

THE 11TH ARMORED CAVALRY REGIMENT IN VIETNAM,  
JANUARY 1969 THROUGH JUNE 1970

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
Military History

by

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2002

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# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188), Washington, DC 20503.

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE <p style="text-align: center;">31 May 02</p>	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED <p style="text-align: center;">Master's Thesis 31 Jul 01--31 May 02</p>
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4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment In Vietnam, January 1969 Through June 1970	5. FUNDING NUMBERS
---	--------------------

6. AUTHOR(S)  Major Edward James Chesney	
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7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD 1 Reynolds Ave. Ft. Leavenworth, KS 66027-1352	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
---	--

9. SPONSORING/ MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSORING/MONITORING
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11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

12a. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT  Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.	12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE  A
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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)

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This thesis concludes that armored warfare in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam showed that, with ingenuity, armor could be used in ways no one had thought possible. The troopers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment tailored their doctrine to the situation and environment coming up with countless creative adaptations to make armor a useful tool. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment could and did do tremendous damage to enemy units when the enemy chose to stand and fight, but ultimately, that choice remained the enemy's.

14. SUBJECT TERMS Vietnam, Cambodia, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Armor, Atlas Wedge, Montana Raider, Long Reach I and II	15. NUMBER OF PAGES 116
	16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UL
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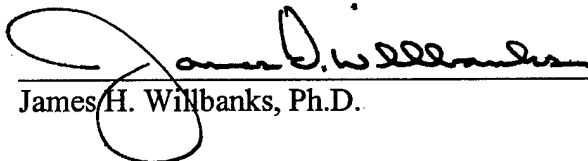
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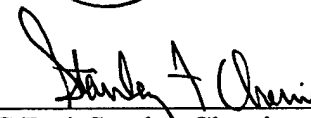
THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

Name of Candidate: MAJ Edward James Chesney

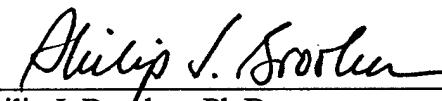
Thesis Title: The 11th Armored Cavalry in Vietnam, January 1969 through June 1970

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (Reference to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

THE 11TH ARMORED CAVALRY REGIMENT IN VIETNAM, JANUARY 1969 THROUGH JUNE 1970, by MAJ Edward J. Chesney, 104 pages.

This is a historical narrative of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's operations in Vietnam after the 1968 Tet Offensive through the Cambodian Incursion. The regiment's operations provide a historical example of an armored formation fighting on a noncontiguous battlefield as envisioned in FM 3.0. It briefly describes the Army's initial deployment of armor to Vietnam and examines changes made to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's Table of Organization. Operations examined include: TREASURE ISLE, ATLAS WEDGE, MONTANA RAIDER, LONG REACH I and II, TEXAS TRAVELER, and TOAN THANG 43.

This thesis concludes that armored warfare in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam showed that, with ingenuity, armor could be used in ways no one had thought possible. The troopers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment tailored their doctrine to the situation and environment coming up with countless creative adaptations to make armor a useful tool. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment could and did do tremendous damage to enemy units when the enemy chose to stand and fight, but ultimately, that choice remained the enemy's.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife and children for their support during this project. I would also like to offer my sincere appreciation to the many people who helped me develop and reseach this thesis particularly my committee, Dr. James Willbanks, BG(Ret) Stanley Cherrie, for their support and guidance with my thesis. Dale Andrade, Joel Meyerson, and John Carland from U.S. Army Center of Military History provided invaluable insight and support in developing this topic. Additionally, Cliff Snyder and Jeannine Swift from the National Archives and Records Administration from who gave freely of their time and expertise during my research.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	After Action Report
ACAV	Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle
ACTIV	Army Concept Team in Vietnam
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CMH	US Army Center of Military History
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
ORLL	Operations Report-Lessons Learned
RG	Record Group
RPG	Rocket Propelled Grenade
USARV	United States Army Vietnam

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is not viewed as an armored war. The popular perception is of light infantry fighting in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam. Few realize that the US Army had substantial armored forces in Vietnam. The term, armored unit, as used here is generic and includes tank and mechanized infantry battalions and companies, as well as armored cavalry squadrons and troops--all forces that went into battle mounted. These units were fighting an area war on a noncontiguous battlefield much the way the new version of FM-3, *Operations*, envisions future battlefields; thus, studying armored operations in Vietnam has some applicability to today's operational environment.

By late 1968, the US Army had committed three tank battalions, nine armored cavalry squadrons, and nine mechanized infantry battalions to fight in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> More than one-half of these units operated in the lowlands around Saigon under the command of II Field Force Vietnam. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was the largest armored formation to fight in Vietnam and represented 25 percent of II Field Force's armored and mechanized resources.<sup>2</sup> The Regiment spent over five years combating the *People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, or North Vietnamese)* and the *People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF, or Viet Cong)* throughout the III Corps Tactical Zone and Cambodia.<sup>3</sup>

The 11th Armored Cavalry's operations in Vietnam provide a historical example of how armor operated in a restrictive environment, but few current officers know much about armor's role in Vietnam. Recognizing that the Army will deploy into restrictive environments in the future and that armor will be part of that force, several questions

arise about the regiment's experiences. What types of operations did the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment conduct in Vietnam from January 1969 through June 1970? How effective was the regiment, and did it contribute to achieving II Field Force Vietnam's operational objectives? Was the increased logistical burden of an armored unit offset by the regiment's operational capabilities within Vietnam?

This thesis will focus only on the operations of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment from January 1969 through June 1970, to include operations where the regiment, squadrons, and troops were under the operational control of other units within II Field Force. By late 1968, the regiment's tactics, techniques, and procedures were refined and combat proven, and the operational situation after the Tet Offensive provided II Field Force an opportunity to go on a sustained offensive. During this period the 11th Armored Cavalry played a major role in II Field Force's offensive and provides several historical examples of squadron-sized and regimental-sized operations in a noncontiguous environment.

### Background

The II Field Force Vietnam was activated in March 1966. The largest Army combat command in the theater, it had territorial responsibility for III and IV Corps Tactical Zones--the southern half of South Vietnam (see figure 1). Saigon, the country's capital, fell within III Corps, and its defense was critical to the survival of the South Vietnamese government. At its height in November 1968, II Field Force's major ground maneuver units were the 1st Cavalry Division, 1st Infantry Division, 9th Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, 199th Light Infantry Brigade, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The II Field Force used its

armor almost exclusively in III Corps because of the armor's limited mobility in IV Corps' Mekong River Delta.

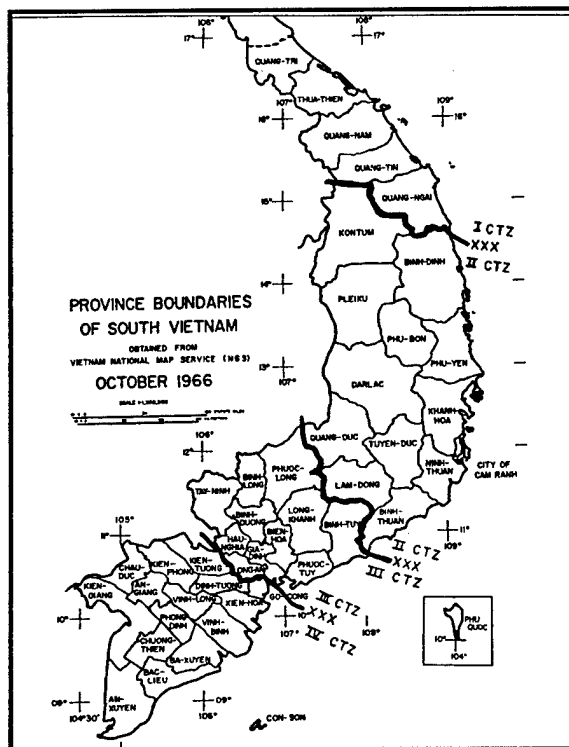


Figure 1. Corps Tactical Zones of South Vietnam. *Source:* Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam (MACOV), 28 March 1967, p. 15, folder 319-0016-141-30, box 6, Command After Action Reports, Records of the Army Staff, Record Group 319, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

The III Corps Tactical Zone was also important to the enemy. Gains there by the Communists reinforced the perception that the Saigon government was ineffective. In addition to the local force guerrilla units, there were four divisions of main force troops--the *1st* and *7th Divisions* of the *People's Army of Vietnam* and the *5th* and *9th Divisions* of the *People's Liberation Armed Forces*, commonly referred to as the Viet Cong. These divisions operated and were supplied from base areas along the Cambodian border. In

addition there were twenty North Vietnamese and twenty Viet Cong battalions assigned to semipermanent areas of operations in III Corps.<sup>4</sup> These enemy forces were principally light infantry formations supported by machine guns, mortars, and rockets.

In 1965, few within the US Army's senior leadership believed that Vietnam was a suitable place for armored forces. Three factors seemed to weigh against their use. First, the war in Vietnam was seen as a guerrilla conflict. Armor, it was believed, would be ineffective against a shadowy force that rarely stood and fought. Second, Vietnam's terrain and climate, with its jungles, rice paddies, and monsoon rains, were less than ideal for the employment of armor. Third, armored battalions required significantly more logistical support and support troops than a comparable light infantry battalion. These factors led senior Army leaders to believe armor should not be sent to South Vietnam.

#### Geography and Trafficability

Geography was one of the key factors that caused the senior leaders to view armored formations as inappropriate for service in Vietnam. However, significant portions of Vietnam were suited to armor's employment. The III Corps Tactical Zone was one such area. It encompassed eleven provinces with an area of over 11,500 square miles and a population of nearly four million. A large portion of the zone's population clustered around the city of Saigon. The terrain of III Corps consisted mainly of piedmont with rolling hills and plains. The area north and west of Saigon was the flattest portion of the piedmont, and although it is dotted with dense jungle, the region was the most suitable in Vietnam for using armored forces. Rugged, forest-covered hills ran along the northern border of III Corps. To the east were coastal lowlands characterized by sandy beaches, rice fields, and flat-floored valleys. Therefore, most of the terrain in

III Corps was trafficable by armored and mechanized forces. However, southeast of Saigon was the Rung Sat Special Zone, a dense mangrove swamp that was impassable to armor. Further to the south was the Mekong Delta with its marshes and rice paddies, which were also not conducive to armored operations.<sup>5</sup>

Movement by tanks and other vehicles throughout III Corps depended on the weather. During the dry season armor could traverse over 90 percent of the terrain in the corps tactical zone (see figure 2), but by late July or early August, tracked vehicles began to bog down in the thickening mud caused by frequent rains. In southern III Corps, the upper reaches of the Mekong Delta were perennially wet, further limiting armor's cross-country capability (see figure 3). Generally, wheeled vehicles were restricted to roads and trails.<sup>6</sup>

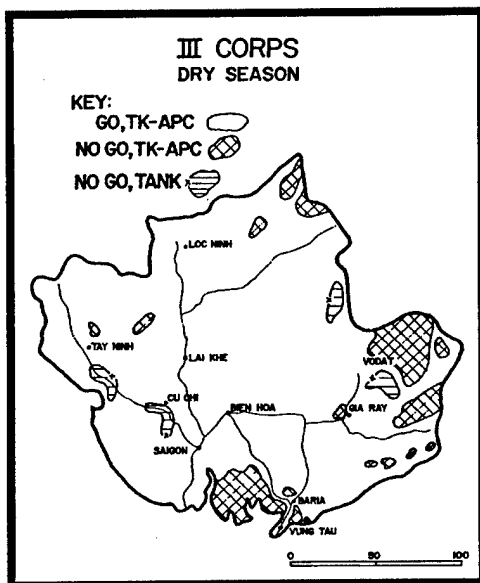


Figure 2. III Corps Dry Season Trafficability. *Source: MACOV, p. 35.*

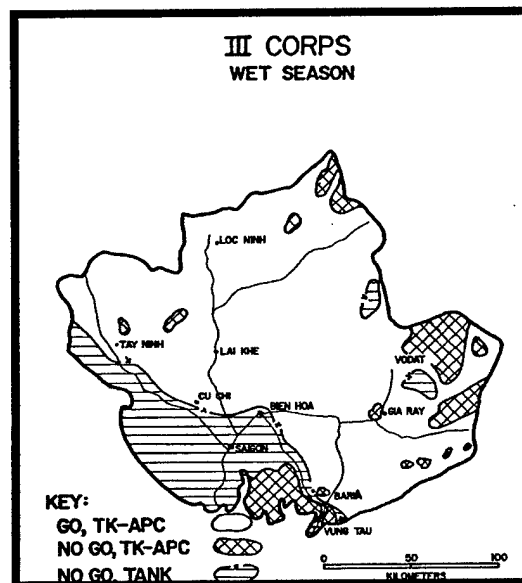


Figure 3. III Corps Wet Season Trafficability. *Source: MACOV, p. 37.*

### Initial Deployment

When the 1st Infantry Division deployed to South Vietnam in the fall of 1965, the division commander, Major General Jonathan O. Seaman, wanted to bring his armored units along as well. After some debate, General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army, allowed the division to deploy with its divisional cavalry, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and the squadron's M48A3 Patton medium tanks to test the effectiveness of armor in the Vietnam environment. The M48A3 was armed with a 90-millimeter cannon, 7.62-millimeter coaxial machine gun, and a .50-caliber commander's machine gun. In Vietnam an additional machine gun was added for the loader's use. The tank weighed nearly fifty-two tons when combat loaded. If armor proved useful, General Johnson was prepared to reinforce the division with a tank battalion.<sup>7</sup>

The 1st Infantry Division moved into III Corps in October 1965, and heavy fighting was soon at hand. During the early morning of 12 November, Troop A, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, occupied a night defensive position with Company A, 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, along Highway 13 just south of Ap Bau Bang in Binh Long Province in northern III Corps. At dawn the enemy attacked, assaulting the Americans repeatedly throughout the morning. At one point, Troop A's armored personnel carriers swept out from their positions, raked the attackers with intense machine-gun fire, and pushed the enemy back. This action clearly demonstrated to Army leaders that armor's mobility and lethality could be a valuable asset on Vietnam's battlefields. The Army quickly approved Major General Fredrick C. Weyand's request to deploy his 25th Infantry Division to Vietnam with its organic armored units.<sup>8</sup>

The early results from the battlefield also shifted opinions about armor's role in Vietnam. General William C. Westmoreland, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), commander from June 1964 to July 1968, was initially skeptical of the armor's utility in Vietnam. He later wrote, "I was mistaken in the belief that modern armor had only a limited role in the fighting in Vietnam. . . . [M]uch of the land was in fact solid terrain, and roads and bridges could be improved to accommodate tanks."<sup>9</sup> However, when he was notified that the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was available for service, he believed its organization was too heavy.<sup>10</sup>

#### Organization

General Westmoreland requested modification of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's table of organization before it deployed to Vietnam. The most significant change was replacing the M48A3 medium tanks and M114 armored personnel carriers in the armored cavalry platoons with armored cavalry assault vehicles (ACAV). The ACAV was an M113 armored personnel carrier modified with an FMC Corporation armament subsystem, which consisted of a shield for the .50-caliber machine gun and a pedestal-mounted M60 machine gun and shield on each side of the ACAV (see figure 4). The ACAV operated much like a tank in that the crew fought from the vehicle and rarely dismounted except to search enemy positions. Some units also mounted an M60 machine gun at the driver position. The vehicle weighed just over twelve tons when combat loaded.



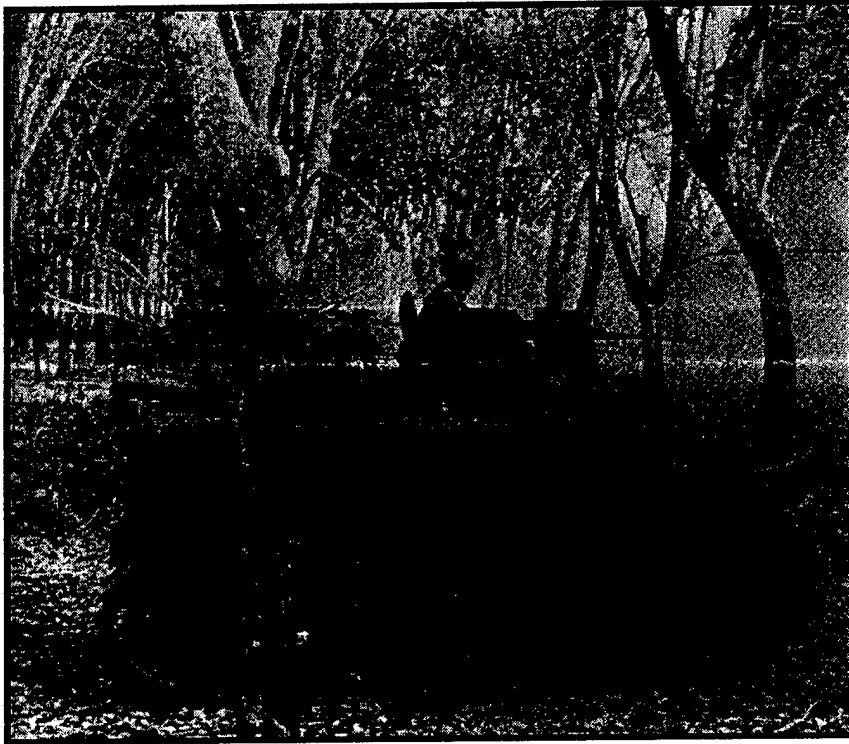


Figure 4. ACAV. Source: *The Blackhorse No 1*, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1968, p.13, Historians files, U. S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C.

This change reduced the number of tanks in the regiment from 132 to 51 which resided in three tank companies. The modified table of organization increased the regiment's overall personnel strength by 323 while the number of armored vehicles remained relatively unchanged. The substitution of ACAVs for tanks was made to increase the regiment's cross country mobility in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the regiment's structure in figure 5, it is apparent that it lacked organic combat support. To remedy this situation various units were permanently attached to the regiment during its tour in Vietnam. The attachments included engineer, chemical, military intelligence, transportation, avionics, and medical units. The attached units

added over 500 personnel to the regiment's strength (see figure 6). The regiment received direct support maintenance from the 185th Maintenance Battalion.<sup>12</sup>

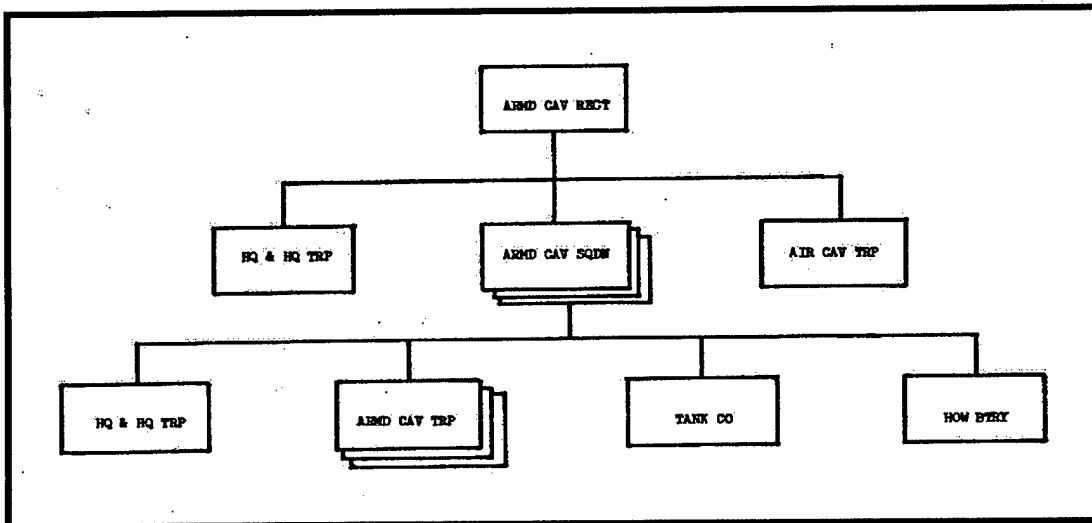


Figure 5. Organizational Chart for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. *Source:* MACOV, 164.

