

AFTER ACTION REPORT THE BATTLE OF LOC NINH

4 - 7 APRIL 1972

SUBMITTED BY:

MARK A. SMITH, MAJOR, USA (RET)

GROUND COMMANDER, BATTLE OF LOC NINH

INTRODUCTION

I have read a number of reports concerning the battle of Loc Ninh. The one most professionally disturbing is the one rendered by Major U. C. Collins while a student in the USA Command and General Staff College. One of the material sources from which he gathered information was Major Albert E. Carlson, currently Colonel Albert E. Carlson, Artillery. At the time of the Loc Ninh battle, Major Carlson was the Deputy Regimental Staff Advisor to the 9th ARVN Regiment. During the course of the battle, he was on the inner perimeter; not on the outer perimeter or in the Regimental Tactical Operations Center (TOC). The important point is that, as an Artillery officer, Major Carlson was assigned to the inner perimeter and ordered to stay there prepared to offer advice to the tactical commander concerning fire support planning. Also to be noted is that as an Artillery officer and staff advisor to the ARVN, this is the job in which he had been trained. Sergeant Kenneth Wallingford was also assigned to the inner perimeter to assist Major Carlson. These men did not have access to the command group during this battle. Additionally, their capability to communicate was limited to one PRC-77 radio adjusted to only the assigned advisor frequency.

In regard to the tactical disposition of friendly and enemy forces, as related in Major Collins' report, they are based upon pure supposition by Major Carlson and are a complete fantasy. As I recall, a majority of the events, as described in the report, either did not happen or did not occur as described. Perhaps they are the opinion of Ed Carlson and the 5th DCAT after action report "writers" They could also be the opinion of some Washington based Vietnamese Generals. The opinions provided by these sources, however, are wrong; and have no basis in fact.

I was the ground commander of all ARVN and U.S. forces during the battle of Loc Ninh. I wrote the attached report from that point of view. Within minutes of the on-set of the battle of Loc Ninh, command of all defending forces was passed to me by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Schott. I retained this command authority for the duration of the battle; and, in fact, throughout the subsequent period of imprisonment in Cambodia.

From almost the opening moments of the battle, Colonel Vinh, 9th ARVN Regimental Commander, did not command. Thirty five minutes into the battle, I superceded his authority and relieved him of command for the reasons noted in the attached report. His staff then served under my command during the entire fight. LTC Richard Schott placed me in command and then protected me from all personnel who attempted to interfere. LTC Schott's deferment of command to me was communicated to MG James Hollingsworth and BG John McGiffert. They agreed with LTC Schott's decision. This command situation was further communicated by me to General Hung, Commander, ARVN 5th Division. LTC Schott's decision to put me in command was made in deference to my experience in combat. I had participated in major battles at Loc Ninh in 1966 and 1967. Further, my ability to use the various supporting arms was

established. I had served in Vietnam, for at least a portion of every year, from 1965 - 1972; and, finally, I was the only U.S. soldier, on the ground at Loc Ninh, who was fluent in the Vietnamese language.

The attached report describes the true disposition of friendly forces, not where some commanders claimed them to be, and the true disposition of enemy forces, not where they were "assumed" to be. The report also correctly reflects an organization of 4 rifle companies per battalion which was the standard rifle company organization in the 9th Infantry Regiment.

I have written the attached report to set the record straight. I regret that The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) chose to classify my initial report, which I rendered while in Letterman Army Medical Center in early 1973. Classification of my initial report, I have been told, was required because of sensitivity regarding the manner in which LTC Schott was killed; and the actions of SFC Howard Lull. The U.S. Army's uneasiness concerning the content of my initial report was further compounded by my pointed statements concerning Major Davidson, the acting Loc Ninh District Senior Advisor, and his Vietnamese counterpart. These two men escaped from Loc Ninh and Major Davidson was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Cross; the award being presented prior to myself and Captain George Wanat being released from the POW camp. Subsequent to our release, however, my comments in regard to Major Davidson were that he "whined" throughout the entire battle; and finally deserted Captain George Wanat while under fire. My DIA debriefers and the U.S. Army ignored my comments because the Army would be embarrassed if it admitted a "deserter" had received the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism during a battle where he ran away. I could not professionally ignore Major Davidson's conduct and actions during the battle and refused to retract the truth. As a result, my initial report remains classified or has ceased to exist. At my insistence, the Army accepted my submission of a recommendation for award of the Distinguished Service Cross to Captain George Wanat for his actions at Loc Ninh and for his thirty one days of escape and evasion (E&E) prior to being captured by the Vietnamese. George was, most deservedly, awarded the DSC.

In Annex D to this report is a description of the events in the prisoner of war (POW) camp in Cambodia. Once again, as with my initial Loc Ninh after action report, the DIA chose to classify my debriefing concerning the period of imprisonment. The DIA did so because of my strong statements concerning "who did what" and "who did not do as duty and honor would dictate" while held as a POW.

