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15 August 1967

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*William S. Witters*  
WILLIAM S. WITPERS  
MAJ, Infantry  
Chief

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1ST AIR CAVALRY DIVISION

REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

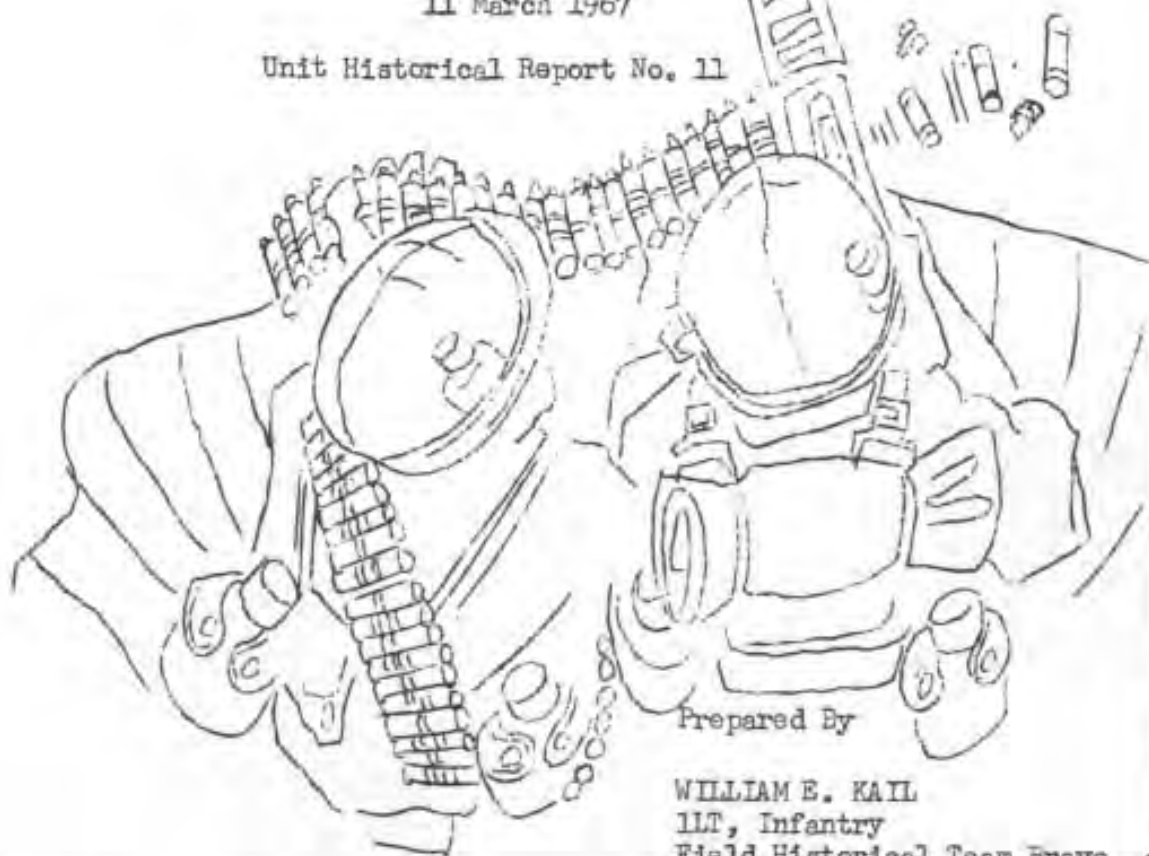
Office of Information and History

# The Battle of

# PHU NINH

11 March 1967

Unit Historical Report No. 11



Prepared By

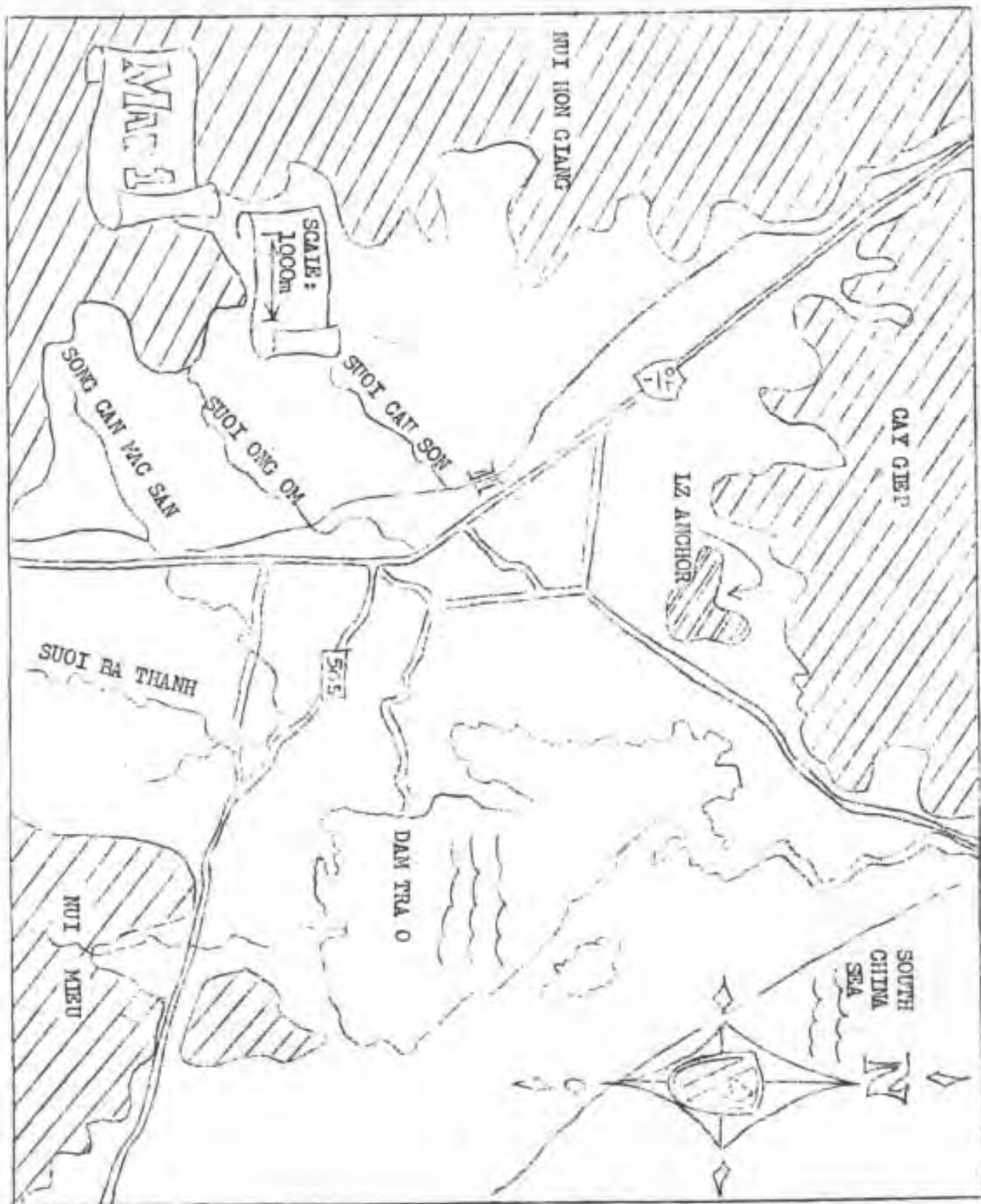
WILLIAM E. KAIL  
1LT, Infantry  
Field Historical Team Bravo

On March 11, 1967, as part of the 1st Air Cavalry Division's Operation Pershing in Binh Dinh Province, the 2d Battalion of the 5th Cavalry (2/5), under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Stevenson, continued its search and destroy operations. The 2/5 operations were being conducted in an area within Phu My District called the Crescent after the quarter moon appearance on a topographical map caused by mountainous terrain surrounding coastal plains on three sides. (Maps 1 and 2) The Cay Giap Mountains to the north, the Nui Hon Giang hill mass to the west, and the Mieu Mountains to the south surround the coastal plains which stretch east to the South China Sea. The Crescent area is located approximately two hundred and seventy-five miles south of Da Nang.

The battalion had been in the area since the ninth of March when the 2d Brigade had assumed responsibility of the Crescent, and contact had been very light. The four companies of the 2/5 were well spread out on the morning of the eleventh. (Map 3) At 5:00 AM Alpha Company had begun a village search on the narrow coastal strip located east of the Cay Giap Mountains. Bravo Company began the day with a search mission in the Cay Giap, to the north of Landing Zone (LZ) Anchor. They were to return to Anchor prior to darkness to provide security for the battalion command post and Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery. Delta Company was sweeping and searching south of Alpha Company on the narrow strip of coast to the east of the Cay Giap Mountains. Charlie Company was employed south of LZ Anchor where they were blocking in conjunction with a mechanized sweep being conducted to the east from Highway 1 by elements of the 40th Regiment of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

At 9:00 AM that morning Charlie Company, under the command of Captain Don Markham, completed their move from LZ Anchor into two blocking positions in the vicinity of the hamlet Phu Ninh (3). (Map 3) The northern blocking position was occupied by the first and second platoons while the company command group, the third and fourth platoons blocked from the south. Captain Markham had anticipated that "it would be a very easy mission. The 4th platoon went without its mortars. We went light."

