then move overland to X-Ray. The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Cavalry was to be flown into LZ Victor, about 3.5 kilometers east-southeast of LZ X-Ray. They flew in at 08:00 and quickly organized to move out, the trip taking about 4 hours. Most of this was uneventful until they were approaching X-Ray. At about 10:00, some 800 yards (730 m) to the east of the LZ, the 2nd/7th's Alpha company received some light fire and had to set up a combat front. At 12:05, Lt. Col Tully's forces of the 2nd/5th battalion had arrived at the LZ.

Third push to the lost platoon

Using a plan devised by Moore, Tully commanded Bravo/1st/7th and his own Alpha/2nd/5th and Charlie/2nd/5th companies in a third major effort to relieve the lost platoon under Sergeant Ernie Savage. Making use of fire support, the relief force slowly but successfully made its way to the knoll without encountering PAVN elements. 2nd Platoon had survived but at a significant cost; out of the 29 men, nine were KIA and a further 13 WIA. At around 15:30, the relief force began to encounter sniper fire and began the process of carrying the wounded and dead of the lost platoon back to X-Ray. The expanded force at X-Ray, consisting of Moore's weakened 1st Battalion of the 7th, Tully's 2nd Battalion of the 5th, and one company of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th consolidated at X-Ray for the night. At the LZ, the wounded and dead were evacuated, and the remaining American forces dug in and fortified their lines.



Relief of LZ X-Ray on November 15

Night attacks on Bravo

While the American lines at X-Ray were harassed at various times during the night by PAVN probes, it was shortly before 04:00 that grenade booby traps and trip flares set by Captain Diduryk's Bravo Company began to erupt. At 04:22, the PAVN launched a fierce assault against Diduryk's men. Bravo fought off this attack by an estimated 300 PAVN in minutes. A decisive factor in this stand, in addition to rifle and machine gun fire from Bravo's lines, was the skilled placement of artillery strikes by Diduryk's forward observer, Lieutenant Bill Lund. Making use of four different artillery batteries, Lund organized fire into separate concentrations along the battlefield, with devastating consequences for the waves of advancing PAVN. The PAVN repeated their assault on Diduryk's lines some 20 minutes after the first, as flares dropped from American battlefield to Bravo's advantage. For around 30 minutes, Bravo fought off the PAVN advance with a combination of small arms and Lund's skilled organization of artillery strikes. Shortly after 05:00, a third attack was launched against Diduryk's forces, which was repelled by Lieutenant James Lane's platoon within 30 minutes. At almost 06:30, the PAVN launched yet another attack on Diduryk's men – this time in the vicinity of the company command post. Again, Lund's precision in ordering artillery strikes cut down scores of PAVN forces, while Diduryk's men repelled those who survived with rifle and machine gun fire. At the end of these attacks, with daybreak approaching, Diduryk's Bravo Company had only six lightly wounded among its ranks – with none killed.

LZ X-Ray secured

By the morning of November 16, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry had been reinforced by the remaining elements of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry and 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry. Unattired this would have put the U.S. forces on rough parity with the original PAVN forces, three battalions, or about one complete brigade each. That afternoon, 1st/7th

Cav. withdrew from the battle zone while the 2nd/7th Cav. and 2nd/5th Cav. took up defensive positions for the night.

The battle was ostensibly over. The PAVN forces had suffered hundreds of casualties and were no longer capable of a fight. U.S. forces had suffered 79 killed and 121 injured and had been reinforced to levels that would guarantee their safety. Given the situation there was no reason for the U.S. forces to stay in the field, their mission was complete and arguably a success. Moreover, Col. Brown, in overall command, was worried about reports that additional PAVN units were moving into the area over the border. He wanted to withdraw the units, but General Westmoreland demanded that the 2nd/7th Cav. and 2nd/5th Cav stay at X-Ray to avoid the appearance of a retreat.