The end-notes referenced in this report are located immediately after "The Battle" section of the report. At Annex B, is a roster that reflects names and/or call signs of participants. If anyone was omitted from the report or was not given proper credit it is unintentional. As to the question: Who was in command? I was in command! My call sign, and nickname, is "Zippo"; my call sign was the prefix all call signs of personnel assigned to the 9th RCAT. Annex C reflects the names of eleven Americans, not counting myself, and one Frenchman. I believe ten of these people are still living. I further believe at least eight of them will verify that I commanded the defending forces during the battle of Loc Ninh.

PRELUDE TO BATTLE:

During the winter of 1971-72, the 5th ARVN Division conducted operations of a limited nature in Bing Long, Phouc Long, and Bing Doung provinces. These operations rarely made contact with the enemy, except for limited incursions into Cambodia toward the town of Snoul. It should be noted that, within the 9th ARVN Regiment, contacts with the enemy increased when advisors again accompanied battalions on operation. This practice was reinstated by myself in November 1971. SFC Lull and myself accompanied battalions on operations on a regular basis. One small battle between Lai Khe and Ben Cat was initiated by the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, in December 1971. The area had been worked by numerous units without advisors. By pushing the ARVN commander to move farther off the highway, contact with a company of NVA was achieved. This indicated to LTC Schott, Colonel Bill Miller, and to me that all was not as pacified as the 5th ARVN Division staff would have us believe.

Contacts around Loc Ninh were rare, as the enemy could see you coming for a very long distance. Members of the Border Ranger Battalion and the French plantation manager, however, assured me that the NVA were in the area continuously. The Frenchman also told me that he paid the NVA not to start trouble in the plantation. This was done to preclude damage to the trees. The 9th Regiment soon learned that by operating only within the confines of the rubber plantation, one could avoid trouble.

One operation conducted northwest of Loc Ninh was to put a "scissor" bridge in place on a small river at the border. The reason given was to allow units to avoid using QL13 as the single avenue of approach to Cambodia. My observation was that the bridge offered an excellent avenue of approach for the enemy. The ARVN, however, left the bridge in place and never guarded it or used it for operations because of its size and location, in the jungle. The NVA made fine use of this bridge, and one other, to put the 5th NVA Division in place for battle; and, the 9th Division used it to by-pass Loc Ninh for points South. During the battle of Loc Ninh it took one full day to destroy this bridge.

A short time prior to the battle, LTC Schott and myself drove to Fire Support Base (FSB) Alpha. 'At the Montagnard village, short of Fire Base Alpha, is a river. The bridge there had long since been destroyed; however, "someone" had been building an underwater bridge with rocks. Inquiries to the Rangers and to the 9th Regiment Headquarters drew a negative response on knowledge of this endeavor. A stop at the village and a discussion with some children made it clear that "someone" had ordered the people to bring rocks to build this structure. Further questioning about "who" only solicited the response: "The Vietnamese." When asked if it was the ARVN or the enemy, the response was that all Vietnamese were the enemy. When LTC Schott and I raised the issue with Colonel Vinh, he was not worried. Me was sure the Montagnards were using the underwater bridge to smuggle wood from Cambodia. This structure held no tactical implications for Colonel Vinh. He further stated that it was good for the "scissor" bridge to remain in place as it gave the NVA the opportunity to by pass Loc Ninh. He also said that if the NVA came with full combat power, using the tanks and armored personnel carriers (APC), captured in an earlier battle, we would have to surrender. He also

stated that he had been a prisoner in the 1950's and it was better than being dead.

I made up my mind to two things at this time: (1) Loc Ninh would not surrender without a fight; (2) The bridges would become prime targets at the onset of any battle. With this in mind, the stage was set for the battle of Loc Ninh.

On 30 March 1972 the Stars and Stripes published a picture of NVA T-54 tanks on the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" headed South. Colonel Vinh, however, remained convinced that the only armor the 9th ARVN Regiment faced was captured M-41 tanks and APCs. An inventory of high explosive anti tank (HEAT) ammunition, for the sole 106mm Recoilless Rifle at Loc Ninh, showed the presence of precisely six rounds on-hand! There were also fifty rounds of canister ammunition on-hand. Colonel Vinh assured me he would request more ammunition. On the afternoon of 4 April 1972 Major Carlson, SOT Wallingford, a French photographer named Michael Dummond, and myself journeyed from Lai Khe to An Loc. We were passed by numerous overloaded vehicles fleeing south. Just south of Loc Ninh the French plantation manager passed us and waved for us to go back. We proceeded on to Loc Ninh. The village square was basically deserted, except for some drunk ARVN soldiers at the local "soup stand". They said they were drunk because tomorrow they would die. Colonel Vinh was not alone in his defeatism. Amazingly the National Police station was erecting additional barbed wire and filling sandbags. This for a staff of six people! These personnel included one female and five male police. When I inquired of Major Davidson as to the district chief's plans for the police, he stated that they had been ordered to defend the police station.