At 10:00 after the ARVN sweep was well under way and "not a shot had been fired in anger", Markham instructed his third platoon, led by Lieutenant Dana L. Gerald, to send out a local patrol to insure their rear security. Gerald dispatched Staff Sergeant John R. Kriedler with three other men with instructions to check the hamlets to the east along route 505. (Map 3) The four man patrol traveled lightly, carrying only their individual weapons and ammunition. They had traveled about thirteen hundred meters down the road checking the huts along both sides when they reported spotting a Viet Cong soldier. Sergeant Kriedler had observed the man dodging among the huts to his front. Reacting quickly they chased the man who ducked into a hut where Kriedler cornered him. Determined not to be captured, the enemy soldier charged past the patrol members in a futile effort to escape--Kriedler shot and killed him.



REPUBLIC of  
SOUTH VIETNAM

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FOUR CORPS TACTICAL ZONES

CENTRAL  
VIETNAMESE  
HIGHLANDS

THE  
CRESCENT

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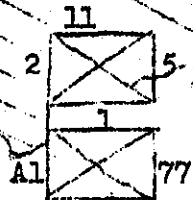
SAIGON

Map 2

CAY CIEP



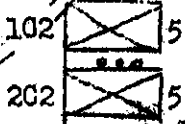
SOUTH CHINA SEA



LZ ANCHOR

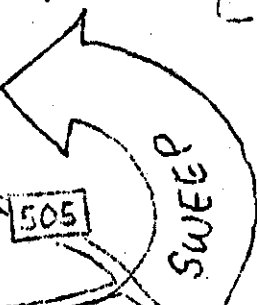
SONG CHAU TRUC

MAP 31

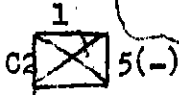


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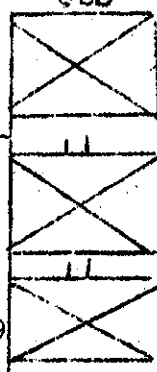
SUOI ONG OM



ARUN



SCTY



PHU NINH

SONG CAM MAC

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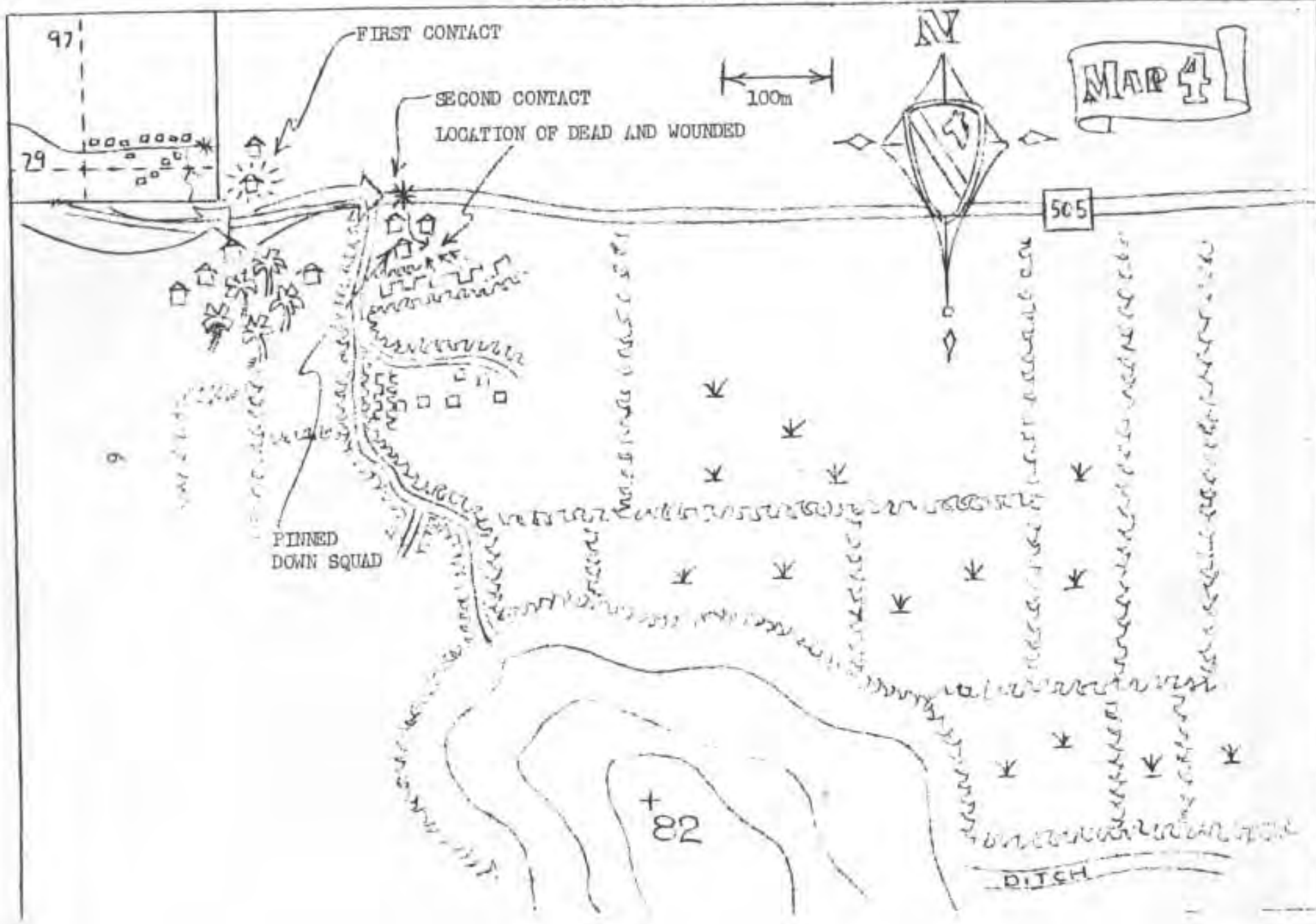
Kriedler reported to Gerald and Markham that he had encountered a local hamlet guerrilla, dressed as such, and armed only with grenades. The appearance of a local Viet Cong as opposed to a North Vietnamese Army Regular was hardly cause for alarm. Local guerrillas encountered during the daytime are seldom encountered in groups greater than two or three, and seldom stand and fight as long as any means of escape is available. No one became excited or suspicious at this minor incident nor with the second local guerrilla that Kriedler observed running south farther down the road. Kriedler opened fire wounding the man who disappeared in the huts to the right of the road. The patrol pursued and found the wounded enemy, who like the first was obviously a local Viet Cong. Kriedler reported this second encounter to his commander, requested a medical evacuation helicopter (MEDEVAC) for the wounded VC and leaving two of his men with the stricken enemy, Kriedler and Specialist Four Jose Garza began to search the huts in the area.

The enemy, in reality a sizeable NVA force, was located on the northern edge of one of two long ridges or fingers that thrust their way generally north from Hill 332 in the Mieu Mountains. The slope was covered with large boulders beneath which there were natural foxholes and bunkers. Waist-high scrub brush grew where it could among the boulders, covering the hill with a tangle of underbrush. The enemy appeared to have established their defenses in considerable depth. Their forward outposts were established four hundred meters north of the base of the slope and consisted of squad and fire team size positions. At the base of the ridge they occupied a great trench some six hundred meters in length which followed the contour of the base of the slope. This trench appeared to be a main defensive position. Snipers and machine guns were positioned higher up in the rocks giving them the advantage of observation and plunging fire on the plains below. Their leaders employed the often tested and almost invariable successful tactic of allowing their attacker to advance to within point-blank range before commencing a devastating volume of fire to inflict maximum casualties. More important, this technique pins down the attacker too close to allow the Americans to employ their artillery and air support without endangering their own troops. This had worked before and it was to be successful again on the eleventh of March.

With the initial shots Lieutenant Gerald had decided to lead a small patrol out to determine exactly what was going on, and to reinforce Kriedler should it become necessary. He took six men with him and moved rapidly down the trail, spurred on by the gunfire he had heard. (Map 4)

Kriedler and Garza searched in a southeasterly direction on the south side of the road. As they cleared the last hut and moved out into a small open area moving toward a nearby hedgerow, a well-covered and concealed enemy opened up on them from the hedgerow, killing both Kriedler and Garza instantly. Lieutenant Gerald was now two hundred meters away and moved rapidly toward the sound of the latest shots. Gerald moved his patrol in to the left or north of where Kriedler and Garza had fallen. Gerald could see no sign of any enemy. Kriedler and Garza lay on their faces in the small open area ten feet from the hedgerow. Nothing moved and not a sound could be heard.

