

The Blackhawks in Vietnam



HISTORY IN VIETNAM

History of 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry in Vietnam 1967 – 1972

The First Squadron, First United States Cavalry, America's most battle-honored unit was called to active combat in the summer of 1967. The squadron deployed to the Republic of South Vietnam on 29 August 1967. Under the command of LTC Richard H. Herrington it had prepared for movement into combat by conducting an extensive training and testing period at Fort Hood, Texas. The squadron, known by its historical title – The First Regiment of Dragoons – took leave of its parent organization, the first Armored Division, and was attached to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, which was operating, in Task Force Oregon.

Two days after its arrival in country the squadron was committed to battle. Its command post, was established at Hill 35, known, as LZ Fat City. On 5 September, the unit's first casualties, Lt. Whitmore and SSG. Gobel were killed in a mortar attack, The first major operation in which the squadron participated was Operation Stuart which began on 15 September. The M48 tanks and armored personnel carriers of the squadron were adapted for employment in a new type of armored warfare in jungle areas. Classic cavalry missions of reconnaissance and security were relegated to minor roles as offensive sweeps with U.S. Inf., ARVN and Territorial Forces became the standard method of operation. During this period the unit accounted for 109 enemy killed and was awarded the Valorous Unit Citation.

In late September the squadron came under the operational control of the First Air Cavalry Division. The headquarters was displaced to Hill 29 and this area was renamed Blackhawk Hill in honor of the Regiment's heraldic symbol. The troopers soon shortened this to "Hawk Hill", the name by which it is now known.

On 7 November 1967, B Troop took part in combat operations near LZ Ross in the Que Son Valley. During some of the fiercest fighting, of the war under 1Lt James Taylor, the

executive officer, B Troop succeeded in killing 39 NVA, and remaining in control of the field of battle. For his actions on LZ Ross, 1LT Taylor was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

On 2 January 1968, LTC Walter Cousland took command of the squadron. The Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase III ended on 25 January. In their first campaign the Blackhawk troopers had killed 561 enemy soldiers and captured 38. The friendly-enemy ratio was in excess of 24 to 1.

The squadron returned to operations around Hawk Hill – Tam Ky. The TET Counteroffensive of 1968 which was characterized by “conventional warfare” situations in which, the enemy attacked in multi-battalion formations and abandoned extensive fortifications.

During this period the squadron participated in four major actions which resulted in the defeat of enemy attempts to overrun Tan Ky. These battles – Tam Ky, Pineapple Forest, Carterville and Cigar Island – were fought in the period 30 January to 30 March. The vicious nature of this period of fighting can be seen in the fact that in these brief engagements the 1-1 Cav accounted for more than 956 enemy soldiers killed. In recognition of its contribution to staving off the enemy attacks, the First Regiment of Dragoons was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. In large measure, the success of these operations had come from cooperative efforts with G Troop 7/17 Air Cavalry. The squadron’s own air cavalry troop had been detached, but the new team of ground and air cavalry showed the wisdom of joint operations.

Early April gave the 1-1 Cav a new area of operations and the mission of lifting the communist siege of Tien Phouc. During this mission the unit participated in Operation Burlington Trail. Sweeping on either side of Route 533, the squadron closely integrated air and ground cavalry capabilities. Eighty-eight enemy were killed and 5 captured in Burlington Trail, the principle victory of the squadron was the opening of Route 533 and allowing road resupply and GVN control of Tien Phouc.

For the next two months small troop and platoon-sized operations were conducted. One troop was kept south in the Burlington Trail AO while the squadron was returned to Hawk Hill to participate in Operation Wheeler-Wallowa. The principal successes in this operation were the huge caches of enemy supplies discovered and seized by the squadron: 97,000 lbs. of rice, 3,250 lbs. of potatoes, 400 lbs of salt, 76 individual weapons and 7 crew served weapons. In addition more than 1,400 rounds of mortar, artillery and bomb ordinance were discovered. The Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase IV ended on 30 June with a total of 524 enemy soldiers killed by the squadron. LTC Richard D. Lawrence assumed command of the squadron on 1 July. On 24 August

perhaps the largest and most successful battle in which the squadron has been ever fought took place. Building out of light contact by a platoon on a reconnaissance mission, the action developed into a full scale battle involving the entire squadron, an attached U.S. Rifle company and a troop of the ARVN 3/4- Cavalry. Operating in the western portion of Pineapple Forest the squadron killed 227 NVA the first day. LTC Lawrence maneuvered the troops into blocking position and then swept through -the enemy entrenchments, The 3d NVA Regiment and an attached anti-air craft company were routed and pursued by the vigorous application of the squadron's firepower. The known dead by body count numbered 549 out of an estimated 1,200 NVA soldiers. This was the first action in which the squadron had been employed together on a single battlefield.

