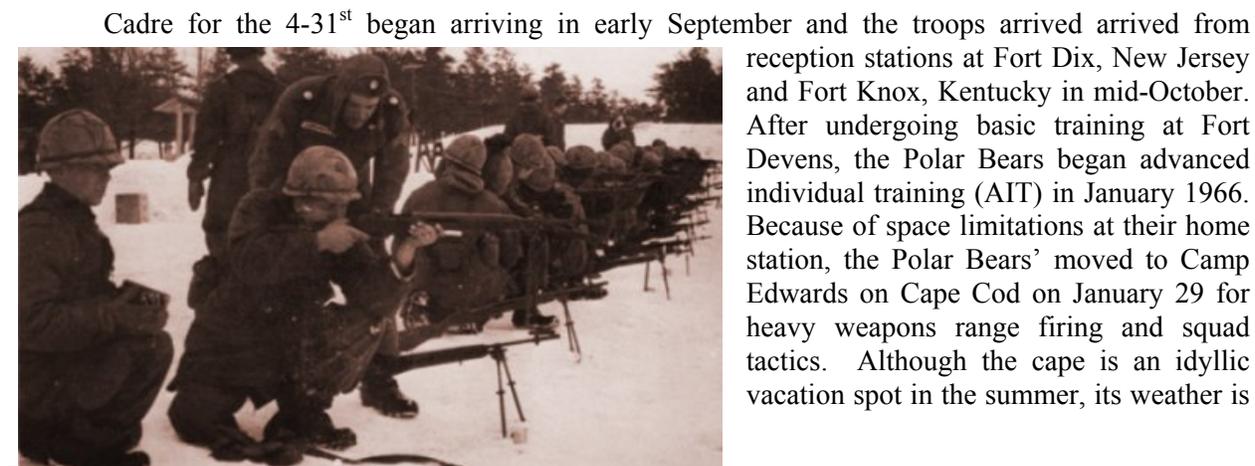
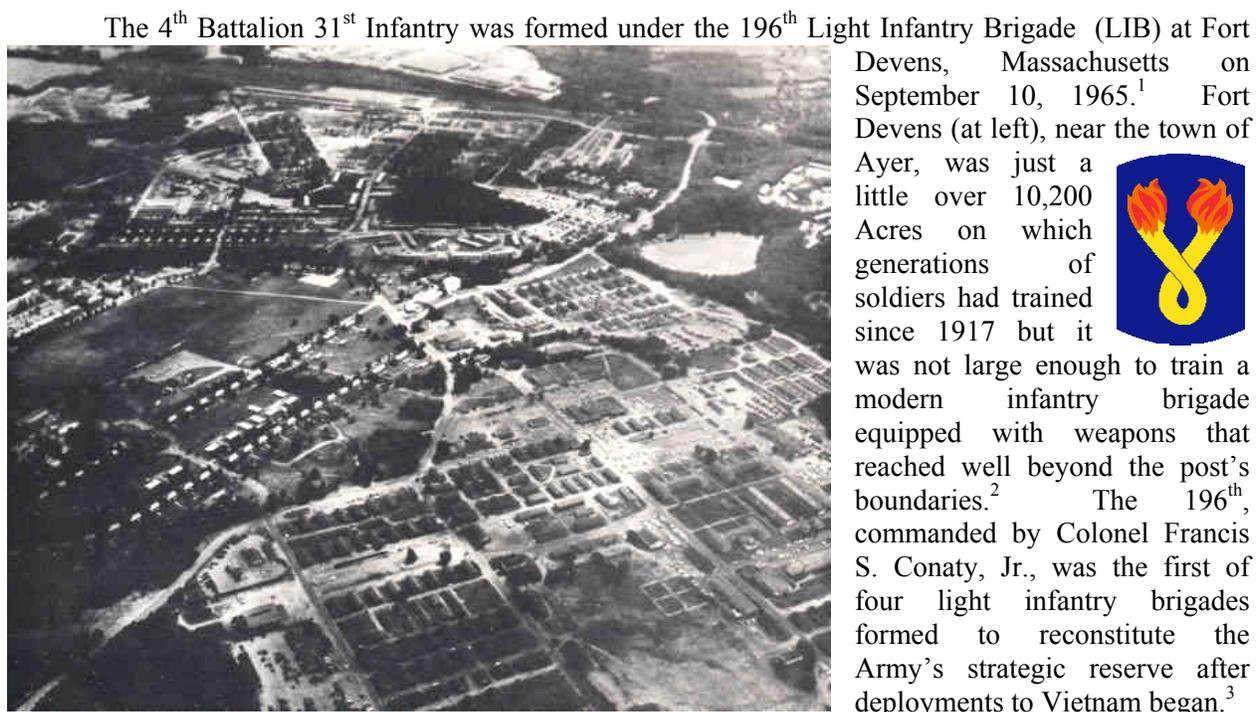


