

THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE AT QUANG TRI

THOMAS KJOS

PREFACE

We have at least a hazy memory of our firefights - images, sounds, feelings. We remember walking, running, the heat, the rain. We remember “humping a load.” What we didn’t know at the time, and perhaps have not been able to learn since, is what those firefights were part of. The larger battles, the plans, the “why the hell were we in that place, at that time.” This is the story of Delta Company at Tet in 1968. It is also the story of the plans and battles that give greater context to our place in the history of the Vietnam war.

PROLOGUE

Six North Vietnamese Army Battalions were moving into positions to launch the attack on Quang Tri City when the elite commandos of the NVA 10th Sapper Battalion struck key targets in the city at 0200 hours on January 31, 1968. The capture of Quang Tri would open an avenue of attack straight from the DMZ to the strategically important city of Hue.



The Army of the Republic of Vietnam defending the city was widely expected to quickly collapse. Instead, the ARVN troops stayed, fought, and held the city until cavalry troopers rode to the rescue — this time to the thump of rotor blades.

Capital of the province of the same name, Quang Tri was 12 miles south of the DMZ, situated on National Highway QL 1. A road network of north-south and east-west corridors passed through the city. Only 45 miles north of Hue, Quang Tri, on the coastal plain, was vulnerable to attack from all but the west, where the Thach Han river presented a formidable barrier.

The American 3rd Marine Division, spread along the DMZ, was preoccupied with pacification operations and the defense of Khe Sanh, and stretched thin. According to the official Marine Corps history, “The 3rd Marine Division had no men to spare for the defense of Quang Tri City, which was an ARVN responsibility.”

South of the Marine AO the responsibility for Quang Tri Province lay in the hands of the ARVN 1st Division, which many Americans considered South Vietnam's best. Its 1st Regiment, however, responsible for the immediate vicinity of Quang Tri City, was not at all well regarded.

The 1st Regiment’s 2nd and 3rd Battalions were dispersed in Rural Development missions far north and northwest of the city. The 1st Battalion was south and east of the city, reinforced by a company of armored cavalry. The attached 9th Airborne Battalion was northeast of the city in the hamlet of Tri Buu, with one company deployed in Quang Tri City, and one detached to patrol in the vicinity of QL 1 south of the city. The paratroopers were all volunteers, with nine weeks of intensive combat training at the Airborne Training Center, capped by a three-week jump school at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The 1st Regiment’s CP was at La Vang Military Camp. The National Police patrolled throughout the city proper.

MACV Commanding General William Westmoreland expected “the next major Communist campaign [to be] in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, just below the DMZ.” Accordingly, Westmoreland moved his ‘First Team,’ the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), into I Corps. The Cav’s 1st Brigade, at LZ English near Bong Son, received orders on January 17 to move to the Hue–Phu Bai area. Arriving there on January 19, on January 25 it shifted farther north into Quang Tri Province.

1st Brigade Commander Colonel Donald V. “Snapper” Rattan positioned his battalions, including the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, south and west of Quang Tri City, assigned to Search and Destroy missions and building and defending fire bases. Meanwhile, to the east of the city, thousands of NVA troops were deploying to strike.

GIAP'S GAMBLE

General Vo Nguyen Giap, architect of the Tet Offensive, had been preparing for the Tet campaign since the summer of 1967. Deciding it was too late to alter his plans, Giap gambled. Ignoring the unexpected arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division, he unleashed an all-out assault throughout I Corps as planned. In the northern provinces, the capture of Hue would be the main objective. Taking Quang Tri would be important, not so much to *taking* Hue, but to *holding* it, because its transportation hub would allow the corps-size B-9 Front, just north of the DMZ, to advance down the coast along Highway 1 to reinforce.

THE PLAN

A platoon of the NVA 10th Sapper Battalion would infiltrate the city at night and attack key objectives to support the main attack by four battalions of the 812th Regiment of the NVA 324B Division and the VC 808th and 814th Battalions. 324B was known to be one of the NVA's best.

With four infantry battalions (K4, K5, K6 and K8), and its signal, reconnaissance, and heavy weapons companies, the NVA 812th Regiment totaled about 2,600 troops. K4 Battalion would attack from the east and K6, with the regiment's heavy weapons company, from the southeast. K8 screened in the northwest and K5 Battalion was in reserve in the southeast. The 600-man VC 814th Battalion would attack from the northeast. The VC 808th Battalion would screen in the north, blocking QL1 to allied reinforcements.