The campaign ended on 31 October with a final count of 1,200 dead enemy compared with U.S. losses of only 29. The squadron had reached maturity on the new battlefield of Southeast Asia, learning to adapt classic cavalry techniques to new situations and a resourceful enemy.

During the remaining autumn and winter months the squadron operated in AO Oregon north of Tam Ky. B Troop was detached and worked with the 2d Eng ,of the 7th Marines on Cigar Island. Action was light in comparison to the recently concluded campaign-and plans were drawn for an extensive village pacification effort in Operation Hardin Falls. The squadron would sweep an area of 30 sq. kilometers and provide security for U.S. engineers and GVN officials to resettle and rebuild the area. The sixth phase of the counteroffensive ended on 22 February 1969 with the squadron accounting for 226 enemy dead and 5 captured .

The 1969 TET Counter offensive began on the morning of 23 February with coordinated attacks by the communists throughout the Republic of South Vietnam. Initially, squadron- elements were used to assist ARVN units in repulsing attacks, but soon capitalized on the enemy's exposed positions to extract a heavy toll. In repulsing these attacks during the three day period the squadron obtained a body count of 177 NVA and 75 VC. Also captured were: 3 Prisoners, 35 individual weapons and 7 crew served weapons. On 15 March Operation Oregon ended and Operation Frederick Hill commenced. 24 March found another major engagement growing out of a platoon-sized probing action. However this time a single platoon would perform by itself and decimate an entire NVA battalion.

At 1515 hours 24 March, Lt Ronald Eddy was ordered to conduct a combat sweep two kilometers southwest of Quang Ngai. The third platoon of A Troop in conjunction -with an RF Company performed this mission and no major contact was anticipated. At 1545

hours heavy contact was initiated by an estimated NVA company-size force. The cavalry platoon deployed off the road and assaulted the enemy position. After an advance of 200 meters, the volume of enemy fire increased and the RF company broke contact and withdrew. Now alone, LT Eddy pushed his platoon forward another 300 meters until stopped by a cane field with stalks eight feet high. The platoon had overrun the enemy's, forward position but within the concealment of the cane field lay the entire 1st Battalion of the 22d NVA Regiment.

After returning a heavy volume of fire, the individual tracks began to slow their rate of fire to conserve ammunition and breakout fresh boxes. One M48A3 tank and a ACAV were hit and LT Eddy shifted his vehicle out of line to redistribute these vehicles' ammunition and to cover the men transferring the cases. The NVA soldiers interpreted the slacking U.S. fire and the pull back of the one vehicle as sign that the platoon was defeated. They rose out of their trenches and in a sight rare in this war began a frontal assault on the platoon. It soon became obvious that the enemy had miscalculated, for they -were met with more than ample direct fire. The mighty 90mm main guns from the tanks came in to action spraying the enemy with lethal canister rounds at point blank range. The attack lasted but five minutes and only a few NVA lived to recount their tactical blunder.

By 1645 the remainder of A Troop joined the 3d Platoon but effective pursuit was impossible and air and artillery support was denied due to the close proximity of friendly villages. Sporadic fire was received at long range but this was quickly silenced. At 1730 hours CPT Pate, the troop commander, logged into a night defensive position and the Battle of Canefield was over. The total number of enemy killed by the 3d Platoon of A Troop was 386 on that day of bloody victory. The volume of fire can be imagined when it is realized that in less than 60 minutes this platoon of eight vehicles expended 70,000 rounds of Cal. 50 MG ammunition, 140,000 rounds of M-60 MG ammunition and 150 90mm main gun rounds. The TET Counteroffensive officially ended on 8 June with squadron accounting for more than 900 enemy dead. LTC Philip L. Bolte, who had replaced KTC Lawrence, was wounded when his C&C helicopter exploded a mine on an LZ and he was evacuated. He was replaced by LTC John H. Dure III. The squadron participated in sweeps of Harrier Island, the defense of Hawk Hill from a sapper attack, a sweep of the Rice Bowl south of Duc Pho and minor operations around Chu Lai. The Summer — Autumn Campaign ended on 31 October 1969,

On 1 December LTC Richard G. Graves became the sixth officer to lead the First Regiment of Dragoons in Vietnam. With a new commander the unit also received a

new weapons system – the M551 Sheridan Airborne Armored Reconnaissance and Assault vehicle as a replacement, for the reliable M48A3 Patton tank.

The squadron, terminated operations in Quang Tin Province on 3 March these were known to the 196th Brigade as Operation Frederick Hill. The next two weeks were spent in Chu Lai and on 17 March again went OPCON to the 196th Bde for an operation near LZ Ross. On 25 March the 1-1 Cav returned to the OPCON of the 196th Bde and participated in Operation Nantucket Beach. The Winter – Spring Campaign of 1970 ended on 3 April; the results for the squadron -were 166 killed and 57 captured. The slackening off of the body count and the weak enemy activity were in great contrast to the previous year and indicated the increased control which the Vietnamese government now exercised over the local population.

