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This report is based on Technical Reports--Combat Operations After Action Reports from the participating units and personal interviews with veterans of the battle. Questions concerning leadership are addressed concerning the conduct of the battle and conclusions drawn. For the benefit of future leaders lessons learned and recommendations are made for consideration.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER



A-1

THE BATTLE OF HILL 875, DAK TO, VIETNAM 1967

An Individual Study Project  
Intended for Publication

BY

LTC Leonard B. Scott, IN

Doctor Jim Williams  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
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ABSTRACT

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Hill 875 was the most costly terrain feature taken by U. S. servicemen in the Vietnam war, yet little is known about the battle. Current published works on the battle have been incomplete, vague and sketchy. This paper will attempt to describe in detail the events leading to and the actual battle for the terrain feature that survivors simply called, "The Hill".

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Questions concerning leadership are adressed concerning the conduct of the battle and conclusions drawn. For the benefit of future leaders lessons learned and recommendations are made for consideration.

## The Battle For Hill 875

Dak To Vietnam 1967

General Situation: In late October 1967, American intelligence sources indicated North Vietnamese forces were building up in the Central Highlands' province of Kontum. The enemy's focus seemed to be the northern portion of the province in the vicinity of Dak To, due its natural geographical approach to the sparsely populated but strategically important region.

The Dak To region was particularly notorious for its difficult terrain. Choking rain forest covered mountain peaks that rose to 1,800 meters while bamboo and twisting strangler figs covered the valleys and lower slopes. The dense foliage provided the enemy perfect concealment allowing them to move undetected. Temperatures reached sticky nineties during the day but dropped to the chilling fifties at night.

On 3 November the enemy plans became clear. Sergeant Vu Hong, an artillery specialist assigned to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 66th Regiment, surrendered himself to South Vietnamese Popular Forces near Dak To. Vu Hong stated

he was part of a reconnaissance team scouting the Dak To area for an upcoming attack by his division. The sergeant went on to give his unit's entire battle order. The enemy forces of the 1st NVA Division were divulged to be the 24th, 32nd, 66th and 174th Infantry Regiments with the 40th NVA Artillery Regiment in support. The mission of the NVA force was to annihilate a major U.S. element in order to force Allied forces to deploy additional troops to the region.

Based on the previous intelligence reports and the sergeant's information, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, (MACV), issued orders to meet the threat. Sixteen battalions and support units were immediately rushed to Kontum Province. The 4th Division's Commander, Major General William Peers, was designated as the overall Commander for the operation. The 4th Infantry Division with two brigades, a brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, three battalions from the 173d Airborne Brigade, and six, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalions, totaled a little more than 16,000 troops under General Peers' control. The resulting battle that occurred was not designated as an operation in itself, but occurred within the boundaries of the 4th Infantry Division's operation known as 'MACARTHUR'. The battle would be called 'The Battle for Dak To'.

The first engagements in early November were bloody and costly to U.S. forces who had combed through the difficult terrain trying to find, fix and destroy enemy forces before they could launch their planned attack. It became evident

the NVA had been preparing for the battle for some time. Expanded trails, roads, well-constructed defensive positions with overhead cover, and signs of usage of draft animals all pointed to the undeniable fact the enemy had lured the Allied forces onto the ground of their choosing. General Peers later wrote, "The enemy had prepared the battlefield well. Nearly every key terrain feature was heavily fortified with elaborate bunker and trench complexes. He had moved quantities of supplies and ammunition into the area. He was prepared to stay."<sup>1</sup>

The first major contacts occurred on November 3rd and 4th when two 4th Division battalions met entrenched enemy in different locations. Both American units were stopped cold by a tenacious enemy entrenched in defensive positions. Only after tons of bombs were dropped by Air Force aircraft and thousands of artillery rounds fired were the American forces able to take the positions--only to find the NVA had withdrawn. The cost was high for the soldiers of the 'Ivy' Division while the enemy losses were considered light.

During the next ten days, U.S. and ARVN forces found the enemy and repeatedly made bloody assaults in the attempt to dig him out of his bunkers and trenches. Casualties mounted reducing companies in some Allied battalions to 50 and 60 percent. The 173rd Airborne Brigade's three battalions especially took heavy losses. On the 11th of November the 1st Battalion of the 503rd engaged in a battle that decimated two of their companies formed into a task

force. Twenty-one paratroopers were killed and one hundred and fifty-four were wounded rendering the task force combat-ineffective.<sup>2</sup> The enemy used a tactic of pinning down the assaulting American force from bunkers then attacking with another unit to the rear or flanks. The enemy had learned to close on, hug, the American perimeter to keep from being destroyed by artillery and aerial bombing.

The culminating battle of operation "MACARTHUR" occurred on the 19th of November and lasted five days. The following account describes the battle in detail.