Chapter 17

4th BATTALION: FT DEVENS AND VIETNAM 1965-1971

Note: This Chapter is still being written and so far covers only the period Sep 1965 to May 1967. Additional sections will be posted as they are finished.



¹ Other components of the brigade were the 2nd Battalion 1st Infantry, 3rd Battalion 21st Infantry, 3rd Battalion 82nd Field Artillery, 8th Support Battalion, F Troop 17th Cavalry, 175th Engineer Company, 587th Signal Company, and the Brigade Headquarters Company. Stanton, p.88.

² Fort Devens was closed in 1996 after 79 years as an active Army installation. Photos courtesy of 196th Light Infantry Brigade Year Book 1966.

³ The others were the 199th Light Infantry Brigade at Ft Benning, Georgia, the 198th Light Infantry Brigade at Ft Hood, Texas, and the 11th Light Infantry Brigade at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Shelby L Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, Washington, DC: US News Books, 1991, pp. 87, 89.

miserable in January and gets worse in February.

Returning to Fort Devens in a snow storm in mid-February, the battalion next conducted a 21-mile road march to Leominster State Forest. In addition to its physical conditioning role, the event was intended to teach counterinsurgency tactics. With 9 inches of snow on the ground, the event was agony from start to finish. Whether any learning about counterinsurgency took place was doubtful. Ed Boss remembers that A Company's bivouac site was atop a frigid, windswept mountain. Of course chow was served down in the valley, about an hour round trip through the snow. Troops had to make their way down the mountain and back up each time chow was served. Real insurgents would have had a field day with ambushes and booby traps between the chow line and the bivouac site.

On March 31, the Polar Bears moved to Camp Drum (now Fort Drum and home of the 4th Battalion 31st Infantry since 1996), a 107,000 Acre reservation near Watertown, New York, that offered



sufficient training land for brigade-level maneuvers. Riot control training was added to the schedule in anticipation of the 196th LIB's first overseas mission. Colonel Conaty had been alerted that his brigade would deploy to the Dominican Republic in June. Combat operations by Marines and the 82nd Airborne Division had averted a leftist takeover but the situation remained unstable. After Exercise REDCON READY in May, the brigade's Infantrymen were awarded the coveted blue shoulder cord signifying that they were fully-trained infantrymen. Returning to Ft Devens to prepare for

overseas movement, troops packed, performed maintenance on their equipment, and were given leave en masse from 16-30 June.⁴ Meanwhile, elections were held in the Dominican Republic on June 1, allowing the Inter-American Peacekeeping Force to be withdrawn. The "Chargers" would soon get a different mission.⁵

Deployment



The 196th LIB left Boston on July 15 aboard the troopships USNS *William O. Darby* and USNS *Alexander M. Patch* and sailed southward along the Atlantic coast.⁶ Their destination was Vietnam. In an effort to maintain discipline and a sharp edge, troops were kept busy with physical training, sanitation details, and classes on jungle warfare, survival, weaponry, and tactics. Taking training seriously aboard rolling troopships amid the smells of diesel fuel and vomit was more than a challenge. Skirting

⁴ Unit History, 4th Battalion 31st Infantry, APO San Francisco 96256, May 1967.

⁵ William B Allman, *Fighting Forces: The Charger Brigade*, Vietnam Magazine, april 1992, P.10.

