



Vietnam Battles

Part One

DANGER

forward

The Magazine Of The Big Red One, Vietnam



Vietnam Battles—1

AP bau BANG

THE BATTLE OF AP BAU BANG came little more than a month after the main body of the First Infantry Division arrived in the Republic of Vietnam. It was the Big Red One's first big fight.

At 1558 hours on 11 Nov 65, all company-size units in or attached to the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry were ordered to assume defensive positions for the night. Responding to the order, they made what constituted one more small but crucial move on the military chessboard of Vietnam.

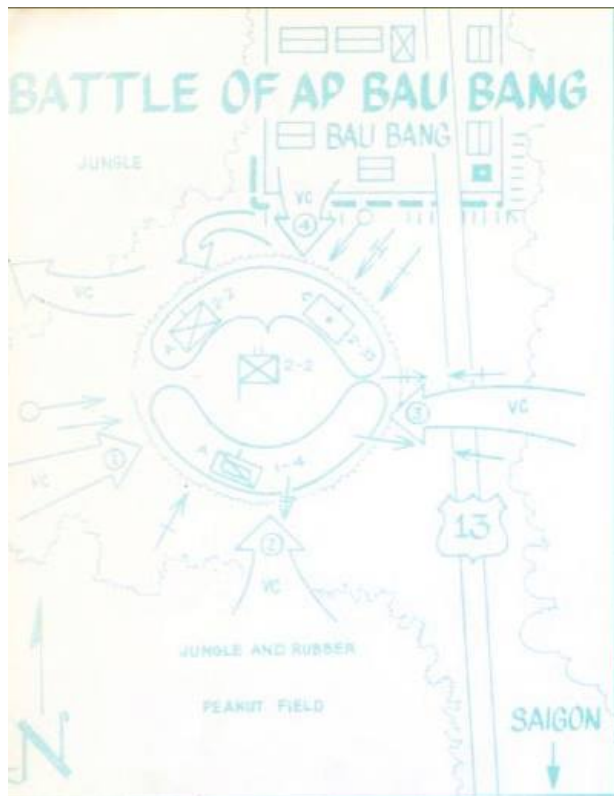
The mission of the 2/2 Inf — assigned during Operation Road Runner in support of Operation Bushmaster — was to sweep and secure National Highway 13 from Lai Khe north to Bau Bang on 11, 12, and 13 Nov. The mission's purpose: to permit the safe passage of the 7th Regiment,

5th ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Division.

And thus, as evening began on that dusty Nov day and the last ARVN unit had passed, the three rifle companies and the reconnaissance platoon of the battalion, A Troop of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry (attached), and C Battery of the 2d Battalion, 33d Artillery (which moved north with the 2/2 Inf in order to furnish additional fire support for the ARVN force's move), all began to settle into their prearranged positions. As they did so, it was decided that the position occupied by the artillery was inadequate. And so A Co, 2/2 Inf; A Trp, 1/4 Cav; the battalion command group; and C Btry, 2/33 Arty moved into a new 200-by-300-meter defensive position just south of the village of Bau Bang. (See map, Page 6.)

*Troopers of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry
watch an Air Force jet strike VC mortar
positions in Ap Bau Bang*





Key to map symbols appears on Page 32.

The Big Red One's first major Vietnam action began 12 Nov 65, when the VC launched mortar attack (1) followed by infantry assault (2) aimed at capturing machine guns mounted on 1/4 Cav carriers. Second ground attack (3) was repulsed by .50 caliber fire. Main VC assault (4) was supported by dug-in weapon positions in village of Bau Bang.

Under the support of the hail of automatic weapons and small arms fire, there had come — from out of the jungle and rubber trees south of the perimeter and west of Highway 13 — the first VC infantry assault. Enemy infantrymen crawled through waist-high bushes of a peanut field beneath their supporting fire. A small number then charged the concertina wire in an attempt to get at the machine guns mounted on armored personnel carriers (APC's) behind the wire.

The rifle companies installed concertina wire, dug individual holes; and ambush patrols were moved into place.

At 2215, two mortar rounds hit to the front of the command group. At 2330, an ambush patrol from A Co, 2/2 Inf killed one VC who had discovered the patrol's initial position. The patrol found a new location and quietly passed the remainder of the night.

At 0510 on 12 Nov, all elements of the battalion task force were told to be ready by 0630 to resume their sweep-and-secure efforts along Highway 13. Fifty-five minutes later, the enemy began their attack.

A mortar barrage of approximately 50-60 mortar rounds launched from the jungle area in the southwest was joined at 0616 by a hail of automatic weapons and small arms fire.

At about 0630, the ambush patrol from A Co, 2/2 Inf was surrounded and outnumbered by almost five to one. The patrol leader decided that to get back to safety, the patrol would have to fight its way out. This it did. Sergeant Edward P. Ference of Riverside, Calif, the assistant squad leader, exposed himself with repeated daring to fierce enemy fire in order to direct his men, cover their withdrawal, and aid the wounded. When he reached the relative safety of the battalion perimeter, SGT Ference saw one of his wounded comrades lying in the midst of the advancing enemy force. He went to the man's aid and died by his side. For his heroism, SGT Ference was posthumously presented the Nation's second highest award, the Distinguished Service Cross.