MOVEMENTS OF KRIEDLER AND GERALD PATROLS





Perhaps Gerald concluded that the enemy had shot his two men and left quickly, for he moved the patrol on line out to where his two fallen soldiers lay. Again the cunning enemy fired at almost point-blank range from the hedgerow with two automatic weapons. Lieutenant Gerald fell mortally wounded, Specialist Four Freddie Marshall Jr. (Kriedler's radio-telephone operator) and two other men were killed instantly.

Quick reaction saved five lives as Staff Sergeant Ronald Morrison, and Specialists Four Jamrs R. Ribel, Millard Farmer, Clyde P. Rocco, and Jesse Tageant quickly dove behind a hut which provided cover. However, they could not move as the enemy waited for them to expose themselves before firing. They were pinned down ten feet from their fallen comrades and twenty-five feet from the enemy. Specialist Tageant carried Lieutenant Gerald's radio and reported to Captain Markham what had happened.

Captain Markham's evaluation of the situation convinced him that his men were pinned down by perhaps a squad of local VC. He immediately moved down the trail with the balance of the third platoon, intending to reinforce his pinned down elements and destroy the VC squad. (Map 5) Markham reached the area round 11:00 AM and moved his men around to the right in an attempt to outflank the enemy. The attempt was repulsed and Markham remained convinced that this was a small local VC unit, well-comouflaged and concealed. He estimated that he faced a reinforced squad or at the most a platoon. Based on Markham's estimate Colonel Stevenson decided to lift his first and second platoons down from their blocking positions to the north. Stevenson coordinated with Markham to determine where they should be inserted to facilitate their employment. Markham recommended they be inserted to the north. The battalion commander arranged for the lift while Markham and his portion of the third platoon remained embroiled in their fight to flank the enemy.

As the third platoon minus moved up and attempted to flank the enemy to relieve their pinned down squad, they had run into heavy fires. They had moved in a file formation headed by Private First Class Lamont Watson until they reached a large hedgerow where Sergeant First Class Shelley (affectionately known to his men as "Pop Shelley"), who led the element, stopped them. He had observed some activity to his front which he quieted with two or three quick shots. Crawling out of the hedgerow they moved down into a small finger trench which led toward the enemy positions. Watson continued to lead as they came to a slight turn he ran point-blank into an enemy rifleman who opened up with a quick burst. Everyone dropped to the bottom of the trench and no one was hurt. No more shots were heard and the Americans began to move again. Rounding the corner of the trench the Viet Cong again opened fire, this time wounding Watson in the right hand and side. Specialist Four Larry Beal, carrying an M-60 machine gun, spotted over the top of the trench the VC who had fired. Beal stood up and opened fire with his M-60. The Viet Cong had beat a hasty retreat behind a hedgerow after he had hit Watson. Beal saw him an instant before he disappeared and pinned him down behind the hedgerow with 7.62 fire while "Pop Shelley" and Specialist Four Raymond Sidberry pulled Watson back to safety. Beal fired over three hundred rounds while Shelley and Sidberry threw grenades into the area. The fire was ineffective as the Viet Cong were lodged in spider holes dug into the hedgerow. Beal

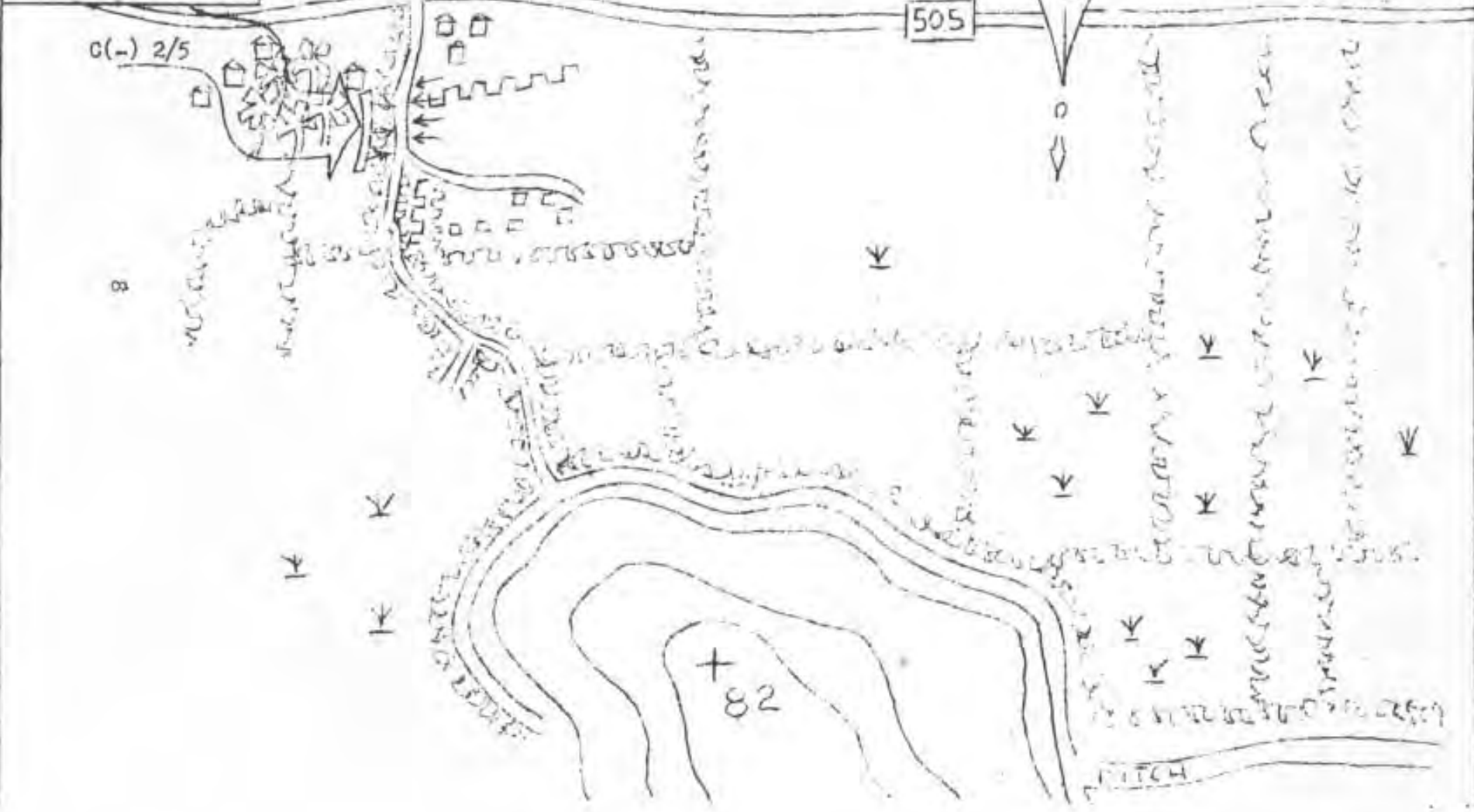
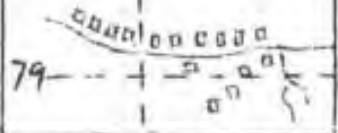
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MOVEMENT OF MARKHAM AND THIRD PLATOON (-)

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MAP 5



ceased fire long enough to reload giving the VC a chance to pop up and return fire, one round of which knocked Beal's steel pot from his head though not wounding him.

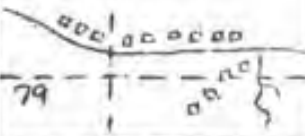
The fourth platoon remained at the original blocking position. The platoon leader, Staff Sergeant Jimmie D. Shoemaker, monitored Captain Markham's radio transmissions and was anxious to get into the fight. Shoemaker suggested to the company First Sergeant, Phillip C. Miller, that he, Shoemaker, take a small element and move around to the north, moving through the rice paddy and block from the north to prevent anyone from escaping. Permission was granted and Shoemaker moved into position without incident. (Map 6) Here he waited with his five men, hoping to surprise any escaping enemy. Shoemaker realized that he was only 200 meters north of the ~~squad~~ that had been originally pinned down. He contacted Markham and suggested that he move south and attempt to assist them. Markham agreed and Shoemaker began to move. He did not know exactly where the men were so he moved very slowly using Specialist Tageant's radioed instructions as a guide. Unable to satisfy himself as to where the enemy was or the pinned down elements were located, Shoemaker set fire to the first hut he encountered (they had carried no smoke grenades). He then requested directions from the burning hut. This idea worked well as Tageant was able to give Shoemaker a good idea exactly where the enemy and friendly troops were located. Shoemaker very carefully moved his people toward the pinned down squad, one man at a time, taking full advantage of all available cover and concealment. Finally he was within fifteen meters of them and Shoemaker discovered "after reaching this point we couldn't leave either because we were then pinned down." By "pinned down" Shoemaker meant that all further movement had to be accomplished by crawling. Tageant, located fifteen meters south of Shoemaker, huddled behind the hut with his comrades, suggested that Shoemaker lay down a base of fire which might allow them to pull back from the hut. The sergeant moved with his radio-telephone operator "as concealed as possible" to a good firing position. Once in position he called for Specialist Four William Walters, an automatic rifleman, "to come forward and lay down behind the trunk of a tree to keep Charlie's head down, but he got off one blast and then Charlie got him." Shoemaker crawled over, grabbed Walters by the heels and started pulling him back. One of his men joined him and together, pulling him a little bit at a time, they managed to pull him back to a safe area to the north where they called in a MEDEVAC ship. The squad was still pinned down and Shoemaker decided to try one more time "because to me it sounded like a logical idea to keep him (the enemy) pinned down so that the people could withdraw. . . ." Shoemaker moved back to his firing position with Specialist Four Dennis Kuzma, his RTO, and another automatic rifleman, Specialist Four Lacavoli. As the three men got into position "evidently Charlie outguessed us, and he shot John Lacavoli." The squad went through the same procedure of dragging Lacavoli back to get him medevaced. Shoemaker was "rather disappointed and disgusted too, so I decided not to try any more." He decided to attempt to use Aerial Rocket Artillery to engage the enemy. Charger Red (radio call sign of the gunships of B Troop 1/9) was on station with two ships and Shoemaker contacted him requesting support. He had obtained some smoke grenades from one of the medevac ships and threw one