THE PLAN UNFOLDS

During January, the 812th infiltrated into the hamlets and countryside around Quang Tri. As they did, thousands of Vietnamese civilians fled to the city. That didn't go unnoticed. On January 28, the Quang Tri Province Chief and the Commanding General of the ARVN 1st Division declared a state of emergency and imposed martial law. The two officers waited and watched for the strike they sensed lurking just out of sight.

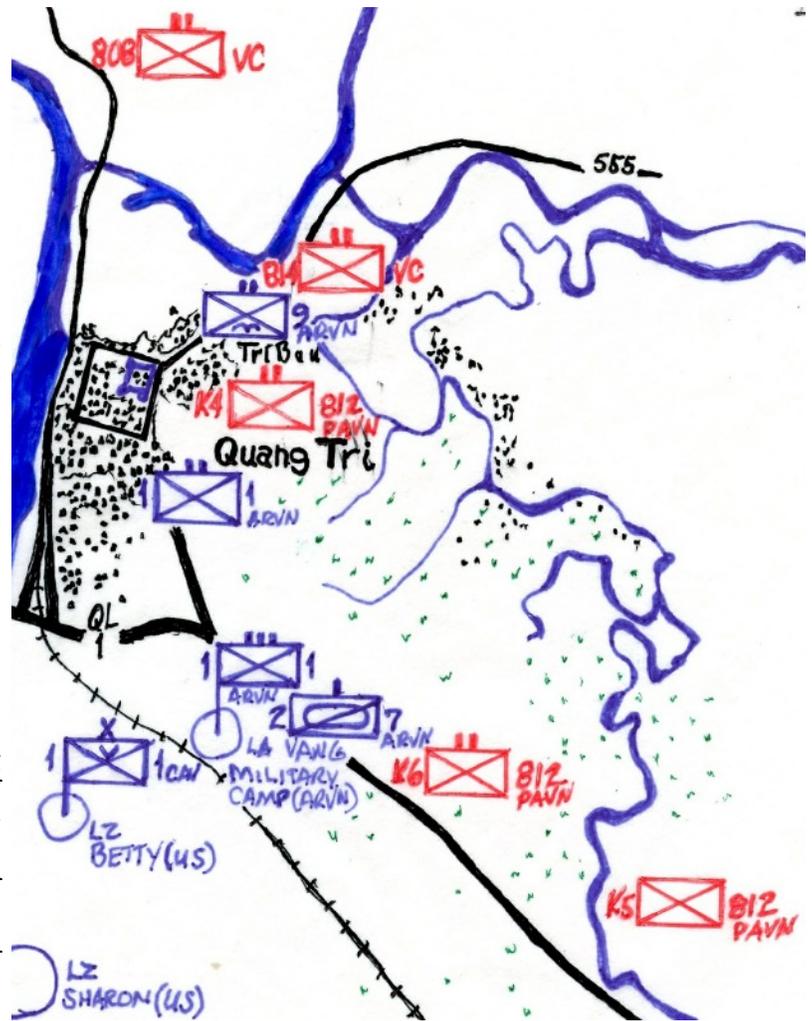
The sapper attacks in Quang Tri the morning of January 31 were intended to be simultaneous with the main attack of the 812th. However, rain, swollen streams and unfamiliarity with the terrain delayed K4; it launched its assault two hours late, at 0420. Given that respite, the South Vietnamese concentrated on isolating and eliminating the sappers.

When it finally came, the 812th Regiment's attack was on multiple axis accompanied by rocket and mortar attacks on US and ARVN bases throughout the province. K4 advanced along four routes to penetrate the city from the east. K6 Battalion, advancing from the southeast between Highway 1 and the railroad, struck the ARVN compound at La Vang south of the city. K5 and K8 screened southeast and northwest of the city respectively to ambush and block allied reinforcements. The VC 814th Battalion struck from the northeast through the small village of Tri Buu.

