

## OPERATION HAWTHORNE

Sharpened by a rest and additional training, the brigade (minus) next moved to Dak To in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands. The initial mission was to relieve a besieged RVN Regional Forces garrison at the Toumorong Outpost about twelve miles northeast of Dak To. The action, however, developed into a major spoiling attack against the 24th NVA Regiment, which intelligence indicated was building up for a major drive from Toumorong overlooking the Dak Tan Kan Valley through Dak To to Kontum.

The 2-502d retained its mission as I Field Force reserve until 7 June, while the 1-327th, the 42d ARVN Regiment, and the 21st ARVN Ranger Battalion began the relief of Toumorong. Intense fighting developed on 7 June, when an artillery position west of Toumorong manned by Battery B, 2-320th Field Artillery, Company A, 2-502d Infantry, and elements of the 326th Engineer Battalion were attacked by an estimated battalion of the 24th NVA Regiment. One gun position was twice overrun by the enemy and twice regained by the artillerymen turned infantry. Dawn revealed 86 slain enemy, 13 of whom were inside the artillery position.

The 1-327th pressed on to relieve the Toumorong outpost and then moved north to maintain contact with the enemy. Another fierce battle erupted, in which all three of the battalion's companies were engaged simultaneously in separate fire fights. Meanwhile, the 2-502d was released from its reserve mission and dispatched to envelop the northern flank of the enemy in contact with the 1-327th. The companies of the 2-502d moved along ridges running northeast to southwest, rising gradually to higher mountains to the northeast. On the afternoon of 9 June, Company C was pinned down by heavy enemy fire. The opposing forces were in such close proximity that each was in hand grenade range of the other. After one platoon had been overrun by the NVA and two other platoons were in imminent danger, the commander of Company C, Captain William S. Carpenter, called for an airstrike on the center of his company in order to stop the NVA advance. The first airstrike delivered napalm thirty meters short of the target into the jungle canopy. Enemy firing ceased, and Company C was able to break contact and withdraw approximately 125 meters as the second napalm strike was delivered. The company established a new perimeter and resisted renewed attempts to probe its position until Company A reached it during the night. These two companies formed a larger perimeter and awaited relief.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. With all maneuver units committed, the 2-502d assembled a provisional company from volunteers at the Phan Rang base camp. Dispatched hurriedly to Dak To, the provisional company secured the high ground above the encircled companies position, where a landing zone was established and the besieged units were extracted.

The work of the 2-502d and the 1-327th had fixed the position of an estimated NVA regiment, well dug in on the ridges lining the Dak Tan Kan Valley. The battalions had executed a double envelopment, moving the equivalent of nearly 15,000 troops in 33 separate airmobile operations exerting continuous pressure against the enemy for sixteen days and nights. I Field Force turned to B-52 strikes on 13 June to complete the work begun by the 1st Brigade. The 1-327th and the 2-502d air assaulted into the valley thirty minutes after a massive air strike by twenty-four waves of B-52 bombers. Large numbers of enemy dead were found, as well as a systematic series of tunnels, some as deep as fifty feet. The follow-up action continued until 20 June.

Operation HAWTHORNE was one of the most successful of the Vietnam conflict in that a major enemy unit had been engaged, fixed, and rendered combat ineffective. In a war of squad-against-squad engagements in which progress was often measured in very small increments, such an achievement was impressive. USMACV estimated that the 24th NVA Regiment had suffered 531 killed, compared to U. S. losses of 48 dead and 239 wounded. MG Stanley R. Larsen, Commanding General, I Field Force, then on a trip to the U. S. publicly stated that the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division was the "best fighting unit in Vietnam."<sup>37</sup> In September 1968, the 1st Brigade received the Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism during Operation HAWTHORNE.

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<sup>37</sup>Vietnam Odyssey, n.p. This source credits Operation HAWTHORNE with inflicting over 1200 enemy casualties. Westmoreland, "Report," pp. 126 and 282, indicates there were 531 known enemy casualties.