The next day, the two remaining battalions abandoned LZ X-Ray and began a tactical march to new landing zones, 2nd/5th under Lt. Col. Bob Tully to LZ Columbus about 4 km (2 mi) to the northeast, and 2nd/7th under Lt. Col. Robert McDade to LZ Albany about 4 km (2 mi) to the north-northeast, close to the Ia Drang. Air Force B-52 Stratofortresses were on their way from Guam, and their target was the slopes of the Chu Pong massif. The U.S. ground forces had to move outside a two-mile (3 km) safety zone by midmorning to be clear of the bombardment. Tully's men moved out at 09:00; McDade's followed ten minutes later.^[6]

Events leading to the ambush

The first indication of enemy presence was observed by the point units of the American column, the point squad of the reconnaissance platoon under Staff Sergeant Donald J. Slovak, who saw "Ho Chi Minh sandal foot markings, bamboo arrows on the ground pointing north, matted grass and grains of rice."^{[6]:285,286} After marching about 2,000 meters, Alpha Company leading the 2nd/7th headed northwest, while the 2nd/5th continued on to LZ Columbus. Alpha Company came upon some grass huts which they were directed to burn. At 11:38, Bob Tully's men, the 2nd/5th, were logged into its objective, LZ Columbus. Communist troops in the area consisted of the 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, the 1st Battalion 33rd Regiment, and the headquarters of the 3rd Battalion, 33rd Regiment, of the PAVN. While the 33rd Regiment's battalions were understrength from casualties incurred during the battle at the Special Forces Plei Me camp, the 8th was General Chu Huy Man's reserve battalion, fresh and rested.^[6]

Alpha Company soon noticed the sudden absence of air cover and their commander, Captain Joel Sugdinis wondered where the choppers were. He soon heard the sound of distant explosions to his rear; the B-52's were making their bombing runs on the Chu Pong massif. Lieutenant D. P. (Pat) Payne, the recon platoon leader, was walking around some termite hills when he suddenly came upon a North Vietnamese soldier resting on the ground. Payne jumped on the PAVN trooper and took him prisoner. Simultaneously, about ten yards away, his platoon sergeant captured a second PAVN soldier. Other members of the PAVN recon team may have escaped and reported to the headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment. The North Vietnamese then began to organize an assault on the American column. As word of the capture reached him, Lt. Col. McDade ordered a halt as he went forward from the rear of the column to interrogate the prisoners personally. The POWs were policed up about a hundred yards from the southwestern edge of the clearing called Albany, the report of which reached division forward at Pleiku at 11:57.^{[6]:289,290}

McDade then called his company commanders forward for a conference; most of whom were accompanied by their radio operators. Alpha Company moved forward to LZ Albany; McDade and his command group were with them. Following orders, the other company commanders were moving forward to join McDade. Delta Company, which was next in the column following Alpha Company, was holding in place; so was Charlie Company which was next in line. Battalion Headquarters Company followed, and Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry brought up the rear of the column. The American column was halted in unprepared, open terrain, and strung out in 550-yard (500 m) line of march.^{[6]:292,293} Most of the units had flank security posted, but the men were worn out from almost sixty hours without sleep and four hours of marching. The _____ was chest-high so visibility was limited. The column's radios for air or artillery support were with the company commanders.

An hour and ten minutes after the PAVN recon soldiers were captured, Alpha Company and McDade's command group had reached the Albany clearing. McDade and his group walked across the clearing and into a clump of trees. Beyond that clump of trees was another clearing. The remainder of the battalion was in a dispersed column to the east of the LZ. Battalion Sergeant Major James Scott and Sergeant Charles Bass then attempted to question the prisoners again. While they were doing this, Bass heard Vietnamese voices, and the interpreter confirmed that these were PAVN talking. Alpha Company had been in the LZ about five minutes. Right about then, small arms fire erupted.

