

12. RESULTS: Meaningful assessment of the results of the 35 days of airmobile operations that swept across the rolling plateau country west and south of PLEIKU should be made only in context with the actual or potential involvement of enemy forces, the danger posed, and the ability of A-R-V-N forces to resist that threat.

What were the goals of North Vietnam's invasion army at the outset of its adventure at PLEI ME? How serious was the threat, not only to the installation in the immediate path of that force, but to all of the Central Highlands as well? Could that threat have been stopped without the 1st Air Cavalry Division?

Too, when results of any action or campaign are assessed, statistics must be utilized. In many cases it is the only way results can be shown in a tangible manner and, therefore, readily grasped. So the statistical breakdown showing casualties inflicted upon the enemy, casualties sustained by the 1st Air Cavalry, and the arms and materiel captured from the enemy is included as Inclosure 28.

Even standing alone and without explanation, these statistics depict significant results. The total of confirmed and estimated enemy kills were in excess of any figures previously reported in the Vietnamese conflict.

But there are many intangible elements that cannot be portrayed by statistics. Indeed, the most significant aspects of victory can be discussed only in speculative terms based, of course, upon certain vital statistics and reasonable assumptions.

The battle at PLEI ME was not a haphazard engagement, generated by local enemy forces. Rather it was clearly the outgrowth of a master plan--- a campaign to secure and dominate a major portion of South Vietnam. Entitled the WINTER-SPRING CAMPAIGN of 65-66, the plan reportedly envisioned the establishment of a North Vietnamese Army Corps of three divisions in South Vietnam. The corps was to operate in an area bounded on the north by the 17th Parallel; on the south by a line running generally along the southern boundaries of PLEIKU, PHU BON and PHU YEN Provinces; on the east by the South China Sea; and on the west by the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Control of the corps was to remain within the high command in Hanoi.

Within the frame work of the LONG XUAN (Winter-Spring) CAMPAIGN 66-65, there were three FIELD FRONTS (a designation considered to be interchangeable with the term DIVISION) that were to conduct a series of lesser campaigns. One of these was the TAY NGUYEN (Western Plateau) CAMPAIGN which had as its objective the seizure of National Liberation Front provinces of BI (KONTUM) and GIA LAI (PLEIKU Province and parts of BIHN DINH and PHU BON Provinces). Specific objectives of the TAY NGUYEN CAMPAIGN were the Special Forces camps of PLEI ME, DAK SUT, and DUC CO; the new LE THANH District Headquarters; and PLEIKU.

The strike at PLEI ME was the opening gun of the campaign. The FIELD FRONT selected to control the attack correctly estimated the strength and capability of G-V-N forces in and around PLEIKU. That estimate counted on the II Corps Commander being capable of committing not more than one infantry battle group and an armored cavalry squadron to the relief of the PLEI ME camp. It also estimated that US forces could or would place two battalions in reserve at PLEIKU. Based on this estimate, the FIELD FRONT commander deployed two regiments; more than enough to accomplish the desired mission of destruction of both the relief column and the C-I-D-G Camp.

The lure and the ambush at PLEI ME was the beginning of the struggle for the highlands. Had it been successful, FIELD FRONT's courses of action could either have been to repeat the same tactic on other peripheral outposts---DUC CO, PLEI DJERANG, DAK SUT, DAK TO---or to maintain its initial momentum by moving directly to attack PLEIKU. But whether by the long or the short route, the target remained the same. To control PLEIKU is to control the highlands.

The question then remains: could the threat have been stopped without the 1st Air Cavalry Division? In arriving at the answer, several factors should be considered.

Regardless of potential reinforcement by US forces, the II Corps Commander was obligated to commit a force to the relief of PLEI ME or risk the destruction of the camp.

Without reinforcement, the Corps reserve at PLEIKU could not be committed without endangering the security of that strategic center. Moreover, it is unlikely that A-R-V-N reinforcements, already committed in other sectors of the Corps area, could have been brought to PLEIKU in time to mount an effective relief.

There is strong evidence that, regardless of a US pledge to defend PLEIKU, the available G-V-N forces there would have been committed on 23 October piecemeal and in no greater strength than anticipated and planned for by the N-V-A commanders. In a planning conference the night before the relief column was to be committed, the II Corps Commander indicated he wanted to airlift one Ranger Battalion southeast of PLEI ME, leave one infantry battalion in PLEIKU as a reserve, and move down the road to the camp with only one Ranger Battalion and the armored cavalry squadron. That this concept was developed well after the Commanding General, Field Forces Vietnam, had promised a 1st Air Cavalry Division battalion task force for the security of PLEIKU indicates the existing tactical frame of mind. US advisors at the conference dissuaded him and the relief column was dispatched with sufficient strength to avoid defeat in detail.

After the initial meeting engagement on 23 October between the armored task force and the North Vietnamese 32d Regiment, there was more than a little reluctance on the part of the TF commander to get his column rolling toward PLEI ME. It was only after the guarantee of fire support from the 1st Air Cav artillery units and the actual placement of an artillery liaison party from the 1st Cav artillery in the column that the task force once again got moving to the C-I-D-G camp.

On 26 October, when the task force began a sweep outside the PLEI ME camp and was struck hard by the 33d Regiment, it again was the fire power of the 1st Brigade's artillery units at HOMECOMING and PUNT that saved the force from a severe mauling.

These were factors involved in the immediate defense of PLEIKU and the relief of PLEI ME. Despite the casualties taken by the N-V-A regiments at the ambush site and at the Special Forces camp, both units withdrew in order and as tactically cohesive and effective units. The danger to PLEIKU was only temporarily allayed.