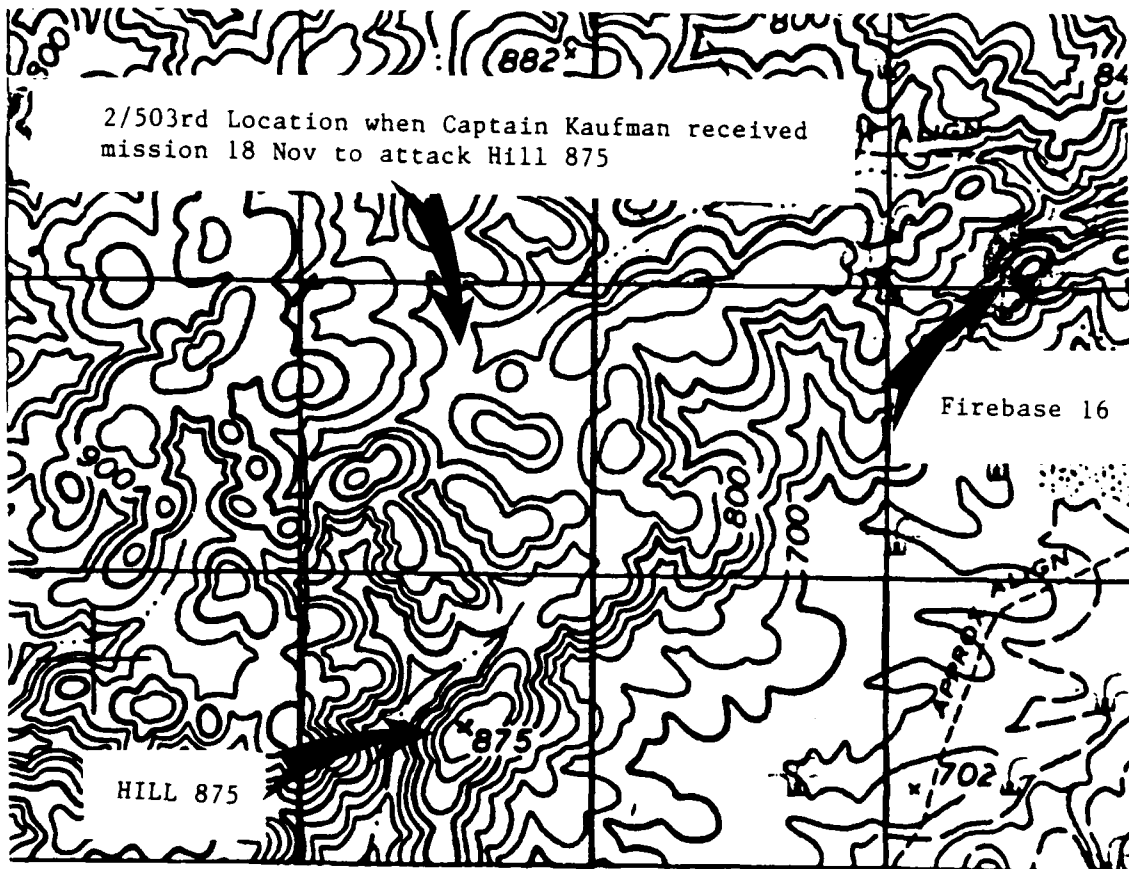
1400 hours, 18 November, 1967

Deep within the central highlands just eight kilometers from the Cambodian border Specialist Six (SP6), Fred Devereux recalled the tired company commander sat down on the jungle floor beside his radio operator. Captain Harold J. Kaufman, Charlie Company commander of the 2nd Battalion 503rd Infantry, slid a map from his leg pocket and plotted the coordinates to his new objective. He had received word over the radio from his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James Steverson, that as the senior company commander, he would be in charge of planning and leading the battalion in an assault on a nameless hill to the southeast. Colonel Steverson had told him a Special Forces mobile strike force only two kilometers away had been advancing up the hill and been taken under fire by NVA in bunkers. Steverson had told Kaufman he would not accompany



the battalion but would direct the operation from the command and control (C & C) helicopter.<sup>3</sup>

Kaufman noticed on the map the hill, unlike most, was marked by its height in meters. He glanced up in the direction of the new objective and made his first decision as ground force commander. He would call his objective "Hill 875". Taking out his damp notepad Kaufman began jotting down notes to brief his two fellow company commanders. Captain Tom Kiley, the Alpha Company commander and 1st Lieutenant Bart O'Leary commander of Delta Company, were fairly new to their commands. The news of enemy in bunkers would require a detailed briefing from Captain Kaufman on how he wanted to accomplish the mission.

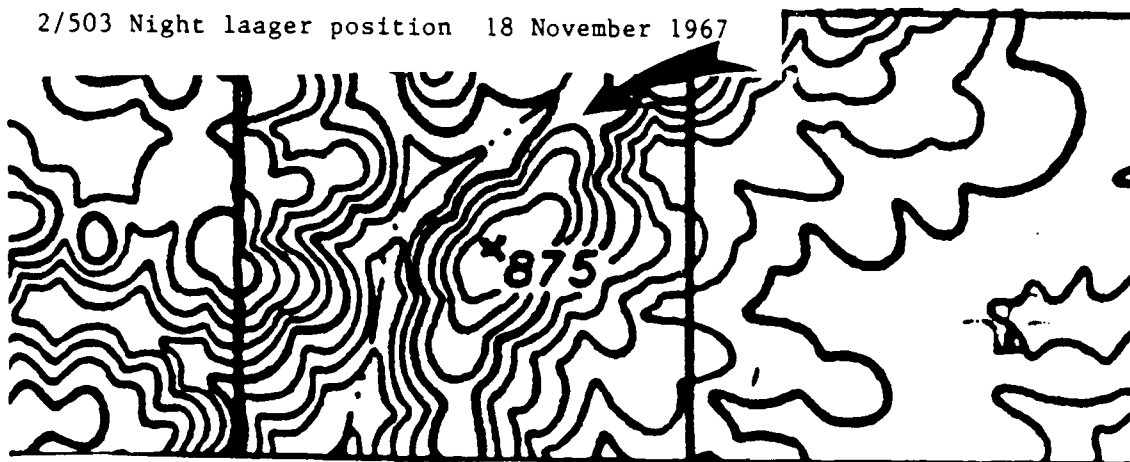


in the past fourteen days the 173rd and 4th Division had lost over 150 men killed and another 500 wounded. Captain Kaufman's battalion, 2nd of the 503rd, had suffered 25 killed and 77 wounded in the past ten days. Bravo Company had sustained 63 of the casualties and was considered combat ineffective. Captain Kilev's Alpha Company had 20 men lost to wounds and had been reduced to 85 men left in the field. The 2nd Battalion was supposed to have four maneuver companies with a total field strength of about 600 men, but Captain Kaufman would have to plan the attack for three companies with a total strength numbering a few less than 290 paratroopers.

1430 Hours

Kaufman issued the change of orders to the other company commanders and in 30 minutes the units began moving across the mountainous terrain. Alpha Company was the lead company and after moving for two hours the point team found a small hospital complex at the base of Hill 875. Kaufman ordered the battalion into a laager for the night at the northern base of the hill to prepare for the attack the following day. Ambushes were established and the forward observer (FO) from the 319th Artillery, attached to Charlie Company began calling in fires on the hill.

