

## OPERATION MALHEUR

From 29 April to 1 May, the 1st Brigade was in a "stand-down" status at Khang Dong. In early May, the brigade began movement to Quang Ngai Province on the coast in I Corps area, where it was placed under the operational control of Task Force OREGON.

Task Force OREGON came into existence in response to the overall military situation in South Vietnam in early 1967. While the 1st Brigade had engaged in operations in the coastal provinces of II Corps, the major USMACV effort had been to relieve enemy pressure against Saigon to the south in III Corps. Operation CEDAR FALLS and Operation JUNCTION CITY were developed north of Saigon against well-developed enemy complexes. Operation JUNCTION CITY, lasting from 22 February to 14 May, involved twenty-two U. S. and four ARVN battalions, the largest allied effort of the war to that time, and resulted in over 2,000 enemy dead.<sup>40</sup> As USMACV attempted to consolidate these advances in the III Corps area, the enemy began exerting increasing pressure in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces in the I Corps area to the north. A major reaction force was needed in the north, but USMACV could not spare a division from operations in the II and III Corps areas. Contingency plans had been prepared, however, resulting in the activation of Task Force OREGON. This task force was assembled by creating a provisional headquarters out of I Field Force assets, borrowing division support troops from various U. S. Army units, and bringing together three separate brigades: the 196th Light Infantry Brigade from the II Corps area, and the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, also deployed in the II Corps area. The arrival of Task Force OREGON in I Corps in April 1967 permitted the Marines in Quang Ngai to move units further north to reinforce the DMZ vicinity and hastened the northward extension of pacification efforts by the 1st Cavalry Division in the coastal area of Binh Dinh Province, leading to the opening of Highway 1 to Da Nang.<sup>41</sup>

The first mission given to the 1st Brigade upon attachment to Task Force OREGON (in May 1967), was to find and destroy VC/NVA forces, and to neutralize VC/NVA base camps in the areas west and northwest of Duc Pho in Quang Ngai Province, beginning 11 May.

The first phase of the operation began with air assaults by the 1-327th and 2-502d west of the base area followed a day later by an air assault by the 2-327th. Most of May was spent in operations against the 2d VC Regiment in this area. It was during the early portion of this phase of the operation that the 1st Brigade was awarded its second Congressional Medal of Honor. SP4 Dale E. Wayrynen of B Company, 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry was assisting in the evacuation of wounded personnel from an earlier conflict when his platoon stumbled upon a fortified enemy bunker. A violent firefight erupted in which the point man was wounded. Specialist Wayrynen rushed to his aid and brought him back to safety. Suddenly, an enemy hand grenade was dropped among the men of his squad. Wayrynen shouted a warning to his fellow soldiers and

smothered the deadly blast with his body. His courageous act was credited with having saved the lives of his platoon leader and fellow squad members. When intelligence indicated that remnants of the 2d VC Regiment were moving northwest in an attempt to evade the brigade, the three maneuver battalions were redeployed in early June in order to entrap the fleeing enemy.

On 8-9 June, the 2-327th and the 2-502d conducted assaults west of the Song Be Valley. The number of enemy contacts were initially high but declined over a period of days. Intelligence indicated that the enemy was withdrawing from the area. At the request of Province officials, the 1st Brigade turned its attention to evacuation of the civilian population from the Song Tra Can and Song Be Valleys, rich rice-growing areas from which the VC had been extracting food and taxes for many years. The valley clearing operation lasted from 15-22 June, during which time civilian refugees were evacuated to Nghai Hanh. During the course of the valley sweep, the 1-327th developed contact with what was believed to be elements of the 1st VC Regiment on the high ground north of the mouth of the Song Tra Can Valley. In addition, elements of the 2d VC Regiment were suspected to be in the vicinity of the Song Be Valley. On 25 June, the 1-327th launched assaults against the former enemy position and the 2-327th against the latter. The 2-502d assisted the 2-327th. After a fruitless search for the 1st VC Regiment to the north, the 1-327th moved southwest on 29 June to aid the other two battalions.

On 3 July, the 1-327th was removed from the search to conduct Operation LAKE. This operation, directed by Task Force OREGON, consisted of providing road security for engineer units working on Route 1 from Dien Truong to Sa Huynh. This assignment lasted until 12 July. Meanwhile, the other two battalions aggressively sought to fix and destroy the 2d VC Regiment. The 1-327th rejoined the effort on 14 July. The operation continued until 2 August, as significant enemy contacts declined.

Over the three month period of Operation MALHEUR, the enemy exhibited a weakening resolve to engage the brigade. Early in the operation the brigade made contacts with company and battalion sized enemy units, which often stood and fought. Over a period of time however, the size of enemy units engaged became smaller, until only two to five man parties were being encountered.

Overall, the operation had been successful in making contact with the enemy. Over 800 enemy were confirmed dead during the course of the operation; nearly 300 weapons had been collected and 133 tons of salt and 260 tons of rice confiscated. The 1st Brigade lost 81 dead and 594 wounded. Because of the sustained length of Operation MALHEUR, the men of the 1st Brigade were increasingly threatened by general loss of resistance to malaria, fevers, and fatigue, particularly since much of their activity took place in the low valley floors which were or had been inhabited by the local population and their animals.

40 It is worth noting that on 22 February, elements of the 173d Airborne Brigade initiated Operation JUNCTION CITY ALTERNATE in the first mass combat parachute jump of the Vietnam War. This was a bitter pill for the proud soldiers of the 1st Brigade for they had originally been earmarked to make this parachute jump, but were precluded from participation because they were already committed to ground operations elsewhere.

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The area of operations was steep and heavily vegetated. These conditions coupled with temperatures ranging at times above 100° F., slowed movement in the area of operations considerably. The operation, an interim assignment, lasted only eleven days and was characterized by sharp, small-unit clashes. Heavy units were encountered in places of earlier configurations, which often demanded further completion for short periods of time. Sporadically, to allow escape from of ambush and harassment, frequently, bridge groups were effectively blocked by accurate sniper fire. The enemy was thus able to evacuate base complexes before maneuver elements could reach the hostile line.

The nature of unit activity during Operation HOOD RIVER was generally typical of much of the 1st Brigade's combat experience in Vietnam, and some examples of the actions of the 1-25th during this operation are illustrative of the way of the brigade during its stay. In carrying out its part of the brigade scheme of maneuver, the 1-25th based its effort upon intelligence derived from their officers and the order of battle section of the 54 ARVN Division. Most of this intelligence was dependent upon reports of agents operating both overt and covert collection networks within the Vietnamese population. The battalion discovered these reports to be only 50 percent reliable. Urban suggested that at least locations were later verified to be one-half to one mile off. Although intelligence indicated that elements of the 1st VC Regiment or the 54 ARVN Division were in the area, neither battalion or brigade operations as a whole produced any indication of the presence of main force units. First gains taken during Operation HOOD RIVER were, without exception, from local force units.

The 1-25th opened its part in the operation on 5 August with air assaults and its assigned area of operations, code named VEGNIE. Upon completion of the combat assault, each element began search and destroy operations in its