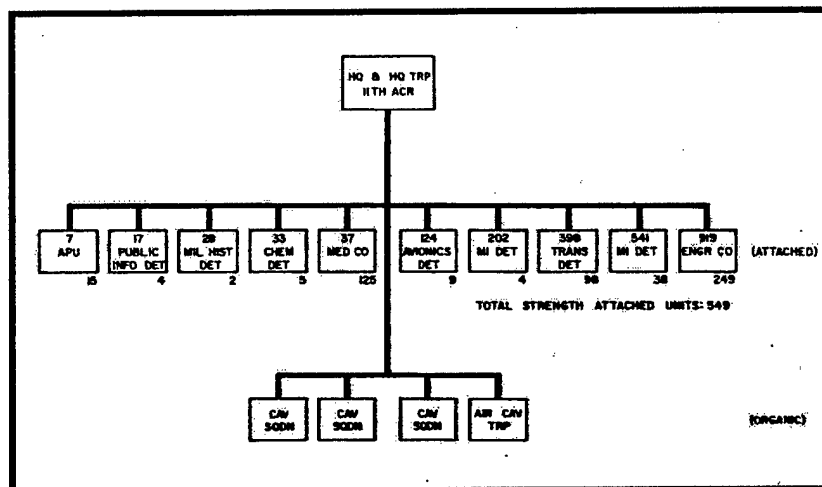


Figure 6. Administrative and Support Organization 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. *Source:* Report, Optimum Mix of Armored Vehicles for use in Stability Operations, Army Concept Team in Vietnam, ACTIV project Number ACG 69F, 27 January 1971, G14, Historian files, CMH.

The regiment's combat power consisted of three ground maneuver squadrons and an air cavalry troop. Each squadron contained three reconnaissance troops, a tank company, and a self-propelled 155-millimeter howitzer battery. The squadron's howitzer battery provided the ground maneuver units immediate artillery support when in contact. The regiment's major weapons systems included 48 helicopters, 51 M48A3 Patton medium tanks, 296 M113 armored personnel carriers, 18 M109 self-propelled 155-millimeter howitzers, 9 M132 flamethrower tracks, 27 81-millimeter mortars, 476 .50-caliber machine guns, and 727 7.62-millimeter machine guns.<sup>13</sup>

The principal maneuver elements of the regiment's ground squadrons were its three armored cavalry troops and one tank company. These troops consisted of a headquarters platoon and three armored cavalry platoons, each with three scout sections and one infantry and one mortar squad (see figure 7). Armored cavalry platoons were unique in that they were a combined arms unit at the platoon level. Additionally, each tank company had a headquarters platoon with two tanks and three tank platoons each with five tanks.

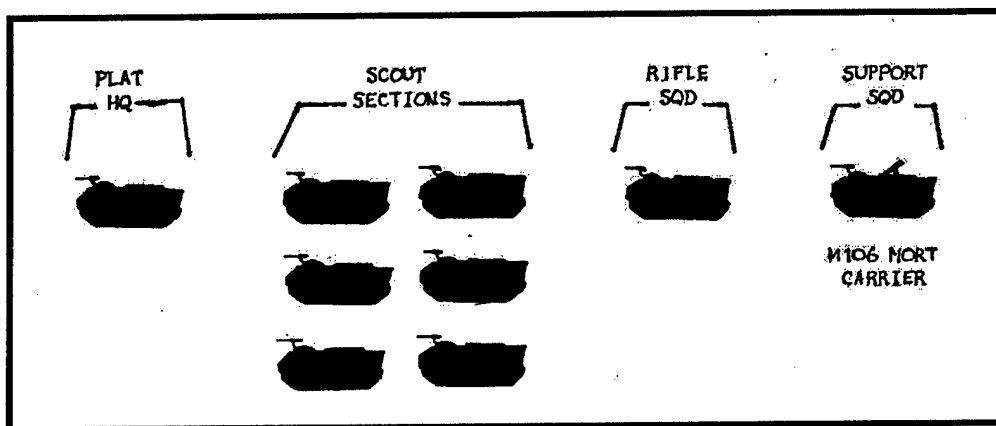


Figure 7. Armored Cavalry Platoon, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.  
 Source: MACOV, 165.

### Early Years, 1966-1968

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, commanded by Colonel William W. Cobb, arrived at the port of Vung Tau on 7 September 1966 and shortly thereafter engaged the enemy in heavy fighting. The regiment established Blackhorse Base Camp at Long Giao south of Xuan Loc in Long Khanh Province northeast of Saigon. The regiment's initial contact with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces involved defeating convoy ambushes during Operation ATLANTA on 21 November and 2 December.

During 1967 and 1968, the regiment refined its use of indirect fires, air support, maintenance, and supply. Typically, the regiment had at least one squadron detached to one of the divisions operating in III Corps Tactical Zone. Regimental-level operations with all three squadrons available were rare. The regiment operated throughout III Corps Tactical Zone during this period.

### Missions: Advantages and Limitations

Over the next two years the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was used in a variety of combat operations. The most common missions were reconnaissance in force, counterattack, defense, cordon and search, sweeps, convoy security, protection for land clearing companies, and reaction force. Although armored units could capably perform all these tasks, they proved better at some tasks than others. Armor's most significant advantages were firepower, mobility, and protection from small-arms fire. The regiment provided II Field Force a great deal of operational mobility, such as during Operation ATTLEBORO in November 1966, when 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, moved over 200 kilometers in a single day.<sup>14</sup>

Resupply and maintenance were the regiment's Achilles heel. The noncontiguous battlefield in Vietnam meant there were few secure avenues either to evacuate damaged vehicles or to move supplies forward. Dealing with these issues required forethought and detailed planning. Before an operation the regiment typically surveyed the existing support areas in its upcoming area of operation. It conducted an assessment of these facilities and compared them against their expected requirements. If necessary, the regiment constructed new facilities or forward bases to support its operations. During late 1968 and early 1969, CH-47 Chinook helicopters airlifted much of the food, water, fuel, ammunition, and spare parts to units in the field from forward support areas. By mid-1969, road accessibility and safety increased to the point where trucks could take the place of helicopters in delivering supplies to units in the field.<sup>15</sup>

Although most areas in III Corps were accessible to armored vehicles, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment often required engineer support, especially during the rainy season or when crossing streams. In the jungle the cross-country rate of movement was sometimes only 1 1/2 to 2 kilometers per hour, because the armored vehicles would literally have to push their way through the trees and brush, a technique known as jungle-busting. Tanks usually led the way, followed by the armored personnel carriers (see figure 8). Extensive jungle-busting operations took a heavy toll on all types of armored vehicles, especially tanks; and jungle-busting, along with mines, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), and maintenance failures, made sustaining operations for any longer than ten days nearly impossible.<sup>16</sup> The regiment's units required a one-to-two-day maintenance stand-down after such operations.

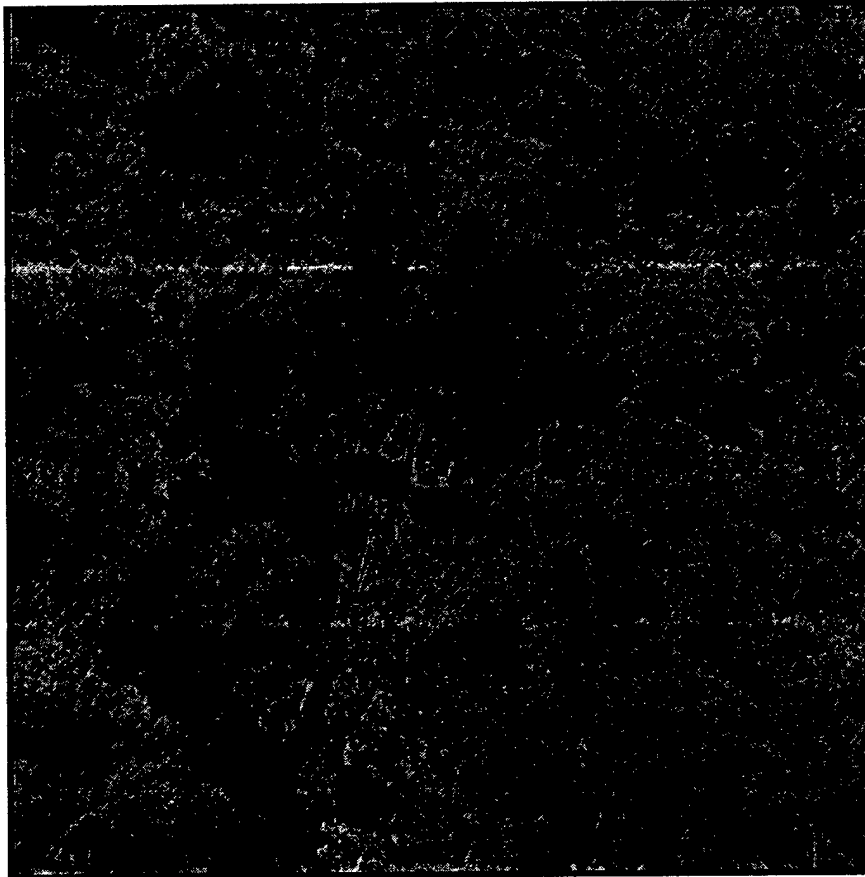


Figure 8. ACAVs Jungle-busting. *Source:* The Blackhorse, No 1, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1968, 21.

By late 1968 the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment had a workable maintenance system in place, though it was far from ideal. The regiment's squadrons traveled with their organizational maintenance assets, but for immediate direct support maintenance, direct support contact teams deployed into the forward support areas. Squadrons pushed these contact teams forward to the nearest firebase with a heavy maintenance capability and collocated the contact teams with the tenant maintenance unit. This was known as "satelliting." By setting up with an established maintenance unit, the contact team had

access to both repair parts and backup maintenance. Satelliting provided a single point of contact to the supported squadron and also gave the contact team much greater flexibility by allowing it to tailor its maintenance support to the operation.<sup>17</sup> The regiment augmented its supply of spare parts by removing parts from destroyed vehicles.

Damaged and inoperative vehicles presented the regiment with evacuation problems. Operational combat vehicles towed disabled vehicles behind them to drop-off points. Evacuation by air was also an option for armored personnel carriers. The M113 armored personnel carriers, after their tracks were removed, could be airlifted by the CH-54 Sky Crane.

#### Operational Concept and the II Field Force Mission

The operational situation confronting General Westmoreland from 1965 through June 1968 led him to emphasize the main force war. When he assumed command of MACV, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were on the offensive, but, after suffering heavy losses during the Tet Offensive in early the 1968, they had to reconstitute many of their units. The enemy was now on the defensive, so General Creighton W. Abrams became the MACV commander in July 1968 under different operational conditions. He saw an opportunity to alter the balance between pacification and the main force conflict. He believed the different facets of the war in Vietnam were a seamless continuum--he called it "One War." Abrams saw the main force conflict and pacification as being interlinked and inseparable, believing that progress in both areas was essential for success in Vietnam.

General Abrams' strategic goal was to provide meaningful security to the Vietnamese people in expanding areas of increasing civil control. To accomplish his

strategic goal, he emphasized the concept of area security, which required mobility, aggressive expansion, and flexibility of allied units. The essential requirement was to separate the enemy from the population. To that end, US Army and Vietnamese forces sought to drive the enemy's main force units away from the population while eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructure within the populated areas.<sup>18</sup> The 11th Armored Cavalry was extensively employed against the enemy's main force units.

Through the first six months of 1968, which included the Tet Offensive, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units suffered over 150,000 casualties. These casualties, especially among midlevel officers and noncommissioned officers, reduced their combat effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> They expended huge amounts of men and materiel, but failed to provoke a general uprising or the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army. As a result of this setback, the enemy avoided contact with allied units in order to gain time to regroup. However, despite the need to conserve strength, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong still sought to inflict casualties on American units through ambushes and attacks by fire against firebases and outposts.<sup>20</sup>

Supplying their forces in South Vietnam was a difficult and time-consuming process for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. In order to conduct offensive operations, they had to pre-position their supplies. Porters carried weapons, ammunition, rice, and medical supplies from Cambodia to caches inside South Vietnam (see figure 9). A key component of Abrams' "One War" strategy was to damage the enemy's logistical system--disrupting, interdicting, and destroying those pre-positioning efforts.<sup>21</sup> This effort delayed and or weakened enemy offensive operations.



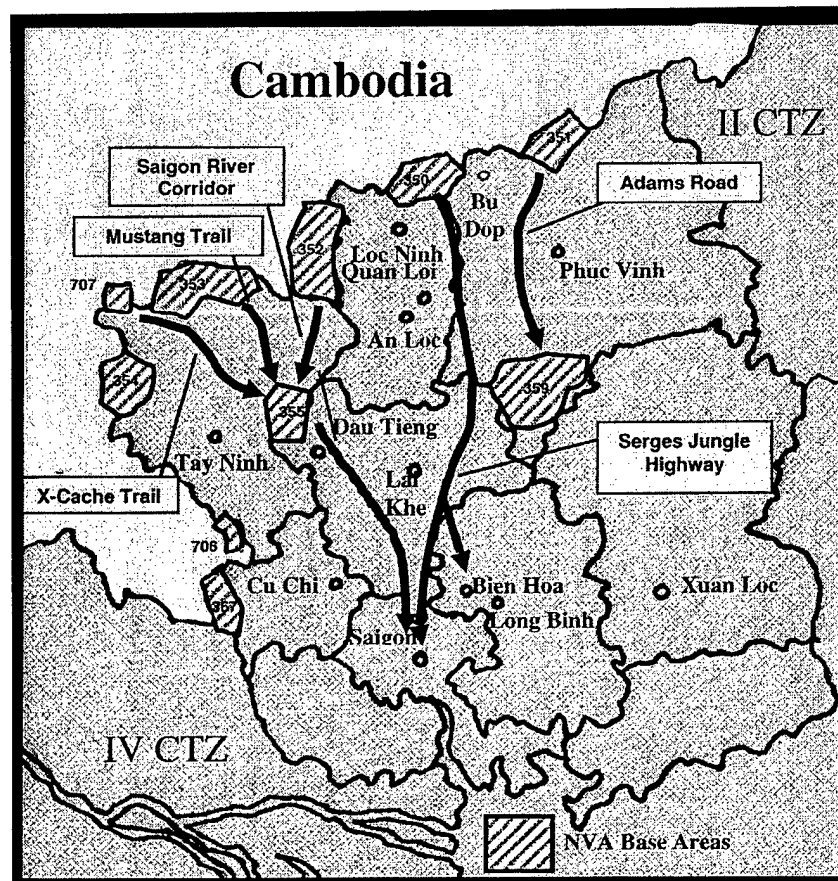


Figure 9. North Vietnamese Base Areas and Infiltration Routes into III Corps Tactical Zone. *Source:* After Action Review, *The Shield and the Hammer: The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in War Zone C and Western III Corps*, 14th Military History Detachment, undated, pp. Maps 3-6, box 14, Historian's Background Files, 14th Military History Detachment, RG 472, NARA; Colonel Donn A. Starry, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 12 Jun 70, Historians files, CMH; Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1978), 170; and J. D. Coleman, *Incursion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 13.

General Abrams viewed III Corps, especially the vital ring around Saigon, as the key to South Vietnam's defense. Substantial gains there by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong would render the other defenses throughout the country irrelevant. The II Field Force's mission was to conduct sustained unilateral or combined operations to

destroy enemy main and guerrilla forces and to neutralize their bases and supply distribution points, especially in the vital Saigon, Gia Dinh Province area.<sup>22</sup> To accomplish this, the II Field Force deployed its forces in layers (see figure 10). The outer defense ran along the Cambodian border and the northern III Corps boundary. The 1st Cavalry Division, with brigades from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions, formed this layer and sought to erode the enemy and keep him so weak and occupied that he could not interfere with pacification efforts. Also, the Americans were to reduce and, if possible, choke off the flow of supplies and replacements into the interior of III Corps.

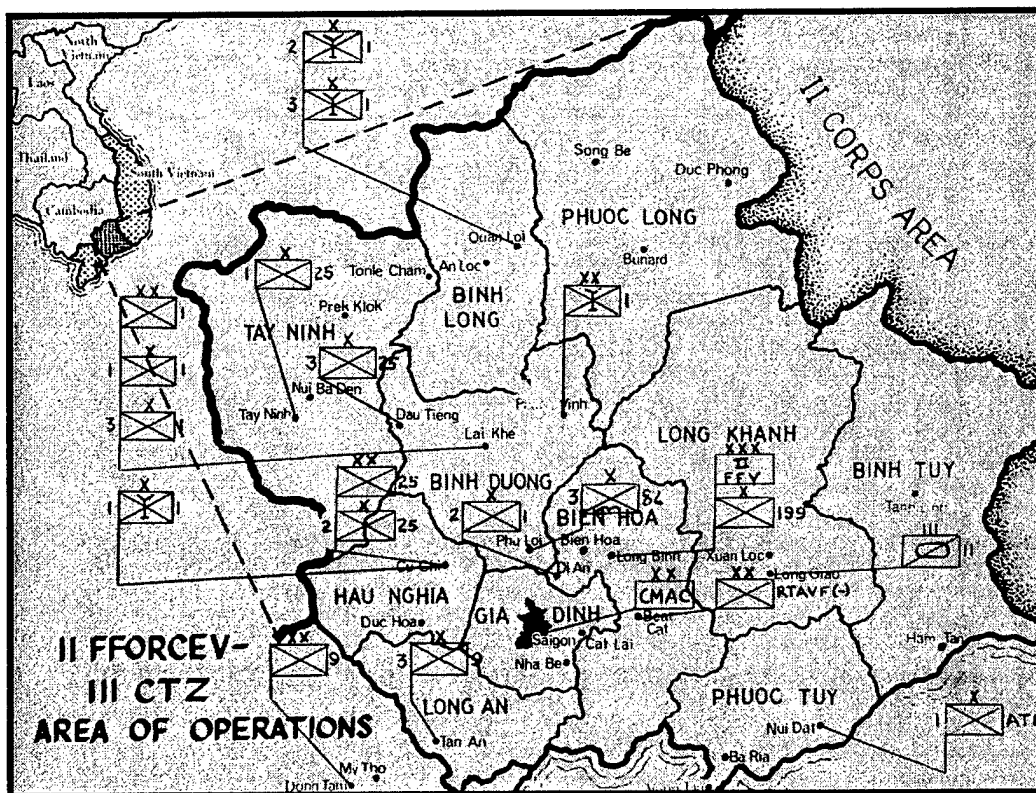


Figure 10. II Field Force Vietnam Unit Distribution. *Source:* Operations Report-Lessons Learned, 1 November 1968 – 31 January 1969, II FFV, undated, Incl. 2, box 18, ORLLs, USARV Command Historian, RG 472, NARA.

The second layer was positioned from thirty to seventy kilometers from Saigon. The brigades from the 1st, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment kept pressure on the enemy already deep within South Vietnam and sought to destroy base areas in their respective areas of operation. The inner layer was the Capital Military Assistance Command, which had control of the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in and immediately around Saigon with the mission of interdicting enemy infiltration into the city.<sup>23</sup> The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment would play an important role in Abrams' new offensive look.

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<sup>1</sup>Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington, D.C.: US News Books, 1981), 93-94, 124-60.

<sup>2</sup>Report, Optimum Mix of Armored Vehicles for Use in Stability Operations, Army Concept Team in Vietnam, ACTIV Project Number ACG 69F, 27 January 1971, p. II-6, Historians files, US Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C.; and Operational Report-Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 November 1968-31 January 1969, II Field Force Vietnam (FFV), encl. 8, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup>Enemy units referenced in the text are italicized.

<sup>4</sup>ORLL, 1 February-30 April 69, II FFV, undated, pp. 13-16, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>5</sup>Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam (MACOV), 28 March 1967, pp. 35-36, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-48.

<sup>7</sup>General Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1978), 56.

<sup>8</sup>Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 63.

<sup>9</sup>William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 178.

<sup>10</sup>1966 Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Command History, 70-71, CMH Historian files.

<sup>11</sup>ORLL, 11 March–31 October 1966, 11th ACR, 7 December 1966, p. 3, CMH Historian files.

<sup>12</sup>Report, Optimum Mix of Armor, pp. G14-15.

<sup>13</sup>MACOV, pp. 164-166.

<sup>14</sup>After Action Review (AAR) Operation Attleboro, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, not dated, box 2, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Asst CofS S3, AARs, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>15</sup>Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel George S. Patton, Commander, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Headquarters, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 7 April 1969, pp. 13-14, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>16</sup>AAR, Operation Montana Raider, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 29 May 1969, 24, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>17</sup>Senior Officer Debrief, Colonel George S. Patton, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup>One War: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Command Overview 1968-1972, Headquarters MACV, Chap 2, 15-16, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>19</sup>MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, p. 199, CMH.