THE DEFENDERS HANG ON

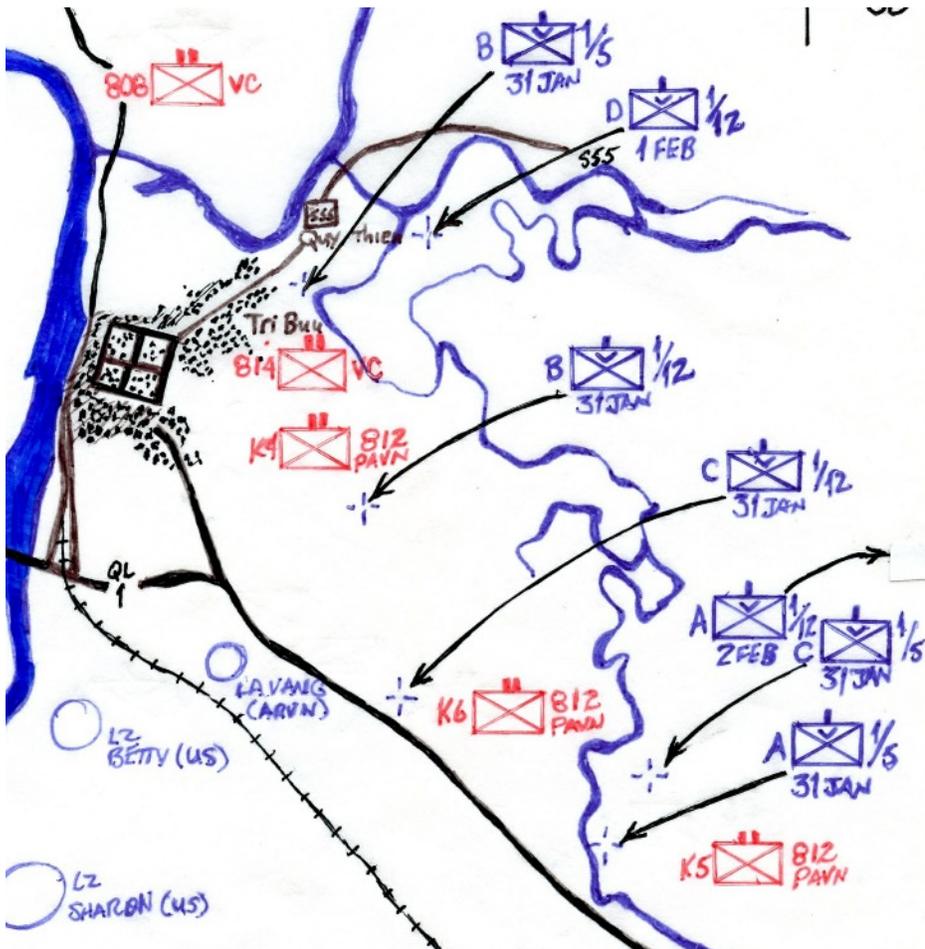
At Tri Buu, the VC, wearing ARVN paratrooper uniforms, approached the 9th Airborne Battalion. The ruse failed when an ARVN sentry saw the impostors were wearing sandals instead of jungle boots. The defenders opened fire, and fierce hand-to-hand fighting ensued. The VC 814th would be seriously depleted when it finally reached the Quang Tri Citadel.

Meanwhile, east of Quang Tri, K4 and K6 encountered withering fire from the defenders, but still advanced. The ARVN 1st Battalion, fighting for every foot of ground, slowly fell back toward the sector headquarters. Heavy fighting went on throughout the morning of 31 January along the city's edge. By noon the outcome of the battle still hung in the balance. The South Vietnamese held on, but if the NVA committed its reserve battalions, they would be overwhelmed. They needed reinforcements, and the only available force was the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade. Anticipating such a move, the enemy had been rocketing and mortaring LZ Betty since dawn to pin down the nearby part of the brigade. ARVN infantry and paratroopers held the NVA at bay while waiting for relief.



SNAPPER'S RESPONSE

Quang Tri Province Adviser Robert Brewer choppered into Colonel Rattan's brigade headquarters on LZ Betty shortly after noon. Brewer told Rattan, "The situation is desperate. One enemy battalion has fought its way into the city. He is reinforcing from the east and has established fire support positions on the city's east and south."



Rattan requested authority to attack east of Quang Tri City from 1st Cavalry Commanding General Major General John Tolson. The General, who been a key figure in developing the airmobility concept, immediately approved the request. "I agreed with [Rattan's] assessment," he later wrote. "I trusted his judgment implicitly."