The pursuit of the North Vietnamese 33d Regiment by the battalions of the 1st Brigade and the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry introduced the enemy to a new concept in warfare. His retreat from PLEI ME to CHU PONG must surely have been a nightmare. The enemy was routed from his hiding places, hounded and pursued, fragmented and destroyed in terrain he had believed would be his protector. Certainly nothing in the enemy's background or training had prepared him to cope with the full effects of an unleashed airmobile pursuit.

The actions of the 3d Brigade in the CHU PONG-IA DRANG complex revealed to the North Vietnamese Army how individual combat skills and massive supporting fire could be used to achieve an objective. The combined combat power brought to bear on the newly-infiltrated 66th Regiment and the remnants of the 33d Regiment resulted, as the statistics clearly indicate, the near annihilation of both regiments.

This left the 32d Regiment and, although the A-R-V-N Airborne Brigade made the infantry contact, it again was the Cavalry's artillery that furnished the real killing blows. When the regiment finally reached its Cambodian sanctuary, it had not more than 1,000 able-bodied men remaining, making it something less than an effective regiment.

In sum, then, the 1st Air Cavalry Division achieved two things during the PLEIKU Campaign. It countered the immediate threat to PLEIKU, and it seriously disrupted the enemy's longer-range plans for the highlands.

The results of the campaign were well summed up in the statement made by the Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara when he visited the 1st Cavalry base at AN KHE, on 29 November 1965. He termed the total campaign an "unparalleled achievement" and declared that there would be "more air cavalry divisions."

Many fruits of victory or defeat are psychological in nature. The victory achieved at PLEI ME has had the noticeable effect, at least in PLEIKU Province, of stimulating an optimistic attitude toward the struggle. After the VIET CONG raid on U-S/G-V-N installations in PLEIKU in February, and the attacks on Special Forces camps throughout the year, culminating in the regimental-sized siege and ambush at DUC CO in August, there was little cause for optimism anywhere.

US advisors too have become more optimistic, not so much about the eventual defeat of the VIET CONG, but that the A-R-V-N commanders will be more receptive concerning adoption of concepts that heretofore have been belittled or rejected. For example, advisors with the A-R-V-N Airborne Brigade are confident that that the dramatic demonstration of what close support artillery can do for infantry will go far to convince the brigade of the desirability of training officer forward observers (at the time of the engagement, not a single officer F-0 was assigned to any of the 32 rifle companies in the A-R-V-N Airborne Brigade).

Conversely, what was the impact of the defeat upon the North Vietnamese forces? The invasion army of North Vietnam found itself beaten in land combat for the first time in 15 years and by an Army that its propagandists claimed was weak, ineffective and decadent. Beyond these points, the total impact can be only a matter of sheer speculation or fond assumption.

It perhaps suffices to assume that since victory for the U-S/G-V-N forces has brought some joy and optimism to that side, then, assuredly, defeat must have brought some measure of despair and pessimism to the enemy.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

1. CASUALTIES INFLICTED UPON THE ENEMY (By Major Unit)

	1st Bde 23		3d Bde 10		2d Bde 21		1/9 Cav* 23		TOTALS
	Oct-9	Nov	Nov-20	Nov	Nov-26	Nov	Oct-26	Nov	
VC(NVA)	216		1,224		7		72		1,519
KIA (BC)									
VC(NVA)	610		1,388		20		24		2,042
KIA (EST)									
TOTAL KIA	826		2,612		27		96		3,561
VC (NVA)									
WIA (EST)	780		251		0		147		1,178
VC(NVA)									
CAPTIVES	138		19		20		0		157

\*Denotes period when cavalry squadron operated directly under divisional control and casualties were not figured in brigade totals.

2. CASUALTIES SUSTAINED BY 1ST AIR CAVALRY UNITS (By major unit)\*

	1st Brigade	3d Brigade	2d Brigade	TOTALS
KIA	57	239	4**	300
WIA	192	307	25*	524
MIA	0	4	0	4

\*Includes 1/9 Cav Sqdn Casualties.

\*\*2 killed and 11 wounded by premature burst of defective mortar round.

3. ARMS AND MATERIEL CAPTURED FROM THE ENEMY (By Major Unit)\*

	1st Brigade	3d Brigade	2d Brigade	TOTALS
Individual Weapons	127	768**	2	897**
Crew Served Weapons	26	100	0	126
Materiel	#	#	#	#

\*As noted in Paragraph 8, weapons captured during this period primarily were of Chinese Communist manufacture, were of good quality and were well maintained. Sheer weight of numbers precludes detailed listing of all captured arms.

\*\*400 weapons were destroyed in place in L-Z X-RAY and L-Z ALBANY due to the inability to evacuate them. A similar fate befell substantial amounts of ammunition and grenades.

#During the campaign a N-V-A hospital was captured along with \$40,000 of surgical equipment and supplies. Most of the supplies were turned over to the PLEIKU Hospital, or to the division-sponsored refugee dispensary at AN KHE.

#Nearly 300 pounds of enemy documents, many of them bearing "top secret" labels, were captured and processed through divisional and II Corps intelligence channels, and about 30 pounds were evacuated to higher headquarters.

#Substantial quantities of ammunition and grenades were captured and either evacuated or destroyed. Following is a representative listing of materiel losses sustained by the enemy during the campaign:

250,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition, linked and individual rounds.

500 grenades, primarily CHICOM potato mashers.

114 rounds of 82mm mortar ammo

45 rounds of 81mm mortar ammo

85 rounds of 75mm recoilless rifle ammo

40 rounds 40mm rocket launcher ammo

#A quantity of individual field equipment was captured during the campaign. But materiel such as packs, shovels, picks, rain jackets, eating utensils, other such items quickly found its way into the hands of the troops as war souvenirs.

(Inclosure 28 to Combat Operations After Action Report)