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The Cavalry's Cambodian Campaign

Probably no single operation better demonstrated the airmobile concept than the 1st Cavalry Division's Cambodian campaign. In the early hours of 1 May, six serials of B-52's dropped their heavy ordnance on hard targets within the primary objective area. The last bomb went off at 0545. Fifteen minutes later an intense artillery preparation began with the priority to the proposed landing zones in the 3d Army of the Republic of Vietnam Airborne Brigade's objective area. D-day had arrived.

At 0630 the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Cavalry Regiment began its movement from the northwest of An Loc toward the border. At the same time a 15,000 pound bomb, with an extended fuse designed to detonate about seven feet above the ground, was dropped to clear the jungle at landing zone EAST. This was followed fifteen minutes later by a similar drop at landing zone CENTER. Shortly after first light, the Forward Air Controllers began directing tactical air strikes on pre-planned targets, shifting to the 3d Army of the Republic of Vietnam Airborne Brigade's objective area during the period from 0700 to 0800.

The 1st Squadron, 9th Air Cavalry began aerial reconnaissance operations early on D-day and by 0740 had established contact. Five North Vietnam Army soldiers and their 27-ton truck became the first recorded casualties of the operation. At 0800 hours the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry conducted a landing zone reconnaissance which was followed ten minutes later by the combat assault of an Army of the Republic of Vietnam airborne battalion into landing zone EAST. The landing zone was secured and became a fire support base when six 105-mm howitzers and three 155-mm howitzers were inserted shortly thereafter. During this air assault, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment had moved out of their staging area and crossed the line of departure, moving north. In the 3d Brigade area, C Company, 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized) crossed the Cambodian border at 0945, followed by elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment to the east which crossed approximately fifteen minutes later.

During the afternoon of D-day, two companies of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry made a combat assault into Objective X-RAY in the northern portion of the 3d Brigade area of operation. This movement had been tentatively planned by General Shoemaker and, due to the relatively light resistance throughout the area, he ordered its execution as the final combat assault of D-day.

The enemy reaction to the opening of the Allied Offensive took the form of a confused, milling crowd, ill-prepared to deal with the massive onslaught that was unleashed. Tactical surprise was complete. The enemy had not left the area, nor had he reinforced or prepared his defenses. The heliborne assault forces were not greeted with heavy anti-aircraft fire but rather only with small arms fire from a few individuals. Nowhere in evidence were the heavy machineguns from the three anti-aircraft battalion-size units known to be in the area. While later evidence showed that while some strategic preparations had been made hedging against a possible allied thrust, the enemy tacticians had not taken steps to counter an air assault. Airmobility had again caught the enemy off-balance. The results were evident, as noted in the following official excerpts of the day's activities:

The 1/9 Cav had a field day catching small groups of NVA trying to evade, resulting in a record total of 157 NVA killed by helicopter.

TAC Air in another record setting day put a total of 185 sorties on hard targets which resulted in 109 NVA KBA in the ARVN Airborne AO alone.

Among the ARVN Airborne forces, the 5th Battalion was outstanding with 27 NVA killed and 8 prisoners taken during the day. The prisoners were later identified as members of the 250th Convalescence Battalion, the 50th Rear Service Group and the 1st Battalion, 165th Regiment, 7th NVA Division.

The 3d Company, 3d ARVN Airborne made the first significant cache discovery at 1720 hours when they found a large medical cache of up to 6,000 pounds. The cache

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included the finest in modern surgical equipment and had been imported from western Europe via Air France, possibly through Phnom Penh. The ground contact of Company H of the 2/11 ACR was the highlight of the 11th ACR operations during the day. After passing through a regimental-size base camp, a large enemy force was encountered in trenches to the north. The ensuing battle left 50 enemy dead versus 2 U. S. KIA, the only U. S. combat fatalities of D-day.

On 3 May Task Force Shoemaker was reinforced with elements of the 2d Brigade. Multiple small caches were being discovered by the ground units while the first large weapons cache was observed from the air by A Troop of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry. This area was engaged with gunships and Tactical Air resulting in the destruction of 7 2½-ton trucks, 13 ¾-ton trucks, and 3 jeeps. Another truck park in the nearby area was discovered and the Cavalry Troop destroyed nine trucks with their own gunships.

On 4 May 1970, B Troop of the Cavalry Squadron observed numerous bunkers and military structures in a densely vegetated area northwest of the current ground operations. Additional aerial reconnaissance teams further reported that these structures and bunkers were connected with bamboo matted trails. One pilot also reported seeing numerous antennas in the southern part of the complex. On 5 May, Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, in response to the aerial reconnaissance sighting reports, displaced into the northern half of the complex which had been dubbed "the city". Immediately upon entering the suspected area, the Cavalry troopers reported finding numerous storage bunkers measuring 16 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 8 feet deep. Subsequent reports indicated that most of the bunkers contained large quantities of weapons and munitions and that the enemy had just recently evacuated the area. Throughout the period 5-13 May 182 storage bunkers, 18 mess halls, a training area and a small animal farm were discovered in the area.