Brewer and Rattan identified likely enemy locations, and Rattan selected LZs on which to land his companies. Working swiftly and efficiently, Rattan's staff put together a plan and called up the lift assets. As General Tolson later noted, "The LZs were selected for the purpose of reducing the enemy's reinforcement capability by blocking his avenues of approach and eliminating his fire support capability by landing in his support areas." The 1/8th Cavalry was fogged in on its mountaintop bases, and the 1/502nd Infantry, attached from the 101st Airborne Division, was defending the brigade's bases, so Rattan had just two battalions available. He ordered Lieutenant Colonel Daniel French's 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry to land east around the village of Thon An Thai and positioned Lieutenant Colonel Robert

Runkle's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry southeast of Quang Tri City. Priority for lift went to 1/12th. Relief was on the way. The ARVN defenders knew it and redoubled their efforts to hold on.

THE CAVALRY RIDES

Alerted at 1345, the first US company committed, Bravo Company 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, air assaulted into an LZ east of the city, the first skytrooper setting foot on the LZ at 1555. A few minutes later, intense fire met Charlie Company 1/12th as it came into a hot LZ, but the battalion's assaults had bracketed the enemy's heavy weapons supporting the enemy attack, and the cavalry troopers overran them. The enemy was caught between the Cavalry and ARVN 1st Regiment. Within two hours of being alerted, and less from the brigade staff completing its work, the first slicks had touched down almost on top of the NVA battalions. Behind the 12th Cavalry, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry landed two companies near the village of Thong Thuong Xa, right on top of elements of K6. The two cavalry battalions, vaulting over the enemy's blocking forces, had landed in five locations in the Communist rear. The surprised NVA fought back with machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles. The 1st Brigade's helicopters and infantry-directed American firepower pounded the enemy. Struck from above by gunships, hammered by artillery, and wedged between the ARVN and the Americans, K6 was shattered as an effective fighting unit. By landing directly on top of the NVA, the 1st Cavalry cut off the support those units were providing to the Communist infantry inside the city.

B Company 1/5th, OPCON to 1/12th, landed northeast of Tri Buu. The ARVN airborne troops there "were in pretty good contact, but holding their own," remembered Bravo's commander, CPT Michael Nawrosky. Allied units blocked the 814th from contesting the Cav landings from the north or reaching the city. According to 1st Brigade's war diary, "It was obvious that the NVA were completely unfamiliar with air cavalry warfare." Rattan had redirected his 1st Brigade 180 degrees, from the far west to east of the city, in just two hours.