<sup>20</sup>Resolution No 9, Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), July 69, pp. 25-35, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>21</sup>Lt. Gen. Julian J. Ewell and Maj. Gen. Ira A. Hunt Jr., *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974), 196.

<sup>22</sup>Joint General Staff and MACV, "Combined Campaign Plan for Military Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, 1969," 30 September 1968, p. 14, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>23</sup>Ewell and Hunt, 197-99; and ORLL, 1 November 1968–31 January 1969, II FFV, undated, encl 1, box 18, ORLLs, US Army, Vietnam (USARV) Command Historian, RG 472, NARA.

## CHAPTER 2

### WORKING THE SYSTEM

As 1969 began, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was based east of Saigon at Long Giao conducting Operation TOAN THANG (Complete Victory), Phase II. The regiment was under the operational control of the 1st Infantry Division, which had been charged with the protection of Saigon and the main routes of communication within the division's tactical area of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the division conducted missions to support the MACV's Accelerated Pacification Campaign, which was designed, to upgrade the security level of 250 South Vietnamese hamlets within the II Field Force area of operation. Providing security to the population was critical to the success of the war effort. The division commander told his battalion and brigade commanders, "It does not matter how many enemy units we destroy on the battlefield if we lose the hamlets. . . . [I]f this comes to pass we will indeed have lost the war."<sup>2</sup> To prosecute the pacification effort, the division commander gave areas of responsibility with targeted hamlets to his 2d and 3d Brigades and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

#### Operation TREASURE ISLE

As a component of the 1st Infantry Division's Accelerated Pacification Campaign, the 11th Armored Cavalry conducted Operation TREASURE ISLE, which was a cordon and search operation against the village of Tan Binh. Armored forces were frequently tasked to conduct joint cordon and search operations of villages with the South Vietnamese Army and national police to uncover and eliminate the Viet Cong infrastructure. The village of Tan Binh in Binh Duong Province northwest of Saigon was

a source of concern for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The village sat astride the main supply route from Ben Cat to Phuoc Vinh. With a population of approximately 2,200, the village had been under Viet Cong control since 1965 and was believed to be a principal source of enemy support in the area.

Colonel George S. Patton IV, commander of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, was determined to root out and destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure in Tan Binh.<sup>3</sup> He had the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 5th Infantry Division, available for the operation. Operation TREASURE ISLE was Colonel Patton's plan for an extended cordon and search operation of Tan Binh Village. What separated this cordon and search from others was his determination to keep the seal in place as long as necessary to find the Viet Cong. The initial mission of sealing the village went to the 2d Squadron because of its ability to advance rapidly on the village and surprise the enemy.

Just before midnight on 10 January, the 2d Squadron closed in on Tan Binh from three directions. Artillery fired preplanned missions north of the village to mask the noise of the approaching armored vehicles. By 0300, the 2d Squadron had closed the seal. No one was allowed to leave the village. The next morning the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, deployed by truck from Ben Cat to assist in the cordon and search. Once 3d Battalion arrived and took up positions, 2d Squadron's Troops F and G returned to their respective firebases.

In the early afternoon of the eleventh the hunt for the Viet Cong began in earnest. National police and South Vietnamese troops screened the village's population, searching for the Viet Cong. During the days that followed, troops scoured the village and detoured

traffic around the village. Civil affairs troops were also active. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's S-5 section contained an attached Armed Propaganda Team made up of fifteen former Viet Cong trained in psychological operations, political warfare, and intelligence activities, that worked to persuade the villagers to identify the Viet Cong. Other activities included daily medical and dental sick call, showing progovernment movies, and building a village school.

The first few days of the search turned up few Viet Cong. The villagers believed this search was just like all the other searches and would soon end. On day four the villagers realized that the seal was indefinite, and several Viet Cong rallied or changed sides by surrendering to government forces. These ralliers provided valuable intelligence on the Viet Cong infrastructure in the village. Guided by these defectors, new searches uncovered camouflaged bunkers and tunnel complexes full of weapons, ammunition, and food supplies.

The seal of Tan Binh ended around noon on 18 January, but the operation was not over. South Vietnamese forces intercepted and detained several Viet Cong operatives trying to infiltrate back into Tan Binh. Prior to Operation TREASURE ISLE, almost no Viet Cong had been taken in Tan Binh. This operation netted seven Viet Cong prisoners and thirty ralliers, while another fifty-one low-level Viet Cong support personnel came over to the government. Based on intelligence gathered on the Viet Cong infrastructure in Tan Binh, the operation captured 65 percent of known Viet Cong and identified many other possible members.<sup>4</sup> Armor played a role in sealing the village, though air assaulting light infantry around Tanh Binh could just as easily have accomplished the mission.



### M551 Sheridan Fielding

In December 1968 Colonel Patton received word that the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment might get some of the new M551 Sheridans. The Sheridan is an Armored Reconnaissance-Airborne Assault Vehicle armed with a 152-millimeter gun launcher capable of firing both a conventional family of ammunition and the Shillelagh missile, a 7.62-millimeter coaxial machine gun, and a .50-caliber commander's machine gun (see figure 11). In Vietnam an additional machine gun was added for the loader's use. The Sheridan weighed just over seventeen tons when combat loaded. Lieutenant Colonel Merritte W. Ireland, commander of 1st Squadron, agreed to take the new vehicles.

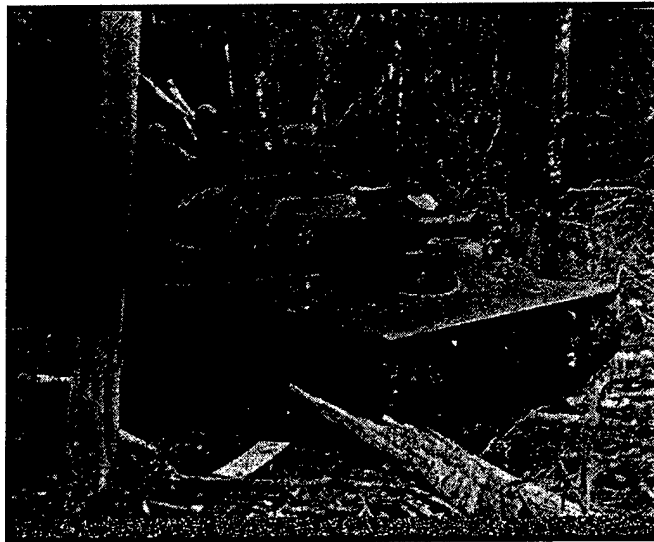


Figure 11. Sheridan Operating During Operation MONTANA RAIDER.  
*Source:* The Blackhorse No. 1, 11th Armored Cav Regt, December 1968, 21, Historians files, U. S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C.

In late January the 1st Squadron began new equipment fielding of the Sheridan at Blackhorse Base Camp. Each armored cavalry platoon exchanged two ACAVs for three

Sheridans. The crews received one week of training, focusing on the turret and fire control systems, but there was no integrated platoon training. The vehicles were not equipped with the electronics for firing the Shillelagh missile. The reorganized armored cavalry platoons each had a Sheridan section with three M551 and two scout sections with two ACAVs each.<sup>5</sup>

The addition of the Sheridan greatly increased the combat power and capabilities within the armored cavalry platoons. The Sheridan had about the same cross-country mobility of the ACAV, but two of the vehicle's characteristics provided major firepower gains for the platoons. First, the available ammunition for the 152-millimeter main gun offered multiple engagement options to the platoon leaders. The gun fired high-explosive, white phosphorus, and antipersonnel rounds.<sup>6</sup> The high-explosive round gave the platoons the ability to destroy enemy bunkers with direct fire. The antipersonnel round was a beehive round that contained 9,800 flechettes. This round proved more effective than the M48's 90-millimeter antipersonnel ammunition because the flechettes were heavier and because there were a lot more of them. Second, the gunner's sight for the main gun and the coaxially mounted machine gun was the XM-44 night sight. The sight's nine-power magnification enabled gunners to see up to 900 meters at night and during periods of limited visibility.<sup>7</sup> After receiving and training on the Sheridan, Troops A and B deployed to the Bien Hoa area for the Tet buildup, where they soon came under fire.

Both troops were involved in a firefight on 23 February 1969. Troop A and a company of military police engaged two companies of the *K3 Battalion, 274th PLAF Regiment*. In an engagement lasting over eight hours, Troop A was reinforced by Troop

B and a company of infantry. Air strikes, artillery, and direct fire accounted for 111 enemy casualties and rendered the heavy weapons and mortar companies of the *K3 Battalion* combat ineffective. The Sheridans performed well in this action. An inspection of the enemy casualties after the battle revealed that over 80 percent had multiple fchette wounds.<sup>8</sup> By August all three squadrons received Sheridans for their armored cavalry platoons.

#### Operation ATLAS WEDGE

Through the early part of 1969, enemy activity was low, but just after the Tet cease-fire on 22 February, North Vietnamese incidents began to rise sharply throughout III Corps. These incidents continued into early March and were typically characterized by heavy attacks by fire and sapper attacks against American installations. The enemy's commitment of major ground elements was uncoordinated and very costly--their highest casualties since the post-Tet offensive in May 1968. Heavy logistical losses, combined with effective use of Air Force B-52 strikes against North Vietnamese units massing for the attack, weakened the enemy's offensive capacity. The enemy retreated into his base areas to prepare for his next offensive.<sup>9</sup>

The II Field Force received intelligence of increased enemy activity along the Saigon River infiltration corridor by elements of the *1st* and *7th PAVN Divisions*. In order to strike multiple segments of the Saigon River Corridor, II Field Force coordinated the activities of the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Cavalry Division. In late February, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, reinforced with Company C, 2d Battalion (Mechanized), 22d Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, fought the North Vietnamese in the southern Michelin Plantation in a three-day battle. The *101st*

*Regiment, 1st PAVN Division*, fought from well-constructed bunker complexes, but was driven from its positions, losing ninety-one soldiers.<sup>10</sup> This action further reinforced II Field Force's intelligence estimates of an enemy buildup.

Operation ATLAS WEDGE was II Field Force's response to the North Vietnamese buildup. The operation was to be a ten-battalion affair that included units from the 1st Infantry Division reinforced with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment under the division's operational control, the 25th Infantry Division, and the 1st Cavalry Division. The II Field Force held a planning conference on 16 March and issued the final orders for ATLAS WEDGE to begin on 19 March.

The focal point of the operation was the Michelin Plantation just east of Dau Tieng in Binh Duong Province.<sup>11</sup> The plantation had nearly eighty square kilometers of neatly planted rows of rubber trees with the trees forming a canopy, which allowed for little growth of ground vegetation. Trails and roads crisscrossed the entire area.

A primary goal of the operation was to hit the *7th PAVN Division* so hard that it would be incapable of offensive operations for some time to come. The 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, deployed to the west and northwest of the Michelin while the 11th Armored Cavalry attacked from the east along the "Giant Swath." This was a 600-meter-wide strip cut through the jungle from Highway 13 to the Michelin. Engineers moved forward along the route, laying armored vehicle launched bridges (AVLB) across streams to speed the regiment's movement into the plantation. The 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, deployed into areas south and east of the Michelin (see figure 12). The 11th Armored Cavalry and 1st Infantry Division, by attacking directly into the Michelin, would bear the brunt of the battle.



Figure 12. AVLB Extending its Bridge. *Source: Christopher F. Foss, ed., Janes Armor and Artillery 2000-2001 (Alexandria: Janes Information Group, Inc., 2001) 152.*

The 11th Armored Cavalry's Air Cavalry Troop launched an aerial reconnaissance of the area around the Michelin Plantation on the afternoon of 17 March. The helicopters observed large enemy troop concentrations in the northeastern Michelin and took heavy ground fire as they moved in for a closer look. The Air Cavalry Troop called in artillery, AH-1G Cobra gunships, and nine tactical air strikes. Based on the results of the aerial reconnaissance, the II Field Force extended the 11th Armored Cavalry's area of operation to include the entire Michelin and placed Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, which was already in the eastern Michelin, under the regiment's control. The 11th Armored Cavalry also further increased its task

organization by pulling 3d Squadron from operations in an area in northeastern Bien Hoa Province, known as the "Catcher's Mit" for ATLAS WEDGE.

The II Field Force initiated ATLAS WEDGE on 18 March, when Task Force 1-28 Infantry, 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, established Firebase Picardy six kilometers east of the Michelin Plantation to conduct reconnaissance-in-force and night patrol operations to the south and southeast of the plantation. Task Force 1-28 Infantry consisted of two of the battalion's organic rifle companies and Troop B, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry. The 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, air assaulted into a landing zone southeast of the Michelin and moved north-northwest towards the plantation. The rest of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, road marched from Di An just north of Saigon to begin operations west of Firebase Thunder I, six kilometers north of Lai Khe.<sup>12</sup>

The 11th Armored Cavalry made its move by air assaulting combined infantry and engineer teams into three choke points along the Giant Swath to sweep for mines and improve the speed of its move into the Michelin Plantation.<sup>13</sup> Behind the engineers was 1st Squadron, followed closely by 3d Squadron. Upon entering the Michelin, 1st Squadron put three troops abreast and moved to the southeast (see figure 13). They immediately came under small-arms and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire, but during a sharp ten-minute firefight the 1st Squadron rolled through the North Vietnamese position, killing twenty-four enemy soldiers.

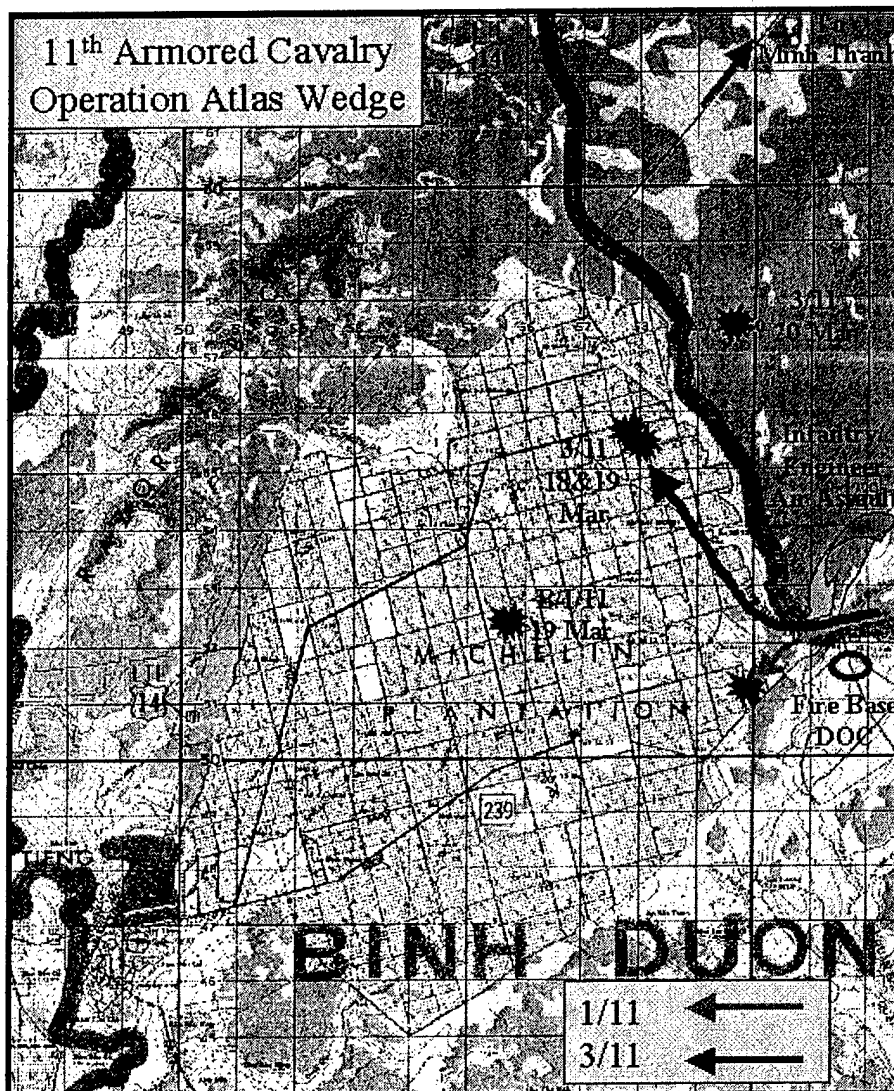


Figure 13. *Source:* After Action Report, Opn ATLAS WEDGE, 17th Military History Detachment, 19 April 1969, 6, box 4, AARs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, February–March 1969, RG 472, NARA; and AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 15 August 1969, 5, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

The 3d Squadron entered the Michelin and swung to the northwest toward an enemy base area located by an Air Cavalry Troop observation helicopter. In a series of contacts lasting into the early evening, the squadron killed forty-eight North Vietnamese

defenders and discovered five base camps. Troop M's attack and sweep through several enemy base camps developed into the largest firefight of the day. After attacking through the first base camp, Troop M was reinforced with two infantry platoons from Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry. They continued their attack into a second base area, overwhelming the enemy defenses. A sweep of both areas turned up thirty-four slain North Vietnamese and five prisoners. The prisoners belonged to the *C18 Antiaircraft Company, 209th Regiment, 7th PAVN Division*.<sup>14</sup>

The 11th Armored Cavalry continued to conduct troop-sized reconnaissance-in-force missions throughout the northern half of the Michelin. The nineteenth was spent destroying enemy bunker complexes, and there were several small contacts. The 3d Squadron was resupplied and then started its movement to a night defensive position north of the plantation. At 1800, Troop B, 1st Squadron, killed twenty-four and captured one North Vietnamese soldier in a quick twenty-minute firefight. Shortly thereafter, elements of a US Special Forces trained and led paramilitary forces known as a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), from the Minh Thanh Special Forces Camp northeast of the Michelin, encountered an enemy force. These CIDG forces had been placed under the operational control of the 3d Squadron the previous evening. The North Vietnamese were moving south in the northern Michelin along the 3d Squadron's line of march. The CIDG Company set up a hasty ambush, killing several of the enemy, but the North Vietnamese broke contact and retreated north. The 3d Squadron quickly reinforced, putting Troop L and Company M on line and sweeping north to reestablish contact. A two-hour firefight ensued, with 3d Squadron calling in artillery, helicopter gunships, and Air Force Spooky aircraft (an AC-47 with three 7.62-millimeter gatling guns). The end



result was twenty-four enemy dead and one captured.<sup>15</sup> The 3d Squadron went into a night defensive position north of the Michelin.

During the early morning of 20 March, three B-52 strikes hit northeast of the Michelin Plantation. The 11th Armored Cavalry inserted its Aero Rifle Platoon to conduct a bomb damage assessment, while the rest of the regiment continued its reconnaissance-in-force missions throughout the Michelin, locating enemy supply caches and destroying bunker complexes for the remainder of the day.

While conducting the bomb damage assessment, the Aero Rifle Platoon came under heavy fire and was pinned down around 1400. The fire was coming from a bunker complex that had not been hit by the morning's B-52 strike. The Air Cavalry Troop provided fire support and requested ground reinforcements.

The 3d Squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel John W. McEnery, sent Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry--a mixed team with one platoon each of infantry, ACAVs, and tanks--to relieve the Aero Rifle Platoon. Company A followed behind the tank platoon and immediately came under RPG and small-arms fire. The tanks cut a swath around the bunker complex and then turned to attack through it. The RPG fire destroyed three tanks, and a fourth fell into a bomb crater after the tank commander was blinded from the splash of an RPG against his turret. Suddenly, the relief force was down to an ACAV platoon, an infantry platoon, and one operational tank. However, the tank's radio was ruined, making coordination with the other vehicles nearly impossible. Realizing this, Lieutenant Colonel McEnery landed and led another attack through the bunker complex, riding on the back deck of the lone tank. Despite being wounded by grenade fragments, McEnery coordinated the movements of his forces, attacking all the

way through the complex using hand and arm signals to get them through. He then wheeled the tracks about and attacked again, retracing their previous route. Enemy fire dropped off, allowing the Americans to reorganize and prepare a night defensive position. A search of the bunkers the next morning turned up seventy-four enemy dead.<sup>16</sup>

On 21 March the pace of operations within the Michelin Plantation slowed. The 3d Squadron moved east of the Michelin to Firebase Doc for maintenance and remained there until leaving the area on 24 March. The 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, assumed control of 3d Squadron's old area of operations, while 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, moved into the southern Michelin. The 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, moved to a resupply point west of Firebase DOC, and then on to the northern edge of the Michelin to establish a night defensive position. Through 23 and 24 March the unit moved to the northern outskirts of the Michelin to serve as a blocking force against any enemy moving out of the plantation. The 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, left the area on 25 March, conducting a final reconnaissance in force through the Michelin before moving east along the Giant Swath.<sup>17</sup>

Operation ATLAS WEDGE was noteworthy because it showed that armor was able to operate effectively within the vast Michelin Plantation. The mobility, firepower, and protection provided by armored vehicles allowed the cavalry squadrons to inflict substantial damage on the enemy. The final tally showed tons of captured supplies and 421 dead North Vietnamese soldiers, with the 11th Armored Cavalry inflicting the bulk of the enemy's casualties. The total American losses were twenty-two killed and one hundred wounded. When it was over Operation ATLAS WEDGE had degraded the 7th PAVN Division's ability to conduct offensive operations in the Saigon River corridor.