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# SHOEMAKER PATROL MOVEMENTS

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MAP 6

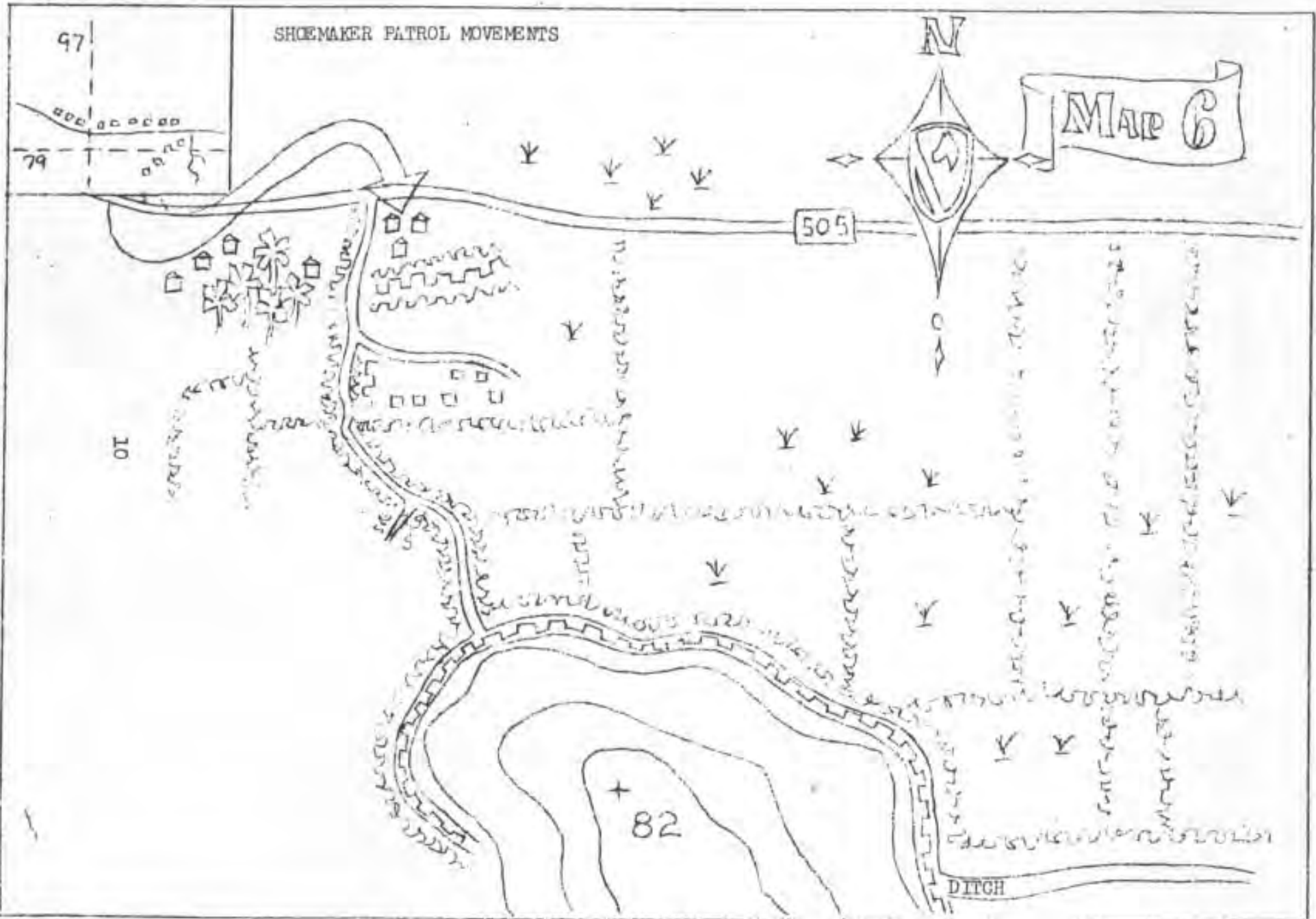


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+ 82

DITCH



of them, giving the pilots the direction and distance of the enemy location from the smoke. The first pass was a little over; however, to everyone's advantage the enemy opened fire on the helicopter. This provided the pilot with the exact location of the enemy and both ships proceeded to unload their fourteen 2.75" rockets each. The well-entrenched enemy was not harmed and they continued to fire. Charger Red returned to Landing Zone English located 30 kilometers to the north and rearmed before returning to the fight. They were back thirty minutes later and again expended all their ordnance. The well-prepared VC positions withstood the barrage unphased and continued to fire. Both ships withdrew realizing their fires were ineffective. The time was now about 2:30 PM and Shoemaker called Tageant telling him to pass the word around to remain in position until darkness under the cover of which they probably could withdraw.

Markham had ordered his artillery forward observer (FO) Lieutenant Miles W. Gaffney to move to the location of the pinned down patrol and attempt to assist their withdrawal with artillery. Gaffney and three men took the same route from the blocking position to the contact area as Lieutenant Gerald had used. When Gaffney arrived at the built-up area he could hear Shoemaker's ARA coming in. He quickly moved his three men into a hut for protection. Gaffney did not know who was directing the ARA runs: "All I know is that it sounded pretty close and we wanted some protection for ourselves." After the first ARA pass Gaffney checked the area around the hut and saw the pinned down squad. He and his RTO, Private Jessie Glover, made a dash to join the men pinned down behind the hut and as he crossed the open area between the two huts "Charlie opened up and hit my RTO." Wounded seriously but not critically, Glover dropped to the ground but Gaffney made it to the others. Glover lay twelve meters from the protection of the hut and Gaffney instructed him to "take off your radio, and just make a dive." Glover complied and reached the relative safety of the hut. The radio which Gaffney needed to call artillery fire remained where Glover dropped it--to go after it was to invite certain death. Gaffney remained "pinned" down behind the hut caring for his wounded RTO for the next eight hours.

Captain Markham meanwhile had moved on to the southwest to meet his second platoon at LZ Billy (Map 7), which Colonel Stevenson had arranged to lift down from the northern blocking positions, at the time Markham had reported he was taking casualties. It was now almost one o'clock in the afternoon and to this moment the entire fight had been oriented on the estimated enemy squad that had pinned down Lieutenant Gerald's patrols. There was no indication that the enemy element was of any greater size. Since the second platoon leader, Sergeant First Class Adolpho Salazar, did not know where the enemy was or where to move, Markham moved with Salazar's platoon; Markham's plan was to move east placing the platoon in a good blocking position behind the enemy who was now located to the north. He chose to move along the base of the hill rather than along the high ground to prevent the enemy from placing fire on his left flank as he maneuvered east. He ordered the platoon to move south in a north-south trench until they encountered a trench running east, which was discovered as soon as they entered the trenches.