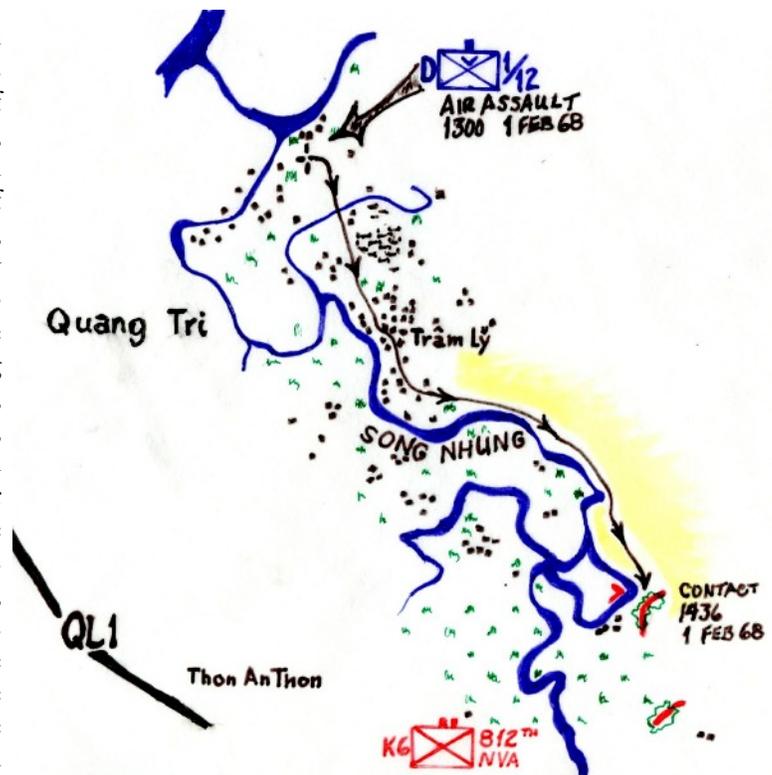
THE TIDE OF BATTLE TURNS

In close-quarter engagements the enemy began to buckle, and the commander of the NVA 812th decided to withdraw rather than commit his reserve battalions. At 1900 hours on January 31, fifteen hours after launching its attack, the NVA infantry along the east wall of the Quang Tri Citadel broke contact. Demoralized NVA soldiers, some donning civilian clothing over their uniforms, threw away their rifles and tried to reach the protection of K5 in the south. The airmobile assault had crushed the Communist attack and relieved the ARVN defenders. The cavalry troopers pressed the attack throughout the night, and into the morning.

By early afternoon the next day, Quang Tri City had been largely secured by the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. The main attack by the K4 battalion of the 812st Regiment, 324th Division (PAVN) had failed. North Vietnamese troops remaining in Quang Tri City were prisoners of war or too badly wounded to flee. K4 and K6 were now dispersed in small groups throughout the countryside south and east of the capital, doing their best to avoid contact.

ENTER DELTA

The NVA was on the run from the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade, which had quickly pivoted from its westward orientation and air assaulted its companies into positions east of the city. One of those was D Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, commanded by Captain Richard Kent. Delta had remained at LZ Suzie 10 kilometers southwest of Quang Tri [YD 268445] overnight on the 31st, before flying to join the fight on Thursday, February 1, 1968. Delta was on the ground at YD 361543, 3 kilometers northeast of the city, at 1300 hours. The company began moving to the southeast, the Song Nhung river on its right, with the order of march, 1st platoon, CP, 3rd platoon, and 2nd platoon, searching for the fleeing battalions of the 812th Regiment, People's Army of Vietnam. An hour or so later, the company passed through a village in the vicinity of Tram Ly [YD 366530]. The platoons paused to draw water for their canteens from a well, further spreading the company out. The company's Kit Carson Scout was told by villagers, "There are VC ahead." Some Delta veterans recall this as the point at which CPT Kent called for the Brigade Scouts and was taken up for an aerial recon. Though this is possible, it does not square with Kent's later attempt to retrieve the wounded 1st platoon leader.



COMBAT

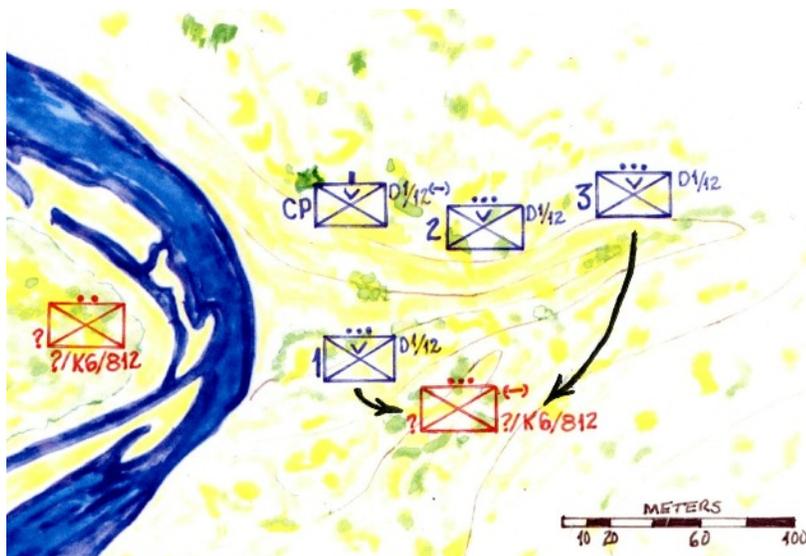
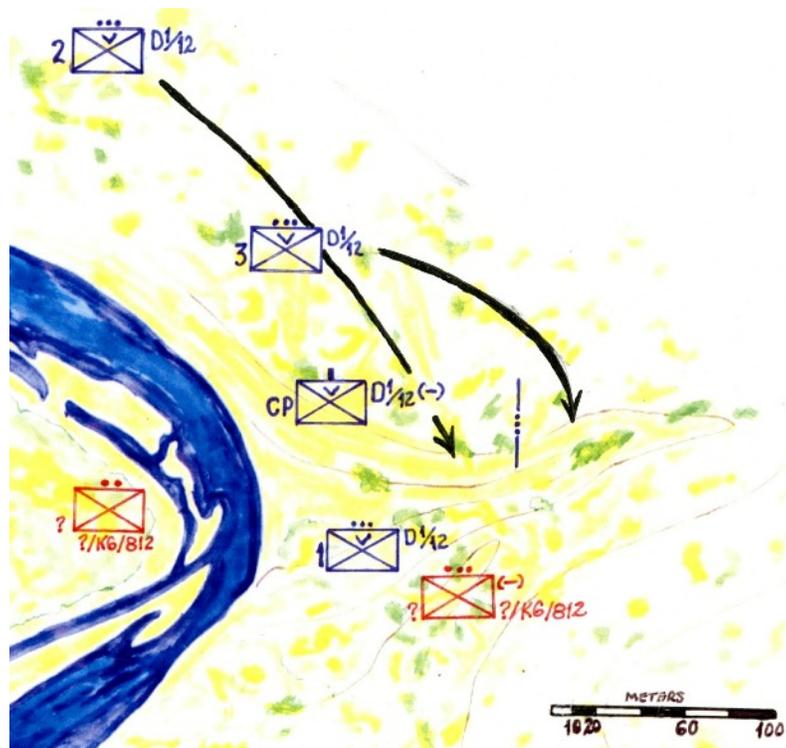
At 1436, the company's 1st platoon was engaged by a platoon of the 812th Regiment's K6 Battalion dug into spider holes along a low sandy ridge just beyond a swale that drained to the shallow Song Nhung on the company's right. The enemy platoon commander had placed one of his squads across the river where it could place fire up the swale north of his defended ridge. It is probable that the engagement was triggered by the discovery of a spider hole by a member of the 1st platoon. The NVA were in "escape mode." There would be no reason to plan an ambush at that obscure location. CPT Kent called for a Brigade Scouts' helicopter team, which, already in the area, arrived quickly.