⁶ The *Patch* and *Darby* transported troops overseas during the Korean War. After the war, both transported troops and dependents to and from Europe.

storms in the Atlantic, the convoy passed through the Panama Canal and headed west, stopping at Long Beach, California to refuel and replenish rations.⁷

After a gut-wrenching month at sea, the brigade reached Vung Tau, Vietnam on August 15. The 4-31st Infantry's advance party, led by its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh J. Lynch, had arrived by air on August 6 and met the troops at the docks. Air Force C-130 transports took them the remaining distance to Tay Ninh, their new home. In the shadow of a dormant volcano called Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain), Tay Ninh, with a 1966 population of around 200,000, is an important market town and Buddhist religious center surrounded by rubber and tea plantations and rice fields. The Cambodian border is only 12 miles to its north. Saigon is 65 miles to the southeast but the Viet Cong frequently ambushed convoys and mined the roads. The 196th LIB's arrival at Tay Ninh was accompanied by an unwelcome surprise. General Westmoreland, the Commander of US Forces in Vietnam, placed the 196th under the US 25th Infantry Division's control and reassigned its Artillery Commander, Brigadier General Edward H. DeSaussure, Jr., as the 196th's commander, downgrading Colonel Conaty's position to Deputy Commander.



Arriving at Tay Ninh will live forever in the memory of all who endured it. The temperature was 124° and the battalion's bivouac area was two miles from the airfield, a hike everyone had to make with dufflebag, weapons, and full field gear. There were no facilities of any kind at the Polar Bears' new home, so they lived in tents. Because they arrived during monsoon season, vehicular traffic was impossible around the muddy bivouac site. Consequently, all equipment, supplies, food, and water had to be hauled by hand over the two-mile stretch from the airfield.

Fireball and Attleboro

The 4th Battalion's first mission was Operation Fireball, conducted from September 8-14, moving by air to Dau Tieng to provide local security for national elections. On September 14, they joined Operation Attleboro, a search operation in the Viet Cong's (VC) War Zone C. Like several other 196th LIB operations to follow, Operation Attleboro was named after a town near Fort Devens.

Early on September 18, 1965, 4-31st Infantry flew in the rain from Tay Ninh to establish a forward operating base north of Dau Tieng. Things remained quiet until just after midnight on September 19. Sniper fire erupted in C Company's sector, followed soon after by a mortar attack on the battalion CP. Captain John M. Harrington, the Battalion S-4, and his radio operator, SP4 Manzie Glover, Jr., were killed and 16 others were wounded. The following morning, the battalion marched a few kilometers farther north to secure an area where the 175th Engineer Company cleared the jungle for another forward operating base. Rain continued throughout the day, turning the area into a muddy quagmire. As daylight faded, small arms and mortar fire struck several places around and within the perimeter, wounding

⁷ Pictures courtesy of 175th Engineer Company website.

another man. Over the next several days, C Company and then B Company engaged in a series of stiff firefights with the Viet Cong, losing three men killed and twenty wounded.

On October 6, the battalion returned to the field after a brief stand-down at Tay Ninh. Around noon, C Company found a series of tunnels. Soon after, B Company found a huge rice cache and a large array of farm implements in a nearby area where no civilians lived. With the rain beating on steel helmets, ponchos, and weapons, soldiers searched along trails that showed signs of heavy and recent use. The enemy could not be far away. A Company was the first to make contact, engaging in a brief firefight that resulted in two men being wounded but the enemy paid too. Blood trails, several discarded weapons, and a bundle of documents were found. Two days later, D Company found another rice cache and A Company engaged a VC patrol, losing two men wounded and killing three of the enemy.

On October 11, C Company's commander, First Lieutenant Franklin S. Pearce, and two of his men were wounded and evacuated from the field. Pearce, a well-respected commander, lost his leg. Firefights erupted throughout the night. In some cases, the enemy got close enough to throw grenades into the perimeter. A, C, and D Companies each found blood trails the next morning but no bodies or weapons. The following day, air strikes were called in on suspected enemy locations before the Polar Bears were flown back to Tay Ninh.

On October 18, the battalion flew back to Dau Tieng to guard that sprawling base. Martha Raye, an actress who had made her debut before World War II, visited Dau Tieng as part of a USO tour. Lieutenant Colonel Lynch declared her an honorary Polar Bear and presented her a set of regimental crests. That night, B Company killed one enemy soldier and the following morning found a VC hospital complex with 27 structures above and below ground, stocked with medical supplies, clothing, more than 12 tons of rice, salt, canned milk, and peanuts. That same day, 2-1st Infantry ran into the southern edge of what was later discovered to be the VC 9th Division's base camp near the Saigon River. On October 26 and 27, A and B Companies engaged in firefights that killed 9 VC and captured 4 others. There were no US losses.⁸ Signs of enemy presence were everywhere, including sampans, construction materials, tunnels, and documents. With the element of surprise gone, the brigade reassembled at Dau Tieng and prepared to attack in force. At that critical juncture, Colonel Conaty was reassigned to the 1st Brigade 25th Infantry Division.