The VC ground attack consisted of three efforts, in a counter-clockwise sequence.

The .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the APC driven by Specialist Five (then Specialist Four) William D. Burnett of Republic, Wash., failed to function, and so SP4 Burnett moved from the cover of the driver's seat to the top of the vehicle, quickly cleared the weapon, and used it on the approaching attackers, annihilating 14 of them. During this action the carrier took three direct hits from mortar fire, disabling it and wounding the vehicle commander. SP4 Burnett assumed command, ordered the crew out of the vehicle, covered their withdrawal, and personally carried the wounded commander to protective cover moments before a mortar round landed directly on the vehicle. During the withdrawal, he also saved the life of another wounded man by using his hand weapon to eliminate two VC who were about to kill his beleaguered companion. After administering first aid to the wounded soldier, Burnett again exposed himself to a heavy volume of gunfire, going from vehicle to vehicle in search of a medical aidman for his critically injured commander. Upon finding an aidman, he led him back and then picked up his commander and carried him across 250 meters of terrain through intense hostile gun fire to the helicopter evacuation pad. For his resolute bravery and stunning compassion, SP4 Burnett was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

The next enemy assault came from the east side of Highway 13. This attack was repulsed by .50 caliber and small arms fire along the eastern portion of the perimeter. Meanwhile, during the period 0645 to 0700, an airborne forward air controller arrived with a flight of A1E Skyraiders which dropped their bombs and 20 mm cannon fire in the jungle area north of the battalion position.

At about 0700, the enemy made its main assault from the north out of the village of Bau Bang. That village along with Ap Ben Dong So had been visited, on the two days preceding the attack, by the Iron (3d) Brigade and 2/2 Inf civil affairs teams. They had distributed rice, beans, dry milk, clothing, CARE packages and candy. The brigade MEDCAP team had treated patients in both villages.

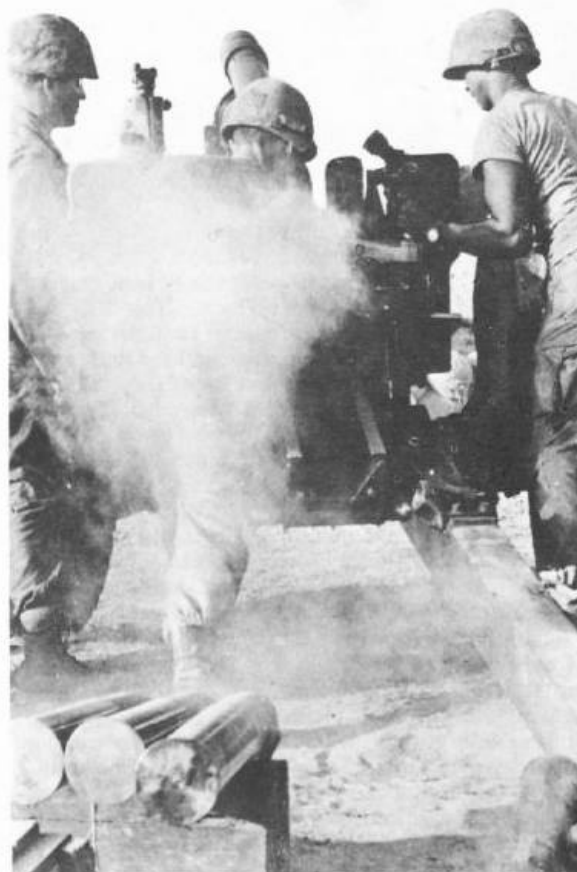
But now the VC launched their principal assault from Ap Bau Bang. Recoilless rifle and automatic weapons positions had been dug in along the berm that ran from east to west on the village's southern edge. The recoilless rifle, automatic weapons, and mortar fire provided effective support for the VC infantry assault.

The attack was met at the row of concertina wire by the combined fire of C Btry, 2/33 Arty, and the machine gun and rifle fire of A Co, 2/2 Inf. Although faced by this hailstorm of fire, one VC « suicide squad » pushed through it, penetrated the perimeter, and managed to lob a grenade into one of the howitzer positions. The attack bounced counterclockwise along the perimeter until it dissipated into the woods to the northwest.

Once it was established that the recoilless rifles were dug into the berm south of Ap Bau Bang, and that the mortars were located within the village, permission was granted to strike Ap Bau Bang. The berm was hit first by a flight of Skyraiders which used 500-pound bombs against the recoilless rifle positions. In the meantime, 22 rounds of artillery were fired directly into the berm and 40 rounds into the village.

At about 0900, the Viet Cong renewed their main attack from the village. C Btry fired 65 rounds point blank into the oncoming troops. A flight of Air Force jets dropped napalm directly on the attacking VC and the village mortar positions.

For the next three hours, the 2/2 Inf forces held their positions while artillery and air strikes pounded the enemy. At the end of the day, 198 VC bodies were found near the battalion perimeter.



Gun crews from C Btry, 2/33 Arty fired point blank into oncoming VC during one point in fierce Bau Bang fighting.