2/503 Night laager position 18 November 1967



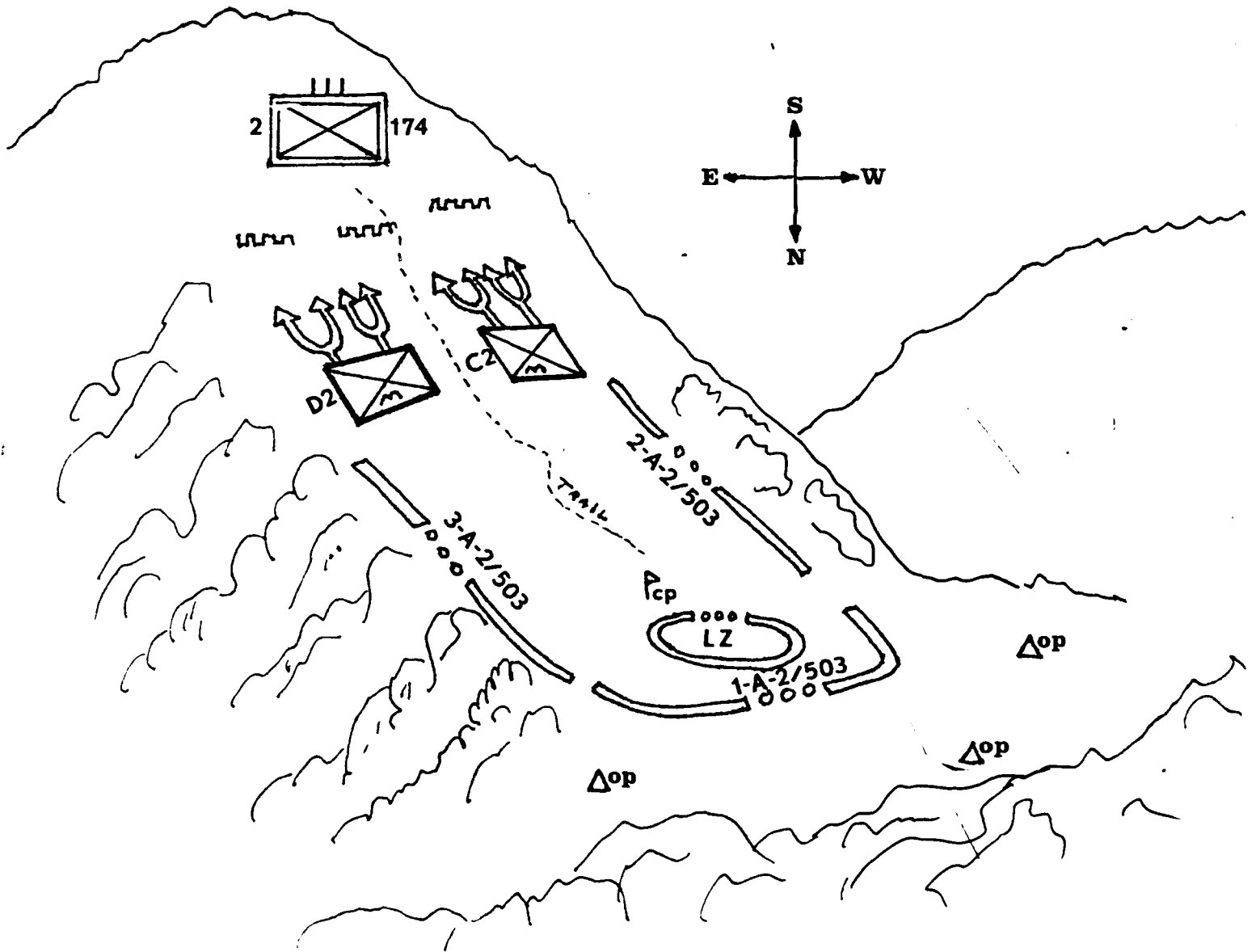
0800, 19 November

SF6 Fred Devereaux recalls he spent a sleepless night at the base of the hill to let the Artillery and Air Force bombard the objective. He said he prayed the barrage had convinced the enemy to withdraw from the hill. Devereaux was an old veteran and was senior medic from Headquarters Company. He had been with the 1st Cavalry Division in 1965 and had fought in the battle of the Ia Drang. He remembers anticipation hung in the air as real as the smell of the napalm. In silence the men of the 2nd Battalion slipped on their rucksacks and double-checked their weapons. Each rifleman carried 18 to 20 magazines of M-16 ammunition with most carrying extra boxes of 5.56 ball ammo in their rucksacks. They felt they were ready to take the hill.<sup>3</sup>

0940 Hours

Captain Kaufman stood at the base of hill waiting for the last bomb run. He had delayed the attack until the forward air controller (FAC) brought in a last pair of F-100's to drop 500-pounders to finish softening the forward

2/503rd Attack on Hill 875, 19 November 1967



field grade officer with the battalion to catch up and walk along side him.

SP4 Brock recalls Major Charlie Watters, the 2nd Battalion Chaplain, passed by him with his everpresent smile. "Tom, I think I'm getting to old for this." Brock responded with, "Father, that makes two of us." Tom Brock, like most of the men in the 2nd Battalion considered Charlie Watters a good friend. The Chaplain was unlike most Brock had met in that Father Watters stayed in the field with his beloved soldiers. He was famous for his camouflage parachute vestment and weekly announcement of "Church call and no excuses!"<sup>5</sup>

1030 hours

First Lieutenant O'Leary commander of Delta Company, moved up closer toward his point team and could see to his front the effects of the artillery and bombing. The top of the thick jungle canopy had huge holes blown through it that let sunlight reach the forest floor. Below the tree tops the forest floor was covered in shattered and gnarled debris of bamboo, vines, and smaller splintered trees. Making his way over the debris 1Lt. O'Leary saw his point man, SP4 Kenneth Jacobson, climb over a fallen tree and turn around to his slack man motioning to his nose. O'Leary stiffened knowing Jacobson was signaling he smelled the enemy.

The point man slowly lowered his hand and began to turn around when snots rang out. Jacobson pitched backwards, hit

by three rounds in the chest. The air immediately filled with screams and bursts of return fire from the stunned point squad. Not knowing where the killer was hidden, the vengeful paratroopers emptied M-16's wildly into the trees and debris. The platoon medic ran forward toward the fallen soldier. The aidman, SF4 Farley, had just knelt by his comrade when he was knocked violently backwards. Shot in the head by automatic weapons fire, Farley died instantly. Delta Company had found the enemy.<sup>6</sup>

Captain Kaufman received the report holding the radio handset tightly to his ear barely able to hear over the roaring sound of gunfire. Lieutenant O'Leary was reporting over the radio the first casualties when more shooting broke out in front of Charlie Company. The 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, on the left side of trail, was under enemy fire as well. Their point man was shot and a medic was killed trying to reach him.

Kaufman could only acknowledge the situation reports and motion for the other handset that would give him contact with battalion headquarters. Meanwhile junior officers and NCO's shouted orders to scared, confused men to move forward and fix the enemy positions. The shock of the first deaths wore off quickly as the junior leaders got down to the deadly business of closing with the enemy. They spread their men out and began moving forward using fire and movement. The ragged line of Infantrymen advanced over the debris approximately 10 meters when they were raked with

machinegun fire and grenade shrapnel. Taking casualties and unable to move forward the assault leaders reported their situation to the commander. Realizing the attack had failed but not wanting to give up the ground already taken, Kaufman ordered a withdrawal of only twenty meters and the establishment of a perimeter. He reported to battalion headquarters that the attack was stalled by an estimated entrenched enemy company. He then requested additional artillery and air support to try and blast the defenders out of their positions before attempting another assault.

SF4 Tom Brock recalls Chaplain Watters knelt beside Captain Kiley as he listened to the radio. Kiley shook his head and spoke softly to the Chaplain. "We've got KIA's and wounded."

Watters rose without speaking and began walking up the hill toward the sound of gunfire. Brock knew better than try and stop the Chaplain. Father Watters would want to be with the wounded as he had always done before to try to help in any way he could.<sup>5</sup>

Captain Kiley yelled for his weapons platoon leader to get busy cutting a landing zone (LZ) for extraction for the wounded. Kaufman would not have to call and tell him about the LZ or rear security; these things were standard operation procedure (SOP). The unit and junior leaders were experienced and knew what had to be done. Events would unfold slowly like they always did. It would take time to determine the strength of the enemy and his dispositions.

Artillery and air would be brought in and another attack would be mounted once the hill was softened up. Riley glanced at his watch: it was a little after eleven.

1300 Hours

The F-100 pulled up and banked right as the hill shook with the explosion of two 500 pounders hitting its forward slope. Captain Kaufman stood and waved his men forward. Both companies advanced only fifteen meters over the plowed ground when again the NVA machineguns began their deadly chatter. Lieutenant Donald Smith, 3rd Platoon Leader of Charlie Company spotted a machinegun position and led a squad forward to take it out. Moving along a depression an unseen mutual supporting machinegunner caught the lieutenant and attacking squad in flanking enfilade fire. Bullets cut down Lt. Smith and two of his men.<sup>6</sup>

First Sergeant Deebbs of Delta Company spotted a firing port only ten meters from where he lay and he tossed in two grenades. After the explosions Deebbs moved the 2nd Platoon forward in the attack. No sooner had the platoon passed the bunker than the dead inside were replaced with more NVA who began throwing grenades out the portal toward the surprised and exposed 2nd Platoon members. First Sergeant Deebbs and the 2nd Platoon fell back taking their wounded. They now knew the bunkers had interconnecting tunnels. The battle for the hill was going to require digging the enemy out.