Brigadier General DeSaussure's plan of attack for Operation Attleboro was confusing and its ad hoc execution made matters worse. Advancing north from Dau Tieng on foot, the 196th's attack axis paralleled the Saigon River. Because 3-21st Infantry was tied down with static security missions, 1-27th Infantry, a part of the 25th Infantry Division, was attached in its place but it was not initially employed as a battalion. Its B Company advanced along the river on the brigade's right flank, while its C Company air assaulted into an isolated landing zone (LZ) on the brigade's extreme left. Between those two companies were the 2-1st and 4-31st Infantry, each with two companies abreast advancing on parallel axes through the jungle. The companies could not see or support each other in the dense jungle, dooming their advance to a blind foray into dangerous territory. As C/1-27th Infantry landed, it was immediately engaged, suffering six wounded and six killed on the landing zone. Included was its commander, who soon died of his wounds. "Dustoff" helicopters were driven off repeatedly by heavy fire.⁹

⁸ Unit History, 4th Battalion 31st Infantry, September 1965 to April 1967, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Bks, PA.

⁹ Major General (Ret.) Guy S. Meloy, *Operation Attleboro, The Wolfhounds' Brave Stand*, Vietnam Magazine, October 1997, p.38.

Seeking to salvage the situation, the 1-27th's Commander, Major Guy S. "Sandy" Meloy, landed nearby and called for his A Company, then in reserve at Dau Tieng. Meloy and every member of his command group were wounded soon after landing but most stayed in the fight. The 196th's Commander also reacted, but failed to tell Major Meloy what he was doing. To Meloy's surprise, C/3-21st Infantry was lifted in from Tay Ninh to join him. He did not know they were coming until the helicopters landed and the company commander reported in on Meloy's command net. B and C Companies 2-1st Infantry were lifted in the next morning to reinforce Meloy's growing command but he was again surprised when they showed up because no one told him they were coming. Later that afternoon, C/2-27th Infantry, from Meloy's sister battalion, and that battalion's command group reported they were inbound from Dau Tieng. Misunderstanding where they were to land, they landed two kilometers northwest of Meloy's perimeter and immediately came under fire. The company and battalion commanders were both killed, leaving a lieutenant to hold the isolated company together.

A/2-27th Infantry was next to arrive. It was sent immediately through what appeared to be a gap in the enemy's line to reinforce C/2-27th and assist its move back to Meloy's expanding perimeter. Two members of A/2-27th, Captain Robert F. Foley and PFC John F. Baker, Jr. earned the Medal of Honor during their company's failed attempt to break through to C/2-27th. On the morning of November 5, B/1-27th Infantry linked up with A/2-1st and A/4-31st Infantry, formed an ad hoc battalion task force, and circled north of the enemy base area to fight their way through to C/2-27th. When they reached Meloy's perimeter late that afternoon, ten rifle companies from five battalions were under his command.¹⁰

Meanwhile, BG DeSaussure ordered Lieutenant Colonel Lynch to attack with his other three companies against an enemy force entrenched in concrete emplacements along the east-west road defining the VC base area's southern edge. Because the Polar Bears would have to cross an open field swept by at least a dozen machineguns, Lynch declined the order and was promptly relieved of command. DeSaussure did not press the order and the battalion stayed put, no matter who was in charge. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Coley took command of the battalion in the field near Soui Da. General Westmoreland flew in to talk with the battalion on November 9 and shortly after he departed, the VC mortared the site, wounding six men. On November 13, C Company's 3rd Platoon was ambushed, losing two killed and three wounded. Intense enemy fire prevented the platoon from recovering the bodies of the two dead men but they struggled to regain the ground on which their comrades lay and they succeeded. The wounded were evacuated by helicopter under fire but the company had to carry the bodies of PFCs Michael J. Macarell (Hasbrouck Heights, NJ) and Edward J Piantkowski (Chicago, IL) out under fire. Air strikes were called in to help extricate the company. Before the fighting ended, the 1st Infantry Division, 3rd Brigade 4th Infantry Division, 173rd Airborne Brigade, and a regiment of the 5th ARVN Division had all joined the action, relieving Major Meloy's ad hoc command and attempting to block enemy escape corridors. Over 1100 members of the VC 9th Division were killed.