## Operation MONTANA RAIDER

Following up on the success of Operation ATLAS WEDGE, MONTANA RAIDER was a one month-long, three-phased operation designed to follow up on the success of ATLAS WEDGE, this time targeting the enemy areas that fed men and material into the Michelin Plantation. It conformed to General Abrams' One War strategy by attacking the North Vietnamese logistical system as operations moved closer to their Cambodian sanctuaries. MONTANA RAIDER would further separate the enemy's main force units from Saigon and the bulk of the population of III Corps. On 12 April, operational control of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment passed to the 1st Cavalry Division. Major General George I. Forsythe, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, decided to conduct a major operation, spearheaded by the 11th Armored Cavalry, into the enemy base areas west and north of the Michelin Plantation. Phase I targeted a base area known as the "Crescent" to the west of the Michelin Plantation. "Elements of the 1st Cavalry Division had conducted countless operations in the Crescent," said General Forsythe "but owing to the lack of armor churn-up and destruction of the thousands of bunkers, had been unable to destroy the base." With armor they might succeed this time.<sup>18</sup> The 1st and 2d Squadrons, 11th Armored Cavalry, reinforced with an infantry battalion from the 1st Cavalry Division would make up MONTANA RAIDER's ground maneuver element.

Phase I of Operation MONTANA RAIDER kicked off with the Air Cavalry Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry, and the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, conducting aerial reconnaissance of the area. On 12 April, 1st and 2d Squadrons, 11th Armored Cavalry, road marched from Bien Hoa to areas around Dau Tieng, a distance of ninety-eight

kilometers. The two squadrons then moved past the area of operation and during darkness turned 180 degrees and swung into the Crescent.

The 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, air assaulted into blocking positions to thwart the enemy's escape. For the next nine days, until 20 April, the 11th Armored Cavalry moved in and around the Crescent, killing 129 and capturing 6 North Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Extensive jungle-busting during Phase I was hard on the armored vehicles, and the 11th Armored Cavalry had a maintenance stand-down near Dau Tieng on 20 and 21 April.

On 22 April, the regiment moved 149 kilometers north to Quan Loi to establish a base of operations for Phases II and III. The 1st and 2d Squadrons, 11th Armored Cavalry, and the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, formed the ground maneuver element for Phase II, which began on 24 April. The regiment's engineers, supported by CIDG forces from the Tong Le Chon Special Forces Camp, swept Route 246 for mines before 1st and 2d Squadrons moved into their areas of operation west of the Saigon River and south of the Cambodian border. On 25 April the armored units conducted aggressive reconnaissance-in-force missions, spending over a week searching the area. The Americans uncovered supply caches and bunker complexes, including a hospital complex complete with four operating rooms and twenty-five bunkers with interconnecting tunnels. Offensive operations ended on 2 May with the squadrons returning to Quan Loi for another maintenance period. Phase II cost the enemy 95 soldiers killed, 42 tons of rice, 245 individual and crew served weapons, and more base areas torn up.<sup>20</sup>

Phase III lasted from 7 to 14 May, with 1st and 2d Squadrons, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, deploying into the area east of the Saigon River and north of the Michelin Plantation. The ground maneuver elements conducted reconnaissance-in-force operations throughout the area but encountered few enemy forces and supplies.

During MONTANA RAIDER, the 11th Armored Cavalry changed the way it supplied itself. The regiment completely severed its ground lines of communication. In place of ground supply, CH-47 Chinooks delivered the vast bulk of the 50,000 pounds of food, water, fuel, ammunition, and spare parts each day that the ground maneuver elements required for sustained operations. Damaged vehicles were towed behind operational combat vehicles and dropped off at secure collection points. Maintenance contact teams flew to the collection points and were able to keep a large percentage of the combat vehicles in a combat ready status so long as major assemblies were available.<sup>21</sup>

During Operation MONTANA RAIDER, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment moved over 1,000 miles, 800 of which involved jungle-busting. The regiment inflicted 268 casualties on the enemy and damaged his logistical system along the Saigon River corridor. American losses were not inconsequential. The Americans lost 45 killed and 240 wounded, and 8 tanks and 3 ACAVs were destroyed. Building on the momentum of ATLAS WEDGE, MONTANA RAIDER struck the enemy's logistical network north and west of the Michelin Plantation and continued to move operations toward the Cambodian border and pushed the enemy farther into the western hinterlands of III Corps.

### Towards the West

After Operation MONTANA RAIDER, the regiment returned to II Field Force's operational control and moved back to the Blackhorse Base Camp. The regiment commenced Phase III of Operation Toan Thanh, which was general combat operations within its area of responsibility. Contact was relatively light, but the regiment used this period for training with the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division. This allowed the 11th Armored Cavalry to refine liaison and coordination systems and techniques associated with combined American-South Vietnamese operations. The 1st Squadron operated in eastern Binh Duong Province in areas known as the "Trapazoid" and "Iron Triangle" under the control of the 1st Infantry Division. Again, contact was light, but there were frequent encounters with enemy rear elements.<sup>22</sup>

On 26 May, the 2d Squadron moved west into the An Loc-Quan Loi area of Binh Long province. The squadron was placed under the operational control of the 1st Infantry Division, with the mission of conducting reconnaissance in force operations against the *7th PAVN Division*. The 2d Squadron made three significant contacts in early June with three different regiments of the *7th PAVN Division* south of An Loc. These contacts cost the North Vietnamese 162 dead and 10 prisoners with American losses 6 killed and 15 wounded.

In response to these contacts, on 10 June the 11th Armored Cavalry deployed 3d Squadron into Binh Long province and shifted the regimental headquarters to Quan Loi. The 1st Squadron continued its operations in the "Trapazoid" and "Iron Triangle" under the control of the Bien Hoa Area Tactical Command. The regiment immediately increased its operations in the rubber plantations west of An Loc-Quan Loi. Over the

next ten days the regiment applied constant pressure on the *7th PAVN Division*, preempting a major ground attack against An Loc. The North Vietnamese suffered 154 killed and 6 captured during the regiment's operations, while American losses were 7 killed and 7 wounded.<sup>23</sup>

On 22 June the 1st Cavalry Division assumed operational control of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The division gave the regiment its own area of operation. The area of operation generally ran about ten kilometers east of Highway 13 to the Cambodian border in the north and northwest, to the provincial border with Tay Ninh in the southwest, and Binh Duong in the south. The area of operation included the towns of Loc Ninh, An Loc, Quan Loi, and Chon Thanh.<sup>24</sup> The next few months would see the regiment conducting operations in eastern Tay Ninh and northern Binh Long Provinces, with some heavy fighting to come.

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<sup>1</sup>Operational Report-Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 November 1968–31 January 1969, 1st Infantry Division, 19 February 1969, p. 1, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Trip Report (10-69), Destruction of Viet Cong Insurgent Infrastructure at Village Level, US Army Combat Developments Command, 4 February 1969, p. 3, box 2, After Action Reviews (AAR), Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>4</sup>AAR, Operation TREASURE ISLE, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 20 May 1969, pp. 5-6, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>5</sup>Lt. Col. Merritte W. Ireland, Exit Interview, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 24 April 1969, pp. 1-2, box 2, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, 1966-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>6</sup>Training Circular, No. 17-16, Armor Reconnaissance/Airborne Assault Vehicle M551 (General Sheridan), Headquarters, Department of the Army, 21 March 1968, p. 22, box 1, Command Reports, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 1967-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>7</sup>ORLL, 1 November 1968–31 January 1969, 1st Infantry Division, p. 1, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>8</sup>Lt. Col. Ireland, Exit Interview, p. 2; and Quarterly Evaluation Report (QER), 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 5 April 1969, p. 7, box 1, QER, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>9</sup>ORLL, 1 February–30 April 1969, II Field Force Vietnam (FFV), undated, pp. 16-17, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>10</sup>AAR, Company C, 2d Battalion (Mechanized), 22d Infantry, 16 March 1969, p. 2, box 13, AARs, Infantry Units, Asst CofS S-3, 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, January 1968 – December 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>11</sup>ORLL, 1 February–30 April 69 ORLL, 1 February–30 April 1969, II FFV, undated, pp. 23-24, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>12</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 17th Military History Detachment, 19 April 1969, p. 6, box 4, AARs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, February–March 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>13</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 15 August 1969, p. 5, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>14</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 11 April 1969, p. 5, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>15</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 17th Military History Detachment, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, pp. 11-13.

<sup>17</sup>AAR, Operation ATLAS WEDGE, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, pp. 12-13.

<sup>18</sup>Col. James H. Leach, Lt. Col. James L. Dozier, Lt. Col. Glenn G. Finkbinder, and Maj. Gen. George I. Forsythe, "MONTANA RAIDER: Mobility in the Jungle – Classroom for Tomorrow?" *Armor* 80 (September-October 1971): 7.



<sup>19</sup>AAR, Operation MONTANA RAIDER, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 22 May 1969, pp. 12-13, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 11-14.

<sup>21</sup>Leach et al., “Montana Raider: Mobility in the Jungle--Classroom for Tomorrow?” 10.

<sup>22</sup>Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel James H. Leach, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 7 December 1969, p. 10, box 1, Command Reports, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10; ORLL, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 1 April–31 July 1969, 18 August 1969, pp.5-6, box 2, ORLL, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>24</sup>ORLL, 1 April–31 July 1969, 1st Cavalry Division, undated, Tab A, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Cavalry Division, RG 472, NARA.

## CHAPTER 3

### FIGHT FOR THE BORDER

Early 1969 had been a successful period for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and during the last six months of 1969 the regiment finished fielding the M551 Sheridan. The regiment operated mostly in northeastern Tay Ninh, northern Binh Long, and northwestern Phuoc Long provinces. During this period the US Army began withdrawing forces from South Vietnam and the Vietnamization of the war accelerated. The American and South Vietnamese units began to routinely conduct joint operations. The major engagements during the later months of 1969 included both American and South Vietnamese ground forces.<sup>1</sup>

The Dong Tien (Go Forward Together) Program was initiated by MACV as a step towards Vietnamization, gradually turning the prosecution of the war over to the South Vietnamese, and was divided into two broad areas: civic action and security operations. The regiment's civic action projects improved the infrastructure of South Vietnam by building schools and other public works. By-products of the 11th Armored Cavalry's presence were improvements to the local road network from the regiment's engineers rebuilding and repairing bridges and culverts that enhanced the regiment's mobility.

Security operations within the Dong Tien Program involved combined American and South Vietnamese operations, as well as training of the South Vietnamese Army and local defense forces. The MACV believed that through combined operations the South Vietnamese forces would improve their combat efficiency. The 3d Squadron and the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, conducted the first large-scale combined operation in Binh Long Province. There were no major contacts during the operation, but it

enabled the regiment to further develop its coordination and command and control procedures for fighting with the South Vietnamese. Over the last six months of 1969 close coordination and combined operations became the norm, with the efficiency of these operations gradually increasing.<sup>2</sup> In August, American and South Vietnamese forces in Binh Long Province would fight a series of engagements that would validate the concept of the Dong Tien Program.

#### Battles in Binh Long Province

The regiment spent July operating in northern Binh Long Province around the towns of Loc Ninh, Quan Loi, and An Loc, conducting route security on Highway 13 between An Loc and Chon Thanh. On 29 July, Nguyen Van An rallied under the South Vietnamese government's Chieu Hoi amnesty program. He was a platoon leader in a sapper company of the *9th PLAF Division*. During his interrogation he told of an upcoming offensive in mid-August, in which elements of the *1st* and *7th PAVN Divisions* and the *9th PLAF Division* would attack in Binh Long Province, particularly at An Loc, Quan Loi, and Loc Ninh, as well as along Highway 13. His story matched up with recent intelligence, but was not completely believed.

Over the next several days the 11th Armored Cavalry's intelligence section worked to confirm or deny An's story. By 3 August there was enough evidence to indicate An might be telling the truth. The regiment's S-2 believed that, as part of the autumn offensive, the enemy wanted to seize and hold An Loc for one day and launch a series of coordinated attacks in an effort to inflict as many US casualties as possible.<sup>3</sup> That evening, the 11th Armored Cavalry briefed both the II Field Force and the 1st Cavalry Division. While not

completely convinced by An's story, the 1st Cavalry Division deemed it wise to begin planning to counter the offensive.

Binh Long Province offered the enemy several advantages for an offensive. All of the targeted towns were within twenty-five kilometers of the Cambodian border and adjacent to extensive rubber plantations. The rubber plantations allowed the enemy easy navigation and rapid movement, even at night. The disadvantage was clear from earlier operations-- armored units could operate easily, move rapidly, quickly concentrate and bring massive direct fires to bear within the plantations' neat rows.

The 1st Cavalry Division began shaping the battlefield to deal with the potential North Vietnamese attack. The division had three brigade-sized elements to defend Binh Long Province: 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment; 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division; and the South Vietnamese 9th Regiment, 5th Infantry Division. It sent pink teams to the Cambodian border west of Loc Ninh to an area known as the Fishhook. These pink teams each consisted of one OH-6A Kiowa observation helicopter and one to three AH-1G Cobra gunships. The Kiowa searched for the enemy while the Cobra watched for enemy ground fire. The Cobra could also attack the enemy immediately. Additionally, the 1st Cavalry Division called in twenty-four B-52 strikes on suspected enemy base complexes east of the Fishhook. To coordinate the division's efforts the 1st Cavalry Division established a jump command post at Quan Loi under Brigadier General George W. Casey, the Assistant Division Commander, Air. On 7 August, the division adjusted the disposition of its forces to strengthen positions around the towns and requested additional armored forces. The 1st Infantry Division sent the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 16th Infantry, reinforced by Troop A, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry,

to An Loc and placed the battalion under the operational control of the 11th Armored Cavalry.

During the enemy buildup from 5 to 10 August the 1st Cavalry Division's aircraft searched the area for infiltrating enemy units. On the ninth the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, attacked a large group of enemy soldiers believed to be from the *272d Regiment, 9th PLAF Division*, killing twenty-three. That same day the Air Cavalry Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry, engaged another enemy force later identified as members of the *271st Regiment, 9th PLAF Division*, and the *101D Regiment, 1st PAVN Division*, and found thirty-three bodies. Then on 10 August, the Air Cavalry Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry, supported by Company C, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, engaged an enemy force, killing thirty-one and capturing five. The prisoners identified themselves as members of an artillery unit supporting the *272d Regiment*.<sup>4</sup>

The contacts of 9 and 10 August supported the basic outline for communist operations that Nguyen Van An gave on 29 July. Now confident that there would be an enemy attack, the 1st Cavalry Division completed its final disposition of forces and conducted rehearsals. Patrols on 11 August turned up few contacts, and the division believed that enemy units were now in place and ready to launch their offensive.

The Americans were right. Just after midnight on 12 August the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong began their offensive with an attack on Chon Thanh. South Vietnamese troops defended their positions, holding the enemy at bay. Troop F, 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, swept in from the north on Highway 13, breaking up and driving off the enemy's attack. Within the next two hours the enemy attacked other positions throughout the province, particularly those defended by Americans (see figure 14).

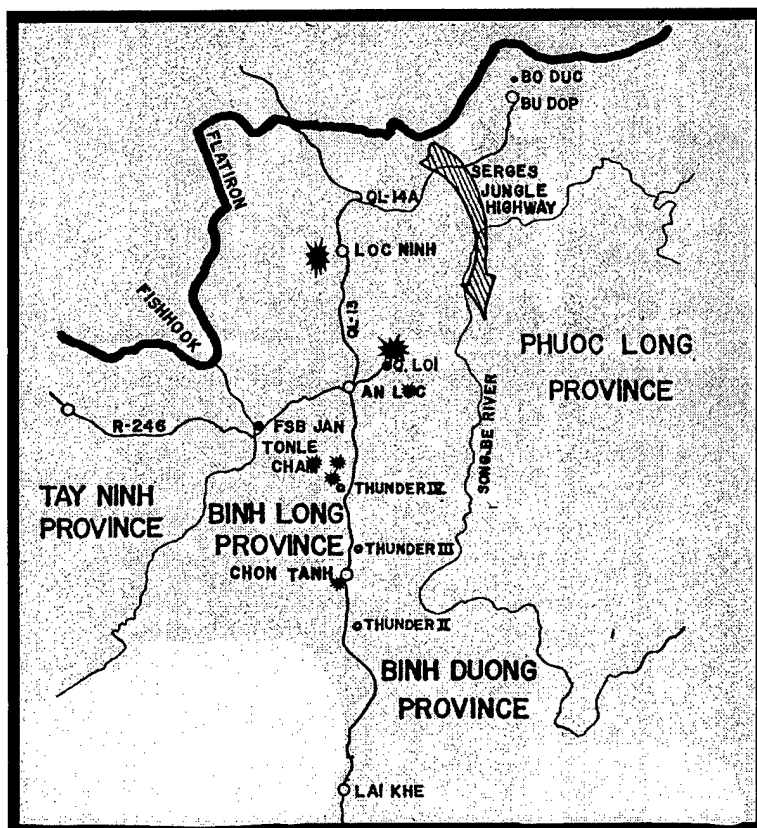


Figure 14. Attacks in Binh Long Province. *Source:* After Action Report (AAR), Enemy Attacks in Northern Binh Long Province, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 21 October 1969, p. 1, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cav Regt, December 1967–September 1969, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.; AAR, The Battle of Binh Long Province, undated, 14th Military History Detachment, pp. 11-16, box 5, AARs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, March–December 1969, RG 472, NARA; Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Donn A. Starry, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 12 June 1970, U. S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C., Historians files.

The most serious threat the 1st Cavalry Division faced was at Landing Zone Andy, near Quan Loi, an enclave of perimeter wire and bunkers backed up by several local reaction forces and a mobile reaction force. The reaction force was built around the regiment's engineer company, the 919th Combat Engineer Company, and contained two combat engineer vehicles and four ACAVs.<sup>5</sup> The enemy penetrated the wire in three places, but the

reaction forces were able to blunt the enemy penetrations. The North Vietnamese failed to exploit their penetrations of Landing Zone Andy's perimeter, in part, because of a firefight that developed between the Troop A, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and a North Vietnamese battalion two kilometers to the southeast (see figure 15).

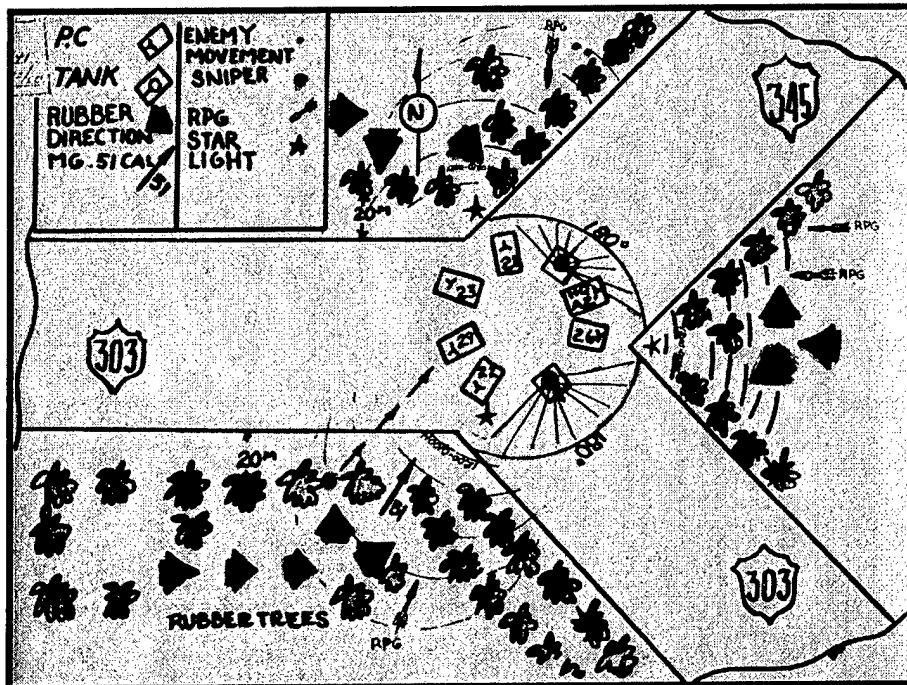


Figure 15. 2d Platoon's Disposition Southeast of Landing Zone Andy.  
*Source:* After Action Review, The Battle of Binh Long Province August 1969, 1st Cavalry Division, undated, p. Part III Diagram B, box 5, AARs, March–December 1969, Asst CofS G3, 1st Cavalry Division, RG 472, NARA.