Other after action reports state that the 1st ARVN Cavalry was operating in Cambodia just prior to the battle. This is a myth concocted by Vinh and the Commander of the 1st ARVN Cavalry. They were, in fact, at FSB Alpha. The only exception to this was a total of five APCs and one tank at the intersection of QL15 and QL14. These vehicles were placed here for two reasons: (1) To provide a blocking force to protect the flank of the 1ST Cavalry Regiment moving to Loc Ninh; (2) to assist or reinforce the 1ST Battalion, 9th infantry, at Bo Dop. The small size of this force indicates the lack of tactical awareness of the 9th Infantry and 1st Cavalry Regimental Commanders; because it is not tactically sound to appose a force of two NVA regiments with an ARVN force of only five APCs and one tank. Colonel Bill Miller, SRA 5th DCAT and myself both attempted to convince Colonel Vinh and General Hung to pull the 1ST Cavalry back to Loc Ninh. Colonel Vinh's thinking was that the NVA would attack FSB Alpha and leave Loc Ninh alone. Also this was his reasoning to move the two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry, not to the west of Loc Ninh as previously reported, but to place them on the first hill mass south of Loc Ninh to cover a withdrawal by the 9th Regiment. This movement was ordered immediately after the departure of General Hung and Colonel Miller from Loc Ninh. There was a contact to the west of Loc Ninh on the afternoon of 4 April. It was actually made by the 9th Regiment Reconnaissance (Recon) Company but it was reported as a contact made by the 3rd Battalion because Colonel Vinh had told General Hung that the 3rd Battalion remained to the west. After this contact, all that remained of the Recon Company was one wounded soldier with a radio. He

remained on the radio until the afternoon of 6 April and provided me with targets to the west of Loc Ninh.

When I returned from An Loc, late in the afternoon of 4 April, I advised Colonel Vinh to move the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, except for one company, back to Loc Ninh from Fire Support Base Alpha. I also advised him to leave a PF Platoon and RF Company at the Cam Le bridge to assure its destruction. Again, Colonel Vinh stated that we could "survive" if we provided the enemy a variety of targets. Also he felt that ordering the destruction of the bridge would anger not only General Hung, but also the NVA Commander! Colonel Vinh's theory was that, "when we surrender", we could bring up certain things to show we actually helped the enemy. The term "when we surrender" became more and more common in Colonel Vinh's discussions, until he did in fact try to surrender Loc Ninh on 7 April 1972.

A contact was made by the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry, South of Loc Ninh on the evening of 4 April 1972. A five man squad of NVA was ambushed and two were captured. At approximately 0200 hours, according to the 9th Regiment S2, these two stated that they were from the 272nd Regiment, 9th NVA Division. They further stated that the rest of the division was passing Loc Ninh to attack An Loc. Their regiment was to provide a blocking force to the south while the 5th NVA Division made the main attack on Loc Ninh with Soviet Armor.

When I learned this at 0300 hours, I carried the E-6 Regiment west of Loc Ninh on the situation map and added the 272nd Regiment to the south and the remainder of the 5th NVA Division as the attacking force.

The events described above and the resulting disposition of friendly and enemy forces, as depicted on my map as of 0300 hours, 5 April 1972, set the stage for the battle of Loc Ninh. As the battle scenario develops, it will become evident why I continued to place the 272nd Regiment of the 9th NVA Division south of Loc Ninh.

THE BATTLE

The battle of Loc Ninh began during the afternoon of 4 April 1972 when the Recon Company, 9th ARVN Regiment, was destroyed by what was believed to be elements of the NVA E-6 Regiment West of Loc Ninh. A lone surviving soldier, with a radio, reported tanks and infantry in large numbers moving toward Loc Ninh and the South.

At 0300 hours, 5 April, a rocket attack on Loc Ninh was initiated by the NVA. At this point Colonel Vinh became concerned about Loc Ninh itself. He informed LTC Schott and myself that now he would order the 1ST Cavalry Regiment back to Loc Ninh. We told him in no uncertain terms that it was too late. Besides, FSB Alpha had an anti-tank ditch and four tubes of artillery. Colonel Vinh disregarded this advice and ordered the Rangers, 2/9 Rifle Companies and the 1ST Cavalry at FSB Alpha to return to Loc Ninh. The five APCs and one tank at the intersection of QL13 and QL14 were to "cover the withdrawal."

At 0335 hours, the Commander of the 1st Cavalry informed Colonel Vinh he was surrendering. Vinh said he understood! As a result

of Vinh's action, it became clear to me that he did not intend to fight the NVA and I told Vinh he no longer commanded anything. The regimental staff, with the exception of the regimental XO, backed me. LTC Schott also backed me. As of that moment, and for the rest of the battle of Loc Ninh, I commanded the 9th ARVN Regiment.

I immediately contacted the commander of the 1ST ARVN Cavalry Regiment and told him I would "air strike" him if he surrendered without a fight. He stated that they would try. Ten minutes later the Rangers and 2-/9 contacted me and said they were attempting to fight on to Loc Ninh; but, the 1ST Cavalry had surrendered and was moving West with the NVA.

I contacted the United States Air Force (USAF) Forward Air Controller (FAC) and requested air strikes on all personnel and vehicles moving toward the west and into Cambodia (Note 1). A Spectre Gunship reported attacking armored vehicles moving west, five kilometers from QL13.