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100m

MAP 2

KRIEDIER, GERAID PATROLS  
& PO PARTY

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2 & 3 CONTACT

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0 2/5

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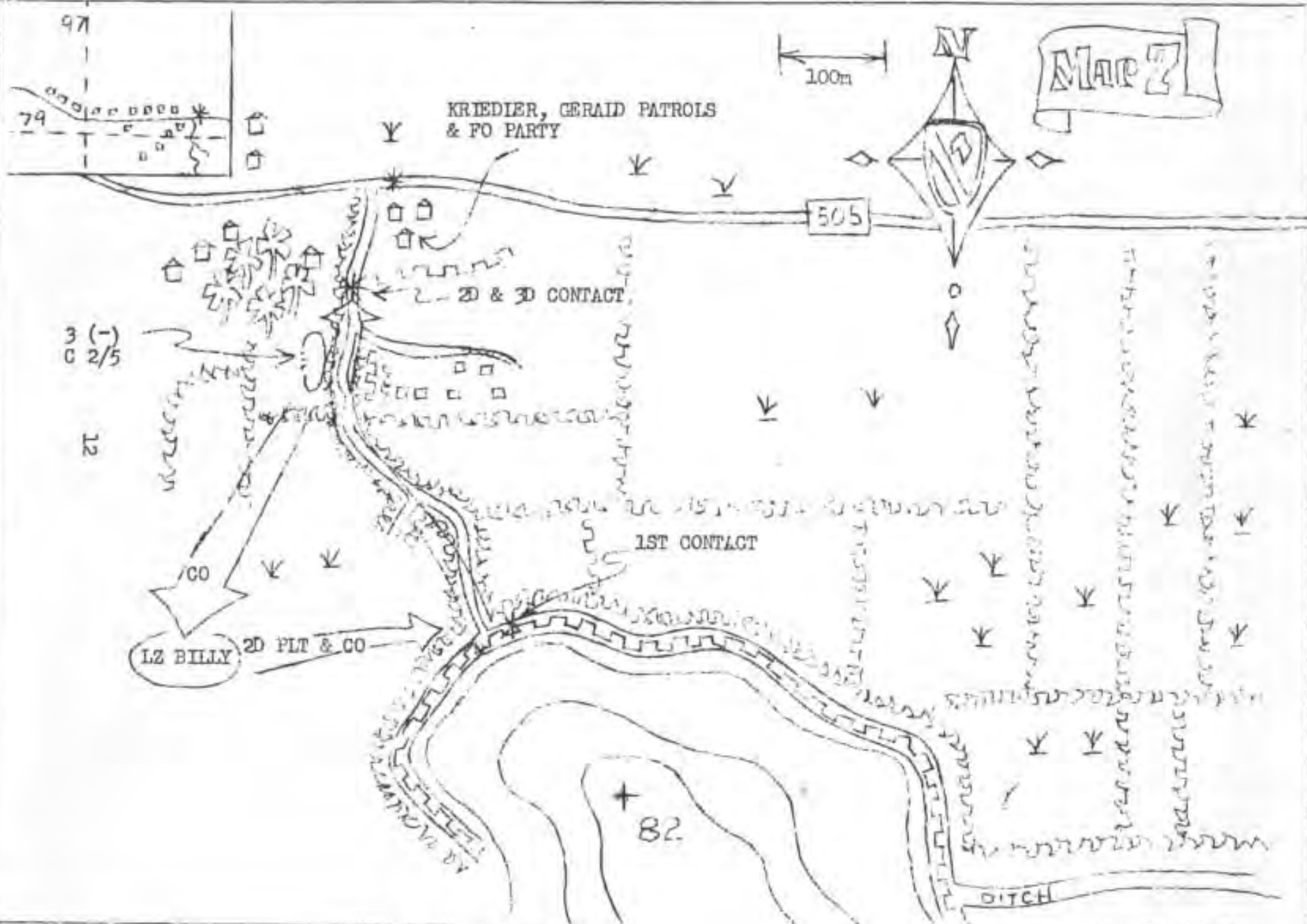
LZ BILLY

2D PLT & CO

1ST CONTACT

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DITCH



Staff Sergeant James Mitchener led the point squad on this attempted move to the east. After bypassing the heavy vegetation that obstructed the entrance of the east bound trench where it met the north-south trench, Mitchener moved his men back into the east bound trench. They moved approximately seventy-five meters before the vegetation in the trench again made it impassable. Having obtained a machete, the point man, Specialist Calvin K. Graser, began to cut his way through. Graser had cleared the trench for about ten feet when he reached a small bend and as he stepped around an automatic weapon opened up killing him instantly and wounding the two men behind him. Specialist Four Warren Starnes immediately tossed a hand grenade and one of the men began pumping M-79 grenades into the area. The enemy fire ceased; however, it could not be determined if friendly fire had killed anyone. Specialist Four James Hickman, the platoon medic, moved up and administered first-aid to the two wounded who were then moved back to the LZ for evacuation. Mitchener and Salazar then moved up to pull Graser's body back. Salazar moved up to Graser while Mitchener covered him. Salazar got Graser back without drawing fire. Markham now considered this avenue closed and pulled the platoon back to the intersection of the two trenches. Markham left a small element at the intersection to prevent the enemy from using this avenue of maneuver, and taking the remainder of the second platoon, moved north in the north-south trench to where he had left Sergeant Shelley and the third platoon minus. After reaching Shelley, Markham decided to continue moving north through the trench toward the VC squad that had his FO party and third and fourth platoon patrols still pinned down. He hoped to relieve the pressure on his men so they could withdraw their dead and wounded. As they walked down the trench attempting to make contact, the enemy opened fire wounding the first two men. Markham had them evacuated and tried again, this time crawling. Twice more they were repulsed though no one was injured. Finally, exasperated and desperate to relieve his pinned down elements, Markham called for a volunteer to accompany him on one last attempt:

I said come on, I need some help and Specialist Four Donald Bennett volunteered. He moved right up, without any question (Bennett followed his company commander who led the way). As he and I were crawling down this trench, on our hands and knees so we couldn't be seen above the level of the ground, I heard a shot and thought my pistol had gone off because it was right in my face. Bennett cried out, and he had been shot from, at the most, ten feet. One shot and he was dead...the enemy had tremendous fire discipline. He didn't open up wildly with a burst of sixty, he fired one shot, and then he moved out, because I immediately hugged the ground and threw grenades toward where the fire came from, but he didn't fire back. It was only with the bravery of the men with me that we were able to get Bennett back and evacuate him immediately, but he was mortally wounded and unfortunately he didn't live.

It was approximately 3:30 PM and all efforts since 10:00 in the morning to rescue the pinned down squad had failed. Sergeant Shelley, equally frustrated and concerned with the ordeal his pinned down patrols were suffering, looked at his company commander and said, "Sir, Goddammit, we can't get through

this way (north), we can't that way (east), why don't we crawl down--let me take some men, I'll crawl down that way (west)." Shelley wanted to move west, away from the enemy, circle around to the north and try to flank them. (Map 8) He remembered a ditch running north and south located about one hundred and fifty meters west of where they were. Shelley took five men and crawled to that ditch, where they jumped into it and moved to the northern limit of the trench. They then crawled out of the trench into a heavily vegetated palm grove. Moving to the northeast edge of the palm grove they radioed Shoemaker requesting that he throw a smoke grenade to identify exactly where he and the pinned down squad were located. Shoemaker complied but Shelley and his men could not see the smoke. Shelley led his men farther to the northeast where they found another north-south ditch into which they crawled and held a war council to plan the next move. Suddenly one of the men spotted purple smoke and a quick check with Shoemaker confirmed his location which was to Shelley's northeast and he continued to move his men north down this second trench. Sidberry, who was leading the file, spotted a Viet Cong with an automatic weapon who promptly opened fire forcing Shelley to withdraw his men to the west. They moved into a position from which they could return fire and throw grenades which they felt accomplished nothing. Shelley moved back to a more secure area and contacted Markham explaining what had occurred and recommended that they maneuver around to the road and link up with the fourth platoon to see if they could assist them. Markham agreed and Shelley accomplished the linkup.