2nd Battalion ambushed

Lt. Pat Payne's reconnaissance platoon had walked to within 200 yards (180 m) of the headquarters of PAVN's 3rd Battalion, 33rd Regiment; the 550-man strong 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment had been bivouacked off to the northeast of the American column. As the Americans rested in the tall grass, North Vietnamese soldiers were coming towards them by the hundreds. It was 13:15. The close quarters, intense battle lasted for sixteen hours.^{[6]:293–295}

North Vietnamese forces first struck at the head of the 2nd Battalion column and rapidly spread down the right or east side of the column in an L-shaped ambush.^[12] PAVN troops ran down the length of the column, with units peeling off to attack the outnumbered Americans, engaging in intense, brutal close-range and hand-to-hand combat. McDade's command group made it into the clump of trees between the two clearings that constituted LZ Albany. They took cover from rifle and mortar fire within the trees and termite hills. The reconnaissance platoon and the Alpha Company 1st Platoon provided initial defense at the position. By 13:26, they had been cut off from the rest of the column; the area whence they had come was swarming with PAVN soldiers. While they waited for air support, the Americans holding Albany drove off assaults by PAVN troopers and sniped at the exposed enemy wandering around the perimeter. It was later discovered that North Vietnamese were mopping up, looking for Americans wounded in the tall grass and killing them.^{[6]:300–305}

All the while the noise of battle could be heard in the woods as the other companies fought for their lives. The 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry had been reduced to a small perimeter at Albany composed of survivors of Alpha Company, the recon platoon, survivors from the decimated Charlie and Delta Companies and the command group. There was also a smaller perimeter at the rear of the column about 500–700 yards due south: Captain George Forrest's Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry. Captain Forrest had run a gauntlet all the way from the conference called by McDade back to his company when the PAVN mortars started coming in. Charlie and Alpha companies lost a combined 70 men in the first minutes. Charlie Company suffered 45 dead and more than 50 wounded, the heaviest

casualties of any unit that fought on Albany.^{[6]:309} Air Force A-1E Skyraiders soon provided much-needed support, dropping napalm. However, because of the fog of war and the inter-mixing of both American and North Vietnamese troops, it is likely that the air and artillery strikes killed not just PAVN, but Americans as well.^[12]

At 14:55, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry under Captain Buse Tully began marching from LZ Columbus to the rear of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry column that was about two miles (3 km) away. By 16:30, they came into contact with the Alpha Company perimeter under Captain Forrest. A one-helicopter landing zone was secured, and the wounded were evacuated. Captain Tully's men then began to push forward towards where the rest of the ambushed column would be. PAVN troopers contested their advance, and the Americans came under fire from a wood line. Tully's men assaulted the tree line and drove off the North Vietnamese. At 18:25, orders were received to secure into a two-company perimeter for the night. They planned to resume the advance at daybreak.^{[6]:339,340}

At around 16:00, Captain Myron Diduryk's Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, veterans of the fight at LZ X-Ray, got the word that they would be deployed in the Battalion's relief. At 18:45 the first helicopters swept over the Albany clearing and the troopers deployed into the tall grass.^{[6]:341–343} Lieutenant Rick Rescorla, the sole remaining platoon leader in Bravo Company, led the reinforcements into the Albany perimeter, which was expanded to provide better security. The wounded at Albany were evacuated at around 22:30 that evening, the helicopters receiving intense ground fire as they landed and took off. The Americans at Albany then settled down for the night.

The next day, Friday, November 18 dawned on the battlefield. The Americans began to police up their dead. This task took the better part of the day and the next, as American and North Vietnamese dead were scattered all over the field of battle. Rescorla described the scene as, "a long, bloody traffic accident in the jungle."^{[6]:369} While policing the battlefield, Rescorla recovered a large, battered, old French army bugle from a dying PAVN soldier. The Americans finally left Albany for LZ Crooks at 13°40'5.6"N 107°39'10"E, six miles (10 km) away, on November 19. The battle at LZ Albany cost the Americans 155 men killed or missing and 124 wounded.^{[6]:295} One American, Toby Braveboy, was recovered on November 24 when he waved down a passing H-13 scout helicopter.^{[6]:352–354} About half of some 300 American deaths in the 35-day Operation Silver Bayonet happened in