The Rangers and 2/9 made contact with the five APCs and one tank from the 1ST Cavalry at the intersection of QL13 and QL14. As many personnel as possible mounted the vehicles and they tried to break through to Loc Ninh. I requested that "Spectre" try to cover their withdrawal. This is the unit that was ambushed just north of Loc Ninh. The Rangers reported an ambush one kilometer long. I ordered them to light through the ambush and ordered air strikes in support. The Rangers reported that Colonel Vinh had ordered them back to FSB Alpha. It was at this point that we noticed Colonel Vinh on another radio. We disconnected Vinh's handle - and told the staff to keep him off the radio to subordinate units. Vinh was told that if he wanted to do something, talk to 5th Division and tell them what was happening.

As the battle began to develop, the sensor operator from 5th Division began to bang on the side of his console. All the little black buttons on his console had turned white. I knew nothing about sensors; but I asked him if this real function had ever happened before. He stated that animals would sometimes cause an individual sensor to activate but that he had never before observed all sensors activated at one time. I asked him for the sensor locations. He said only 5th Division knew the locations. I then asked Colonel Vinh and later General Hung about these locations. I was unable to obtain a satisfactory answer. I finally asked the "Sundog" FAC to contact 5th Division and Corps for the positions of the sensor fields and then for him to bomb them. He said, "which one?" I took another look at the sensor console and said, "all of them." What was done about this request I don't know; the sensor console ceased to operate after our TOC received a hit that morning from a 75mm Recoilless Rifle round.

The volume of fire into Loc Ninh increased over the next two days. The vast majority of the fire was rockets and tube artillery, with some mortar rounds. The tube artillery was from three locations: (1) Four tubes of 105mm, captured from the 1ST Cavalry Regiment; (2) 105mm and 155mm firing from the south, probably captured at Hung Tam on 6 April; (3) fire coming from the north and northwest. The artillery from this third source was fired from a great distance and I believe it was 130mm gun rounds rather than the 155mm previously reported. I spoke to an advisor (Note 2) at Hung Tam by radio and he assured me that his counterpart had "spiked the tubes" prior to their attempting to pullout.

On 6 April, however, the Company Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, at Cam Le bridge informed me that the guns from Hung Tam were firing on Loc Ninh. I ordered an air strike on Hung Tam at approximately 1900 hours, 6 April. General Hung, however, canceled my order as he still believed the guns were in the hands of the 52nd Regiment. By evening of the same day the guns had disappeared to the west. Earlier, on the morning of 5 April, direct fire weapons had commenced firing into Loc Ninh from across the airstrip to the east. One round from a 75mm recoilless rifle struck the 9th Regiment TOC directly in front of the command radio. Both LTC Schott and I were wounded in the head and neck (Note 3). Major Carlson, Sergeant Wallingford, and Michael Dummond came through the fire and patched us up as best they could.

Major Carlson, in the mean time, attempted to direct the air campaign. MG James Hollingsworth, however, demanded to know why "Zippo" was not using all of the air support he had provided. I got back on the radio and informed MG Hollingsworth that he would have to wait until I got the holes in my head patched up. He apologized to me and in ten minutes I was back on the radio. Major Carlson, SGT Wallingford, and Michael Dummond returned to the inner perimeter. I never saw Major Carlson again during the battle. At approximately 1000 hours, 5 April, a platoon (two) tanks pulled into the tree line to the west of Loc Ninh. I took a portable radio, LTC Schott, and SFC Lull and headed for the perimeter just outside of our bunker.

When we reached the bunker with the single 106mm RR on it, SFC Lull was no longer with us. We climbed to the top of the bunker and engaged the tanks with the 106mm RR. This, I believe, is the tank that has been described in various after action reports as being destroyed by direct fire artillery. Infantry engaged us on the bunker and I was wounded again (Note 3). LTC Schott and I then went to the artillery compound, got the gunners of their bunkers, and ordered them to direct fire into the tree line. I requested an air strike west of the camp. The FAC on station offered the "Spectre" Gunship as a solution. The second tank in the woodline was either destroyed by "Spectre" or the 105mm direct fire. I suspect that the "Spectre" actually did the job as there was the appearance of "flashbulbs" going off on the back deck of the tank just prior to it blowing up.

I must dispute the after action reports that claim the tanks stayed exclusively in the woodline and supported the infantry. In daylight hours this was true; at night, this was not the case. Twice on the night of 5 April, T-54s rolled through the perimeter from the west and back out on the airfield side. The first time this happened they were hardly noticed because of the intense indirect fire assault on Loc Ninh. The second time this happened the 106mm engaged them with canister! The commander and driver of both tanks were killed. The tanks then sat in the wire to the east, next to the airfield, for about thirty minutes. There was no Spectre on station at the time; and, the FAC on station and I both thought the tanks were knocked out of action. I was called by the defenders on the east of the compound as the 174th NVA Regiment was making a ground assault across the airfield. I called for CBU and NAPALM. This forced them to withdraw. The real objective of their attack became obvious when two new drivers from the 174th Regiment drove the "knocked out" tanks into the rubber trees across the airfield. During this entire first day, I tried to coordinate with Major Davidson and Captain Wanat in the District Compound.