The battle had not gone well for the "Chargers". The fight had cost the lives of 60 Americans and another 159 were wounded. Despite confusing directions from Brigade Headquarters, the rifle companies had performed well. Their steadfastness prevented what could easily have become a disaster. Because Brigadier General DeSaussure's poor planning and lack of coordination created a confusing and dangerous tangle, he was relieved of command and replaced by Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles. The brigade was saved from disaster by Major Meloy, the courage and initiative of individual rifle

¹⁰ They included A, B and C Companies 2-1st Infantry; C Company 3-21st Infantry; A, B, and C Companies 1-27th Infantry; A and C Companies 2-27th Infantry; and A Company 4-31st Infantry. It is unclear why or whether the command group of 2-1st Infantry, which no longer had any rifle companies left under its command, continued its original mission.

company commanders, and the discipline of the troops involved. Major Meloy was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions.

On the morning of November 29, a squad from B Company sprung an ambush, killing three VC, but two of their own men were wounded in the encounter. During the first week of December, C Company's point man tripped a booby trap that wounded four men. Later that week, A Company killed two VC in a trench network and followed up its work with an artillery barrage that cleared the area. The Polar Bears saw little further action until December 17. That evening, the battalion set up a forward operating base near Nui Ba Den, awaiting its return to the fight. They did not have to wait because the fight came to them. Around dusk, a hand grenade was tossed into the company's laager position, followed soon after by a mortar barrage that seriously wounded one man. Artillery fired in response set off a secondary explosion, probably indicating a hit set off the enemy's mortar ammunition. The next morning A and C Companies each reported engagements with enemy patrols but there were no confirmed results. Sporadic sniper fire over the next several days indicated the enemy was still near but was unwilling to engage in pitched battles as he had been in November.

For the rest of December, the Polar Bears operated with A Company 2-34th Armor attached to secure Route 29 near Dau Tieng. On Christmas Day, the battalion served dinner to around 100 Vietnamese children. The following day, the VC showed their displeasure by mortaring and ambushing A Company. SP4 Ronald D. Evans (Cincinnati, OH) and PFC Plummer Williams (Forrest City, AR) were killed by a hidden Claymore mine. Three days later, it was B Company's turn to be ambushed. PFC Robert F. Rathbun was killed in the opening burst of fire and four others were wounded.

Fitchburg, Cedar Falls and Gadsden

Tay Ninh Province was reasonably quiet for a time after Operation Attleboro but there were reports of a renewed buildup along the Cambodian border. To head off an expected enemy offensive against Tay Ninh, the 196th LIB conducted a series of operations intended to draw the enemy into a fight. In December, Operation Fitchburg, named after another town near Fort Devens, was the northern wing, the anvil, of a hammer and anvil operation that would merge into Operation Cedar Falls, which began on January 8, 1967. Cedar Falls was aimed at clearing the VC out of a tunnel-infested 25-mile long corridor encompassing the Ho Bo and Boi Loi Woods and the Filhol rubber plantation. Despite the participation of elements of the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 173rd Airborne and 196th Light Infantry Brigades, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the operation's results were disappointing. An underground complex found near the Filhol plantation may have been the Viet Cong's regional headquarters but it had been vacated before it was discovered by troops of the 25th Division.

In early February, the 196th LIB conducted Operation Gadsden, another foray into densely forested War Zone C. The operation began with a reconnaissance in force by C Company. Near dusk on February 4, the company found the enemy but the price was high. Nineteen men were wounded in the firefight that followed. The next day, A Company encountered the same enemy force, losing one man killed. He was PFC Joseph M. Brady of Watson, West Virginia. Brady was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for the actions that cost him his life. For the next two weeks, 4-31st Infantry's role in the operation was limited to securing a bridge site (A Company), a field artillery battery (B Company), and the brigade command post (C Company). Between 16 and 18 February, A and C Companies again launched search operations but found no enemy troops. They did find and search a series of tunnel complexes but the enemy remained elusive.