While Kent went up in one of the H-13's, the companion scout helicopter engaged the enemy's spider hole positions that could be seen from the air. Returning from his aerial recon, in which he had located Lieutenant Laurence Keys, the wounded 1st Platoon Leader, CPT Kent, with SP4 Renny Parker, his company-net RTO, went forward to attempt to retrieve the wounded Keys. They were able to reach LT Keys's RTO, SP 4 Darrel Shellie, seriously wounded, and the platoon's medic, PFC Billy Wright, already dead, but not Keys, before they were themselves wounded. Keys, Kent, and Parker survived their wounds; Shellie did not. Kent was now across the swale and because of his and Parker's wounds and the fire of the enemy platoon, out of communication with the company. Lieutenant Colonel Daniel French, the battalion's commander, just arriving overhead in his Command & Control Huey, asked Delta RTO Ron Redalen to "Get your six," something SP4 Redalen could not do, explaining "I don't know where he is."

MANEUVER

The platoons not in contact would have to maneuver to engage the enemy on their own. Third Platoon, next in the order of march, was led by 2nd Lieutenant Thomas Kjos. Hearing the heavy firing ahead, the lieutenant keyed his handset, said, "I'm taking 3rd Platoon around to the left," then swung his platoon far enough east as it advanced to allow Staff Sergeant Rudolph Ford's 2nd platoon to fill in on his right flank back toward the river. As they came up on-line on the swale, Platoon Sergeant SFC George Wright, who had the rear of the 3rd platoon on the march, anchored its left, and the company now tactically overlapped the dug-in NVA.

With the two platoons on line above the swale, and small arms fire across their front from the NVA squad across the river, they could see that the enemy was dug into spider holes along a low ridge running away toward the southwest. There was only one maneuver: cross through the swale, then swing to the right, up the rise to the dug-in enemy line. With the enemy engaging D Company's 1st platoon to his front, 3rd platoon would be approaching the rear of the NVA line. Perhaps risky, but in the moment there seemed to be no other option.