Captain Wanat would get out of the bunker, look around, and report targets. He reported the mortars firing from the swimming pool on the grounds of the plantation house. These mortars were subsequently destroyed by Spectre. He also alerted me to the presence of an NVA forward observer located on the top floor of the plantation house. General Hung would not clear "Spectre" to fire on the plantation house. As a result, LTC Schott and I took with 106mm canister fire. During this entire period, Major Davidson whined on the radio. His complaint was that I was "hogging all the air strikes" for the main compound. A simple look at a picture of Loc Ninh from the air, however, will show that all these compounds were interconnected. I told him to get off the bunker and look at where the air was going in. Later in the night Captain Wanat described the Major as being "distraught." Under the circumstances, I think the Captain's words were most kind. I consider Major Davidson's actions as being most unprofessional, to the point of being childish and cowardly. Nothing that happened, to include his "escape" from Loc Ninh, alters my initial impression that this officer acted in a cowardly fashion throughout the battle.

At approximately 2200 hours, 5 April, I saw Colonel Vinh tell his bodyguard and two other soldiers to do something. They donned flack jackets and helmets. They then sprinted from the bunker. I finally ascertained, upon their return, that Vinh had ordered them to open the gates of the compound. Vinh explained: "we had do this so we can run out easier". By this time we had approximately one hundred wounded, from all compounds, in the hospital bunker. Colonel Vinh was preparing to desert them and run away. I seriously considered shooting Vinh there and then but I had not reached that point yet; that would come later.

The remainder of the first night was basically artillery fire on the compounds. I established with the FACs (Note 4) and the Spectre Gunships, that only I would clear each target and would provide my initials to take responsibility. From that point on they never allowed anyone, including Vinh and General Hung, to cancel a target.

At 0500 hours, 6 April, I saw tracers coming up from the area of the rubber plantation office and processing plant. These were east of the airfield and I ordered them destroyed by NAPALM and 250 pound bombs, ("Snake & Nape"). This was done and no more fire came from that area. Amazingly, I also saw tracers coming from the police station on the edge of town. The brave policemen and one policewoman continued to hold out.

At 0900 hours, 6 April, I was informed by a Spectre Gunship that an anti-aircraft gun on a vehicle was firing from the village square in Loc Ninh. I cleared Spectre to engage this target. I refused to allow jet aircraft to engage this target to protect the Loc Ninh village from collateral damage. At approximately 1100 hours, I was notified by the forces on the east side of the perimeter that women and children were coming up the road from the village. This was verified by the FAC on station (Note 1). When LTC Schott and I climbed to the top of bunker, we saw one of the most pitiful sights I have ever witnessed. The NVA were forcing the children and teachers to walk toward the compounds carrying an American flag. I fired in front of them and they fled back into the village. At approximately 1400 hours, the lone survivor, from the Recon Company, reported tanks and infantry moving toward Loc Ninh from the west in regimental strength.

I called for air strikes on these targets. The soldier on the radio adjusted this fire until the bombs were heard on our radio and transmissions ceased. I did not know his name but he was a real hero.

At 1700 hours, 6 April, Loc Ninh's main compound was overrun the first time by infantry. Elements of the 174th Regiment attacked in company strength across the airfield and a battalion of E-6 Regiment attacked from the west. The company from the 174th massed and tried to run through the front gate as a group. They were decimated by the CBU that I called onto the camp's perimeter. The battalion from the west stopped in the wire when Spectre engaged their supporting tanks. The tanks turned tail and ran. Earlier that morning two TOC radio operators, the regimental surgeon, and myself had crawled into the barbed wire on the west perimeter. With LTC Schott and SGT Lull covering us, we placed claymore mines and white phosphorous grenades behind the six "FOOGAS" drums on that side. We then attached the mines and grenades to a blasting machine with communications wire. When I climbed the steps, I saw hundreds of NVA "standing" in the wire and the ARVN soldiers staring at them. When I detonated the "FOOGAS", it was brutal, as if coming out of a daze the ARVN soldiers began firing. The NVA battalion was decimated. When I went outside to check the soldiers, a single T-54 Tank rolled from the woodline and entered the perimeter. I grabbed an M-72 LAW and fired directly into the front of the tank. The tank and crew were not impressed! Finally, Spectre munitions "sparkled" on the rear deck of the tank and it took a round into the engine compartment. The defenders on the bunker line then killed the crew as they exited the tank. That evening when I checked the bunker lines, the 9th Regiment was down to about fifty defenders. There were about 150 wounded in the hospital bunker. The regimental surgeon and I went to the hospital and ordered all who could walk back to the perimeter. There was no whining, they just went and did their duty.

