

## = Battle of Ong Thanh =

The Battle of Ong Thanh was fought at the stream of that name on the morning of October 17, 1967, in Ch?n Thành District, at the time part of the old Bình D??ng Province, South Vietnam, today in Bình Ph??c Province.

During the first few months of 1967, the Viet Cong absorbed heavy losses as a result of large @-@ scale search and destroy missions conducted by the United States Army, and it prompted North Vietnamese leaders to review their war strategy in South Vietnam. In light of the setbacks which North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces had experienced early in 1967, North Vietnamese General Tr?n V?n Trà suggested that North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces could still be victorious if they inflicted as many casualties as possible on U.S. military units, hoping that the Americans would conclude that the war was too costly and withdraw from Vietnam. Thus, towards mid @-@ 1967, the Viet Cong 7th and 9th Divisions returned to the battlefield again, with the objective of inflicting casualties on U.S. military formations in III Corps Tactical Zone. On June 12, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division launched Operation Billings to destroy elements of the Viet Cong 9th Division, which had built @-@ up strength around northern Phuoc Vinh.

During that operation, American soldiers initially made only limited contact with the Viet Cong, but defeated enemy troops in two separate battles. On June 17 the 1 / 16th infantry battalion, re @-@ enforced by a company of 2 / 28th infantry engaged in a six @-@ hour battle supported by airstrikes and massive artillery. The majority of the casualties suffered from that engagement alone, when the operation concluded on June 26, the 1st Infantry Division had lost 57 soldiers dead and 197 wounded. Then in September, following a string of attacks on allied military installations by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops, Major General John H. Hay decided to temporarily stop conducting large @-@ scale operations until the true intentions of Communist forces were known. Towards October, the Viet Cong 271st Regiment marched into the Long Nguyen Secret Zone, to rest and refit for their next major operation. To disrupt the Viet Cong's resting period, General Hay launched Operation Shenandoah II to clear a section of National Highway 13 which stretched from Chon Thanh to Loc Ninh.

Starting from September 28, elements of the 1st Infantry Division were air @-@ lifted into positions around Long Nguyen, but again only few contacts were made with the Viet Cong. However, on October 16, the 2nd Battalion of the U.S. 28th Infantry Regiment found a major Viet Cong bunker system located south of their night defensive position near the Ong Thanh Stream, and a short fire fight broke out. To avoid fighting a long battle, the commander of the 2nd Battalion decided to pull back, and made preparations for a frontal assault on the next day. On the morning of October 17, two rifle companies of the 2nd Battalion returned to the bunker system they had found the previous day, but they were defeated by the Viet Cong 271st Regiment which had set up an ambush in anticipation of the American attack.

## = = Background = =

In the first half of 1967, United States military forces in Vietnam had inflicted losses on the Viet Cong, both in terms of infrastructure and manpower, through major ground operations such as Cedar Falls, Junction City and Manhattan. For North Vietnamese military leaders such as Generals Võ Nguyên Giáp and Nguy?n Chí Thanh, the operations carried out by the Americans in South Vietnam had been disastrous for Communist forces. Furthermore, the military situation in North Vietnam also prompted North Vietnamese leaders to question their war strategy. In 1967 the United States expanded their Rolling Thunder bombing campaign, which enabled American airpower to destroy rather than just threaten Hanoi's limited industrial infrastructures. Consequently, North Vietnamese leaders feared that if the Red River dikes were targeted by the Americans, Hanoi and the surrounding farmlands would be flooded. At the same time, the North Vietnamese government was afraid the Viet Cong may split in order to accommodate a resolution with the Saigon government, because the U.S.-backed government in the South was showing no sign of collapse.

Despite the unfavorable developments in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese General Tran Van Tra

believed North Vietnam and the Viet Cong could still win the war if they pursued a strategy of attrition . In other words , the Communists would have to fight on for as long as possible , until the United States recognized that the war was unwinnable and would disengage from the conflict in Vietnam . To achieve that objective at the tactical level , Tra argued that North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces would have to destroy American military units , and cause as many casualties as possible until they got tired and left . Indeed , towards mid @-@ 1967 General Thanh , who had the Viet Cong 7th and 9th Division at his disposal , was out to do just that . In June , U.S. military forces in III Corps Tactical Zone began to detect the build @-@ up of Viet Cong troops in northern Phuoc Vinh located War Zone D. To stop a major enemy attack on Phuoc Vinh , Major General John H. Hay ? commander of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division ? launched Operation Billings with the objective of trapping three Viet Cong battalions in War Zone D.