It became apparent that the enemy only let himself be found when he thought the odds were in his favor or when he was compelled to protect a vital base area and the supplies it contained. Otherwise, he would slip across the border to his sanctuary in Cambodia where American forces were prohibited from entering. Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk understood what the North Vietnamese could do to his country if he crossed them, so he remained “neutral”, allowing the North Vietnamese to operate freely in his eastern provinces and to use the port of Sihanoukville as an entry point for weapons and supplies from China and the Soviet Union. Politicians in Washington feared the costs of widening the war, and used Cambodia’s declared “neutrality” as a convenient rationale for keeping the fight localized in Vietnam. Their inhibition was only slightly less stark in Laos.

The strategy was flawed in several respects. 1) It meant South Vietnam would suffer enormous destruction resulting from combat with forces infiltrating its territory. “Destroying the city to save it”, however illogical, became an unofficially sanctioned reality but it could never be sanctioned by citizens whose families, homes, businesses, and crops it routinely destroyed. The policy’s reversal in 1970 and 1971 was only partial and too late. 2) It ensured that home grown Viet Cong insurgents could be amply supplied with weapons and ammunition through neighboring countries and that Viet Cong units could slip across the border to rest, train, and re-equip in complete safety. No American, RVN, or ally in Vietnam had such assurance of immunity from attack. 3) It enabled the North Vietnamese Army to assert that they were merely local insurgents, although that lie was exposed as early as 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley of South Vietnam’s Central Highlands. 4) Worst of all, it assured that enemy units could never be chased down and destroyed, prolonging their vitality and the war by many years. They would continuously slip away, refit, and re-emerge when they were ready. The cost Washington politicians sought to avoid was multiplied and America’s credibility and willingness to defend friends were among the casualties.

Junction City

Intelligence locating the Viet Cong’s main political and military headquarters, the Central Office for South Viet Nam (COSVN) near the Cambodian border prompted a concurrent operation called Junction City.¹¹ Initiated on February 22, it became the largest operation of the war, eventually involving 25,000 troops from the US 1st, 4th, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, 173rd Airborne and 196th Light Infantry Brigades, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and the RVN 5th Division. By the time the operation ended, 2728 enemy soldiers had been killed, as had 282 Americans. The 4-31st Infantry’s principal role in the operation was to conduct airmobile assaults from the town of Soui Da to interdict enemy troop movements. Hopping into a new landing zone every three to four days was risky business but it limited enemy freedom of action along the border.



Lifted out of Tay Ninh on February 21, the Polar Bears reassembled at Soui Da, 20 kilometers to the northeast. Northeast of the town were the remains of abandoned villages along Highway 13, which crossed the Saigon River and led to the Minh Thanh Rubber Plantation in adjacent Binh Long Province. There, units of the 1st Infantry Division had also begun assembling. To the southeast, Highway 19, a dirt road, led to Dau Tieng and the Michelin Rubber Plantation where units of the 4th and 25th Infantry Divisions assembled. To the northwest, Provincial Highway 243 traversed rice fields skirting Nui Ba

¹¹ Junction City, initiated by the US 1st Infantry Division from forward bases at An Loc, Quan Loi, and Loc Ninh, was named after the town in Kansas adjacent to the division’s home station, Fort Riley.

Den's eastern slope to connect with Provincial Route 4, which ran straight north past an old French fort to the Cambodian border. Adjacent to Highways 4, 13, and 19 were dense double and triple canopy forests in which the Viet Cong took advantage of the clay soil to construct a maze of underground tunnels linking bases built above and below ground under the canopy near streams and ponds.

During a reconnaissance north of Suoi Da, Second Lieutenant Owen R. Emery (Cuyahoga Falls, OH) and Staff Sergeant Paul L. Stewart (Lowell, MA) were killed when their platoon engaged an enemy force of undetermined size. The next day, B Company again found the enemy while searching an area that had remained undiscovered during previous operations. Configured in a V-shape, the enemy position was an ambush waiting to happen. As the company's lead platoon neared two large log and earth bunkers near the apex of the V, they came under fire from several directions at once. Specialist John L. Bylon (Chicago, IL), Sergeant James A. Masten (Columbia, NJ), Specialist Martin M. Mugavin (Cincinnati, OH) were killed and a fourth man was wounded in the ensuing firefight. Under the covering fire of artillery and air strikes, the platoon pulled out its dead and wounded and withdrew to safer ground.