The squadron began the new campaign with B Troop under the operational control of the 196th Brigade, operating in the Hiep Luc Valley while the squadron operated in Pennsylvania Square on pacification support operations. F Troop, 17 Cavalry was attached to the squadron.

On 12 July 1970 a new commander, LTC Crosbie E. Saint arrived in the squadron. He adapted the squadron's tactics to the realities of the war and stressed -working in conjunction with regional and Popular Forces. The Cavalry was ideally suited to the role of training these territorial soldiers and convincing them to leave their strong points to seize the initiative from the enemy.

The squadron moved out to participate in Operation Tulare Falls I in early October. This operation was under the control of the 7th Marine Regiment and had as its objective the denial of rice to the enemy. E Troop, 1st Cavalry was attached to the squadron. LTC Saint left F Troop, 17 Cavalry and E Troop 1st Cavalry in Pennsylvania Square as a special task force under the squadron executive officer.

On 24. October, LTC Sheldon Burnett replaced LTC Saint. Operation Tulare Falls was brought to a conclusion while the squadron was operating around LZ Baldy. The squadron accounted for 23 VC killed and over 13,000 lbs of rice captured.

Squadron participation in Pennsylvania Square ended on 26 January 1971 and A, B, C and E Troop boarded naval LST's to support ARVN operations in Laos during Operation Lam Son 719. Landing east of Hue, the squadron road marched to Fire Support Base Vandergrift. The unit went under the operational control of the 1st Bde, 5th Mechanized Division.

The month of March saw a significant increase in enemy activity and reaction to the ARVNI spoiling attacks into Laos. Ambushes on both sides took an increasing toll and the enemy attempted to overrun night defensive positions. On 7 March, A Co 1/11

Infantry, which was attached to the squadron, encountered an NVA platoon and sustained three wounded. LTC Burnett flew to the scene of contact in a light observation helicopter and attempted to extract the wounded men. While circling the area his aircraft was shot down in Laos and LTC Burnett was listed as missing in action. LTC Gene L. Breeding assumed command of the squadron on 10 March. The mission given to the squadron was to secure the road QL9 for friendly conveyances. To accomplish this, vehicular strong points were established on the high ground overlooking the road. Ambushes and reaction missions took their toll, but the road remained open.

From 29 March to 5 April the squadron coordinated the defense of the American base at Khe Sanh. On 7 April, their mission accomplished, the unit road marched to Phu Bai and went under the control of the 101st Airborne Division.

Meanwhile the squadron rear had deployed from Chu Lai to Da Nang and assumed control of a new base camp, Camp Faulkner. On the night of 30 April the main body of the squadron landed by LST at Da Nang and went under the control of the 196 Inf Bde of the Americal Division. On 1 May the 1-1 Cavalry began its participation in Operation Caroline Hill.

On 14 July the squadron received a new commander, LTC Richard E. Lorix. An independent mission in the Que Son Valley began on 31 July 1971. The missions of the squadron were to protect U.S. Engineers building QL 534, to interdict the 31st NVA Regiment's use of the valley and to protect the district Headquarters of Que Son, Thang Binh and Hiep Duc. Working in close cooperation with the 5th ARVN Regiment, the squadron forced the enemy to break up into squad-size elements.

By opening a new fire support base — dubbed LZ Excedrin, the squadron, provided full artillery coverage for this fertile valley. The enemy contented himself with mine warfare and limited RPG attacks. As the national elections in late August and early October approached the mission of protecting the district headquarters, became more important. However the mission of fixing the enemy in the valley and forcing him into the mountains remained a daily job. The 5th Regiment (ARVN) then, struck at enemy bases in the mountains and included B-52 air strikes. These combined operations resulted in 446 enemy killed and the complete rout of the 31st NVA Regiment. LZ Excedrin was closed on 4 October and the Squadron returned to Camp Faulkner.

During the monsoon period the squadron assumed security duties at bases in Da Nang and acted as Da Nang East and West Quick Reaction Force. Each troop received a two week program of instruction in Airmobile Infantry Tactics in order to retain flexibility

during the monsoon rains. They were deployed as Rifle Companies one at a time until the end of January 1972. Additionally, an extensive mortar training course was conducted for all 81mm mortar crews in the Squadron. Finally a unique retraining program was conducted for all Sheridan M551 crews. The training ended with a formal Tank Crew Qualification Course.

As the monsoon period slackened the squadron seized upon new missions in consonance with the 196th Brigade's new mission of conducting a "Dynamic Defense of Da Nang". Working closely with two independent companies of the 51st APVN Regiment, the squadron secured the areas south of Marble Mountain designated as: AO's: Anzio, Arno and Rome. Here limiting operations to security searches and night ambushes the unit again proved its flexibility by serving as an economy of force unit to protect the urban Da Nang area from rocket attacks and ground assault during another enemy build up prior to TET 1972 (The Year of the Rat) .