On the first day of the operation , the 1st Infantry Division was able march about 30 kilometers ( 19 mi ) into Phuoc Vinh virtually unopposed . On June 13 , the Americans claimed to have killed about 60 Viet Cong soldiers in their first major contact . On June 17 Lieutenant Colonel Rufus C. Lazzell and the soldiers of the 1st Battalion , 16th Infantry Regiment , was air @-@ assaulted into a clearing known as Landing Zone X @-@ Ray to search for the Viet Cong . At about 1 : 00 pm Lazzell 's battalion was attacked by elements of the Viet Cong 271st Regiment , and the Viet Cong quickly penetrated the 1st Battalion 's perimeters . However , with the support of artillery and helicopter gunships , Lazzell 's men repelled repeated Viet Cong attacks for the loss of 35 killed and 150 wounded . On June 26 , Operation Billings concluded and the Americans claimed to have killed 347 enemy troops and captured one , at a cost of 57 U.S. soldiers dead and 197 wounded .

In August , the Viet Cong was back in action again ; this time the 165th Regiment of the 7th Division targeted the Tong Le Chon Special Forces Camp , located southeast of the 1st Infantry Division 's area of operations . Just after midnight on August 7 , the 165th Regiment attacked Tong Le Chon and was able to penetrate the Special Forces Camp , but was forced to flee after an ammunition bunker exploded . That night the Viet Cong assaulted the base several times more , but on each occasion they were repelled by artillery fire and close air @-@ support . By September , the scale of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese activities in III Corps had perplexed the U.S. commanders of Military Assistance Command , Vietnam . In the meantime , however , Hay decided to put an end to large @-@ scale operations which had proven to be unproductive , until the enemy 's real intentions were known . Instead , Hay continued to commit his 2nd Brigade to pacification efforts in southern Binh D??ng Province , while the 3rd Brigade provided protection for engineers clearing Highway 13 .

= = Prelude = =

Following various engagements with the U.S. 1st Infantry Division during the previous months , Colonel Vo Minh Triet , commander of the Viet Cong 271st Regiment , was ordered to move his troops into an area known as the Long Nguyen Secret Zone , which was situated between National Highway 13 and the Michelin Rubber Plantation . It was located about 56 kilometers ( 35 mi ) northwest of Saigon , in Binh Duong Province . There , Triet 's regiment was supposed to receive troop replacements and food supplies , to prepare for a major offensive against an unspecified target in War Zone D. In previous years , the Viet Cong 9th Division had often used the month of September and October to rest and prepare for their winter @-@ spring offensives , and 1967 was no different . For that reason Hay was determined to disrupt the Viet Cong 's resting period by launching Operation Shenandoah II , with the objective of clearing Highway 13 from Chon Thanh to Loc Ninh .

On September 29 , Hay ordered Colonel George E. Newman ? commander of the 1st Brigade ? to place the 1st Battalion , 2nd Infantry Regiment and the 1st Battalion , 28th Infantry Regiment , in the northern portion of Long Nguyen . On the next day , Colonel Frank E. Blazey , commander of the 3rd Brigade , was ordered to deploy the 2nd Battalion , 2nd Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Battalion , 28th Infantry Regiment to the southern half of the area . In the early stages of Shenandoah II , U.S. forces only made a few contacts with the Viet Cong . On October 2 , a South Vietnamese unit

operating east of Highway 13 near Chon Thanh made significant contact with a large Viet Cong formation and absorbed heavy casualties . Enemy documents obtained by the South Vietnamese indicated they had clashed with a battalion @-@ sized unit from the Viet Cong 272nd Regiment , sent to attack Chon Thanh in order to cover the movement of the 271st Regiment into the Long Nguyen area . Early in October , Viet Cong soldiers of the 271st Regiment had arrived in Long Nguyen but they could not obtain their much @-@ needed food supplies , as a result of allied search @-@ and @-@ destroy operations which had created significant food shortages for Viet Cong units in the region .