That afternoon, A Company spotted and fired on three enemy soldiers. The enemy got away but they had been guarding a large way station consisting of 180 bunkers and 6 huts in an enclosed clearing. Blocks of composition C-4, blasting caps, detonation cord, and a Zippo lighter were all it took to render the way station useless. It made no sense to stay, however, since the enemy now knew A Company's location and could easily cut them off in the jungle during the night. By nightfall, A Company was back at Soui Da.

On the morning of February 24, B Company resumed its search just a short distance from where it had encountered the enemy the day before. Finding a large, active base area, Captain James G. Leckey, the Company Commander, called in air strikes and artillery that continued for most of the day. Around the same time, A Company found and destroyed 13 pallets of supplies. Soon afterward, sniper fire began dogging the company as it continued its search. C Company, operating nearby, joined forces with A Company to help flush out the snipers. Three men were wounded and one, SFC Felicisimo A. Hugo (Wahiawa, HI) of A Company, was killed amid sporadic eruptions of gunfire as the two sides probed at each other in the humid, gloomy forest.

The following day, sniping continued, initially to no effect. Near noon, the exchange of fire became more intense. A Company was engaged by at least a platoon-sized force in bunkers well-concealed amid the dense jungle foliage. One man was killed outright and three were wounded. One later died of his wounds.¹² Artillery fire was brought in to allow A Company to pull back from the contact area and evacuate its dead and wounded. That afternoon, C Company was operating just east of A Company when it discovered a bicycle repair shop in the jungle. Bicycles, used to transport supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam, were as important to the VC as airplanes and ships were to the US. An enemy platoon watched and waited for the opportunity to strike as the company continued its search of the area. When the firefight came, three of C Company's men were killed and six were wounded but the company pressed the attack.¹³ Thirteen of the enemy were found dead in the forest and their surviving comrades fled.

¹² The dead men were PFC Richard L. Boltz (Ridgefield Park, NJ) and PFC David C. Holden (Jamaica Plain, MA). Both were 22 years old.

¹³ The dead were PFC Johnnie F. Barchak, Jr. (San Antonio, TX), PFC Michael L. Myers (Detroit, MI), and PFC John T. Wetzell (Buchanan, MI). Barchak and Myers were 21 and Wetzell was 20.

While the rifle companies patrolled the jungle, the battalion's Civil Affairs Section, aided by Vietnamese interpreters and members of the Battalion Aid Station, conducted a vigorous civic action program. Medics treated 725 Vietnamese civilians for various ailments in Tay Ninh and the nearby village of Ap Cao Xa. Their actions yielded a significant jump in villagers' willingness to report enemy activity in the area. Civic action is an effective complement to combat operations but in this case, the effort was mounted more than 40 kilometers from where the rifle companies were operating, negating any possible synergy. Moreover, in the areas north and east of Soui Da where the infantry was operating, there were no longer any civilians. Where villages once existed, clashes between the Viet Cong and Americans had made the surrounding areas unsafe, leaving the locals no choice but to flee to the safety of Tay Ninh to seek a new livelihood.

The first two weeks of March brought no further contact with the enemy but there were signs of their presence. Here and there, troops found unoccupied bunkers and spider holes and occasional fresh graves and shattered weapons, the result of the previous month's fighting. The most important discoveries were four newly-dug mortar pits and recent truck tire tracks found by A Company, perhaps indicating the enemy was being re-supplied. That they would risk operating trucks that far south indicated greater strength and confidence than the Polar Bears expected. Contact was not far behind.

On March 19, one man from A Company was killed by a booby trap while searching a bunker complex and the following night, D Company sprung an ambush on a four-man patrol, killing one.¹⁴ A search after daybreak revealed blood trails, indicating that one or more VC had also been wounded in the ambush. On March 26, A Company discovered a dead VC and 17 burial trenches arrayed in rows. Because there had been little action so far, the VC were seemingly preparing themselves for the worst. On April 1, Captain Robert N. Bailey's A Company found a cache of 3200 lbs of polished rice. They destroyed it all. There was no further contact with the enemy. Unexpectedly, the 196th LIB was pulled out of Operation Junction City on April 9 to prepare for a new phase of its tour in Vietnam.

