

OPERATION GIBRALTAR

On 18 September, the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, air assaulted into a suspected VC location in the Song Con Valley. Previous operations in the valley had developed considerable evidence of the VC presence and had resulted in several limited fire fights, but no major contacts had been made. Due to rainy weather and the nonavailability of CH-47 (Chinook) helicopters to move artillery across a swollen stream, the 2-502d made its assault out of range of supporting artillery fire. As soon as the helicopters began descending onto the landing zone, a heavy volume of small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire pounded the area. All three rifle company commanders were either killed or wounded. One and a half companies made it into the landing zone. The rest of the assault force was waved out of the area by a captain who was later killed by ground fire. The paratroopers had assaulted into what was later determined to be a VC battalion command post area. Although the enemy's initial resistance was vigorous, the VC were taken by surprise and were unable to reorganize their forces. The "Strike Force" soldiers in the landing zone reacted to their predicament with aggressive action. As a result, reinforcements from the 2-327th were able to maneuver into the area to rescue the men in the landing zone and to follow up the brigade's first significant contact with the enemy. Three days of tedious movement through the jungle resulted in several additional contacts but no major action. The enemy suffered 226 killed. Not only was this action the first major contact with the enemy for the brigade, but it was the first conquest of a VC main force unit by any U. S. Army element in Vietnam. Two years later, the 2-502d Infantry received its third Presidential Unit Citation for actions around An Khe during this memorable month of September.

Following Operation GIBRALTAR, the battalions of the brigade resumed routine patrolling of the area of operations and maintenance activities. On 21 September, the 1-327th relinquished its defensive responsibilities at An Khe to elements of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) which was in the process of moving inland from Qui Nhon. The 1-327th moved back to An Khe Pass to relieve the 2-502d, which moved back to Qui Nhon. The 2-327th remained at An Khe for another week, during which the paratroopers conducted parachute proficiency jumps north of An Khe. On 28 September, the 2-327th relinquished final brigade defensive responsibilities to the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). This division was to assume tactical responsibility for a zone 150 miles by 150 miles, encompassing three large provinces -- Pleiku, Kontum, and Binh Dinh -- across central South Vietnam.²¹ The 1st Cavalry had arrived at An Khe to assume its important mission without a casualty, courtesy of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division.

²¹For description of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) move to An Khe from that unit's perspective, see Tolson, Airmobility, 1961-1971, pp. 68-73. The 1st Cavalry's first significant campaign was in the Ia Drang Valley in November against the 32d, 33d, and 66th NVA Regiments.