As the surgeon and I were putting the wounded on the perimeter, I noticed that the disabled enemy tank was gone. I questioned a young soldier in the bunker near where the tank had been sitting concerning what had happened to the tank. He explained: "Another pair of tanks had come out of the rubber trees and drug the disabled tank away." I then asked him why he had not fired his X-72 LAW at the tanks. In response, he said "the tanks were not shooting and he didn't want to make them mad." I understood his reasoning and could only pat him on the shoulder to convey my feelings. It is my experience that the M72-LAW is ineffective when attacking the frontal armor of the T54 Tank.

That night Colonel Vinh ordered all the warm soda pop stored in the TOC be opened and passed out to the troops. This was Colonel Vinh's last contribution to the battle. He had stripped off his uniform and was wearing only white under shorts and a T-shirt. He told me we would have to surrender soon. He advised me to keep a white shirt handy. He also told me we were lucky because we were officers. We could surrender. Junior enlisted men would be shot by the NVA. The regimental surgeon confirmed Vinh's statement. We went around the perimeter and told all the Border Rangers to strip to their underwear and try to get to the Cam Le bridge. This was done because it was generally accepted that the Montagnard, Cambodian, and Nhung soldiers would be executed by the NVA. It was then that I learned that most of the unwounded Infantry soldiers on the perimeter were from the 2nd FSB Alpha and the bridge. They

stated that they had been given the option to go north, south, or stay. This group had come to Loc Ninh. That night about twenty men straggled in from the 3rd Battalion which had been located south of the camp. The 3rd Battalion had been virtually wiped out by the NVA 272nd Regiment on the high ground south of the camp.

That night, 6 April, at approximately 2000 hours, lights were seen in the open south of the camp. I directed CBU and NAPALM onto the lights. These lights were within 500 meters of the barbed wire. I did not determine until the next evening what they were. At about 2300 hours, two 240mm rockets landed almost simultaneously on the Loc Ninh Infantry and Artillery compounds. What these notoriously inaccurate, weapons achieved is amazing. One struck the hospital bunker, killing every wounded soldier and medic inside. The regimental surgeon was with me and was spared. The other hit the ammunition dump, in the Artillery compound, and totally destroyed the guns and soldiers. General Hollingsworth, who was flying overhead at the time, said: "it looked like a nuclear explosion."

At 2330 hours, 6 April there was another major attack from the east across the airfield and through the wire from the west. This was repulsed with air strikes and the last few rounds of 106mm canister ammunition. After the attack, Sergeant Wallingford and Michael Dummond brought food and encouragement from the inner perimeter. I did not see Major Carlson; the others said he was manning the radio. Sergeant Lull had become moody and refused to leave the bunker after the second major attack. He asked what my plan was and I said: "To fight." He was not happy with my response. Though he had been wounded only slightly, his mental attitude had greatly deteriorated.

LTC Schott and I moved throughout the perimeter that night and used a portable radio to direct air strikes. We were both wounded a number of times during the night (Note 3) and LTC Schott kept repeating: "I'm glad you are here" By early morning, I noted that there was some mental deterioration in LTC Schott. I believe it was caused by the head wound he had received on the first night of the battle. Despite his head wound, LTC Schott continued to fight throughout the battle. His bravery under fire is unquestionable and he gave me his loyalty and support to the very end of the fight. I further believe this mental deterioration significantly influenced his actions on the following day.

Early on the morning of 7 April Loc Ninh became strangely quiet. There were occasional artillery rounds and mortars but little else. It was as if the attacking force and the defending force were holding their breath for some reason. I increased the air strikes to the west and observed numerous secondary explosions. I also cleared the Spectre Gunship on station to fire at will into the plantation house and grounds. Major Davidson, during this phase of the battle, continued to periodically come up on the radio from his bunker and complain the lack of fire support he was receiving. His statements were totally absurd and embarrassed LTC Schott, Major Carlson, Captain Wanat, Sergeant Wallingford and myself. The FACs tried to reassure him, to no avail. Major Davidson was scared to death.

About 0700 hours, 7 April, there was another major ground attack, from the west and north from the town of Loc Ninh itself. Tanks entered the perimeter from the west. One T-54 Tank chased me around the perimeter

until I could get behind it and shoot an into its rear section. During this "chase" Captain Dey, a brave helicopter pilot from the 1st of the 9th Cavalry, tried to draw the tank's fire off of me with his LOH. In fact, it is most probable his actions enabled me to eventually destroy the tank (Note 7).

Captain Dey also observed the mass of bodies in the barbed wire and the trench lines. Many of the bodies were entangled, friend and foe, indicating that at some point in the late evening hours of 6 April the fighting had been close quarter, "hand-to-hand", combat.

At approximately 0800 hours, 7 April, Colonel Vinh, his loyal body guards still trailing him, ran out through the front gate of Loc Ninh and surrendered. The 9th Regiment Executive Officer (XO) observing Colonel Vinh's desertion and surrender, immediately ran from the bunker toward the inner perimeter. I understood why only when I saw him begin to lower the flag of the Republic of Vietnam. When I observed his action, I ran after him. When I reached him he was pulling off his white T-shirt which he then ran up to the top of the flag pole, signifying to the NVA that we were surrendering. I demanded that he pull the T-shirt down from the pole. We argued and fought for the rope. As we were fighting over possession of the rope, I glanced around and saw all of the soldiers in the TOC were watching from the doorway and other soldiers on the perimeter were starting to strip off-their shirts. It appeared that the XO's act of surrender was going to end the battle then and there. As the commander, I felt the defenders of Loc Ninh could hold on until reinforcements or firepower could be provided to enable us to prevail over the NVA. Accordingly, I shot the XO dead and hauled down the white flag. The soldiers, upon observing my actions, put their shirts back on and faced out again to defend the perimeter. I do not know if anyone put up another white flag after I shot the XO. I assume that it was his white T-shirt that was observed by some pilots. This shirt, however, flew for no more than five or ten minutes.