Captain Kaufman was receiving reports from his platoon leaders and Delta Company commander that their lead elements were pinned down and unable to advance, casualties were mounting from small arms fire and shrapnel from grenades being thrown from the trenches. Two short artillery rounds had exploded in the midst of Delta Company and wounded Platoon Sergeant James Beam and three others. Kaufman knew the attack had lost momentum and ordered his units to fall back to the perimeter on the ridge.

1400 hours.

Captain Kiley of Alpha Company inspected the construction progress of the landing zone and checked the wounded assembled at the evacuation point. Their faces told him in one glance of their agony. Kiley approached his command post not liking the disposition of his company. The second platoon had followed Charlie Company on the east side of the trail and the third platoon had followed Delta on the west side. Both platoons were strung out a least one hundred meters down the ridge to where they were tied in with first platoon that had established rear security. The platoons were spread so thin in the thick vegetation they couldn't support or even see each other. Kiley was about to walk up the hill and find Captain Kaufman when the ground erupted in ear-shattering explosions. NVA 82 millimeter mortar rounds were impacting around him and gunfire suddenly

broke out to his rear where the 1st platoon had positioned a  
outpost.<sup>5</sup>

The small Alpha Company observation post (OP), placed on  
the trail twenty five-meters in front of the first platoon  
had heard twigs snapping and movement. The machinegunner,  
SP4 Carlos Lozada, from South Bronx, got down behind his  
M-60 just as the lead element of an attacking NVA company  
walked into his field of fire. Waiting until the enemy  
closed to within 20 feet Lozada opened up with a long burst.  
He caught the attackers by surprise and gunned down an  
estimated fifteen to twenty NVA. Holding the enemy at bay  
for several minutes Lozada began running low on ammunition.  
SP4 Steers ordered the OP to withdraw in bounds. Lozada  
covered his friends as they ran back ten yards to another  
position. He got up to make his dash but was shot as soon  
as he stood. Carlos Lozada died never knowing he and the  
outpost had given his platoon precious time to form a  
perimeter.

Captain Kiley pushed the sidebar to the radio handset to  
contact the 1st Platoon leader for a situation report when  
the ground around him erupted again. Mortar rounds impacted  
in shattering explosions sending deadly shrapnel whizzing  
over his head. The men who had been working on the LZ dived  
for cover--leaving three troopers writhing in agony from  
wounds.



Below the partially completed LZ the survivors of the OP linked up with their comrades in the 1st Platoon and began firing at the attacking NVA that had burst out of the trees. Hearing the heavy fighting, Kiley ordered the 2nd and 3rd Platoons to reinforce the embattled 1st Platoon.

Lt. Remington, 2nd Platoon Leader, immediately led his men down the western side of the ridge but was suddenly hit by smallarms fire from the west. Shot in both arms and legs the lieutenant pitched over. NVA began pouring over the western ridge in a coordinated flank attack using a well-constructed trail including steps carved into the side of the ridge. Sergeant Aaron Hervas spun around firing and hit several screaming attackers before he was killed. SP4 Frank Stokes and PVT Ernesto Viller were killed seconds later. SP4 Benzine, a team leader, laid down a base of fire to protect his pinned down team and killed 5 to 10 attackers before being felled by a bullet. Several more men of the 2nd Platoon were shot and bayoneted as the enemy charged over their hasty fighting positions. The NVA company continued their assault to the trail and swept down the ridge toward Alpha Company's command post. SP4 Brock remembers the bamboo around him being mowed down like a huge lawnmower from the NVA machineguns. His platoon had been caught in total surprise from the flank attack.

The survivors of the Second Platoon recovered as many of the wounded that they could carry and made their way up

the ridge toward Charlie and Delta Companies' perimeter to keep from being annihilated.

A mortar round had hit in the tree tops above the Alpha Company command post and had wounded Captain Kiley and six others. The senior medic, SP5 Taylor, was attending to Captain Kiley's back wound when the charging NVA broke into view from up the ridge. Kiley and the rest of the wounded fired their M-16's at the attackers bringing down ten to twelve but were overrun by the screaming North Vietnamese. Captain Kiley, SP5 Taylor, SP4 Young, the RTG, and two others were killed defending their position.

Third Platoon of Alpha Company located on the eastern side of the ridge took some casualties during the surprise assault but had managed to form a quick perimeter and turn back the attack before being overrun. Without radio communications to Captain Kiley and cut off to the rear, the Platoon Leader ordered his men to withdraw to Charlie and Delta Companies' perimeter.

An unexplainable lull ensued after the flank attack during which time the remaining survivors of Alpha Company crawled up the ridge carrying many of their wounded and joined the perimeter.

1435 Hours

Captain Kaufman reported by radio to battalion headquarters that his three companies were surrounded and engaged by a large North Vietnamese force.