Lieutenant Kjos, on the right of 3rd where it tied in with 2nd platoon, said, "We need to take out those spider holes." "I'll go, L-T," answered SP4 Gangon, 2nd Platoon. SGT James Neeley remembers the exchange, adding, "Gangon was the only one crazy enough to go along." LT Kjos, unable to think of anything more original, said, "Follow me." With Gangon close behind, the two dashed across the swale, bullets snapping around them. Squad Leader SSG Ed Johnson brought more of the 3rd across through the fire, gaining the rise behind the NVA line. Kjos and Gangon, running in a crouch up the rise, engaged spider holes one after another, sometimes pushing grenades in and rolling away. As the platoon reached the enemy line from the east and fire slackened, the 1st able to engage the NVA from the west. The two platoons methodically took on

the enemy positions, and joined by the 2nd, recovered the wounded for medevac and retrieved the two KIA's.

EVENING

Later, with Captain Donald Orsini replacing the medevac'd Captain Kent, Delta withdrew to higher ground to establish its night defensive position (NDP). The Brigade Scouts had returned to search the area and reported 25 to 35 NVA in a trench line about 500 meters to the south of YD 381514. An H-13 picked up D Company Forward Observer Lieutenant John Kirby, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 19th Artillery, who went airborne and adjusted a heavy artillery barrage on the position. In the short, sharp battle, D Company accounted for 15 NVA KIA, 1 NVA WIA, 3 AK-47 rifles, and 4 SKS rifles, along with ammo, grenades, and personal gear. Delta suffered 2 KIA and 5 WIA.

Two NVA seen wading the river near the day's contact were killed by machine gun fire from the perimeter. At 2300 hours 20 NVA with mortar tubes were seen crossing the river at the same location. Engaged with small arms and artillery, all were believed KIA.

PURSUIT

The next morning, the company moved south to sweep the area of LT Kirby's artillery barrage of the previous evening. Several NVA were engaged with small arms and aerial rocket artillery. The sweep found 5 NVA KIA, numerous mortar and RPG rounds, a mortar base plate, and numerous packs. At 1330, the company was ordered to move to support A Company in contact 4 kilometers northeast.

Company A, in defense at LZ Sharon, had been alerted 1 February for an air assault to search Xom An Lei, a village complex at YD 414524 about six kilometers east of Quang Tri City that had several NVA flags flying and uniformed NVA soldiers in plain sight. The combat assault was delayed until 0815 on 2 February, the insertion made to a position some distance away from the target village. After a scout helicopter received fire, Alpha commander Captain Frederick Peters made an aerial recon before planning company's attack on the village. The company took casualties and finally the attack bogged down after hard fighting in the face of a dug-in and larger enemy unit.

A Company broke contact and linked up with Delta at 1630. The two companies formed a perimeter at YD 416522. Outside the perimeter, listening posts with starlight scopes spotted the NVA exfiltrating the area overnight.

Beginning with Alpha, the two companies were airlifted back to LZ Sharon at 0830 hours on 3 February. Three companies from the 1/502nd were assaulted into the contact area, where they found 24 NVA bodies, 1 SKS and 11 AK47 rifles, and 2 machine guns.

The ARVN airborne troops, with support from U.S. fixed-wing aircraft, had retaken Tri Buu on February 1. Rattan, with the 1/8th Cavalry and the 1/502nd Infantry, continued the pursuit of the shattered enemy during the first 10 days of February.

AFTERMATH

During the 24-hour period, D Company accounted for 42 NVA KIA and 1 NVA WIA. Not included were the estimated 25 killed in the barrage at 381514, where drag marks in the sand and a dead NVA wrapped in a poncho indicated the enemy's usual removal of his dead from the battlefield.

The rapid defeat of the regiment-plus enemy force that assaulted Quang Tri City proved to be one of the most decisive victories the allies secured during the Tet offensive. The main phase of combat was over less than twenty-four hours after it had begun, mop-up operations continuing for the next few days. The 812th Regiment was badly mauled. The Communists' defeat permitted the allies to devote more resources to other battles in the region, especially to the titanic struggle for Hue.

Communist losses at Quang Tri amounted to 86 captured and 914 dead, of which 553 were killed by ARVN forces. General Earl Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later commented that 'it was touch and go' — but Quang Tri was saved.

The swift intervention of the 1st Cavalry Division had prevented Hanoi from achieving one of its major objectives for the Tet Offensive — the capture of a provincial capital and a transportation hub that would have allowed the Communists to commit their reserves into a contested major city. In the process, their overall offensive timetable in I Corps was completely disrupted.

The tenacious defense of Quang Tri City by the ARVN, the accurate evaluation of the tactical situation by Rattan and Brewer, the airmobile capabilities of the 1st Cavalry Division, and the people's refusal to join the enemy...all contributed to the allied victory. The outcome would likely have been different if the 1st Cavalry Division had been a conventional infantry unit.