From this point through the end of the battle things became absolutely bizarre. A major attack at about 0930 hours, 7 April, required that I call for air strikes on the camp itself. I lost all communications with the other members of the team on the inner perimeter. I was later told that they had been forced to hide inside the roof when chased from the bunker by a tank. At 1115 hours two APCs entered the front gate. Initially we thought these were 1st Cavalry troops but when the ramps lowered, NVA soldiers piled out.

At 1000 hours, 7 April, a flight of B-52 aircraft made a bombing run west of Loc Ninh. During the bombing mission there was a short lapse in air support over Loc Ninh; but this, as some claim, did not cause the fall of Loc Ninh. Also, during the B-52 strike a LOH from 1st of the 9th Cavalry came in and attempted to rescue friendly personnel. I left the bunker with an M-60 Machine Gun and covered the Vietnamese soldiers jumping onto the skids of the LOH. During this action I was shot by NVA soldiers coming across the airfield. Contrary to previous reports by the LOH helicopter pilots, the personnel who pulled me to my feet were ARVN Rangers, not NVA soldiers (Note 8).

I returned to the TOC and asked for all available fire power to destroy the camp (Note 9). SFC Lull then grabbed the radio handset and screamed "no NAPALM". Major Davidson also came on the net and yelled "no NAPALM". LTC Schott then took the handset and talked to "someone". He

recommended me for a high award and signed off. At that moment I told Schott and Lull that we should now fight our way out. Colonel Schott said he couldn't make it with his wounds and that Lull and I should go. I said, "that's it, we all stay". As the NVA began to throw satchel charges into the bunker, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Schott, understanding there was no time to argue; believing he could not physically endure an attempt to E & E, and knowing I would not leave him; sat down on a stool and shot himself between the eyes with his own .45 caliber pistol. LTC Schott's action was not an act of fear, Dick Schott died to save SFC Lull and myself. I have heard disparaging remarks about LTC Schott's action from a number of people, including some General Officers. In response to these people, I say: "On the best day of your life, you should hope to be half as brave as LTC Richard Schott." His was an act of sacrifice, not personal desperation. He died for me! No one else was there, except Lull. No one has the right to judge Dick Schott except for me because I was there. He is the bravest man I have ever known. He is dead, not missing in action (MIA) and the North Vietnamese know it! Then I went to the roof the NVA entered the bunker. They cut off LTC Schott's collar and name tag and, then tried to cut off his head. During this, SFC Howard Lull and twelve ARVN soldiers "played dead" in the TOC!

I went to the roof of the bunker and tried to organize the three soldiers left in the trench line. They just ran back and forth yelling "May Bay" the Vietnamese word for helicopter. I tried to call for air support on the radio but it was destroyed by gunfire from an NVA who had mounted a tower in the inner perimeter. One bullet went through my radio, and the back pack, and entered my back. This bullet, or part of it, lodged in the base of my left lung (Note 3).

Immediately after I was shot, by the NVA soldier located on the inner perimeter tower, I saw a LOH swooping in on my position from the west. He headed straight toward me. At the same moment I saw NVA coming out of the bunker line to fire on the LOH. I tried to wave him off as I no longer had a radio. Finally, just before he flared to land, I shot out his windshield and the LOH moved away to the South (Note 7).

I re-entered the bunker and killed three NVA who were attempting to cut off LTC Schott's head. The instant they were dead, SFC Lull and the twelve ARVN soldiers "came back to life". I tried to organize the thirteen people and with the Regimental Surgeon, who came down the other stairwell, led them outside. We retook two bunkers on the bunker line. We held these bunkers until 1830 hours. Then as "Spectre" made a pass on targets to the west, we escaped through the mine field to the southwest. Just on the other side of the perimeter road, a squad of NVA jumped up and engaged us. During this engagement I was shot in the groin with a pistol. I also received a small schrapnel wound in the lower right abdomen (Note 3).

We returned fire and killed all five NVA but my bowels filled with blood and I had to pull down my pants and defecate. While I was in this position, SFC Howard Lull stood up and announced that I had to be left behind. I was virtually immobile and so physically and emotionally drained that I could only cry. SFC Howard Lull and all but two of the ARVN soldiers chose to desert me. They moved toward a hill mass where they felt they would be secure until they could escape or be rescued. The Regimental Surgeon and my bodyguard,

Corporal Hen, stayed with me. We started south and avoided any movement by the NVA. When we reached the small stream bed about 500 meters south of the camp, we saw what the lights the night before were from. A reinforced company had tried to dig into the walls of the stream bed. They were still there, almost all had been killed by the CBU and NAPALM. We looked at the wounded; they looked at us; we moved on. During the night we observed a massive air strike go onto the hill mass that SFC Lull and the ARVNs had run up. I believe they were killed by the air strike. Subsequent to my capture the NVA Commander told me they had all been killed. During this night, we had three contacts with the NVA. After the third contact we were all crawling from exhaustion and wounds.