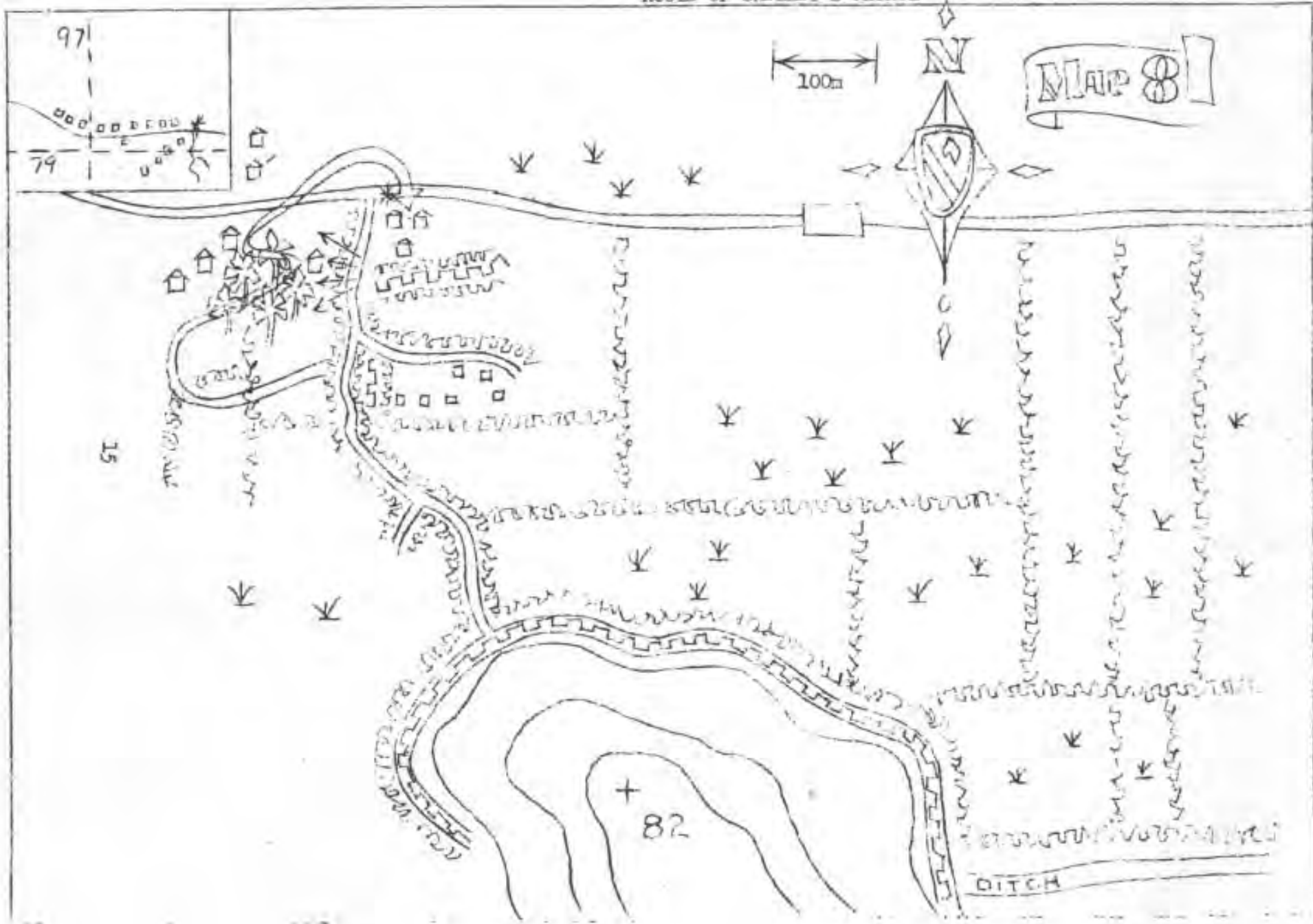
Several incidents of ground to air fire resulting in three helicopters being badly damaged, two lift ships and Colonel Stevenson's command helicopter, in addition to an unofficial report that Charlie Company had thus far suffered six wounded and five killed, convinced Colonel Stevenson that the enemy was no small group of local Viet Cong. His plan called for determining the limits of the enemy positions. Charlie Company's activity had outlined the northern and western limits. He pulled the first platoon of C Company from their blocking position and air lifted them into the high ground to the south with the mission of moving north to make contact. Lieutenant Russel Dooley's first platoon became engaged from the north shortly after landing as he moved his platoon downhill toward Markham. The contact prescribed the southern limit of the enemy positions.

Dooley received his orders at approximately 3:00 PM. Colonel Stevenson alerted him that his platoon would be deployed to assist the remainder of C Company and gave him a brief run down on what was taking place. Dooley's mission was to air assault into the high ground on an LZ located on the top of Hill 82. He was to then sweep north, down the mountain and link up with the rest of his company.

The platoon leader briefed his squad leaders prior to pickup, instructing them to seek cover and remain near the LZ as soon as they dismounted the helicopters. This would give Dooley time to make an estimate of the situation and form a scheme of maneuver. The platoon was picked up shortly and flown into the LZ from south to north so as not to pass over the enemy positions which would endanger the flight from ground fire and also compromise any chance of surprise. (Map 8)



ROUTE OF SHELLEY'S PATROL



Dooley made his plans quickly on the LZ and began to move downhill with the platoon in a file formation with the second squad leading followed by the first and third. The weapons squad was integrated into the rifle squads. They reached a point halfway down the hill when the chatter of a concealed automatic weapon sent the file of men scrambling for cover. As the men sought cover behind the rock laden hillside, Dooley heard more weapons fire to his rear. The fire was to his southeast about 500 meters away and though its source was not identifiable, Dooley felt it could not be ignored:

Hearing fire to my rear (southeast) at an estimated range of 500 meters made me realize how disastrous it would be if the enemy got behind us on the high ground. I called my platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Meisel, who was at the rear of the platoon, and directed him to get some men back up on top to cover our rear, and from their vantage point, attempt to locate the automatic weapon. Privates First Class Rowell and McCoy and someone else I can't recall began to move. Upon leaving his covered position between two rocks, Private First Class Rowell was hit by an enemy sniper. Word came down the hill that Rowell was hit in the stomach. Our medic, Private First Class Myers, who was near the head of the column with the platoon headquarters, jumped up with his aid bag and started back up the hill. Myers got two steps before the sniper's first round kicked up the dirt between his outstretched legs. A round from a separate sniper missed his head by inches. I had to order Myers to stay down until the platoon could lay down a base of fire at the suspected sniper locations. Once we began firing, "Doc" Myers made it to Rowell and patched him up. We were fortunate in that there was already a medevac in the area picking up other wounded and we were able to get Rowell out pretty quickly. Rowell died enroute to LZ Uplift.

Colonel Stevenson meanwhile had ordered Markham to hold what he had and set up in blocking positions. The battalion commander planned to place Delta Company on the ground to the east and have them sweep west to push the enemy into Charlie Company's block. Stevenson intended to put his Alpha Company in to the north to deny the enemy escape in that direction. In addition he ordered Delta Company to send a platoon onto the high ground to link up with Charlie Company's first platoon now located to the south of the enemy. The enemy would thus be surrounded by friendly forces in blocking positions on three sides while Delta Company, acting as the hammer, would hopefully drive the enemy into the anvil of friendly forces. Colonel Stevenson issued his orders and the plan began to unfold. (Map 8)

Captain Markham was to block the enemy from the north, south, and west. After Shelley's group linked up with the fourth platoon there were only eleven or twelve men at the northern position so Markham instructed Shelley to return to his location and pick up the rest of the third platoon. Shoemaker was instructed to consolidate his elements and both platoons were to block from the north. Markham intended to use his second platoon to block from the west while

the first platoon was already positioned to the south. The reorganization was accomplished without incident and they began to prepare several ambushes to catch any enemy attempting to escape from the area. The blocking positions were probed twice that night as the Viet Cong tested the American forces to find the weakest point through which they could escape. Both probes failed and the blood stains, packs and one body discovered in the morning were a source of satisfaction to Charlie Company.

Delta Company, commanded by Captain Richard N. McInerney, completed their air assault into a landing zone 1300 meters east of Charlie Company and began sweeping west by 2:00 PM. (Map 9) McInerney moved with three platoons on line and the fourth platoon, moving to the rear, acted as reserve. The order of platoons from left to right was first, second and third. As they began to move the second platoon received five or six sniper rounds from their front which they quickly silenced with M-79 rounds and continued to move. The company moved on for another four or five hundred meters when they came across a small underground tunnel. McInerney stopped his company while the tunnel was searched.

Meanwhile, by using fire and maneuver Charlie Company's first platoon made it down from the hill at about 4:00 PM. Upon reaching the valley floor they linked up with D Company which was sweeping from east to west. The platoon had been down about 10 minutes when Captain McInerney found Dooley, informed him that his platoon was under the operational control (OPCON) of Delta Company, and directed him to get a squad back up on the hill and wipe out the snipers "who were giving both C Company and D Company hell." Dooley split his platoon in half, taking twelve men to move back up the hill and leaving thirteen men on the valley floor with Sergeant Meisel in charge.

Maneuvering along the east side of the high ground Dooley reached Hill 82. He moved along the reverse slope of the hill back to the location from where they initially started over the face of the hill looking for the snipers. Contact developed almost immediately, Dooley recalled:

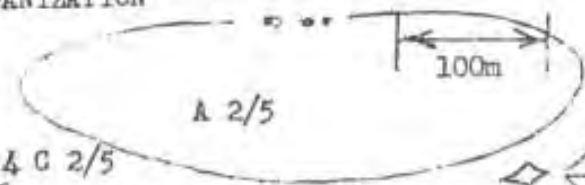
My RTO, Private First Class Katzenburger and I were coming over the face of a large rock when another sniper fired. Katzenburger fell backwards. The round hit the stock of his M-79, ricocheted, hit him in the stomach. Privates First Class Harris and McCoy heard my call for aid. The three of us stripped the radio and his (Katzenburger's) webbed gear off and rendered first aid. Katzenburger got hit at 1710 hours. A medevac I called in was shot up by Charlie (a door gunner seriously wounded) and that ended the medevac attempts. We began moving Katzenburger back up the hill to a safer area for medevac. When the enemy soldier fired at the medevac he revealed his position. I grabbed Katzenburger's M-79 and put four HE rounds on the sniper's head. We found the body the next morning in a north-south ditch located just at the base of the hill.