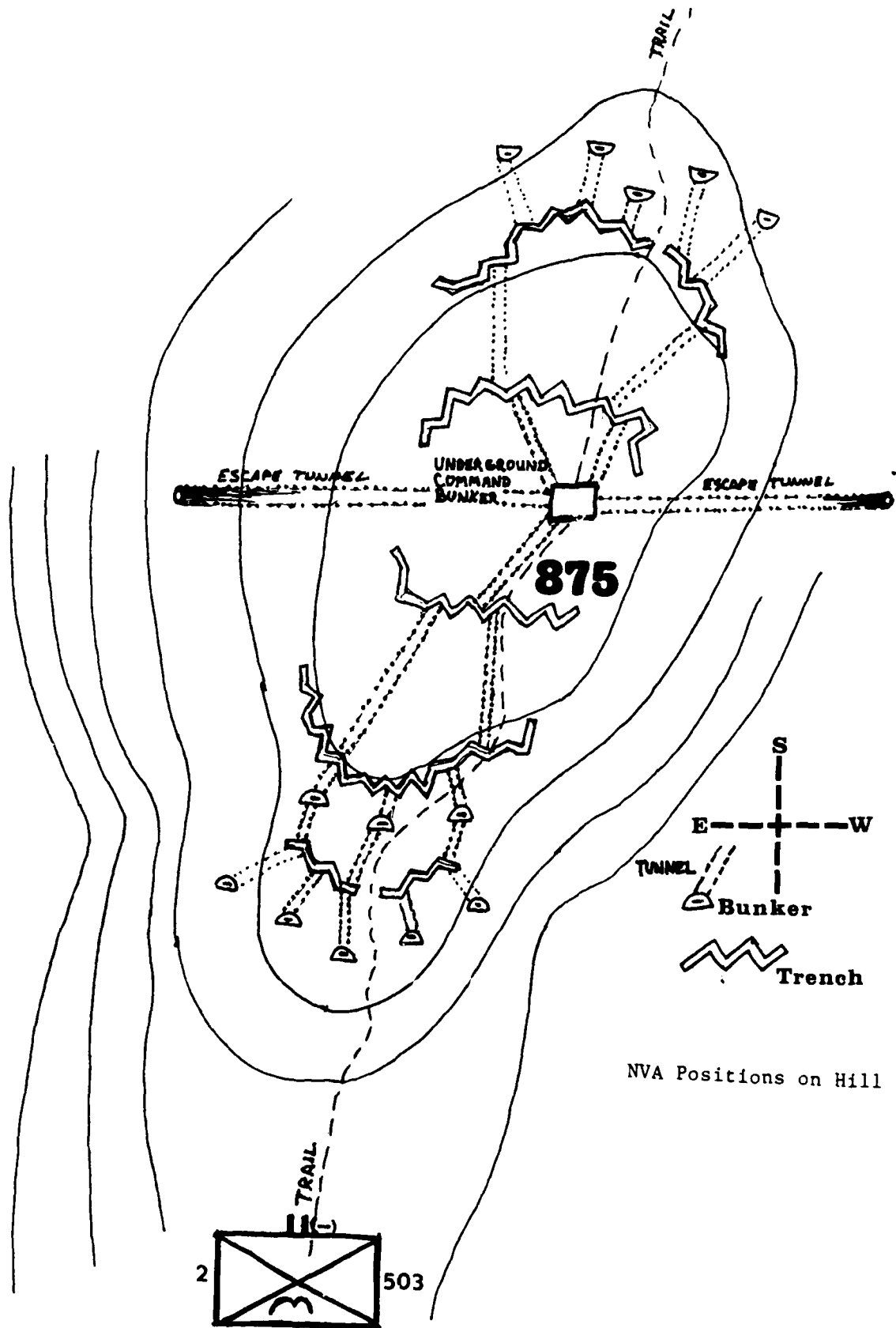
Second Battalion was hit by several more infantry assaults and received heavy mortar, automatic weapons, and B-40 rocket fire. The perimeter was established where the ridge slope was gradual, pitching off on both sides. Charlie Company had from 12 O'clock to 5 O'clock and Delta had from 7 to 12 with Alpha intermingled from 4 to 10. The men were running low on ammunition and most were out of water. Realizing they could not hold much longer Charlie Company's First Sergeant ordered a resupply for the battalion. The 335th Assault Helicopter Company, known affectionately as the 'Cowboys' attempted repeatedly to drop a resupply pallet, but intense ground fire kept the birds away. Six helicopters were lost to ground fire and several more were damaged. One of the choppers had dropped its load outside the perimeter before going down and Kaufman ordered a retrieval party to try to recover the desperately needed ammunition. Lieutenant Lantz was shot dead crawling only a few feet outside the perimeter while leading a recovery team. The team was immediately ordered back.

1735 hours

The 335th continued trying to supply the battalion and a helicopter was able to drop two pallets of ammunition into the perimeter from 80 feet. The resupply of bullets and grenades gave renewed hope to the beleaguered battalion. The officers and senior NCO's moved from position to position to raise the men's spirits and pass out ammo as the

319th Artillery continued to keep a protective ring of steel around the perimeter. Skyraiders and F-100's made continuous passes dropping their ordnance on the hilltop to keep the enemies' heads down while the battalion recovered. Captain Kaufman moved his command post to a huge lone tree in the perimeter where the wounded were assembled. Father Wattens was with the wounded men trying to ease their suffering as best he could. He reported to Captain Kaufman the medics had run out of medical supplies and the men were in desperate need of water. Kaufman could hear the moaning of his injured men as he brought the radio handset up to call in the emergency request for water and medical supplies.

The NVA 174th Regiment had prepared their ground and plan exceptionally well. The 2nd Battalion, and headquarters of the 174th Regiment occupied the 875 complex consisting of three lines of mutually-supporting bunkers all dug into the side of hill and interconnected with deep bombproof tunnels. A series of trench lines ran around the crest of hill from which grenades could be thrown and rocket propelled grenades (RPG's) fired. Outside the complex the 3rd Battalion had been given responsibility for the attack of the flank and rear of the American unit. Mortar crews were positioned on the ridges behind the hill and were to provide indirect fire support. The 3rd Battalion's mission, once their rear and flank attacks had been completed, was to establish a ring





around the trapped Americans to stop resupply and reinforcement by helicopter. Machinegun positions were dug into air defense positions and RPG rockets were stockpiled.<sup>7</sup>

1835 Hours

The FAC pilot flying a U-1 Birdog was almost out of fuel and began flying back to base before his replacement came on duty. By radio the FAC pilot told his relief, who was ten miles away, of a small fire on the side of the hill he was using as the reference point for the fast movers to drop their ordnance. Unknown to the departing pilot the fire had gone out and another had started further down the hill.<sup>8</sup>

Captain Kaufman had his leaders assembled at the lone tree as it began turning dark for a meeting and had just received a status report. The 2nd Battalion had suffered 40 dead, 42 wounded and had 42 missing that were presumed dead. Kaufman was staggered by the losses. He told his leaders to tighten the perimeter and prepare for a night assault on their position. While Kaufman conducted his meeting the Delta Company radio operator, SP4 Robert Fleming, noticed a Skyraider approaching from the south. Previous bomb runs had been coming in from the southeast to the northwest but none had flown directly over the perimeter. Fleming asked First Sergeant Deeks what the aircraft was doing. Deeks yelled at PFC Ellerbrook to call battalion headquarters and find out who was directing the pilot. The prop-driven aircraft flew directly overhead and banked right. Fleming watched the

plane in fascination and remembered seeing flames coming out its exhaust port. The plane turned and made another low level approach from south to north. Fleming saw the two bombs being released and knew immediately they were going to be hit.

The first 500 pound bomb hit outside the perimeter but the second hit the branches of the lone tree exploding in a ear-splitting airburst. Fleming did not know how long he was unconscious but when he sat up small fires were raging all around him revealing the destruction. Bodies and parts of bodies lay in every conceivable position of death scattered beneath the still standing tree. Captain Kaufman, his officers, the wounded, medics, and Chaplin Watters had all been killed. His ear drums ruptured, Fleming couldn't hear but remembers screaming for someone to put out the fires. He was afraid the enemy would see the scattered dead and attack. He recalled believing an NVA platoon could easily have wiped them out following the bomb burst.<sup>9</sup>

SF4 Brock of the 2nd Platoon was on the perimeter when the bomb exploded and remembers the brilliant flash of light then the horrific sound. The men in the lower half of the perimeter, down the ridge, had caught the brunt of the shrapnel. A soldier kneeling by Brock's foxhole had his feet sliced off at the ankles. He was hit by a shard like a huge razor blade. Brock remembers vividly feeling the soldier's legs thinking he was all right until he had felt

warm blood rush into his hands. The soldier's boots were still laced to the point of amputation.

The explosion killed 42 men and wounded another 45. Of the 290 men in the battalion over one hundred were dead and over fifty were wounded. Panic and despair spread like wild fire. Stunned, men walked in circles while others cried uncontrollably knowing they would die. In the darkness the living climbed over the dead to find other survivors in the desperate need to know they were not alone. Men hugged each other and clustered in groups for reassurance they could continue to survive in the nightmare that had befallen them.