At 0800 hours, 8 April, I spotted a FAC. I used my LRRP mirror to signal him. In response, the FAC called in a flight of two fast movers dropping CBU. I was again wounded (Note 3). We fled, as best we could, toward the rubber trees south of the camp. As we stumbled up the hill, I saw a white rice bowl fall to the ground. I shot the soldier who was eating with my pistol and we continued on. The next thing I saw was a huge orange flash and then my left leg was knocked from under me (Note 3). I was knocked unconscious. When I came to my senses, I had a great weight on my head. An NVA soldier was standing on my head. I saw them shoot my bodyguard dead. They were lining up the Regimental Surgeon when I forced my way to my feet. I tried to shoot my .45 caliber pistol but the slide was back and it was empty. The NVA just took it out of my hand. I explained that they did not want to kill a doctor. He could help them. Right or wrong, I intended to preserve at least one friend from that battle. The Surgeon cursed me for telling them he was a doctor but the NVA let him live. He was eventually released with me in 1973.

When they took me to their headquarters an older officer ran down the hill and hit me across the face with a bamboo stick (Note 3). A distinguished looking officer then ran down the hill and threw the man who had hit me aside. He kicked the man and told him in Vietnamese that I was a good soldier. The whacking came because the doctor had, inadvertently, called me "Zippo". It seems that "our friend" Colonel Vinh had told the NVA much during his short stay with them. The distinguished looking officer had me undressed and my wounds treated. Treatment was superficial at best. They tried to give me food but I was afraid to eat because of the abdominal wounds. The interpreter, who spoke perfect English, told me I had been captured by the 272nd Regiment, 9th NVA Division. He further stated that I was the guest of the "Group Commander", "Mr. Tra". When I asked if he didn't mean Regiment or Division Commander, he said that Mr. Tra had many Divisions.

Soon, my old jeep arrived carrying Major Carlson, SGT Wallingford, and Mick Dummond. Mr. Tra had no words for any of them. We were added to the load in the jeep and I was then tied to the floor boards. We went to the West until we reached the road to the scissor bridge. We then went North to the river and east back toward QL13. When a Spectre Gunship flew over they laid branches on the jeep and left me tied to the floor board. They also left the engine running. I knew the destruction Spectre did to tanks and I couldn't even imagine what it would do a jeep. Although I probably gave away a secret, I finally yelled to them, in Vietnamese, to turn off the engine. At QL13

we crossed the underwater bridge. We also met up with a number of captured ARVN M577 vehicles hauling items for the NVA. When we reached Snoul, I was given additional medical treatment for the benefit of photographers.

Carlson and Wallingford told me how a tank had chased them out of their bunker and how they had hidden in the roof of the bunker. Then Carlson said he had been wounded in the chest, by a "Mini Gun" from one of the Cobra helicopters. I told him that I was outside the bunker when the Cobras were shooting and the only thing fired was "NAILS." He became quite flustered and told me he was now ready to take command. SGT Wallingford and I said "cold day in Hell." It seems that Ed Carlson believed he was seriously wounded. According to Wallingford, immediately after Carlson was hit, he was bleeding a lot and Sergeant Wallingford gave him a shot of coagulant. It was too much coagulant because Carlson began to hallucinate. While hallucinating, Carlson tried to shoot at things coming out of the bunker wall and had to be disarmed. At some time on 8 April, the NVA heard Carlson, Wallingford, and Dummond in the bunker and began pouring gasoline onto the bunker and into the firing ports. The defenders assumed the NVA objective was to burn them out. The Americans, the Frenchman, and the ARVN crawled out of the bunker and surrendered because they feared being burned alive. On 9 April 1972, I was again taken to see Mr. Tra. He was now in Snoul. He said I would be well treated and that he would check on me. I interpreted his comment as soldier to soldier talk, not propaganda. That night we were separated from Mick Dummond and driven to the East on QL13. Late that night we were taken out of the jeep and walked all the rest of the night to a prison near to Kratie, Cambodia. They took my shoes and clothes. I marched in GI socks and a Sarong. The next morning we waited outside the camp. This was because the NVA didn't want us to see any other prisoners. While we waited, Major Carlson and Ken Wallingford counted my visible wounds. There were, from head to toe, thirty eight (38) holes in my body (Note 3). In closing this report of my observations on the Battle of Loc Ninh, I state: There were those on the ground and in the air can debate their own participation and performance; as for my performance, the Battle of Loc Ninh was mine - I ran it all! For better or for worse, I did it.'

MARK A. SMITH

Major (Retired)

United States Army

Ground Commander, Battle of Loc Ninh