Troop A, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, was positioned south of Landing Zone Andy as part of the regiment's placement of reaction forces throughout the area of operations at key road intersections. Troop A's 2d Platoon, consisting of two M48A3 tanks and six ACAVs, was in a screening position at the "Y" intersection of Routes 303 and 345, southeast of

Landing Zone Andy. The platoon's armored vehicles formed a 360-degree perimeter in the open area centered on the intersection. Just after midnight the 2d Platoon spotted movement northeast of its position and opened fire. The enemy returned fire and gradually the intensity of the firefight increased. The Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Lawrence D. Noland Jr., repeatedly called for support, but, unknown to him, his antenna for the troop command net had been shot off in the opening minutes of the engagement.

The 2d Platoon held the enemy in check for over two hours but its ammunition was running low. A passing helicopter radioed the situation to the troop commander, Captain William J. Newell, who sent his 1st and 3d Platoons racing to 2d Platoon's support. By 0315 the entire troop was committed to the fight. Cobra gunships arrived and also joined the fight, strafing the enemy with rockets and miniguns. The Communists soon broke contact, leaving thirty-eight dead on the battlefield. The 2d Platoon had disrupted and stalled the movement of the enemy's exploitation force for the attack on Landing Zone Andy. This denied the enemy the ability to support his penetration of Landing Zone Andy's southern perimeter.<sup>6</sup>

Over the next three days 1st Cavalry Division units pounded and pursued the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as they fled back to Cambodia. Infantry units air assaulted between the retreating enemy and their Cambodian sanctuaries to establish blocking positions while armored units chased them. In close pursuit, 11th Armored Cavalry troops immediately came into contact with the fleeing enemy.

For the next several days American and South Vietnamese units developed several contacts into large-scale firefights, hammering away at the enemy. The most significant contact came early on 12 August, when Troop E, 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, stumbled into an enemy bunker complex in the rubber southwest of An Loc. Troop E lost



seven ACAVs to RPG fire while maneuvering against the enemy position. The firefight lasted several hours, then Troop E backed off and called in 4 air strikes, 8 Cobra gunships, and over 400 rounds of artillery to pound the enemy bunkers. When the fight was finished the toll on the Communists was fifty-six dead and seventy-five bunkers destroyed.

On the thirteenth, Troop D, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, engaged elements of the *209th Regiment* west of Loc Ninh. The enemy opened fire with small-arms and RPGs. The South Vietnamese 34th Ranger Group moved up on Troop D's right flank in an attempt to box in the North Vietnamese. They were soon in a running firefight. Troop D and the 34th Rangers maneuvered to keep the enemy in a three-sided box, and, using artillery and helicopter gunships to prevent the enemy's withdrawal, eventually killed seventy-seven of the trapped North Vietnamese.<sup>7</sup>

As part of the North Vietnamese attacks, the *101D Regiment, 1st PAVN Division*, ambushed two convoys on Highway 13 between Chon Thanh and An Loc. Responsibility for the section of Highway 13 was split because where the ambushes occurred near the boundary of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the 1st Infantry Division. During the afternoon of 12 August, Troop F, 2d Squadron, was ambushed thirteen kilometers south of An Loc while escorting a convoy south along Highway 13. Troop F immediately returned fire and called in artillery and helicopter gunships, killing fifty North Vietnamese soldiers. Troop F continued south handing the convoy off to Company C, 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, 1st Infantry Division.<sup>8</sup>

The 2d Battalion had conducted frequent "Thunder Runs" and positioned forces along Highway 13 for security. The *K8 Battalion, 101D Regiment*, ambushed the convoy, but within sight of the ambush were the headquarters tracks from Company C. The company

commander had his tracks pour machine-gun fire into the enemy, while ordering his other platoons to close on the ambush site. Troop F assisted by sweeping in on the ambush site from the north. Within fifteen minutes ACAVs, tanks, helicopter gunships, and artillery were pounding the North Vietnamese, killing fifty-four and causing them to flee.

The North Vietnamese offensive in Binh Long Province was a costly failure. They lost 130 men moving into position from 9 to 10 August, and their unsuccessful attacks the night of 11 and 12 August cost them another 460 men. The American counterattacks, spearheaded by armor, bled another 304 soldiers from the enemy as he fled back to the Cambodian border for a total of 894 dead during the offensive. American losses were twenty-four dead. Timely intelligence and the ability of armored units to bring overwhelming direct fire to bear in concert with supporting fires from artillery and air were decisive in the enemy's defeat.

#### Firefight West of An Loc

In early September, 3d Squadron completed its fielding and training on the Sheridan at Blackhorse Base Camp. On 6 September, the squadron road-marched over 160 kilometers to Firebase Aspen II, southwest of An Loc, and began reconnaissance missions in the area. On the morning of 7 September, Tran Teh Hung rallied under the Chieu Hoi amnesty program at the village of Binh Ninh. During his interrogation Tran said that elements of the *1st, 2d, and 3d Regiments, 9th PLAF and the 101D Regiment, 1st PAVN Division*, were located in the rubber plantations west of An Loc. The enemy's mission was to attack American and South Vietnamese forces west of An Loc and to ambush convoys between Minh Duc and Highway 13. The 3d Squadron received the information from the interrogation around noon.<sup>9</sup>

The squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel David K. Doyle, was familiar with the enemy's staging area from a previous battle in June. He intended to use Troop L as a blocking force to the north while Troop I and Company M attacked into the rubber from the south. At 1430, as they approached the rubber plantation, Troop I and Company M saw movement within the rubber trees. Both commanders verified that there were no friendly forces in the area and then opened fire. The enemy returned fire with small-arms and RPGs.

The squadron commander orchestrated supporting fires, pounding the enemy with artillery, helicopter gunships and air strikes. Company M drove its attack north into the center of the enemy bunker complex, laying down heavy suppressive fires with its M48 tanks and ACAVs. Troop I fought its way north to link up with Company M on its west flank. Company M requested a medevac helicopter, but a Viet Cong recoilless rifle crew shot the medevac helicopter down while it was flying into the landing zone. Company M swept the recoilless rifle team with fire, killing the crew. Troop I and Company M continued to sweep the area, but the enemy broke contact. As night fell both units withdrew as air strikes pounded the enemy bunker complex.<sup>10</sup>

The 3d Squadron reacted quickly to intelligence information and within an hour of receiving the intelligence report had units in motion gaining contact with the enemy within three hours. Speed, shock effect, and firepower led to defeat and disruption of the enemy's planned offensive. The *101D Regiment* left ninety-eight dead on the battlefield. American losses were two killed and twenty-seven wounded.<sup>11</sup>

#### Operations LONG REACH I and II

The II Field Force continued to apply pressure on enemy units and their logistical systems throughout the fall of 1969. Despite this pressure, in late October and early

November, the North Vietnamese began to increase their activity in several places. One of the most dangerous buildups was in Bo Duc District around Bu Dop and Firebase JERRI in northwestern Phuoc Long Province (see figure 16). Intelligence indicated that both the *141st* and *165th Regiments, 7th PAVN Division*, were converging on the area.

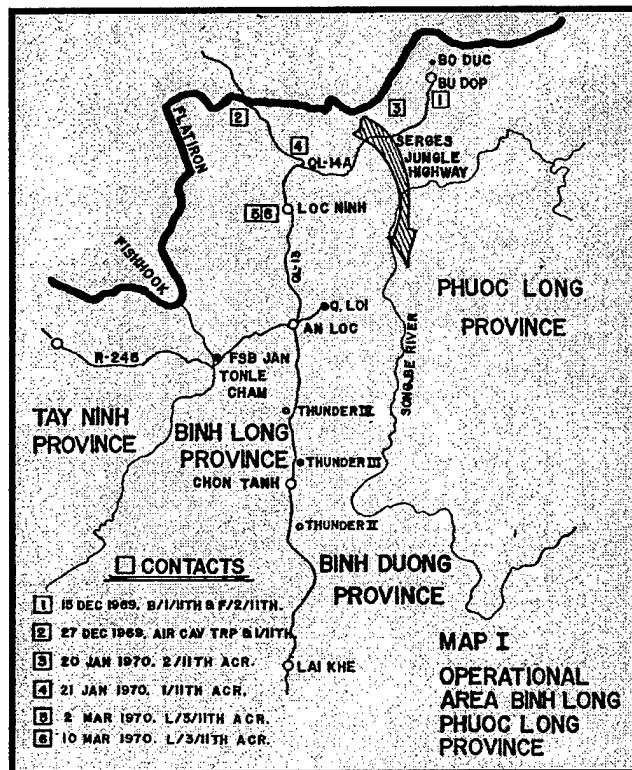


Figure 16. Operations in Binh Long Province. *Source:* Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Col Donn A. Starry, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 12 June 1970, Center of Military History Historian files.

Historically, Bo Duc District was important to the enemy. Just across the Cambodian border lay Base Areas 350 and 351 and the beginning of the Serges Jungle Highway, a network of infiltration trails running through the Bo Duc District south into the interior of South Vietnam. The enemy fought tenaciously to keep this infiltration route open. The Bu

Dop Special Forces Camp and Firebase JERRI were only seven kilometers from the Cambodian border and in close proximity to the Serges Jungle Highway, and the North Vietnamese considered them a threat that needed to be removed.

The enemy launched rocket, mortar, and ground attacks in the Bo Duc District on 4 November. The 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, reinforced the area with 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and established a brigade forward command post at Bu Dop on 7 November. The 1st Cavalry Division ordered the 11th Armored Cavalry to push as far as possible up Highway 14A towards Bu Dop to relieve the enemy pressure on Bo Duc District.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Troop F, 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, came under the operational control of 3d Brigade and was alerted for air movement from Loc Ninh to the Bu Dop Special Forces Camp.

This presented the 11th Armored Cavalry with several concerns. North Vietnamese activity had kept Highway 14A closed to traffic for over eighteen months, and it was probably heavily mined. Nor could tanks skirt the road: soft dirt and heavy vegetation made jungle-busting impossible and provided excellent cover for enemy ambushes. Finally, intelligence simply did not know how many enemy troops stood between Loc Ninh and Bu Dop.

The 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, began its deployment by sending Troop G to Firebase Deb, eight kilometers east of Highway 13 along Highway 14A on 7 November. The next morning the regiment's engineers, sweeping the road for mines, led the tanks of Troop G up Highway 14A, followed closely by the ACAVs of Troop E. It was a slow process, and, despite the road clearing effort, eight vehicles were lost to mines. By the end of the day 2d Squadron was only one-third of the way to Firebase JERRI.

Since the road was dangerous and time was of the essence, the 1st Cavalry Division ordered 2d Squadron to hold in place. Troop F prepared to move by air to Bu Dop. The 2d Squadron ordered Troop G to establish a firebase along Highway 14A to support Firebase JERRI with 155-millimeter artillery fire.<sup>13</sup>

Troop F moved to the airfield at Loc Ninh and prepared its vehicles for the airlift. The first C-130 sortie left at 1102, 9 November for the thirty-five-kilometer flight to Bu Dop. After two days and thirty-three C-130 sorties, Troop F's twenty-three ACAVs and supplies were in Bu Dop.<sup>14</sup> Troop F dug in two kilometers west of Bu Dop, served as a reaction force for both Firebase JERRI and the Bu Dop Special Forces Camp, and conducted reconnaissance-in-force missions until 2d Squadron eventually reached Bu Dop. The 2d Squadron spent the next week clearing mines and conducting troop reconnaissance-in-force sweeps along Highway 14A between Loc Ninh and Firebase Joel (established by Troop G on the ninth). The 2d Squadron had a few light contacts and uncovered more mines.

Operation LONG REACH I failed to open Highway 14A. However, it did cause the enemy some concern. A troop of ACAVs now operated in and around Bu Dop, and 2d Squadron pushed to within twelve kilometers of Firebase JERRI, bringing a battery of 155-millimeter artillery within range of Bu Dop. LONG REACH I was a rapidly planned and executed reaction to the enemy's buildup in the Bo Duc District. The 1st Cavalry Division pushed 2d Squadron up Highway 14A with insufficient engineer and infantry support to open the road. In hindsight the operation's task organization was insufficient for the task of opening a road that had been closed to allied traffic for so long. The 1st Cavalry Division would not make the same mistakes again. LONG REACH II would be a deliberate, well-

planned, and adequately supported effort to open a ground line of communication between Loc Ninh and Bu Dop.

In LONG REACH II, two light infantry companies and the 984th Land Clearing Company, equipped with Rome Plows (see figure 17), reinforced 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry. The Rome Plow was a military standard D7E tractor equipped with a heavy-duty specialized tree-cutting blade produced by the Rome Company of Rome, Georgia. It also had a protective cab. The term Rome Plow became synonymous with land clearing.



Figure 17. Rome Plows Conducting Land Clearing Operations 1969.  
*Source:* US Army Signal Corps 649694, NARA.

The squadron's mission was to clear 200 meters of jungle from each side of the highway and then make and a 100-meter-wide cut around the Bu Dop Special Forces Camp and Firebase JERRI. The objective was to permit heavy convoy traffic along Highway 14A and to cut a swath across the Serges Jungle Highway. It was hoped that ground surveillance

radar and aerial reconnaissance sweeps along the swath would detect enemy traffic moving south.

The 2d Squadron launched LONG REACH II on 5 December. Tanks pushed ahead of the Rome Plows to locate mines and ambushes while Companies B and D, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, moved through the jungle on each flank. ACAVs and M551 Sheridans provided security to the Rome Plows as they cleared away the jungle and the engineers repaired the road. Finally, the squadron's M132A1s, flame-thrower equipped M113s known as "zippos" (see figure 18), secured by the reconnaissance platoon, followed behind, burning the debris from the land clearing operation.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 18. M132A "Zippo" in Action. *Source:* US Army Signal Corps 639315, NARA.

North Vietnamese troops did not openly contest the move along Highway 14A, but they did plant mines at night, bringing them from across the Cambodian border. The 2d Squadron attempted to detect mines and to interdict the North Vietnamese mining effort.



Extra mine detectors and ground surveillance radars were brought in, and the Americans conducted automatic ambushes, using trip wires attached to claymore mines, on trails leading from Highway 14A to the Cambodian border. These efforts enabled 2d Squadron to keep down vehicle losses from mines.

The operation's most significant engagement took place on 15 December after 2d Squadron reached Bu Dop. Troop F was conducting a sweep through an area of old growth rubber plantation northeast of Bo Duc near Hill 172 with the South Vietnamese 2d Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment. The jungle canopy towered seventy-five feet, but sparse ground cover made visibility and movement somewhat easier. Troop F, with the South Vietnamese infantry riding on top of the ACAVs, turned off Highway 14A and moved east through the rubber, then climbed the slopes of Hill 172. As the lead ACAV crested the hill, it spotted three enemy soldiers not more than one hundred feet away. The ACAV commander immediately opened fire, but an RPG hit his vehicle, wounding two crew members. Enemy fire was intensifying around Troop F, and it soon became clear that the Americans and South Vietnamese were in an enemy bunker complex. The 2d Company dismounted the ACAVs and began working its way to the right, hoping to flank the enemy from the south. Troop F came on line facing east and began laying down fire on the North Vietnamese positions, but lost two more ACAVs. Troop F could not call in artillery or air support because the dismounted South Vietnamese infantrymen were too close to the bunkers.

The 2d Squadron called in reinforcements. Troop B, in a night defensive perimeter four kilometers to the north, immediately moved out to support the fight and arrived on the scene within fifteen minutes. Also, two companies from the South Vietnamese 9th Infantry

Regiment, personally led by Regimental Commander Colonel Ma Sanh Nhon, marched to the battle.

Troop B came up on Troop F's left flank and pushed east, but the move left Troop B's southern flank exposed and the North Vietnamese opened fire. Troop B's vehicles wheeled right, came on line, and assaulted south through the enemy. Troop F backed down the slope while Troop B secured the hill, and the South Vietnamese infantry swept the area, clearing enemy bunkers. Cobra gunships rolled in on the fleeing enemy, killing ten. The enemy lost sixty soldiers in this battle. American losses were four killed, sixteen wounded, one ACAV destroyed, and three ACAVs damaged. South Vietnamese losses were two killed and eleven wounded.<sup>16</sup>

Operation LONG REACH II was a major undertaking that had some important benefits. The operation cleared over 6,000 acres of double-canopied jungle and cut a 400-meter-wide swath across the Serges Jungle Highway, a major enemy infiltration route. A ninety-four-truck convoy moved from Loc Ninh to Bo Duc on 30 December without incident. This was the first time in five years that a military convoy was able to use Highway 14A.<sup>17</sup> The II Field Force viewed the operation as a success, and sought to duplicate it, and continued with similar operations in early 1970. The 1st and 2d Squadrons, 11th Armored Cavalry, conducted similar operations in War Zone C in northern Tay Ninh Province. These operations cut across three other North Vietnamese infiltration routes, the Saigon River corridor, the X-Cache Trail, and the Mustang Trail flowing from Cambodia into Base Area 355 in western Binh Duong Province.<sup>18</sup>

### Operation TEXAS TRAVELER

While 2d Squadron was preparing to start Operation LONG REACH II, the 1st Cavalry Division gathered intelligence that the *9th PLAF Division* was in northeastern Tay Ninh Province. The 3d Squadron was tasked to attack west from Highway 13 into northeastern Tay Ninh Province to locate and neutralize the enemy's base camps and cache sites and interdict their lines of communication.<sup>19</sup> The squadron, reinforced by Companies C and D, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, launched the attack on 24 November and crossed into Tay Ninh Province, pushing west from Tonle Cham along Route 246.

The terrain was rugged and not easily traversed by the squadron's armored vehicles, but the troops immediately began detecting signs of recent Viet Cong activity, including freshly dug bunkers and trenches within fifty meters of Route 246. As the day progressed there were light contacts with small groups of Viet Cong. The squadron set up night-defensive positions, which the Viet Cong probed during the night.

The squadron continued to conduct reconnaissance sweeps north and south of Route 246, making several contacts through the day. The enemy had heavily mined the area and several ACAVs and Sheridans were disabled. Late in the afternoon, a scout helicopter from the Air Cavalry Troop spotted three to four Viet Cong in the jungle one hundred meters north of the squadron headquarters' perimeter. The headquarters troop commander swept out of the perimeter with the headquarters' ACAVs sweeping the area with fire. An RPG hit his ACAV, wounding him and another crewmember. Lieutenant Colonel David K. Doyle landed to take control of the situation, directing the ACAVs against the Viet Cong until nearly 2200.

The enemy attacked the headquarters perimeter with small-arms fire and RPGs, quickly hitting one of the M109 howitzers and an M548 ammunition carrier. One of the RPGs detonated the powder charges in the M548, causing a major explosion that engulfed several vehicles in fire and caused those vehicles to explode. Lieutenant Colonel Doyle coolly organized and led the defenders, calling artillery and air strikes to suppress the Viet Cong attack. At one point he told the forward air controller flying above his position, "All our friendly forces are in the fiery area, everything outside the fire is enemy."<sup>20</sup>

The damage suffered during the attack was extensive in both personnel and equipment, but the squadron continued operations along Route 246 for the next two days. The squadron was recalled and returned to Binh Long Province on 28 November. Operation TEXAS TRAVELER was not a very successful operation for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Much like Operation LONG REACH I, this operation sought to open long-held enemy areas without adequate infantry and engineer assets. These operations illustrated the need for combined operations with armor, infantry and engineers to penetrate enemy base areas. Overall, 3d Squadron lost seven Sheridans, three ACAVs, two M109s, five M548s, and seven vehicle trailers to mines and RPGs while suffering nine soldiers killed and seventy-seven wounded. In exchange, the enemy's confirmed losses were relatively light, with fifteen killed, two taken prisoners, and some equipment lost.<sup>21</sup> The next time the regiment crossed into northern Tay Ninh Province it would use Operation LONG REACH II as the model, creating two squadron-sized combined arms teams.