Eight of the sixteen officers of the 2nd Battalion were dead and the other eight were wounded. Of the thirteen medics that started up the hill, eleven had died; the others were wounded. Most of Senior NCO's were dead or wounded, leaving the junior officers and noncoms to regain control. Young sergeants and specialists rose amid the destruction to become leaders. Within thirty minutes of the blast the perimeter was reestablished by men who had been hit hard but were not giving up.

Lieutenant Joseph Sheridan, Platoon Sergeant Krawtzw and Lieutenant MacDonough took command of A, C and D Companies respectively and began reestablishing the perimeter. Lt. O'Leary, Delta Company commander, was wounded badly but assumed command of the force. He had all the remaining radios brought to the new comand post and

reestablished communications with battalion headquarters and with the all important artillery. The survivors of the 2nd Battalion clung to life praying a relief force would arrive soon. They spent the longest night of their lives three-quarters of the way up Hill 875.

The 4th Battalion 503rd Infantry, commanded by Colonel James Johnson, had been conducting search-and-destroy operations west of Ben Het. The colonel received word late that evening about the 2nd Battalion's predicament. Colonel Johnson was ordered by the brigade commander to move his battalion to landing zones first thing in the morning for pick-up and airlift to Firebase (FB) 16. Firebase 16 was only three kilometers northwest of Hill 875. Colonel Johnson gave Alpha and Bravo Companies orders to relieve the 2nd Battalion, construct a landing zone and prepare to assault the hill top. Charlie Company was to link up and be the reserve company and Delta Company was to secure FB 16. Although the 4th Battalion was already committed the 173rd had no reserve force available.<sup>10</sup>

20 November, 0600, Hill 875

The situation was critical for the 2nd Battalion. The unit was low on ammunition, out of medical supplies and in desperate need of water. The wounded were in horrible condition--three had died during the night. The temperature dropped into the fifties during the early morning and most only had their poncho liners and ponchos to keep them warm.

Many of the injured were using towels, bandoliers and T-shirts for bandages. Some had even used safety pins from bandoliers to pin wounds closed. The sun rose, bringing its warmth but also the revealing the destruction. The dead lay everywhere within the perimeter. SF4 Brock remembers looking at the wounded and thinking they were all dead. Their eyes were glazed and none spoke or moved. Only when mortar rounds impacted did they flinch and distinguish themselves from the dead. SF4 Fleming was wounded twice again during the night and recalls that he didn't think he was going to live. His wounds were horribly painful but like other survivors he remembers the need for the water as the worst experience. His tongue had swollen twice its size and he could hardly breathe.

0630 Hours

Fourth Battalion had problems moving to landing zones through the thick vegetation. Bravo Company arrived first at an LZ but experienced more problems. The 173rd's 335th Aviation Battalion had lost or suffered damage to most of their aircraft trying to support the 2nd Battalion. Only two Hueys were available for the airlift to FB 16.<sup>11</sup>

0900 Hours

The last of Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, arrived at the firebase and hurried to resupply themselves. The previous days of humping had depleted their ammunition, food

and water supply. Captain Ron Leonard, commander of Bravo Company was ordered by Colonel Johnson not to wait for the rest of the battalion but to begin moving toward Hill 875 as soon as his unit was resupplied. The rest of the battalion would take at least four hours before arriving and time was critical.

The 4th Battalion had seen much action and was drastically reduced in strength. They had sustained 21 killed and 94 wounded in the past two weeks. The total number of men in the relief force would number less than 280 men.<sup>10</sup>

0947 Hours

Bravo company left the firebase and began moving cautiously toward their object. The situation was extremely dangerous. The NVA were notorious for ambushing relief units and it was known a very large enemy force was in the area. A single American rifle company would be an easy target for a enemy battalion laying in wait. Captain Leonard could only place his best platoon and point man in the lead of his unit and pray they would spot the enemy first.

1400 Hours

The 2nd Battalion survivors were understandably upset and frustrated to learn the relief force was still hours away from making it in to their perimeter. SP6 Fred Devereaux,

Headquarters medic, was doing everything he could to keep the wounded alive. Every minute of delay lessened their chances of surviving--two more paratroopers had died of their wounds since that afternoon. Devereaux had thought the 4th Battalion would have arrived early that morning and had been shocked to hear about the delays. The men of the 2nd Battalion were exhausted physically and mentally, dangerously short of ammunition and had no water. Disregarding his own wounds, Devereaux crawled about the perimeter taking used bandages off the dead to place on those patients who could still use them.

Tired of waiting for the 4th Battalion, 1st Lieutenant O'Leary ordered patrols to knock out the snipers that were harrassing the perimeter from surrounding trees. The snipers had to be eliminated before a another LZ could be started to remove the wounded. Delta Company sent out a clearing patrol but made it out of the perimeter only ten meters when an enemy automatic weapon opened up. One man was killed and three were wounded in less than five seconds. The patrols were aborted.

#### 1730 Hours

The point team of Bravo Company 4th Battalion, finally reached the base of Hill 875 after a harrowing march. During the movement they had passed through several abandoned enemy base camps and found over 40 dead NVA

scattered along the trail. The bodies had been left in small groups for later pick up by their comrades.

The point team reached the crest of the hill and found the first dead Americans of Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion. The dead lay as they had fallen. It was evident the men of 1st Platoon of Alpha Company had fought to the death and made the enemy pay heavily.

Bravo Company made it into the beleaguered 2nd Battalion's perimeter and immediately passed out what little water they had left after the hard march. Captain Leonard ordered his men to construct an LZ but NVA mortars began raining down, stopping all work. A single helicopter suddenly popped over the trees and hovered over the perimeter. Major William Kelly, the 2nd Battalion's Executive Officer, Captain Grosso, the Battalion surgeon, and three company executive officers jumped from the Huey still hovering 15 feet above ground. Not taking fire the bird risked a landing and took onboard five of the critically wounded. The helicopter lifted off and immediately was taken under fire by NVA automatic weapons. Banking hard, the bird barely escaped destruction and made it to safety. Another helicopter tried to come in following the lead of the first chopper but, stiched by bullets, had to turn back.

Major Kelly assumed command of the perimeter and was visisably shaken by the sight of the death and destruction. It was evident to him the battalion was finished as a



fighting force and incapable of helping the 4th Battalion take the Hill. As darkness fell the wounded were comforted by the newly-arrived surgeon and medics.

1830 Hours

Just as sun began to set a barrage of mortar rounds landed on members of the 4th Battalion as they again tried to cut an LZ. The devastating shrapnel killed several men and lightly wounded Captain Leonard and his First Sergeant. The 4th Battalion had its first blood drawn on Hill 875.

2100 Hours

Despite the darkness Alpha Company of the 4th Battalion closed into the perimeter at 2100 hours and Charlie Company made it in at 2220 hours. Like the 2nd Battalion's colonel the 4th's battalion commander had elected not to go with his unit and stayed in the command and control helicopter to direct the relief. Again, the senior company commander on the ground had been made the ground force commander. The 4th expanded the perimeter and gave the survivors of the 2nd their first real chance for rest. The wounded--many of whom had been waiting for evacuation for over 36 hours--would have to shiver through another night and hope the fresh paratroopers would be able to get them out the following day.

