

OPERATIONS FARRAGUT AND GATLING

The 1st Brigade entered 1967 by participating in a number of fast-moving operations typical of its Vietnam Odyssey. Following the conclusion of Operation PICKETT in the Central Highlands, Headquarters, I Field Force ordered the brigade to move 400 miles south to its base camp at Phan Rang and to prepare for Operation FARRAGUT against enemy secret base camps in Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan, and Lam Dong provinces. On 21 January, the movement from Kontum began by both air and land. The motor convoy, consisting of vehicles from all elements of the brigade, completed the trip in six days, without incident, arriving in Phan Rang on 26 January. The trip was the longest military convoy made along Highway 1 to that date. For many elements of the brigade, the arrival at Phan Rang was the first time they had been at the base camp area in over a year.

The respite at Phan Rang was brief and was devoted primarily to change-of-command ceremonies, as BG Pearson relinquished command to BG Salve H. Matheson. The latter, born in Seattle, Washington, and educated in California (UCLA, class of 1942), had served as a lieutenant with the 101st Airborne Division during World War II in Normandy, Holland, and Bastogne. Most of his early career was spent with airborne units. Prior to assuming command of the 1st Brigade, Matheson had served as Assistant Division Commander of the 101st at Fort Campbell. BG Pearson left the 1st Brigade to serve as Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J3), United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

Matheson quickly found that his brigade was a work horse, as it immediately initiated Operation FARRAGUT on 26 January. Following a feint by elements of the 2-502d on 26 January, against a suspected enemy base camp approximately fifteen miles north of Phan Rang, the 2-327th conducted airmobile assaults into a second nearby suspected enemy base camp. These assaults followed a B-52 strike. Meanwhile, the 2-502d moved overland to the second area also. Both battalions conducted search and destroy operations in their areas of operation on 28-29 January, but with minimal enemy contact. On the night of 30 January, the 2-502d was extracted from the area by helicopters and prepared to participate in Operation GATLING with the 1-327th. The 2-327th continued search and destroy efforts as part of Operation FARRAGUT until 16 February.

Operation GATLING developed as a companion to Operation FARRAGUT when intelligence indicated a suspected meeting place for a high level enemy command conference in Lam Dong Province. Stringent security measures were employed to achieve surprise, but a B-52 strike on the suspected area on 1 February, followed by a raid by the 1-327th and 2-502d and subsequent search and destroy efforts to 15 February produced no evidence of the suspected conference or heavy enemy concentrations. From 8-12 February, a TET cease fire was observed.

On 17 February, the 1-327th and 2-502d rejoined the 2-327th in the conduct of Operation FARRAGUT. Search and destroy patrolling continued in the Le Hong Phong forest and Di Linh areas until 28 February, with only a few enemy contacts developed. The final phases of Operation FARRAGUT broadened the area of operations but failed to elicit willingness on the part of the enemy to stand and fight. The operation was terminated on 23 March.

Although contact with the enemy had been limited, the operation was not without its successes. The brigade destroyed both a VC province headquarters and a district headquarters, as well as other facilities, and disrupted VC tax collection efforts. The operation also revealed that scarcity of water made it unlikely that significant numbers of the enemy would use the area in the dry season and that NVA troops were for the first time being integrated with VC troops. In addition, a significant increase in the number of enemy voluntarily surrendering to the South Vietnamese government during the course of the operation indicated that VC control of the local population was lessening.