#### Firefight near the Cambodian Border

By late December the 11th Armored Cavalry had two squadrons operating very close to the Cambodian border. The 1st Squadron was at Loc Ninh and the 2d Squadron at Bu Dop

while the 3d Squadron was in central Binh Long Province conducting security operations and convoy escort along Highways 13. On the morning of 27 December a pink team from the Air Cavalry Troop of the 11th Armored Cavalry conducted a routine aerial reconnaissance for enemy activity northwest of Loc Ninh, about three kilometers south of the Cambodian border. The North Vietnamese opened fire as the helicopter swept in low for a look around. The pink team's Cobra gunship radioed back to Quan Loi that "enemy soldiers were all over the area." The Air Cavalry Troop commander, Major Charles W. Abbey, immediately requested air strikes and sent additional gunships to the area. Flights of strike aircraft began bombing and strafing the North Vietnamese just before 0800.<sup>22</sup>

The 1st Squadron ordered Troops A and D, supported by the South Vietnamese 196th Regional Forces Company, to move toward the battle. The fighting was so close to the Cambodian border that the ground elements were initially held short of the battle area while helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft strafed and bombed the North Vietnamese. By midmorning the battle covered a two-to-three-square-kilometer area, with the heaviest fighting around Hill 98, a small, partially jungle-covered mass 1,500 meters south of the Cambodian border.

By noon the ground maneuver elements were in place. Early in the afternoon the 1st Cavalry Division gave the 11th Armored Cavalry permission to bring artillery and air strikes right up to the Cambodian border. Troops A and D swept through the contact area while the helicopters continued to strafe the enemy. Just before darkness, Troops A and D, along with the 196th Regional Forces Company, withdrew four kilometers south and established a night defensive position.

The battle was an example of how a chance encounter could quickly escalate into a major firefight. In this case, the ability of armored units to deploy rapidly into the contact area contributed to the day's success. The North Vietnamese were caught moving across the Cambodian border and lost eighty soldiers in the subsequent fighting. Lieutenant Colonel John M. Norton, commander of 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, commented on the day, saying, "We surprised the hell out of them. They came across the Cambodian border and we zapped them. The Air Cavalry Troop kept them from digging in and we moved up and rolled over them."<sup>23</sup>

The year ended for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment with its squadrons deployed to attack and interdict North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces as they crossed into South Vietnam. The year had seen the beginnings of Vietnamization and the initial withdrawal of American forces. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong offensive operations were disrupted and weakened, while the South Vietnamese government regained control of the countryside. General Abrams' One War strategy was working, but the enemy maintained the ability to retreat to sanctuaries in Cambodia, reconstitute units, and infiltrate back into South Vietnam.

#### The Crescent and the Crossroads

In late December 1969 and early January 1970, the North Vietnamese began to react to the success of the 11th Armored Cavalry's operations in northern Binh Long and northwestern Binh Duong provinces. The regiment's operations began to restrict enemy logistical movement on the Serpes Jungle Highway. The regiment had 1st Squadron, operating out of Firebase Dennis, north of Loc Ninh, conducting sweeps through the rubber plantations north and west of Loc Ninh and securing Highway 13 from Loc Ninh to An Loc. The 2d Squadron, operating out of Firebase Ruth south of Bu Dop, continued to conduct

security operations along Highway 14A between Loc Ninh and Bu Dop. Additionally, the squadron provided security for the engineers conducting Rome Plow operations along Highway 14A, widening the gap cut across the enemy's lines of communications. In response to the regiment's operations, the North Vietnamese attempted to draw American units into prepared ambushes north of Highway 14A on 20 and 21 January. These battles became known within the regiment as the "Crescent" and the "Crossroads."<sup>24</sup>

Four kilometers west of Firebase Ruth is a large, marshy, crescent shaped, opening in the jungle where the North Vietnamese hoped to ambush American forces (see figure 19). The enemy built bunkers on the north and west sides of the clearing and emplaced seven .51-caliber heavy anti-aircraft machine-guns capable of placing converging fires throughout the clearing.<sup>25</sup> With their preparations complete, the North Vietnamese began the battle early on the morning of 20 January by firing 82-millimeter and 120-millimeter mortars at Firebase Ruth.

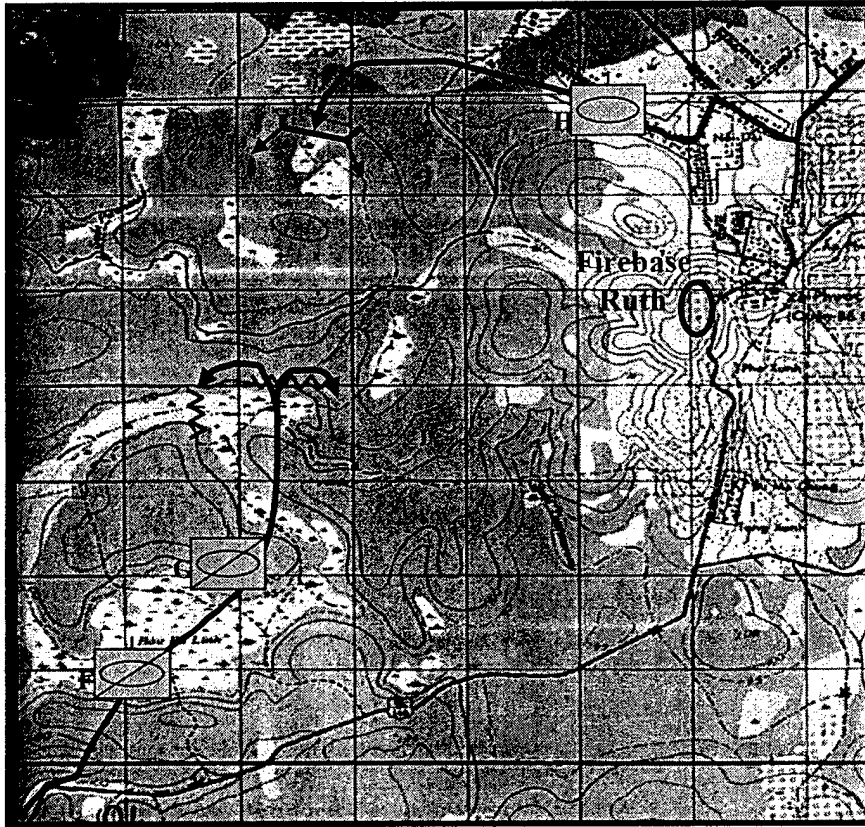


Figure 19. The Battle of the Crescent. *Source:* After Action Report, Firefight Near Bo Duc, 20 Jan 70, 28th Mil Hist Det, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 5 Feb 70, pp. 3-4, box 17, AARs, Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam, Command Historian , RG472, NARA.

The 2d Squadron responded to these attacks with immediate artillery counterfire and by sending out pink teams to search for the enemy firing positions. The pink teams would spend the next few hours searching in vain for the North Vietnamese. The enemy's initial mortar attack ceased and the squadron began its planned reconnaissance operations. Troops F and G conducted operations along Highway 14A and Company H, operating northwest of Firebase Ruth with Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division.<sup>26</sup>



The North Vietnamese, having failed to attract the Americans, mortared Firebase Ruth again, but they finally got the undivided attention of 2d Squadron by shooting at the squadron commander's helicopter.<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Grail L. Brookshire fixed the enemy's position near the crescent and called in a pink team to further refine the enemy's location. Almost immediately the pink team's Kiowa helicopter was hit by .51-caliber fire and forced to land inside the crescent. It appeared to Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire that there were several .51-caliber machine-guns surrounding the clearing, which made an air assault by the Aero Rifle Platoon risky at best. He decided to use his ground troops and began to marshal his forces: Troops F and G began moving from their positions along Highway 14A to attack north to the crescent while Company H began moving in from the northeast.<sup>28</sup>

The AH-1 Cobras of the regiment's Air Cavalry Troop were soon on the scene strafing the enemy positions under the direction of the squadron S-3, Major Fredrick M. Franks. One of the Cobra pilots, Captain Carl B. Marshall, located the wreckage of the downed Kiowa and spotted its pilot, First Lieutenant William Parris, taking cover in a nearby bomb crater. With the other Cobras strafing the North Vietnamese, Captain Marshall landed in a hail of small-arms fire to rescue Lieutenant Parris.<sup>29</sup> Artillery from Firebase Ruth fired due east, pounding the north side of the crescent, while the Cobras and air strikes hit the east and west sides.

The squadron's ground units were rapidly closing on the crescent. Company H, guided from the air, was jungle-busting to move into a blocking position to the north. Troops F and G, also guided from the air, approached from the south. Troop G burst out of the jungle on the southeast side of the clearing and immediately came on line, opening fire on the

enemy. Troop F, following closely behind, came on line to the east of Troop G. Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire called for a CS (tear gas) drop on the enemy's northern position. The CS spread over the North Vietnamese bunkers. The report came in that "It's beautiful, they're running all over the place."<sup>30</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire ordered the Cobras to strafe the enemy and Troops F and G to attack as soon as the Cobras pulled out.

Troops F and G rushed across the clearing, with Troop F sweeping through the wood line to the west and Troop G to the east. Company H killed four enemy soldiers as they fled north toward Cambodia. Troops F and G continued to sweep the area around the crescent until sunset, and then they established night-defensive positions, believing they would continue to search the area the next morning. Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire believed his squadron engaged elements of two battalions reinforced by antiaircraft machine-guns and heavy mortars during the Battle of the Crescent; however, another battle would prevent him from conducting a thorough search of the crescent to confirm his opinion.<sup>31</sup>

The North Vietnamese moved into an area north of Loc Ninh near the small, deserted hamlet of Thran Phung to set up another ambush site on 20 January. The enemy commander had a considerable force at his disposal, including the *K1 and K2 Battalions, 141st Regiment, 7th PAVN Division*, reinforced with 57-millimeter and 75mm-millimeter recoilless rifles, five .51-caliber machine-guns and a company of RPG teams. He chose to set up an L-shaped ambush in a section of old growth rubber trees along a ridgeline north of Thran Phung and had his troops dig bunkers with overhead cover.<sup>32</sup>

The 1st Squadron did not have all of its ground maneuver units available on 21 January, having detached Troop A and Company D for operations with other units. Troops B and C were given the mission to sweep the area north of the intersection of Highway 13 and Highway 14A. The troops moved north on Highway 13 at 0700 and at 0720 Troop C turned off the road, heading directly towards the enemy (see figure 20).<sup>33</sup>



Figure 20. The Battle of the Crossroads. *Source:* After Action Report, Attempted Ambush Near Ap Thanh Phung, 21 January 1970, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 4 Feb 70, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

The North Vietnamese opened fire with recoilless rifles, RPGs, and small-arms fire, forcing Troop C to come on line. Aerial observation was hampered by the large rubber trees that formed a canopy over the ground troops, forcing the ground units to continually pop smoke grenades to mark their positions. As Troop C advanced against the enemy positions, Troop B continued northwest along Highway 13 another 1,500 meters and then swung northeast to strike the enemy's flank and link up with Troop C. After penetrating the enemy's first bunker line, Troop C continued to receive fire from an enemy strongpoint further up the ridge. Troop B encountered heavy small-arms, recoilless rifle, and RPG fire but continued to press its attack, overrunning several North Vietnamese bunkers.<sup>34</sup>

By 0830 the regimental commander, Colonel Donn A. Starry, was circling overhead in a command and control helicopter. Colonel Starry ordered 2d Squadron to immediately launch Troops F and G toward the battle area, and by 0915 they were on the move.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, he began to ring the enemy position with fire, coordinating mortars, artillery, helicopter gunships, and air strikes.

Troops B and C continued their assault against the North Vietnamese, eventually linking up at 1100. The enemy commander tried to maneuver a platoon around Troop C's right flank, but the ACAVs spotted the enemy and immediately brought them under withering machine-gun fire. The enemy was running out of options to hold off the armored assault and began to crack. A quick search of the enemy dead turned up documents that regimental interpreters began to translate. The captured enemy documents identified two enemy base areas just to the north. Air strikes quickly struck the base areas while Troops B and C prepared to continue their attack.<sup>36</sup> As Troops B and C moved north, Troops F and G arrived in the contact area. Troop G swept the area of the contact while Troop F moved

north and came up on the eastern flank of Troops B and C. The troops continued to make sporadic contact until nightfall, killing several North Vietnamese.

The "Battle of the Crossroads" was not bloodless for the regiment. The final cost to the regiment was two Sheridans and two ACAVs destroyed by recoilless rifle and RPG fire, along with one dead and fifteen wounded troopers. The North Vietnamese suffered forty-one dead.<sup>37</sup> The enemy had chosen the time and place for two major ambushes, but the regiment's coordinated firepower, mobility and armored protection overwhelmed the North Vietnamese.

### War Zone C

The 1st Cavalry Division was having success in interdicting the enemy along the Serges Jungle Highway. The combination of the Rome Plow cut along Highway 14A, constant sweeps by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and aggressive patrolling by the division's infantry was proving effective. The North Vietnamese had three major infiltrations routes from Cambodia that passed through, northing Tay Ninh Province in an area known as War Zone C. The "X-Cache Trail, Mustang Trail, and Saigon River Corridor" fed into Base Area 355 northwest of Dau Tieng (see figure 21), and from February through April the 11th Armored Cavalry cut a swath across these trails.<sup>38</sup>

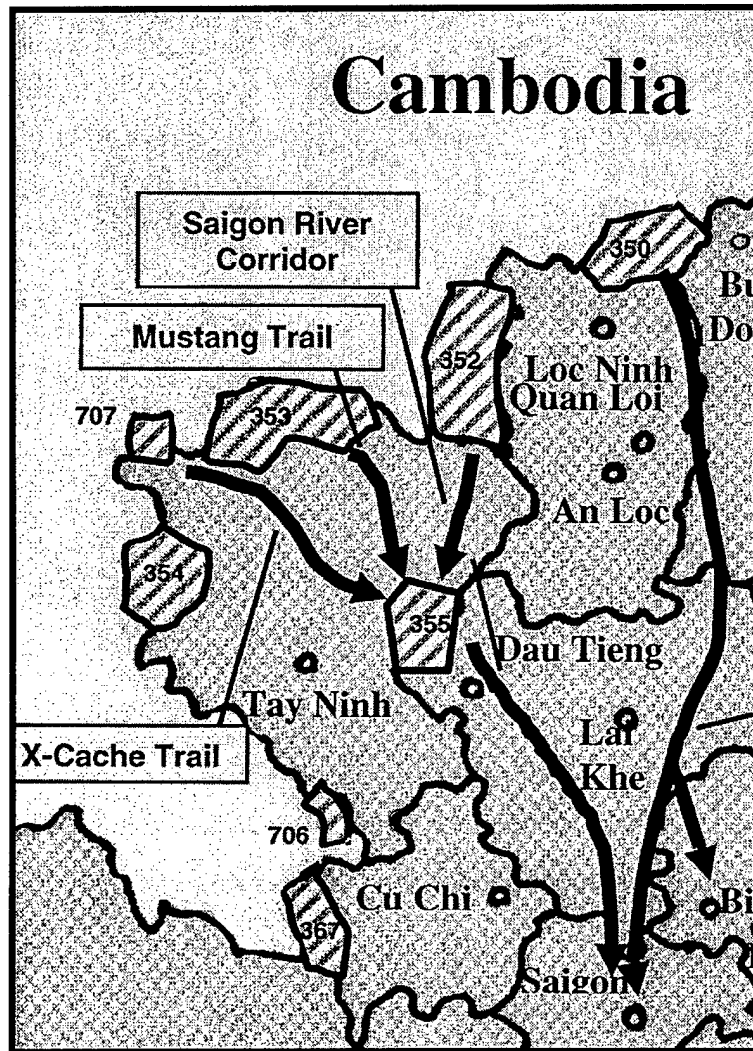


Figure 21. North Vietnamese Trail Network Leading into Tay Ninh Province .  
*Source:* After Action Review, *The Shield and the Hammer: The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in War Zone C and Western III Corps*, 14th Military History Detachment, undated, pp. Maps 3-6, box 14, Historian's Background Files, 14th Military History Detachment, RG 472, NARA; Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Donn A. Starry, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 12 June 1970, Historians files, CMH; Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1978) 170; and J. D. Coleman, *Incursion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 13.

Operation FRESH START began on 15 February as the regiment began to shift from northern Binh Long Province into northern Tay Ninh Province. The 11th Armored Cavalry

assumed operational control of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 501st and 984th Land Clearing Companies. The 1st Squadron, reinforced by the 501st Land Clearing Company, moved west into Tay Ninh Province and then turned north along TL4 towards the town of Katum. The 2d Squadron moved west from Tonle Cham along Route 246 towards Katum. The 3d Squadron moved north and assumed responsibility of the area between Loc Ninh and Bu Dop.<sup>39</sup>

During Operation FRESH START, the regiment varied its technique from Operation LONG REACH II by forming clearing teams, each composed of a tank company and a land clearing company. The reconnaissance troops conducted sweeps and set automatic ambushes along the trails. The North Vietnamese did not challenge the regiment's initial advance, but on 4 February they attacked 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry at Firebase Tina, twenty kilometers west of Tonle Cham, and on 7 February, they struck the 1st Squadron's Rome Plow team. These attacks cost the enemy fifty-eight dead, while barely slowing the clearing operations. American losses were four dead and twenty-one wounded. The North Vietnamese also tried to divert the regiment's effort in Tay Ninh Province by staging a series of costly attacks, which failed, in the vicinity of Loc Ninh.<sup>40</sup> The regiment was not drawn away from its efforts in Tay Ninh Province and continued its land clearing operations.

By mid-March, 1st and 2d Squadrons linked up along Route 246, and with the initial land clearing completed, they began to expand their operations against the enemy's trail system. While clearing Route 246, both squadrons encountered extensive bunker and trail networks. With the initial cut along route 246 completed, the regiment began work on a series of tactical cuts to gain access to enemy base areas and to further restrict the North Vietnamese logistical operations. Working with the land-clearing companies, the squadrons

began to clear trails north towards the Cambodian border and another cut south of Route 246 running east to west, cutting across the enemy trail network (see figure 22). On 15 March, 3rd Squadron came under the operational control of the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division and moved into the area around Lai Khe. In late March 1st Squadron began extending its operations to the west and came under the operational control of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division.<sup>41</sup>

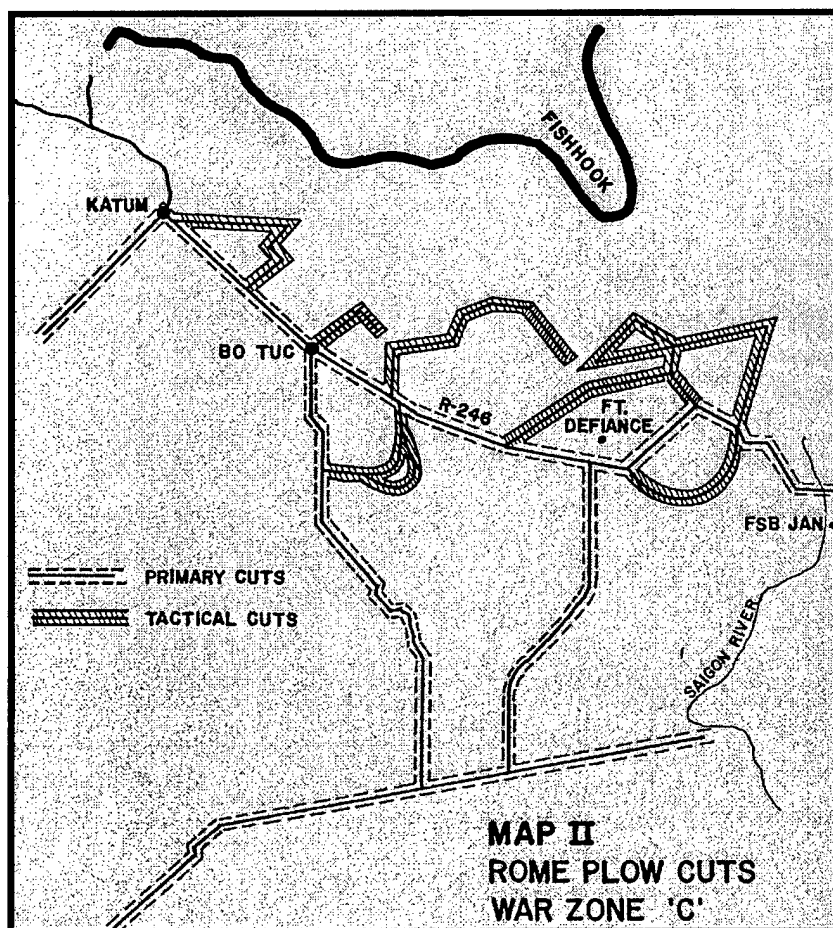


Figure 22. Operation FRESH START Rome Plow Cuts. *Source:* Colonel Donn A. Starry, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 12 June 70, pp. Inclosure 3-19, 3-20, Historian files, CMH.