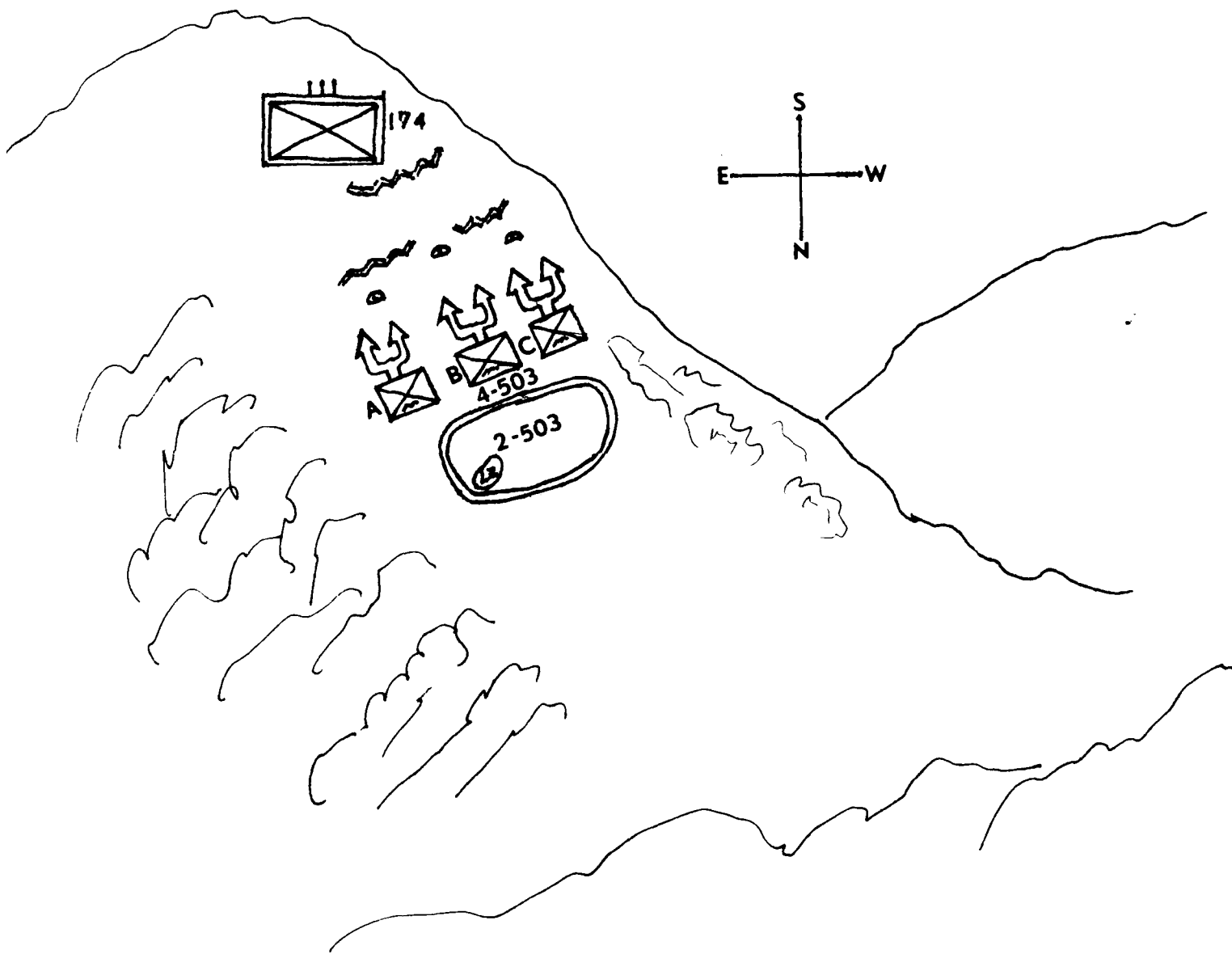
21 November, 0700

Morning revealed that two more of the wounded had died during the night despite the surgeon's efforts. Mortar rounds hit within the perimeter where members of the 4th Battalion were trying to clear a LZ--eight troopers were wounded. Artillery was adjusted on the suspected mortar positions and by noon the first of a few choppers were able to land and pick up wounded. The choppers also brought in more ammo and some water.

1430 Hours

The 4th Battalion planned to attack the hill at 1100 but delayed until 1430 to let jets drop more ordnance. The last bomb explosions were echoing through the mountains when the 4th Battalion rose from their fighting positions to launch their assault. Bravo Company took the center with Charlie Company on the right and Alpha on the left. As Captain Leonard led Bravo Company out of the perimeter the 1st Platoon's radio operator was killed. The 4th Battalion moved forward using fire and movement, shooting their weapons at suspected enemy positions. The entrenched NVA held their fire until the Americans had cleared the perimeter, then opened up with murderous effect raking the exposed, attacking paratroopers. Simultaneously mortar rounds rained down on Alpha Company as they assaulted--wounding fifteen men in the 1st Platoon in the

4/503rd Attack of Hill 875, 21 November 1967



first several minutes of the attack. Second Platoon of Alpha was partially protected by debris as they advanced and fought their way to the first trench line on the hill's military crest. PFC Joseph Decanto and his machinegunner, SP4 John Deatrage of the 3rd Platoon knocked out a bunker in their sector--killing five of the enemy. The rest of the 1st and 3rd Platoons were pinned down and could not move. Alpha Company was taking casualties one by one without advancing. Realizing the company had lost their momentum, Sergeant First Class Fraizer, the acting First Sergeant, crawled up next to the bunker that was shooting diagonally across his company. Covered by PFC Dennis Adams, an attached engineer, who had picked up a machinegun from a wounded trooper--Fraizer crept close enough to be burned by the ejected shells but was unable to get a grenade into the small firing portal. Meantime SFC Thornton and a group of volunteers from the weapons platoon maneuvered under fire to evacuate the wounded.<sup>6</sup>

Charlie Company on the right flank had made it to the first bunker system but then got pinned down. Lieutenant Tracy Murray assaulted the main bunker twice and was killed on the third attempt, only five meters in front of the enemy machinegunner. The battle raged all afternoon without success. With darkness closing in and unable to advance, the battalion was ordered to withdraw into the perimeter to try again the following day. The cost of the attack had been high. Alpha Company had seven men killed and 58

wounded. Bravo Company had 11 killed and 34 wounded and Charlie had 1 killed and 11 wounded. The total--including 2nd Battalion losses due to mortar fire--was 21 killed and 119 wounded. Fourth Battalion had lost one third of its force. During the night a few helicopters came in and extracted more of 2nd Battalion's wounded and the worst cases from the 4th Battalion. The NVA kept their mortars and rockets coming in all during the night. Captain John Connaely, commander of Charlie Company, 4th Battalion remembers vividly the attitude of his men. The hill had become more than just an objective. To the soldiers who had seen so many men die and become wounded, taking the hill had become an obsession. Although the 4th battalion had been hurt the pervasive thought among the paratroopers was that they would take the hill the following day.