North to I Corps—Task Force Oregon

In April 1967, the 196th LIB moved by air from Tay Ninh to Chu Lai on the South China Sea. It took 353 C-130 sorties to haul 3452 men, 973 vehicles, and 8 million pounds of cargo. The brigade became the first Army ground combat unit in Vietnam's I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ), the northernmost of South Vietnam's four military regions.¹⁵ Until that time, the only US ground combat units in I CTZ were Marines. With the 3rd Brigade 25th Infantry Division and 1st Brigade 101st Airborne Division, they formed Task Force (TF) Oregon, an ad hoc division-level command. TF Oregon was formed to free the Marines to better protect the port of Da Nang and patrol the "Demilitarized Zone" separating North and South Vietnam, an area that was anything but demilitarized. Two weeks later, Brigadier General Knowles was promoted to command TF Oregon and was replaced as commander of the 196th LIB by Brigadier General Frank Linnel.

Operation Oregon, named after the headquarters in charge, began on April 30, as a sweep into Binh Son Province.¹⁶ The first day was quiet but it would not remain that way long. That evening, two jeeps left the battalion's forward base to take a resupply and mail to B Company and were ambushed enroute. The ambush was small, consisting of only five VC armed with automatic rifles but the element

¹⁴ The dead man was Sergeant Thomas J. Dando (Clifton, NJ). He was 22 years old.

¹⁵ There had been Army Special Forces detachments along the Cambodian and Laotian borders and advisory teams with the ARVN 1st and 2nd Divisions and ARVN I Corps, but no US Army brigades had previously been sent there.

¹⁶ Archives of the US Army Institute for Military History, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Records of the 4th Battalion 31st Infantry, *Operation Oregon*, May 1967, 4 pages.

of surprise magnified their strength. The lead jeep sped through the ambush but the second careened off the road. The driver, Specialist Bruce H. Scragg (Marmet, WV), was killed when the enemy found him pinned in the vehicle and unable to resist.

The next morning, B Company came under sniper fire, killing Staff Sergeant Bobby E. Hunt (Chuckey, TN). When the Polar Bears responded with an outpouring of rifle, machinegun and grenade launcher fire, the enemy escalated the engagement by firing five 57mm recoilless rifle rounds into the perimeter and intensifying their own fire. Helicopter gunships arrived in mid-afternoon, spraying the enemy positions with rockets and miniguns, causing the VC to back off. That evening, A Company spotted a flotilla of ten sampans, one of them mounting a 57mm recoilless rifle on its deck. A hot exchange of fire soon followed, but artillery soon bracketed the enemy vessels and smothered them in a thundering rain of 105mm shells. No survivors were found.

On the morning of May 3, an enemy force of unknown size probed the battalion's fire support base, hitting the mess tent with a sustained burst of automatic weapons fire during breakfast. Artillery was called in on a group of six VC spotted about 400 meters from the perimeter. Moments later, a call came into the battalion tactical operations center reporting that D Company encountered an ambush on a nearby road clearing operation. Specialist John J. Thomas (Philadelphia, PA) was killed and another man was wounded in the opening burst of fire. D Company's return fire killed two of the ambushers.

When the Polar Bears replaced the 7th Marine Regiment, they assumed responsibility for Combined Action Platoon operations with locally-recruited Vietnamese Popular Forces (PF). The concept placed a reinforced American rifle squad or platoon, with a PF platoon or Regional Force (RF) company to protect a village where the Viet Cong had been active. In the early morning hours of May 23, the village of Van Tuong 1, one of five villages constituting the hamlet of Van Tuong, came under attack. Six days earlier, the 2nd Platoon of C Company 4-31st Infantry had arrived to help protect a newly-appointed village chief. Captain Mike Ruane, C Company's commander, had conceived the idea and assigned Lieutenant James L. Williams and his platoon the mission.

On May 26, 1967 a patrol from C Company stopped four sampans loitering near the shore. The eldest fisherman said he stays on his boat because there are many grey-uniformed soldiers in his village, making him afraid to go home. Four days later, A Company, was fired on during a reconnaissance in force and killed two Viet Cong guerillas in the ensuing exchange. For the next 8 days, the battalion conducted joint operations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) 2nd Marine Battalion. Contact with the enemy occurred daily but resulted in no US losses. Most were brief firefights with small, elusive groups of Viet Cong. Mines and booby traps, however, took their toll. Pressure-detonated 105mm howitzer shells were cleverly concealed in or beside roads on which the battalion's resupply convoys traveled. Four men were wounded by booby traps