On the morning of 31 March, Troops B and D swept north toward an area with several dwellings that aerial reconnaissance had detected within a few hundred meters of the Cambodian border. The 1st and 3d Platoons, Troop B, broke from the jungle and began to advance on the dwellings. A North Vietnamese soldier fired an RPG at a Sheridan as it closed on the structures. The ACAVs and Sheridans returned fire as they swept forward, crushing bunkers under their tracks as they advanced. The platoons formed a perimeter around the complex and began to search the bunkers as Troop D arrived on the scene within an hour. The complex was the training school for the *272d PAVN Regiment*, complete with classrooms and training aids. Troop B killed twenty-seven enemy soldiers and captured another sixteen without suffering a casualty.<sup>42</sup>

From June 1969 through March 1970, the 11th Armored Cavalry, working in conjunction with the 1st Cavalry Division, formed the northern tier of II Field Force Vietnam's area defense. Land clearing parallel to the Cambodian border cut across four major infiltration routes and provided the regiment with mobility corridors from which it could patrol and attack enemy base areas. In combination with the 1st Cavalry Division's operations in depth along the enemy's infiltration network, these operations restricted the flow of supplies to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units in the III Corps Tactical Zone. The enemy suffered heavy casualties trying to supply its forces in South Vietnam, and its operations were becoming less effective.

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<sup>1</sup>Operational Report and Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 August 1969–31 October 1969, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 22 November 1969, p. 11, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Record Group (RG) 472, National and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Col. James H. Leach, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 7 December 1969, Annex G pp. 1-3, box 1, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>3</sup>After Action review (AAR), Enemy Attacks in Northern Binh Long Province, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 21 October 1969, p. 1, box 2, AARs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, December 1967–September 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>4</sup>AAR, The Battle of Binh Long Province, 14th Military History Detachment, undated, pp. 11-16, box 5, AARs, Asst CofS G-3, 1st Infantry Division, March–December 1969, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>5</sup>AAR, Enemy Attacks in Northern Binh Long Province, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>AAR, The Battle of Binh Long Province, 14th Military History Detachment, pp. 11-16.

<sup>7</sup>AAR, Enemy Attacks in Northern Binh Long Province, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, pp. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup>Operations Report–Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 August–31 October 1969, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 22 November 1969, p. 7, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, (NARA).

<sup>9</sup>Valorous Unit Award Recommendation, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 15 December 1969, p. 1, box 1, Organizational History, 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>11</sup>AAR, Operation Kentucky Cougar, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 9 March 1970, p.3, box 1, Organizational History, 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>12</sup>AAR, Operation LONG REACH I, 28th Military History Detachment, 9 May 1970, p. 3, box 1, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, 1968-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 4.

<sup>14</sup>AAR, Airlift of Troop F, 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment to Bu Dop, 28th Military History Detachment, 20 February 1970, handwritten manifest, Historians files, CMH.

<sup>15</sup> ORLL, 1 November 1969–31 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 18 February 1970, p. 9, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>16</sup> AAR, Troops B and F, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 28th Military History Detachment, 11 February 1970, pp. 3-4, box 1, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, 1968-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>17</sup> Quarterly Review of MACV/JGS Combined Campaign Plan, IV Quarter 1969, US Army Advisory Group, III Corps Tactical Zone, 8 January 1970, p. 6, box 1, 1969 Quarterly Review of Combined Campaign Plan, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>18</sup> Donn A. Starry, "A Report on the 11th Armored Cavalry in Southeast Asia--1969-70," *Armor* 80 (January-February 71): 18.

<sup>19</sup> AAR, Operation TEXAS TRAVELER, 28th Military History Detachment, 18 January 1970, pp. 2-3, box 1, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, 1968-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> AAR, Contact Resulting from A Visual Air Recon by Air Cavalry Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 10 April 1970, pp. 1-3, box 1, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, 1968-1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> ORLL, 1 November 1969–31 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 18 February 1970, p. 2, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA; AAR, Firefight Near Bo Duc, 20 January 1970, 28th Military History Detachment, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 5 February 1970, pp. 3-4, box 17, AARs, Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam (USARV), Command Historian, RG472, NARA; and AAR, Attempted Ambush Near Ap Thanh Phung, 21 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 4 February 1970, pp. 2-3, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>25</sup> AAR, Firefight Near Bo Duc, 20 January 1970, 28th Military History Detachment, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 5 February 1970, fig. Enemy Positions, box 17, AARs, Headquarters, USARV, Command Historian, RG472, NARA.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>27</sup>ORLL, 1 November 1969–31 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 18 February 1970, p. 12, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>28</sup>AAR Firefight Near Bo Duc, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>General Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1978), 157.

<sup>30</sup>AAR Firefight Near Bo Duc, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>32</sup>AAR, Attempted Ambush Near Ap Thanh Phung, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup>ORLL, 1 November 1969–31 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 18 February 1970, pp. 12-13, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>34</sup>AAR, Attempted Ambush Near Ap Thanh Phung, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 5; ORLL, 1 November 1969–31 January 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 18 February 1970, p. 13, box 3, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, November 1969–October 1971, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>36</sup>AAR, Attempted Ambush Near Ap Thanh Phung, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>38</sup>Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 159; ORLL, 1 February 1970–31 April 1970, II Field Force Vietnam (FFV), 14 May 1970, pp. 24-25, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>39</sup>ORLL, 1 February 1970–31 April 1970, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 21 May 1970, p. 6, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>40</sup>ORLL, 1 February 1970–31 April 1970, II FFV, 14 May 1970, p. 25, box 1, ORLLs, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>42</sup>AAR Firefight at NVA Replacement School, 31 March 1970, 28th Military History Detachment, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 9 May 1970, p. 5, box 1, AARs, 28th Military History Detachment, Command Historian, 1968–1970, RG472, NARA.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTO CAMBODIA

While the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment conducted operations in northern Tay Ninh Province, the political situation in Cambodia began to unravel. The government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's head of state since 1941, was overthrown in a coup. While the prince was in Europe, General Lon Nol seized power through a secret ballot in the Cambodian National Assembly on 18 March 1970. The United States backed Lon Nol's claim, while the North Vietnamese supported Prince Sihanouk. In early April, North Vietnamese forces began offensive operations against Lon Nol's supporters near the South Vietnamese border. About that time, South Vietnamese infantry and armored cavalry struck base area 706 in the "Angel's Wing" section of southwestern Tay Ninh Province in Operation TOAN THANG 41. The attack was a success and highlighted to MACV the vulnerability of North Vietnamese base areas in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam, senior leaders believed only a large attack against the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia could seriously disrupt their logistical operations. General Abrams was aware that Washington was moving closer to authorizing such an attack and initiated planning for the operation during a meeting with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, commander of II Field Force Vietnam, on 19 April. On 26 April, President Nixon issued a directive for an attack by American and South Vietnamese forces across the Cambodian border. General

Abrams told Washington, "We are prepared to execute a coordinated attack on Base Area 352/353 between 0700-0800 on 30 April Saigon time."<sup>2</sup>

### Preparation

The II Field Force immediately began planning for the incursion, but most of the detailed planning needed to be done by the divisions, and they were not in the loop until very late. The 1st Cavalry Division did not learn of the plan until 26 April. Security was exceptionally tight to maintain operational security for the incursion. In fact, General Davison had to plead with General Abrams before gaining authorization to involve brigade commanders in the planning, but that was just the week before the operation.<sup>3</sup> Within the 1st Cavalry Division, Brigadier General Robert M. Shoemaker, the Assistant Division Commander for Operations, was responsible for planning and assembling the task organization for the main US strike force's attack, aimed at the Fishhook. The organization was christened Task Force Shoemaker (see figure 23).<sup>4</sup>

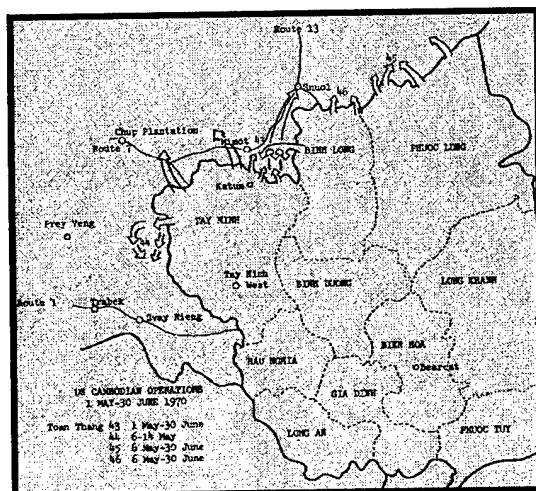


Figure 23, Operations into Cambodia. *Source:* Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, II Field Force Vietnam, box 6, AARs, 17th Military History Detachment, RG 472, NARA.

General Shoemaker personally commanded the division's drive into Cambodia. The division and the 11th Armored Cavalry were deployed across the northwestern tier of III Corps near the Cambodian border. Task Force Shoemaker was an imposing force of nearly 17,000 soldiers that included the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and from the 25th Infantry Division the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized), and the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor. Additionally, the South Vietnamese contributed the 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment and 3d Airborne Brigade. On 28 April Task Force Shoemaker received warning that it must be ready to attack within forty-eight hours.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment would be on the cutting edge of the invasion into Cambodia. The regiment's mission was to seize the Cambodian town of Snoul, which was thought to be the headquarters for an antiaircraft company from the *141st PAVN Regiment*. In the immediate vicinity of town was the *208th Artillery Regiment*, which supported the *7th PAVN Division*.<sup>5</sup>

#### Operation Rockcrusher

The morning of 1 May dawned with artillery, B-52 and tactical air strikes raining down on the Fishhook, as the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Brigade air assaulted into their blocking positions in Cambodia north of the Fishhook. While the South Vietnamese were setting up their new firebases, the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment were moving north from two bases near the Fishhook, named Firebases South I and South II (see figure 24).

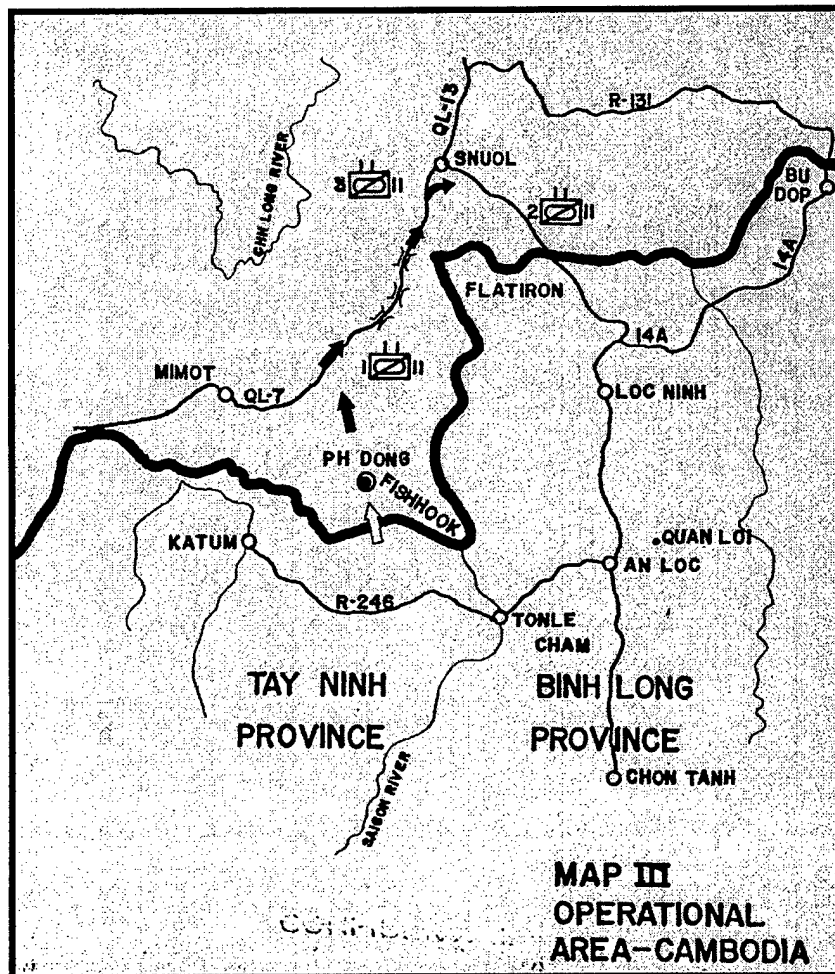


Figure 24. *Source:* Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Donn A. Starry, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 12 June 1970, Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C., Historians Files.

At 0718, Colonel Starry, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's commander, ordered the regiment to advance, and within minutes the lead tanks from 2d Squadron swept down the road from Firebase South I toward the Cambodian border. Company H led with its M48A3 tanks forming a screen for the ACAVs and Sheridans of Troops E and G. The 3d Squadron left Firebase South II, moving from the west to follow 2d Squadron's advance. The tanks of M Company led Troops I and K. Troops F and L



stayed in Vietnam to secure the regimental headquarters and all three of the regiment's howitzer batteries. Both squadrons led with tanks because they provided the best defense against RPGs and mines.<sup>6</sup>

The 2d and 3d Squadrons moved north across a flat open plain towards the border, and as they neared the border the intensity of the preparation bombardment became apparent, as the area was laced with bomb craters, churned earth, and shattered trees. The columns were still south of the border when the enemy fired two RPGs at one of Company H's tanks. One RPG hit the tank but only inflicted minor damage. Company H pulled back, marked the enemy positions with smoke, and called in air strikes. Fighter jets quickly pounded the enemy, dropping bombs within 200 meters of Company H's lead tanks.<sup>7</sup>

At 1100, Company H reached Cambodia, crossing a narrow stream that marked the border. North Vietnamese mortar rounds landed sporadically as the armored column crossed the stream but had little effect. Company H found little evidence of North Vietnamese troops as it moved further into Cambodia. In fact, Colonel Starry later commented, "The enemy appeared, if not forewarned, at least apprehensive about the attack. . . . [t]he enemy moved out of the area just before the operation began, indicating a high-level of intelligence or forewarning."<sup>8</sup> Between the border and the small hamlet of Satum, the first objective was a large open field, but it was covered with a few inches of water and the ground was soft. As Company H continued through the morass, the North Vietnamese raked the tanks with small-arms fire, wounding one soldier. The tanks immediately returned fire with their 90-millimeter cannons and machine-guns, quickly

silencing the enemy. The 2d Squadron continued its advance on Satum reaching the hamlet just after noon. In March, the regiment's Air Cavalry Troop spotted North Vietnamese troops in the hamlet, after which Satum was bombed by B-52s. The 2d Squadron swept the area with small-arms fire, reconning by fire, as it moved into the hamlet, but Satum turned out to be deserted. At 1400, Company H and Troop G continued to advance north while Troop E secured the hamlet.

As 3d Squadron moved on the road from Firebase South I to II into position behind 2d Squadron, it had three armored vehicles damaged and four crewmen wounded by enemy mines. Despite the mines, 3d Squadron got into position, and at 1115 its lead element, Company M, crossed the Cambodian border. Once across the border, 3d Squadron moved along a line of trees to the west of 2d Squadron. As the squadrons advanced they found increasing numbers of bunkers and trenches lining the road, many of them camouflaged in the jungle. The bunkers were empty, but the crews were nervous, expecting the North Vietnamese to try and ambush the columns.<sup>9</sup>

In the early afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel Grail L. Brookshire, the commander of 2d Squadron, began looking for suitable night-defensive positions for his squadron. He chose a small, 200-meters-long field three kilometers north of Satum. He was not satisfied with the size of the field, but it was the best place available. An observation helicopter scouting the field reported seeing a North Vietnamese soldier in a trench line to the squadron's northeast. The helicopter engaged the enemy, which unleashed a torrent of return fire from the North Vietnamese. The enemy failed to hit the helicopter as the pilot

evaded and then left the area, returning within minutes with a Cobra gunship as escort. The Cobra strafed the trench line with rockets and machine-gun fire.

Enemy fire started to come from both flanks of 2d Squadron's column with the North Vietnamese having bunkers in both wood lines. Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire had Company H's tanks turn and open fire on the enemy, blasting the eastern tree line. An RPG hit one of the tanks and within a few minutes the North Vietnamese started firing from the north. Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire pushed the tanks of Company H northwest, with Troop G following in support. Troop E began to sweep southwest to flank the enemy positions, but was quickly hit by enemy RPG and small-arms fire. An RPG hit a Sheridan just below the main gun; the blast blew the vehicle commander and the loader out of the turret, while a large piece of shrapnel decapitated a nearby medic. Troop E now had two dead and several wounded but continued its sweep rolling up to the tree line. One ACAV cut down a North Vietnamese soldier as he tried to flee. The engagement petered out just before nightfall, with the squadron moving a kilometer to the east to set up its night-defensive position.

During the day 3d Squadron advanced to the west of 2d Squadron, finding much the same state of affairs. The wood lines were infested with enemy fortifications; trench lines and bunkers seemed to be everywhere. The squadron rolled up on a large bunker complex about noon. Company M's tanks pounded the complex with fire and destroyed the bunkers. The squadron moved north of Satum by 1300 but was held in place most of the afternoon waiting for a B-52 strike. That night the squadron established three separate night-defensive positions and passed the night uneventfully.

One factor that initially slowed the regiment's advance was the abrupt change from what was basically area war inside South Vietnam to a fast-moving armored assault. General Davison noted, "Literally, overnight they had to go from this static posture into what, in the initial days of the Cambodian operation, was really a war of mobility, and this was rather a rude shock, particularly to the brigade headquarters. It was not so bad for the battalion because they relocated from time to time, but many of the brigade headquarters couldn't find their equipment, they didn't know how to pack up and move, and how to set up a command post in the field." The brigades were so conditioned to moving cautiously and setting up ambushes, continued Davison, "that it took them a couple of days before I could get the message through to them."<sup>10</sup>

While the enemy continued to avoid contact on 2 and 3 May, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment continued to search for enemy positions against scant opposition, but the regiment still lost several armored vehicles to mines. The 2d Squadron again led with its tank company, followed by Troop E and Troop K from 3d Squadron moving south and west of its night defensive position. Trailing 2d Squadron, 3d Squadron continued to sweep the area around Satum and enlarge the regiment's penetration into Cambodia. The squadrons made sporadic contact with the North Vietnamese and uncovered numerous bunker complexes and small supply caches.<sup>11</sup>

#### Battle for Snoul

Working a classic hammer and anvil operation, American and South Vietnamese units advanced deeper into Cambodia over the next two days. South Vietnamese airborne battalions from the 3d Airborne Brigade moved from their landing zones north of the

Fishhook and formed the anvil to block the enemy's withdrawal and interdict his trail network. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, continued their northern advance as the operation's hammer.

On 3 May, the 1st Cavalry Division tasked the 11th Armored Cavalry to move north through the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Brigade and the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry, Division and attack north along Highway 7 towards the small town of Snoul, forty kilometers from the regiment's current position. The town was a key road junction between Highway 7 and Highway 13, north of the Fishhook. Colonel Starry said in an after-action interview that, "Snoul is the key to what goes on in the Fishhook area."<sup>12</sup>

On 4 May, with tanks again in the lead, 2d Squadron led the regiment from Satum north towards Highway 7. The 3d Squadron was tasked to provide security for disabled vehicles as it followed 2d Squadron. About 1400, Troop G spotted some North Vietnamese soldiers mixed in with a group of civilians. The regiment's after-action report took note of this action, stating that Troop G "tried unsuccessfully to detain or kill the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] while not harming the women and children in the area. Having spent the last six months in War Zone C, the men displayed amazing discipline and control. The NVA successfully used the women and children as a shield to escape. The troop, although disturbed by the NVA's escape, had not fired a single round."<sup>13</sup> The squadrons went into night-defensive positions along Highway 7, about one-half way to Snoul.