22 November

The 4th Battalion continued to reorganize and rearm for the attack. Later in the morning the brigade commander decided to postpone the assault for one more day to allow artillery and bombs to level the objective. The hill had bled the brigade dry and there were no replacements available. The commander realized further frontal assaults would only increase the losses and reduce the value of their ultimate victory. While the 4th Battalion settled back into their foxholes the 2nd Battalion survivors went about the gruesome duty of identifying and extracting their dead.

Captain Ron Leonard of Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, positioned himself at the edge of the perimeter close to the hilltop. There he adjusted all the artillery and bomb runs. Meanwhile a task force from the 4th Division, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, airmobiled into a landing zone in the valley east of the hill in preparation for a coordinated attack with the 4th Battalion, 173rd the following day.

23 November, Thanksgiving Day

Unknown to the American forces the NVA of the 174th Regiment withdrew through escape tunnels during the night taking most of their dead. The NVA left only their mortars in position on a ridge behind the hill. At 1100 the 4th Battalion rose up from their foxholes to make the final assault. Bravo Company was on the left, Charlie Company on the right and Alpha in the rear as reserve. At the same time the 1st of the 12th attacked from the southeast.

Captain Leonard of Bravo Company led his men up the ridge as supporting mortars walked their fires up the hill in advance of the assault. SFC William Cates, 3rd Platoon Sergeant, was carrying a satchel charge and was hit by an enemy mortar round. The satchel charge detonated killing Cates and two men beside him. The attack continued and by 1122 the hilltop was secured. The 1st of the 12th arrived a few minutes later and joined the paratroopers in consolidating the desolate position. Later that day the 4th

and 2nd Battalions of the 503rd were airlifted back to Dak To for a much-needed standdown.

For the five day battle the total losses of the 2nd and 4th Battalions plus attachments was 130 killed and 314 wounded. Of the 570 men who struggled to take the hill less than 130 came away unscathed. The actual enemy body count after the hill was taken was only 22 dead NVA. Later, more bodies were reported found but most had been taken by the defenders. Captured enemy documents found in December revealed the 174th Regiment defenders lost more than half of their numbers.

Hill 875 was abandoned on 1 December 1967 by elements of the 4th Infantry Division concluding the operation known as 'MACARTHUR'. On 23 November the New York Times reported that in a briefing at the Pentagon, General Westmoreland said the battle around Dak To was "the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy." General Westmoreland then asserted that the enemy had not succeeded in destroying an American battalion and that "at no time have U.S. or ARVN troops been considered trapped, cut off or surrounded in the area of Dak To."

The battle for Hill 875 was considered a victory by American units participating. It was a victory in that the hill was taken by extremely brave men under the worst of conditions. Fate, bad luck, and a host of other problems

were surmounted by the American soldier who fought gallantly  
and accomplished the mission: they took the hill.



## LESSON LEARNED:

General: The conduct of the battle for Hill 875 raises serious questions about the leadership and tactics employed. For the purposes of this paper only the area of leadership will be discussed.

Problem: During the fight for Hill 875 the battalion commanders of the 2nd and 4th Battalions did not accompany, join, or lead, their units during the struggle. Neither current doctrine, nor doctrine at the time (1967), specifically states where a commander should be on the battlefield.

Discussion: During the battle for Hill 875 the 2nd and 4th Battalion commanders did not lead their men by their physical presence. The phenomenon of battalion commanders not leading their units on the ground had been going on since 1966 and continued through the duration of the war. The normal command and control arrangements were the battalion commander and operations officer would use a command and control helicopter as their forward command post. The battalion executive officer would be responsible for the primary tactical operations center located in the rear. The Army bible of leadership was, and still is, Field Manual 22-100, Military Leadership. This manual defines

'Military leadership' as the "The art of of influencing and directing men in such a way as to obtain their willing obedience, confidence, respect, and loyal cooperation to accomplish the mission." FM 22-100, 1965 and 1983 versions are replete with examples of what a leader is supposed to embody--all of which implies the commander personally leads his men. The leadership manual defines 'Management' as, "The process whereby the resources of men, money, material, time, and facilities are utilized to accomplish the missions and tasks of the organization.

Analysis: The 2nd and 4th Battalion commanders felt their senior company commanders were capable of leading their battalions without their physical presence. The commanders believed they could contribute more in 'managing' the battle rather than leading soldiers on the ground. There are no published accounts of any senior leader ever questioning this practice. The Battle for Dak To after action report makes no mention of this command arrangement in a negative way. It is clear commanders honestly believed they could 'see' and 'influence' the battle from their circling helicopters flying above their units at three to five thousand feet.

The manuals and instruction teaching the time-proven principles of leadership were ignored and a different style of commander emerged in the Vietnam war--a manager but not a leader in the traditional sense. The true 'leaders' of the battle for Hill 875 were the senior company commanders. The

battalion commanders were reduced to managers. The principles of military leadership were ignored thereby causing a distinction between the words, Commander and Leader. Senior leaders during the Vietnam war approved of this leadership method by allowing the practice to continue for the duration of the conflict.

Conclusion: The absence of Battalion command leadership on the ground grew out of earlier experiences of commanders in Vietnam. This practice was at odds with but not prohibited by existing doctrine.

Lesson Learned: Commanding does not necessarily mean leading. Future leaders must be cautious of adapting 'new' methods of command and control that violate the principles of leadership.

Recommendations:

1. FM 22-100 should distinguish a 'Leader' from a 'Manager.'
2. FM 22-100 should cite examples of of commanders who 'managed' their units during combat operations by flying in command and control aircraft as not being true 'leaders'.
3. FM 22-100 should have a section added on 'combat leadership' and cite examples/guidelines of how a commander takes command under combat conditions. The section should include specific guidelines as to the location of the commander on the battlefield. Example:

A leader should locate himself on the battlefield where he can best influence the action of his subordinates. Some general rules are:

- \* when a leader's unit is split or separated he will usually place himself with the majority of the unit.

- \* when a leader's unit is attacking the leader will usually locate himself with the main attack.

## ENDNOTES

1. 4th Division, Technical Report, *Combat Operations After Report--Battle for DAK TO*, Dtd 3 Jan 68.
2. 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep), *Combat Operations After Action Report--Battle for DAK TO*, Dtd 10 Dec 67.
3. Interview with Fred Devereux, MSG (Ret), Carlisle 13 December 1987.
4. 2nd Battaion 503rd Annual Historical Supplement 1 Jan-31 Dec 1967.
5. Interview with Tom Brock, MSG (Ret), Fort Benning, 19 April 1986.
6. 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep) Recommendation for Award of Presidential Unit Citation (Army) Dtd. 15 March 1968.
7. Interview with Lawrence Okendo, CSM (Ret), Fort Benning, 2 May 1986.
8. Interview with Ed Sills, Colonel, Brigade Commander, TSB, Fort Benning, 1985.
9. Interview with Ronald Fleming, SP4 (Ret), Carlisle, 19 December 1987.
10. 4th Battalion 503rd Annual Historical Supplement 1 Jan-31 Dec 1967.
11. Interview with William Connoly, Colonel, Executive Officer ATB, Fort Benning, 20 April 1986.