PLANNED BATTLEFIELD ORGANIZATION

97

79

18



505

3 & 4 C 2/5

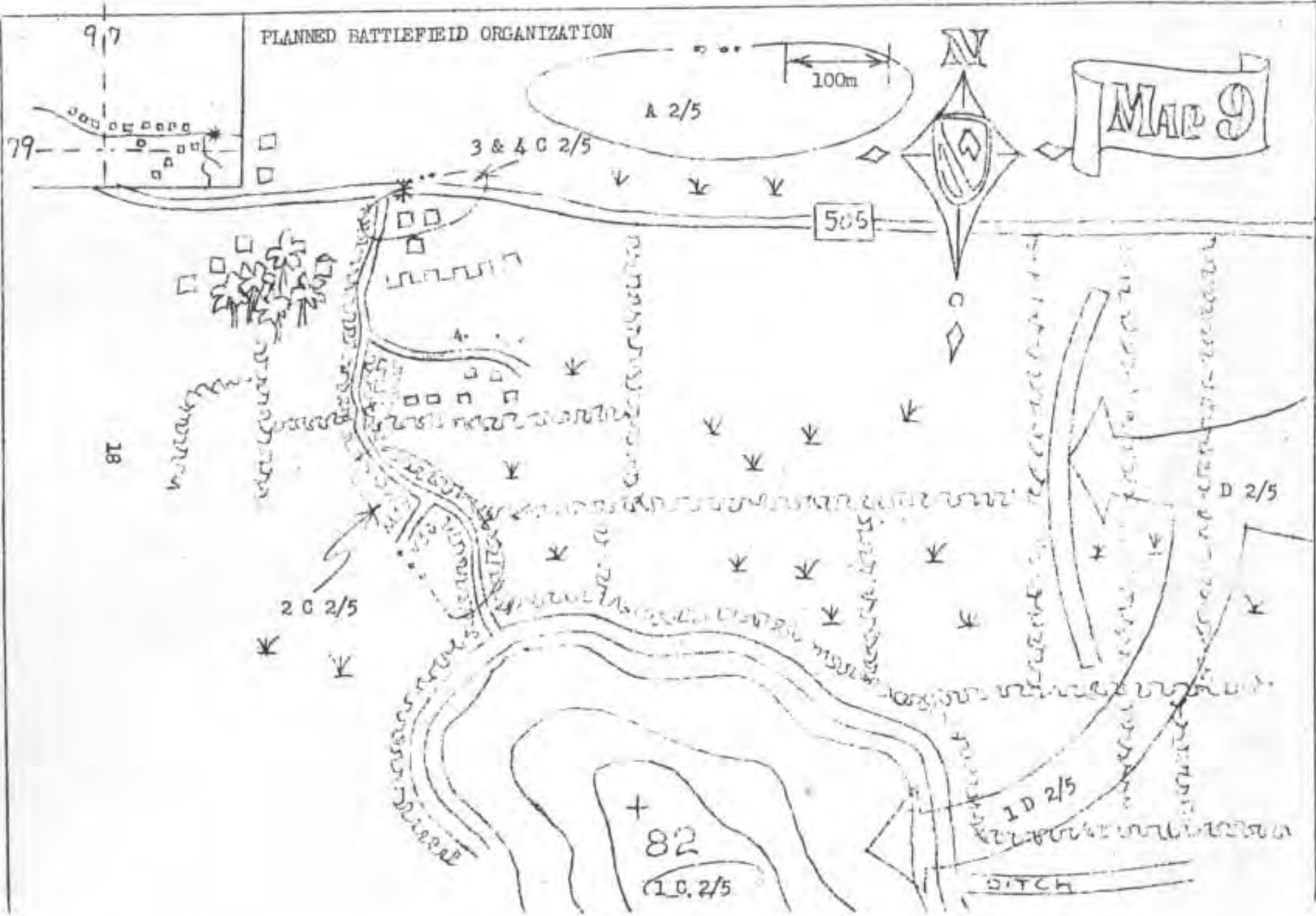
2 C 2/5

D 2/5

1 D 2/5

+ 82  
1 C 2/5

SITCH



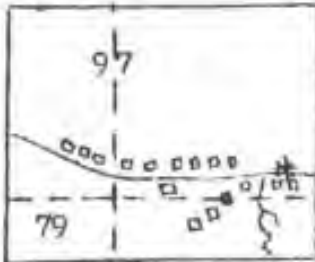
The fourth platoon, under the leadership of Staff Sergeant Miquel Vasquez, maneuvered to the southwest into position behind the first platoon. (Map 10) Vasquez put his squads on line and began pouring fire into suspected enemy positions. Specialist Four John McKabe volunteered to try and pull the first platoon wounded back. He began crawling toward the two nearest wounded, Specialists Four Larry Bailey and Leamon Calhoun. McKabe made it some ten feet before being shot in the back. He was able to crawl back to his own platoon and Vasquez sent two men to assist him back to the rear and get him medevac'd. Vasquez meanwhile directed his M-79 grenadier to place more effective fire on the enemy. The man repeatedly exposed himself while placing extremely accurate fire but was killed in the process. The enemy fire increased and Vasquez decided "that at our location we wouldn't be able to help the first platoon at all, so we backed up twenty-five to thirty meters and we set up a defensive perimeter, keeping observation, and keeping low because we were pinned down by sniper fire." They pulled Specialist Four Kiefer, the first platoon RTO, back with them.

The second platoon had been ordered by McInerney to pull back from its position to an area slightly to its rear and secure a landing zone to evacuate the wounded. (Map 10) McInerney had long since decided that his only recourse was to pull back, getting his wounded out and engage the enemy with artillery fire. He remained near the first platoon locations and was trying to determine exactly where the enemy fire was coming from. Sergeant First Class Albert Cuellar, platoon leader of the second platoon, monitored the last few trans-missions. "The company commander radioed he couldn't tell where the fire was coming from, the palm trees, or the hedgerows, or from what direction." Ten minutes later McInerney radioed that the fire was coming from the base of the hill to the southwest, and as he moved forward he was shot and killed. Cuellar immediately assumed command of the company and called his platoon leaders to advise them that he had done so. Cuellar took on the responsibility forcefully.

After I took command, I carried forward the company commander's orders which were to remove the wounded and secure an LZ so we could get medevacs as fast as possible. I ordered Sergeant Dawson, the third platoon leader, to gather volunteers from his platoon and to go forward into the battle area where the rest of the platoons were pinned down to see if he could organize the first platoon and bring them back, and bring the wounded back, leaving the dead.

Platoon Sergeant Charles Dawson circled around to the east to come up on the first platoon from their rear. (Map 10) He pulled up behind the location of the company CP which was behind the first platoon. Dawson also discovered that he could not move any further: "I couldn't advance my platoon any further because of the open ground. If a man stuck his head up two feet, he was asking for it."

When Cuellar got the word that the third platoon was also pinned down, he called his platoons and instructed them to hold their positions until it became dark. It was now approximately 7:00 PM and the cover of night was not far off.