With D Company was an Army medic, nineteen-year-old PFC Billy Wright, an ardent fisherman and hunter, who graduated from Haywood County High School [Tennessee] in 1966.

Billy Wright was from Stanton, where he was a member of the Stanton Church of Christ. During high school, he worked at the Kroger's in nearby Brownsville in the afternoons and on Saturdays. After graduating in 1966, Billy worked for American Air Filter Brownsville but on April 10, 1967, less than one year out of high school, Billy enlisted in the Army.



High school buddy Pat English would write, years later: "Billy picked me up every morning for High School. He would drive around at night with me on the hood of his car hunting for rabbits. We got into other things that cannot be mentioned. He was a good friend and I miss him a bunch."

A sister, Deb Wright Patterson, was 10 years old when Billy went to Vietnam, "I have sweet memories . . . him letting me tag along many times when he visited Evelyn (Evelyn Caldwell, Billy's girlfriend in high school, also a member of the Haywood County Class of 1966). I loved them so."

In 2005 Billy's other sister, Nancy (Wright) Beard, wrote, "There have not been many brothers who were 8 years older than their sisters who really paid much attention to them. He was different. I remember being in the hospital. He came 20 miles to visit with me and brought me a present, a baby doll. I named her Judy, and kept her until after I was married. Every now and then, I'll have a dream about him. I will be hugging him really tight and telling him that, 'I always knew you were still alive!' He was not only a special brother, He was a very special person. We were proud of him then, and are still very proud of him now."

Basic training at Fort Benning, and Radar School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey were followed by medic training at Fort Sam Houston. PFC Billy Wright was in Vietnam, serving as a Medical Corpsman with the 1st Cavalry Division, barely eight months after enlisting.

Awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions, Billy Lee Wright is on the Wall at Panel 36E, Line 63.

THE COST

SECOND LIEUTENANT RUSSEL R FLESHER	Panel 36E Line 70
SPECIALIST FOUR PAUL R COLLETT	Panel 36E Line 68
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS RICHARD E ENGLE	Panel 36E Line 70
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS DAVID L TURNER	Panel 36E Line 40
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS RAUL CANDELARIA	Panel 37E Line 33
SPECIALIST FOUR JOHN M DASHNAW	Panel 36E Line 69
SPECIALIST FOUR JOHN F KUIPER	Panel 36E Line 76
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS DAMEN L RITCHIE	Panel 36E Line 32
SPECIALIST FOUR HAROLD E CASHMAN JR	Panel 36E Line 2
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS LARRY M CLARK	Panel 36E Line 68
SPECIALIST FOUR DARREL A SHELLIE	Panel 36E Line 60
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS BILLY L WRIGHT	Panel 36E Line 63

	Wounded	Killed
A Company	11	3
B Company	31	2
C Company	9	5
D Company	5	2
1st Battalion 12th Cavalry	56	12

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CONTRIBUTORS

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Former Sergeant James Neeley, US Army (Company D, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Vietnam 1968)

SPECIAL THANKS

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LTC Courtney A. Short, PhD, United States Army

Specialist 4 Darrel Andre Shellie, Detroit, Michigan, was the twenty-year-old son of Oran and Carrie Louise Shellie when he died on a Thursday near Quang Tri City, Vietnam, 8,000 miles from home. He'd been "in country" since the end of May. Eight months down, just four to go.

Darrel Shellie was Lieutenant Key's 1st platoon RTO. He'd become a close friend of Rennie Parker, Captain Kent's Company RTO, who he had trained him on the ins-and-outs of being an RTO.

That afternoon SP4 Parker went forward with Kent into the firefight, and who with the Captain was wounded as they reached Shellie and Medic Billy Wright.

Darrel, wounded by small arms fire, was still alive and Parker, pinned down by the enemy, could do nothing to save him. "It was the most terrible thing I experienced in Vietnam, to watch Darrel die while lying helpless beside him."

Carrie Louise Shellie died in February, 2018, fifty years after her son.

Awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions, Darrel Andre Shellie is on the Wall at Panel 36E, Line 63

We've been unable to find more about Darrel, or even a photograph. If you can help, please contact the webmaster at delta@cattrack6india.com