The logistical storage bunkers contained clothing, food stocks, medical supplies, weapons and munitions. The bulk consisted of ammunition. Generally, all types of equipment and supplies were in an excellent state of preservation and in good operating condition when discovered. "The city" covered approximately three square kilometers and consisted of a well-organized storage depot that was capable of rapid receipt and issue of large quantities of supplies. Judging from the general condition of the oldest bunker and from translation of supply documents found in the area, it was apparent that the storage depot had been in operation for two to two and one-half years. Some bunkers had been constructed within the last six months.

Captured supply records indicated that the supply depot primarily supported the 7th North Vietnam Army Division. Based on the discovery of classroom facilities, numerous mess halls, firing ranges, as well as large stocks of items of personal clothing and equipment in the cache site area, it was determined that "the city" was also used to provide refresher military and political training to recent replacements from North Vietnam.

Selected items of equipment captured at this cache site complex included:

- 1,282 individual weapons
- 202 crew-served weapons
- 319,000 rounds of .51-caliber/12.7-mm ammunition
- 25,200 rounds of 14.5-mm antiaircraft machinegun ammunition
- 1,559,000 rounds of AK-47 ammunition
- 2,110 grenades
- 58,000 pounds of plastic explosives
- 400,000 rounds of .30-caliber ammunition
- 16,920 propelling charges for 120-mm mortar
- 22 cases of anti-personnel mines
- 30 tons of rice 8 tons of corn
- 1,100 pounds of salt

Throughout the Cambodian campaign, Allied forces would uncover other major caches of equipment which proved that this area was truly one of the most important logistical

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bases of the enemy. On 25 May a large automotive parts cache was discovered by A Company of the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry which was the first of a series of caches of various supplies discovered in the area from 25 May to 9 June. One of these, a communications depot, discovered by D Company, 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, indicated that the enemy did not have time to evacuate his most valuable communications equipment. Considering the critical nature of enemy signal equipment, it was felt that his equipment would have received top priority for evacuation. Like "the city" cache site, this area also had supplies segregated, by type, to facilitate storage and distribution to receiving units. Equipment and supplies were for the most part new and in excellent condition.

Unlike the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Cambodian caches were filled with material transported for the most part by truck. Truck repair centers and spare parts were part of the logistics complex. The 1st Cavalry had deprived the enemy of over 305 vehicles in its Cambodian operations. While a few of these were primarily for passengers, such as a captured Porche, Mercedes-Benz and jeeps, the vast majority were cargo carriers. These trucks had a total capacity of 442 tons. Intelligence showed that the captured vehicles were only a small part of the North Vietnam Army truck inventory in Cambodia. During the early days of the operation the Air Cavalry Squadron reported that many Cambodian roads showed heavy use of trucks away from the area of operations. Obviously, they had been among the first items to be moved out of the area.

By mid-May, the search had expanded eastward to the border area north of Phuoc Long Province where on 8 May the 2d Brigade discovered a new significant cache site. This North Vietnam Army base camp, nick-named ROCK ISLAND EAST, eventually yielded 329 tons of munitions. As the operation continued, the 1st Brigade was moved from war Zone C to the O'Rang area east of the 2d Brigade. Both Brigades used the airstrip at Bu Gia Map as a forward logistics base. One rifle company patrolled out of the abandoned Special Forces camp there as security for the refuel, rearm point and the tons of palletized supplies which were offloaded from C-130's and C-123's.

The withdrawal of the 1st Cavalry from Cambodia, although the most critical of all the operations, was executed in a truly classic manner. The withdrawal sequence was time-phased to allow for the redeployment of one fire support base each day. This phasing would allow for even utilization of aircraft assets, particularly the CH-54 Cranes of the 273d Aviation Company which were required for the movement of bridges, 155-mm. howitzers, 2½-ton trucks, and bulldozers. On the second day of extraction, while lifting the 1st Battalion, 50th Cavalry from Fire Support Base DAVID, the aviation units ran into extremely poor weather with ceilings at zero, fog and rain. The Chinooks from the 228th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion showed the ultimate in professionalism by flying at extremely low levels through the valleys, skirting the fog-covered hills, and extracting the unit. On 24 June, while extracting Fire Support Base BRONCHO, one aircraft was downed and five others were hit. At the same time the fire support base was taking indirect fire regularly throughout the day. Using all possible suppressive fires from the armed helicopters, Fire Support Base BRONCHO was extracted at last light.