100m



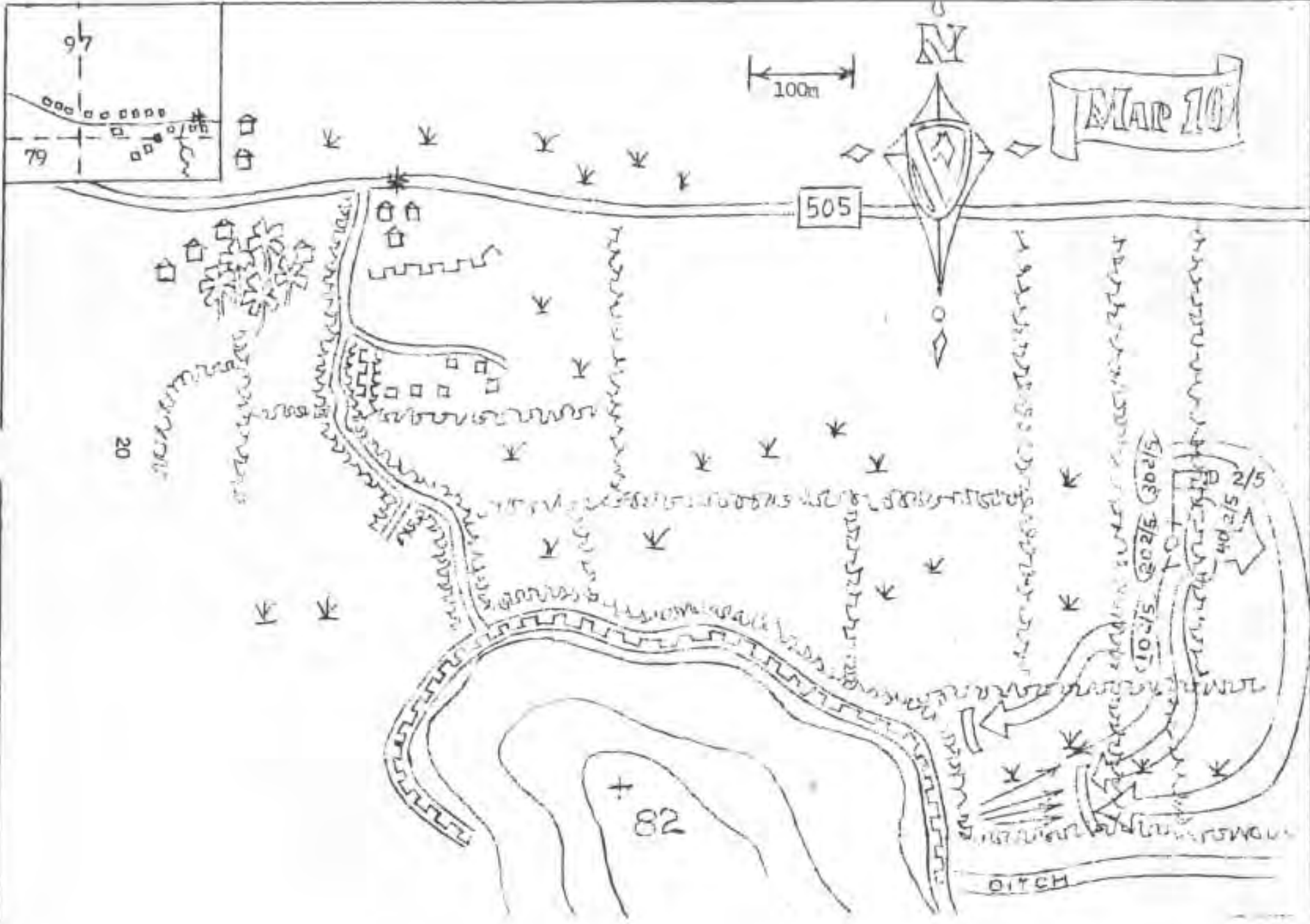
MAP 101

505

20

+ 82

DITCH



Once Dooley made contact Stevenson directed McInerney to move a platoon up to reinforce him. Captain McInerney assigned this mission to his first platoon and ordered them to move out. Staff Sergeant Andrew Trapanni, the platoon leader, began moving his first platoon to the left (south) toward the high ground. (Map 10) They had been gone ten minutes when the platoon began to receive light sporadic small arms fire to their front. Trapanni ordered his first squad to maneuver forward and see if they could determine the source of the fire. The squad moved through a hedgerow, across a small open area and when reaching another hedgerow suddenly came under a deadly volume of automatic weapons fire. The first man in Staff Sergeant Bradley E. Peterson's first squad to discover the enemy was Specialist Four Charles D. Williams. As Williams approached the hedgerow he happened to look down and saw an enemy soldier standing in a six foot deep trench behind the hedgerow. The Viet Cong was aiming up at him with a rifle. Williams jumped back a split second before the VC opened fire and missed him. In the same instant the murderous fire commenced cutting down the squad. Williams instinctively jumped into the trench for cover. He jumped right on top of more Viet Cong then he could count in the moment before they sprayed him with bullets hitting him in the stomach, legs and several other places. Miraculously he was alive; however, he managed to prevent his assailants from discovering that fact.

The trench was an erosion ditch located at the base of the mountain. It was covered by a dense hedgerow. The enemy had fashioned bunkers into the sides to escape indirect fires. They fired by popping over the top, firing and dropping down into the safety of the ditch. After knocking down the first squad at point-blank range the enemy continued to pour a heavy volume of fire into the two trailing squads, the second to the left and third to the right and both twenty-five meters to the rear. The fires of these two trailing squads were further restricted by the presence of the bodies of their comrades who lay dead and wounded from two to five feet in front of the blazing enemy weapons. Sergeant Trapanni, located to the rear between his other two squads, attempted to get a look at the enemy positions. He spotted a Viet Cong, and as he aimed he was hit before he could squeeze off the round. Trapanni's RTO, Specialist Four August Kiefer, immediately reported what was happening to Captain McInerney who instructed them to attempt to flank the enemy with one of the two squads.

The second squad began to move in an attempt to maneuver. It had barely started before the volume of enemy fire stopped them. Staff Sergeant Harvey P. Blanton of the third squad had the same success in his attempt to get riflemen in a position to support by fire.

When McInerney learned that his entire first platoon was pinned down and that Trapanni was wounded, he moved forward with his command group to make an estimate of the situation. (Map 10) He left his other three platoons in place while he determined how best to use them. When McInerney left, it was the last time he was seen alive though he was to transmit several orders over the radio before an enemy bullet found its mark. McInerney's first order was transmitted to the fourth platoon which he instructed to maneuver into a position behind the first and attempt to cover their withdrawal by fire.

During the short wait Dawson was informed that Captain McInerney was dead. Dawson took charge of the forward elements and organized them into a defensive perimeter. By now some of the pinned down elements of the first platoon began to drift back. These men knew the location of several of the wounded. Dawson sent Staff Sergeant Robert E. Conklin with a detail guided by first platoon members who had made it back, to bring in the wounded. Dawson received a radio transmission from Specialist Calhoun who indicated he was wounded and could not move and, taking five men, he went looking for Calhoun. On the first attempt they could not locate him so Dawson returned, called Calhoun on the radio and instructed him to guide them to him with a soft whistle. Dawson and his men finally located Calhoun whose whistle had also attracted several Viet Cong who were also checking the area for equipment. One VC had approached to within ten feet of the helpless Calhoun, but could not see him in the darkness. Dawson pulled Calhoun and three other wounded men back before a headcount revealed all the wounded were recovered. All the platoons then pulled back to the LZ and established perimeter security while Cuellar called in medevacs for the wounded.

As the platoons fell back to the landing zone, carrying their wounded, the enemy began to fire mortars into the LZ. The Viet Cong were apparently attempting to zero in on the landing zone in order to destroy the medevac helicopters that attempted to land. They fired four rounds, none of which hit the LZ. Six or eight grenades were then thrown into the perimeter to discourage the choppers from landing. Undaunted by the grenades or mortars the choppers came in, drawing only small arms fire. Delta Company promptly returned the fire which allowed the ships to land.

The mortars never resumed firing after the first four rounds. The first round impacted fifty meters west of the LZ, the second within thirty meters, the third round was twenty meters south, and the last round hit ten meters from the south side of the LZ. As the medevac ships landed, numerous ARA ships circling the area and firing suppressive fires apparently discouraged further use of mortar fire.

Colonel Stevenson and his Sergeant Major, Robert B. Robinson, flew into Delta Company's LZ shortly before dark and assisted Cuellar in the evacuation of the wounded. Cuellar's chief difficulty was getting people to move while still under occasional small arms fire. The presence of their battalion commander proved the inspiration necessary to see all the wounded evacuated rapidly.

Charlie Company's first platoon section of thirteen men remained on Hill 82. Lieutenant Dooley was moving to a secure area to make a new attempt at medevacing Private First Class Katzenburger. Darkness closed in on the thirteen men as they were carrying Katzenburger up the hill. Staff Sergeant Burton, the 2d squad leader, personally carried the wounded RTO to a relatively clear spot near the top of the hill where a medevac ship could land and Katzenburger was finally extracted at 10:35 PM.



At 10:40 PM Dooley notified his battalion commander, who was located on the ground at D Company's location, that the medevac was complete and that he preferred not to try to make it through the enemy lines and then through friendly lines to link up with D Company. Colonel Stevenson agreed that it was risky, so twelve men from the first platoon of C 2/5 and one man from the artillery FO party attached to the company, Sergeant Rice by name, spent the night of March 11-12 on Hill 82 drawn up into a very tight perimeter. It was a sleepless night.

By the following morning the enemy units had left the battlefield. They had taken many of their dead and wounded with them, hiding them as they went. Scattering in small elements many of them sought refuge in the local hamlets, and in the many caves in the Mieu Mountains. A search of the battlefield and surrounding area commencing the morning of 12 March uncovered many enemy killed and considerable equipment captured. By midnight on the 13th of March friendly forces had accounted for fourteen enemy killed, 53 captured, 145 detainees (personnel not yet classified) and twenty-two enemy bodies uncovered. In addition two hand grenades, two small arms and one crew served weapon were captured. Friendly losses for the two day operation totaled twenty-two killed and twenty-six wounded.

Subsequent evaluation of documents taken from an NVA officer who was killed during the action of March 11, positively identified the hostile force as being elements of the 7th and 9th Battalions and the Regimental Security Group of the 18th NVA Regiment. Interrogation of prisoners further corroborated information contained in these documents and indicated both enemy battalions were understrength having suffered heavy casualties on 11 March 1967.

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PARTICIPANTS IN THE ACTION AT PHU NINH

- A. Specialist Four August Keefer - radio telephone operator for the second platoon D 2/5
- B. First Lieutenant Miles W. Gaffney - artillery forward observer attached to C 2/5
- C. Specialist Four Jesse Tageant - radio telephone operator for the third platoon C 2/5
- D. Staff Sergeant James Mitchner - squad leader in the second platoon C 2/5
- E. Captain Don Markham - commanding officer of C 2/5
- F. Staff Sergeant Jimmie D. Shoemaker - platoon leader of the fourth platoon C 2/5

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