The 1st Cavalry Division dissolved Task Force Shoemaker on 5 May, and the division headquarters took direct control of the operation. The division had thirteen

maneuver battalions either inside Cambodia or in direct support of the incursion.<sup>14</sup> For the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment this change in command relationship was transparent, for the regiment merely reverted to the preexisting command relationship with the 1st Cavalry Division.

The regiment began operations on 5 May by moving generally northeast along Highway 7 with 2d Squadron in the lead. To get to Snoul, the armored column had to cross three small streams. Early that morning Colonel Starry conducted an aerial reconnaissance of the crossing sites; not surprisingly, the North Vietnamese had destroyed the bridges along Highway 7. He took his helicopter in for a closer look and determined that there were fordable sites on the two southern streams, but that the third stream would have to be bridged.

The 2d Squadron moved along Highway 7 with Company H and Troop G leading; to their west, 3d Squadron also moved north. The 1st Squadron, which was now in Cambodia, brought up the rear, sweeping the tree lines along Highway 7 and escorting disabled vehicles to maintenance collection points. Engineers were in the column and had the mission of building the pontoon bridge across the northern stream while the Aero Rifle platoon provided security for them. The bridging assets were flown in by helicopter, and shortly after noon Troops E and G crossed the pontoon bridge.

The rivers were the only natural obstacles between 2d Squadron and Snoul. Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire planned his attack and reorganized his column on the north side of the last stream. Intelligence believed Snoul was defended by a large number of North Vietnamese troops. Confirming this suspicion was the heavy ground fire 1st

Cavalry Division's helicopters received when they approached the town. The 2d Squadron once again put Company H's tanks in the lead, with Troops E and G following. The squadron pushed north along Highway 7 to the hamlet of Kbal Trach, about four kilometers from Snoul, then turned east into a rubber plantation, and then turned north, coming due west of the Snoul airstrip.<sup>15</sup>

Out ahead of 2d Squadron a scout helicopter received .51-caliber antiaircraft fire from the outskirts of the town, confirming that the enemy was still there. Major Frederick M. Franks, the S3 of 2d Squadron, riding in another helicopter, radioed that he had located an antiaircraft position. Remaining on the scene, he directed Troop G to the target with the regimental command tracks following close behind. Colonel Starry and Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire joined in as the cavalry troopers swept towards the enemy, lacing the area with fire. The sudden ground attack surprised the North Vietnamese; in fact, one enemy soldier was captured still manning his machine gun.

Some enemy soldiers fled to nearby bunkers but still continued to fight. The cavalry troopers tried getting the enemy soldiers in one of the bunkers to surrender, but instead of surrendering, the enemy threw out a grenade. The blast injured several Americans near the bunker, including Colonel Starry, who received minor shrapnel wounds in his chest and face, and Major Franks, whose foot was badly mangled. The troopers quickly tossed several grenades into the bunker, killing the three North Vietnamese occupants. A total of twenty bunkers were found in the area.<sup>16</sup>

The 2d Squadron continued north along Highway 7 towards Snoul. Troop E led, advancing towards a point south of the town's marketplace when the enemy opened fire.

An RPG crashed into the lead Sheridan. The troop formed a herringbone, sweeping the area with machine-gun fire. The North Vietnamese continued to engage Troop E with small-arms and recoilless rifle fire. A second RPG hit the lead Sheridan, while the enemy walked 60-millimeter mortar fire into the American position. Troop E pulled back on line with Company H and called in air strikes. Within minutes, jet fighters started to pound the enemy positions, but in the process they destroyed a gas station and at least ten houses.

After the air strikes, Company H and Troops E and G advanced into the southern part of Snoul. Sporadic machine-gun fire was all the resistance they came upon. Company H's tanks quickly dealt with that resistance, using canister and high-explosive rounds to kill at least six North Vietnamese soldiers. Troops E and G also met with limited resistance, and without much difficulty pressed through the enemy and advanced into the town. The remainder of the day passed with the only significant action being a quick firefight while Troop G moved into its night defensive position. As darkness fell, 2d Squadron was in its night-defensive position on the southeast side of Snoul. Unfortunately, several civilians were killed in the attack on Snoul, but the North Vietnamese lost over 120 soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

The 3d Squadron's column followed 2d Squadron north on Highway 7, crossing the pontoon bridge just before 1600. The squadron reported little activity as it followed 2d Squadron entering Snoul from the southwest. The squadron moved off the road to circle around the west side of the town. Almost immediately, Company M called in artillery and air strikes on enemy soldiers seen in some nearby rubber trees. Troop K was



ambushed, with the North Vietnamese using small-arms and RPGs, as it tried to maneuver south of the rubber trees. Luckily, none of its vehicles was hit in the ambush. With darkness coming on, the 3d Squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bobby F. Griffen, moved his squadron into its night-defensive position. It was not a great position because there were houses close to the perimeter with tall grass and fallen logs throughout the area. He was concerned about the enemy infiltrating his position, so he called in a flare ship to provide illumination for the night. During the night, the squadron repelled two probes of its perimeter, killing ten North Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

On the morning of 6 May, 2d and 3d Squadrons advanced into the center of Snoul. Helicopters moved ahead of the advancing armored vehicles, dropping pamphlets warning all civilians to leave the area. But few civilians remained in Snoul--only a group of about one hundred Vietnamese who wanted to leave the country. As the squadrons advanced they found only destroyed buildings with fires still smoldering and deserted streets, for the enemy was no longer in Snoul. First Lieutenant David N. Greenlee, the regimental public information officer, explained, "Air strikes had already hit Snoul...but the troops did not know what type of resistance to expect." He believed Snoul was "an NVA town and possible stronghold."<sup>19</sup> The armored vehicles stopped in the main square while soldiers searched through the shattered buildings. The soldiers brought out loads of soft drinks and food, and there was some looting, which the regiment's officers quickly stopped. The actions of their men were later explained by pointing out, "Operations for the past six months had been in War Zone C or other areas of no civilian population, where everything found was military."<sup>20</sup>

By the evening of 6 May, the battle for Snoul was over. The *141st PAVN Regiment* lost close to 150 men plus 3 .51-caliber machineguns, almost the entirety of its antiaircraft company. After the battle, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment began its familiar mission of searching for the enemy and his caches, and for the next three days 2d and 3d Squadrons pushed outward from Snoul in a series of sweeps to find and destroy the enemy's logistic bases. North Vietnamese resistance was limited, as they avoided combat with the regiment. "As they had done so many times before, the North Vietnamese chose not to fight, retreating instead farther into Cambodia, knowing full-well that the Americans would not pursue them indefinitely."<sup>21</sup>

The regiment would spend the next month conducting sweeps in and around the Fishhook. These operations were very similar to what the regiment had been doing in South Vietnam prior to the incursion. The longer the regiment remained, the more aggressive the North Vietnamese became, with ambushes and mining incidents increasing. The 1st Squadron was placed under the operational control of the 25th Infantry Division for Operation BOLD LANCER, which was another operation into Cambodia directed against Base Area 354 on the western border of Tay Ninh Province. On 25 June, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment began its return movement to South Vietnam, and the last unit crossed the border on 28 June. Troop L, commanded by Captain Ralph A. Miles, was the last of the regiment's units in Cambodia. When his last vehicle crossed back into South Vietnam he radioed, "From the back of the bus, we're all across."<sup>22</sup>

The 11th Armored Cavalry encountered familiar problems during the Cambodian operation. The terrain and vegetation were similar to South Vietnam, but as the regiment moved farther away from its logistical and maintenance support, it had to either drag damaged vehicles with the regiment or evacuate the vehicles back to South Vietnam. Additionally, a decision was made that for political reasons the regiment could not leave any destroyed vehicles in Cambodia. This decision contributed greatly to the regiment's logistical burden. This drained away combat power and logistical support. Also, the regiment used CH-47 Chinooks, nearly fifty hours of blade time per day, to move its supplies and repair parts by air to local support areas in Cambodia.<sup>23</sup>

The 11th Armored cavalry's performance was impressive. In seventy-two hours, the regiment was able to gather its far-flung units, stage its logistical support, plan, and execute a major attack. It took a couple of days to reacquaint itself with a war of maneuver, but once done, the regiment executed an aggressive and effective attack on Snoul. But as Colonel Starry pointed out in an interview during the operation, "If they had had effective anti-aircraft systems, we would have been in trouble."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dale, Andrade, "US Army in Vietnam: Combat Operations 1969-1973, Chapter Breakthrough Cambodia," unpublished manuscript, pp. 4-8, Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C., Historian files.

<sup>2</sup>General Abrams, Message MAC 5610, to General Wheeler, 27 April 1970, sub: Operation Shoemaker, Abrams Papers, CMH Historians files.

<sup>3</sup>Keith William Nolan, *Into Cambodia: Spring Campaign, Summer Offensive, 1970* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1990), 76; and General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officer Debriefing Program (1976), Section 4, p. 7, CMH Historians files.

<sup>4</sup>Nolan, *Into Cambodia*, 78-79; and After Action Review (AAR), Cambodian Campaign, 1st Cavalry Division, 18 July 1970, p. xiv, box 3, Records of the Asst CofS,

G-3, 1st Cavalry Division, AARs, 1970, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup>After Action Review (AAR), Operation Dong Tien II and TOAN THANG 43, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 9 December 1970, p. 1, box 1, Asst CofS S-3, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 1969–1970, RG 492, NARA.

<sup>6</sup>Vietnam Interview Tape (VNIT) 1014, Col Donn A. Starry, 45th Military History Detachment, 8 May 1970, p. 2, CMH Historian Files.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup>AAR, Operation Dong Tien II and TOAN THANG 43, 11th ACR, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Andrade, "Breakthrough Cambodia," p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>AAR, Operation Dong Tien II and TOAN THANG 43, 11th ACR, pp. 5-8.

<sup>12</sup>VNIT 1014, Col Starry, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>AAR, Operation Dong Tien II and TOAN THANG 43, 11th ACR, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup>Commander's Evaluation Report, II Field Force Vietnam (FFV), Cambodian Operations, 31 July 1970, Annex A, p. 3, box 14, Records of the Headquarters US Army Vietnam (USARV) Command Historian, II FFV Operations Report and Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1970, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>15</sup>AAR, Operation Dong Tien II and TOAN THANG 43, 11th ACR, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>21</sup>Andrade, "Breakthrough Cambodia," 29.

<sup>22</sup>Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), 176; and Nolan, *Into Cambodia*, 437.

<sup>23</sup>Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 181; and VNIT 1014, Colonel Starry, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>VNIT 1014, Col Starry, p. 6.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The period from January 1969 through June 1970 was one of progress for both the South Vietnamese and II Field Force. Saigon's influence in the III Corps countryside increased throughout the year, while the influence and capabilities of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong decreased. While statistics can often be deceiving, there were statistical improvements in various categories tracked by MACV. Much of the improvement was a result of improved security, especially along III Corps' transportation network. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was an essential component in achieving these gains.

The II Field Force took the fight into the enemy's previously safe base areas in order to deny him the ability to preposition troops and supplies for offensive operations in South Vietnam. Land-clearing operations gave armored forces access to these areas. The enemy could still mass for attacks, but only if he was willing to pay a heavy price. Nonetheless, although the Communists were clearly less capable of offensive operations, they still held the initiative until their Cambodian base areas were attacked. The attack into Cambodia tore up the North Vietnamese logistical infrastructure along the border, further decreasing their offensive capabilities.

The success achieved by II Field Force against the enemy was paralleled by the pacification effort in III Corps. In terms of rural security, road and bridge security, and the South Vietnamese presence in the daily lives of its citizens, 1969 and early 1970 were a period of progress. Using the six categories of the hamlet evaluation system, 92.4 percent of the population was in the top three categories in June 1969. In December

1969, the percentage rose to 97.4 or another 298,000 of the 3.4 million people in III Corps now under the Saigon government's protection.<sup>1</sup> The Saigon government was wresting control of the population from the Viet Cong. While the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment did not have a large role in actual pacification projects, it was vitally important in driving enemy main force units away from the population as the pacification could continue uninhibited by enemy action.

Roads throughout III Corps were safer. MACV had three road security classifications: green, amber, and red. South Vietnamese and American forces controlled green roads during daylight hours with minimum security measures. Amber roads required thorough security measures, while red roads required major military operations or engineering efforts to open. In February 1969, 814 of the 1,035 kilometers of roads in III Corps were evaluated as green or amber. In December 1969 that number stood at 1,009, with only 26 kilometers rated as red or closed. Some roads, like Highway 14A, had been closed for years, but during 1969 they were opened, partly because armor helped pave the way.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, South Vietnamese and U.S. engineers improved roads and repaired and built new bridges, further enhancing the transportation network in III Corps.

General Abrams' decision to move the 1st Cavalry Division from I Corps to III Corps changed the correlation of forces for II Field Force. Using the 1st Cavalry Division in a mobile defense along the western and northern tier of III Corps successfully disrupted the enemy's infiltration efforts. Teaming the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment with the division created an organization with superior tactical and operational mobility. Working behind the mobile defense of the 1st Cavalry Division and 11th Armored

Cavalry, II Field Force's other units, arrayed in a layered defense, systematically pounded the enemy and hammered his logistical system. This time, however, the difference was that the enemy's losses in men and material were much harder to replace because of the efforts of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry. By early 1970, II Field Force had pushed the enemy's main force divisions back to the Cambodian border and depleted enemy local force units within III Corps. Tactical Rome Plow cuts in Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuc Long Provinces cut across the enemy's infiltration network close to the border before the trails could fan out. These Rome Plow cuts impeded the enemy's logistical effort and allowed the regiment's armored vehicles to move rapidly around the border region.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment demonstrated repeatedly that it could quickly mass against the enemy, turning a chance encounter into a major firefight in which the regiment brought its massive firepower to bear against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. However, if the enemy wanted to avoid a major fight, finding him could be very difficult. The regiment countered this by moving against areas the enemy had to defend, principally his caches and base areas within South Vietnam and later Cambodia. When the regiment did make contact, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong usually got the worst of the encounter.

The great disparity in firepower between the 11th Armored Cavalry and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units led the enemy to counter the regiment in other ways. The enemy used mines to inflict casualties and deny the regiment access to certain areas. While the North Vietnamese used mines on major and secondary roads, the majority of their mining effort, 58 percent, was placed off roads on trails and for protection of its



bunker complexes and supply caches. Between June 1969 and May 1970, the regiment found or hit 1,024 mines (see figure 25). Even with great emphasis placed on detecting mines, the regiment found just over one-half of the mines (see figure 26).<sup>3</sup> The regiment's losses from mines were significant. From April 1969 to October 1969, 153 of 187 vehicles declared as battle losses were from mines.<sup>4</sup>

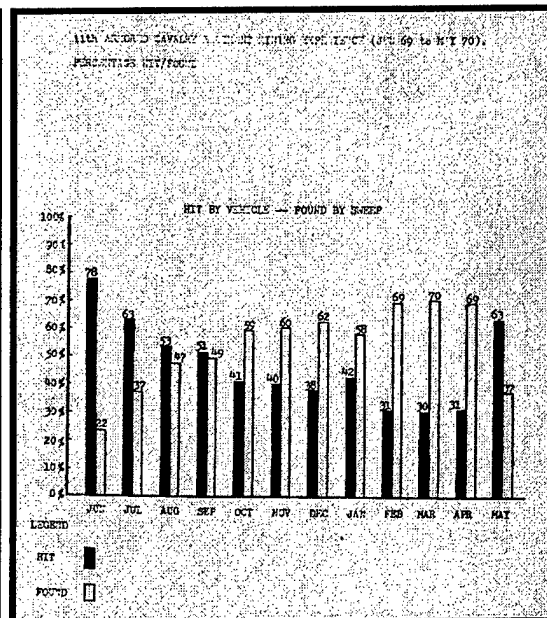
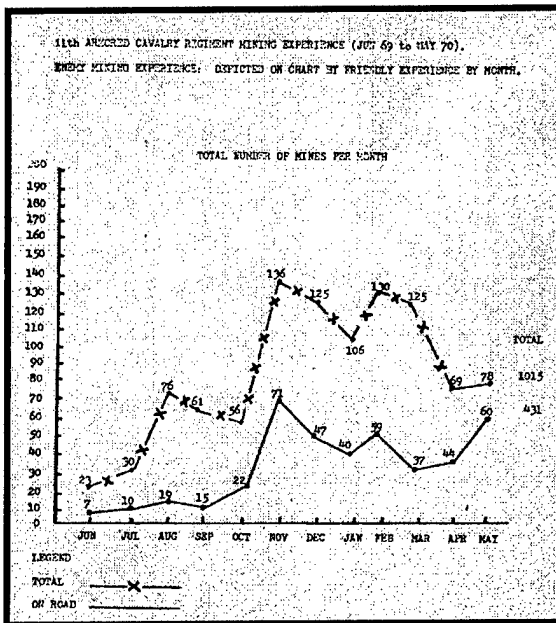


Figure 25. Total Number of Mines Per Month June 1969–May 1970. *Source:* Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Donn A. Starry, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 12 June 1970, pp. Inclosure 3-19, Historian files, Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D. C.

Figure 26. Percentage of Mines Hit and Found Per Month June 1969–May 1970. *Source:* Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Starry, pp. Inclosure 3-20.

The 11th Armored Cavalry was a unique organization in Vietnam, combining a potent mix of tactical and operational mobility, firepower, armored protection, organic artillery at the squadron level, and helicopters into a brigade-sized formation. The

regiment provided the commander of II Field Force Vietnam with a great flexibility. The regiment conducted many different types of operations for II Field Force, but it was best suited for reconnaissance in force, reaction force, and teaming with land-clearing companies. The increased logistical burden of an armored cavalry regiment was clearly offset by its unique capabilities.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's operations in Vietnam provide an historical example for the use of an armored formation fighting on a noncontiguous battlefield. In fact, on two occasions in 1969 the regiment airlifted an armored cavalry troop between Loc Ninh and Bu Dop. These airlifts give an insight into the problems and limitations of airlifting armored forces within a theater and are deserving of study. The logistical challenges faced by the regiment during its operation within III Corps Tactical Zone and in Cambodia parallel the environment envisioned in FM 3-0 and provide examples of how to conduct maintenance, resupply, and convoy security. Additionally, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong adapted their tactics to try and negate their disadvantage in firepower. By using mines, RPGs, and remote base areas the Communists sought to limit the regiment's mobility and access to important logistical areas much. Studying the regiment's operations gives some understanding of how an enemy who cannot stand toe to toe against our firepower fought because the Army will deploy armor into restrictive terrain against determined foes again in the future.

The critical lesson that the 11th Armored Cavalry's troopers and force planners took away from the Army's experience in Vietnam was the need for flexibility. Armored warfare in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam showed that, with ingenuity, armor could be used in ways no one had thought possible. When tasked to do so, the

troopers of the 11th Armored Cavalry adapted their doctrine to the situation and environment. Jungle busting, ambushes, cordon and search, using armored personnel carriers in a tanklike role, and countless other adaptations made armor a useful tool. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment could and did do tremendous damage to enemy units when the enemy chose to stand and fight, but ultimately, that choice remained the enemy's.

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<sup>1</sup>Quarterly Review of MACV/JGS Combined Campaign Plan, III Quarter 1969, II Field Force Vietnam (FFV), undated, p.1, box 1, Quarterly Review of Combined Campaign Plan, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); and Quarterly Review of MACV/JGS Combined Campaign Plan, IV Quarter 1969, II FFV, 8 January 1970, p.1, box 1, Quarterly Review of Combined Campaign Plan, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>2</sup>Report, Security Status of Lines of Communication, II FFV, February 1969, box 1, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, January 1969–February 1970, RG 472, NARA; Report, Sec Status of LOC Lines of Communication, II FFV, December 1969, box 1, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, January 1969–February 1970, RG 472, NARA; and Report, Sec Status of LOC Lines of Communication, II FFV, January 1970, box 1, Asst CofS G-3, II FFV, January 1969–February 1970, RG 472, NARA.

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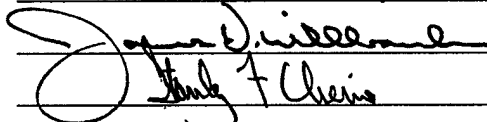
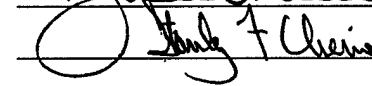
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