[3]

Result

This battle can be seen as a blueprint for tactics by both sides. The Americans used air mobility, artillery fire and close air support to accomplish battlefield objectives. The PAVN and Viet Cong forces learned that they could neutralize that firepower by quickly engaging American forces at very close range. The North Vietnamese Colonel Nguyen Huu An included his lessons from the battle at X-ray in his orders for Albany, "Move inside the column, grab them by the belt, and thus avoid casualties from the artillery and air."^[13] This battle was one of the few set piece battles of the war and was one of the first battles to popularize the U.S. concept of the "body count" as a measure of success, as they claimed that the kill ratio was nearly 10–1.

Casualty notification

The U.S. Army had not yet set up casualty-notification teams this early in the war. The notification telegrams at this time were handed over to taxi cab drivers for delivery to the next of kin. Hal Moore's wife, Julia Compton Moore followed in the wake of the deliveries to widows in the Ft. Benning housing complex, grieving with the wives and comforting the children, and attended the funerals of all the men killed under her husband's command who were buried at Fort Benning.^[12] Her complaints about the notifications prompted the Army to quickly set up two-man teams to deliver them, consisting of an officer and a chaplain.^[14] Mrs. Frank Henry, the wife of the battalion executive officer, and Mrs. James Scott, wife of the battalion command sergeant major, performed the same duty for the dead of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry.^{[6]:416}

Notable awards

- Walter Marm received the on February 15, 1967, for his actions during the 3-day battle at LZ X-Ray. His MOH citation recounts several examples of conspicuous gallantry, some despite being severely wounded.^[15]
- On July 16, 2001, and February 26, 2007, respectively, helicopter pilots Captain Ed Freeman and Bruce Crandall were each awarded the Medal of Honor for their numerous volunteer flights (14 and 22, respectively) in their unarmed Hueys^[16] into LZ X-Ray while enemy fire was so heavy that medical evacuation helicopters refused to approach. With each flight, Crandall and Freeman delivered much needed water and ammunition and extracted wounded soldiers, saving countless lives.^[17]
- Sergeant Ernie Savage's precise placement of artillery throughout the siege of the "Lost Platoon" enabled the platoon to survive the long ordeal. For his "gallantry under relentless enemy fire on an otherwise insignificant knoll in the valley of the Ia Drang," Ernie Savage received the .^[18]
- Lieutenant Colonel , commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions at LZ X-Ray. His DSC citation particularly commends his "leadership by example" as well as his skill in battle against overwhelming odds and his unwavering courage.^[19]
- Journalist Joseph Galloway Bronze Star Medal for valor during the Vietnam war when he repeatedly disregarded his own safety to rescue wounded soldiers while under fire.^[20]

Although many notable decorations have been awarded to veterans of the Battle of Ia Drang, in his book *We Were* , Harold Moore writes: "We had problems on the awards... Too many men had died bravely and heroically, while the men who had witnessed their deeds had also been killed... Acts of valor that, on other fields, on other days, would have been rewarded with the Medal of Honor or Distinguished Service Cross or Silver Star were recognized only with a telegram saying, ' regrets...' The same was true of our sister battalion, the 2nd of the 7th."^[13]

See also

- *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*. Random House. ISBN 0394530284. (ISBN 978-0-394-53028-4), a book which includes accounts by multiple soldiers who recounted the Battle of Ia Drang
- *Chickenhawk* (book) Robert Mason
- *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* (1992), book by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and war journalist
 - *We Were Soldiers*

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External links

- LZ X-Ray
- OPERATION SILVER BAYONET: THE BATTLE OF THE IA DRANG (http://www.ordersofbattle.darkscape.net/site/history/open3/us_iadrang1965.pdf)
- Rescue at LZ Albany (<http://www.historynet.com/magazines/vietnam/3026671.html?page=1&c=y>)
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