Triet then marched his starving soldiers southward toward the Ong Thanh Stream to link up with Rear Service Group 83 , but local Viet Cong units also lacked adequate food supplies of their own , so the 271st Regiment was forced to wait in the area for the arrival of rice and other essential supplies . Meanwhile , on October 4 the Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. Stauffer 's 1st Battalion , 2nd Infantry Regiment , made contact with a company @-@ sized Viet Cong formation about 9 kilometers ( 5 @.@ 6 mi ) south @-@ west of Chon Thanh , and claimed to have killed 12 enemy soldiers . To pursue the retreating Viet Cong formation , Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Cavazos ? commander of the 1st Battalion , 18th Infantry Regiment ? was instructed to conduct an air @-@ assault into a clearing located about 2 kilometers ( 1 @.@ 2 mi ) west of Stauffer ' battalion , in order to block enemy troops . Cavazos ' battalion landed unopposed , and they immediately set up their standard field position with wire entanglements to protect the base . On October 6 , the 1st Battalion 's position was subjected to Viet Cong mortar bombardment ; even though the shells had caused little damage , Cavazos believed it was part of the enemy 's final preparations for a major ground attack later that evening .

At around 6 : 00 pm the rain began to fall and the Viet Cong started attacking the battalion 's camp from different directions , but Cavazos ' men were able to hold their ground , with the support of artillery and mortar fire . By 12 : 00 am the fight was over , and U.S. casualties included 5 killed in action and 4 wounded . Three weeks later a captured Viet Cong soldier from the 2nd Battalion , 271st Regiment , revealed that his unit lost 59 soldiers killed and 56 wounded , in battle with Cavazos ' battalion . On October 8 , Hay pulled Stauffer 's 1st Battalion back to Phuoc Vinh to act as the division 's reaction force . Lieutenant Colonel Terry D. Allen ? commander of the 2nd Battalion , 28th Infantry Regiment ? was then ordered to depart from Lai Khê with three of his rifle companies ( Alpha , Bravo and Delta ) and air @-@ lifted into a site about 21 kilometers ( 13 mi ) northwest of Chon Thanh village , and 3 kilometers ( 1 @.@ 9 mi ) north @-@ west of Cavazos ' 1st Battalion . Charlie Company was detached from Allen 's 2nd Battalion to protect the supporting 15th Field Artillery Regiment .

Two days later , Stauffer 's battalion was deployed into new blocking positions , as Viet Cong units were believed to be moving toward the Michelin Rubber Plantation . On October 11 , Cavazos led two of his companies out on a northward probe , and they were immediately attacked by the Viet Cong . While under heavy fire , Cavazos ordered the lead company to pull back behind a perimeter formed by the second company . As the lead company fell back , artillery and air support were called in to pummel the Viet Cong 's attacking formation . When the battle was over , 21 Viet Cong soldiers were found dead , whereas U.S. casualties for the day were 1 killed and 4 wounded . Shortly afterwards , Cavazos ' battalion pulled back to Phuoc Vinh for rest and refitting . By mid @-@ October , Hay believed the Viet Cong 's 271st Regiment had suffered a major defeat and was ready to withdraw from the Long Nguyen Secret Zone , so he was ready to terminate Shenandoah II . However , increased Viet Cong activity near the Ong Thanh Stream , where the 1st Brigade made most of its contacts , had indicated otherwise .

= = Battle = =

On the morning of October 16 , Allen led two rifle companies ( Bravo and Delta ) of the 2nd Battalion out from their temporary night defensive position along the Ong Thanh Stream to patrol an area to the southeast , which was covered by thick jungle canopy . After marching for about 2 kilometers ( 1 @.@ 2 mi ) , the battalion found a fortified Viet Cong bunker , so Allen ordered his

men to pull back and directed airstrikes against Viet Cong positions . When the bombing runs were over , Allen 's men entered the camp and a firefight broke out with Viet Cong snipers firing down from trees in the surrounding areas . Again , Allen ordered his men to pull back and form a perimeter to protect their wounded soldiers , as artillery strikes were called in against Viet Cong bunker positions . The 2nd Battalion re @-@ entered the camp , and they discovered the bodies of 17 dead Viet Cong soldiers . Allen 's men then moved through the western end of the camp , and another fire @-@ fight broke out with an estimated 60 Viet Cong soldiers .

Later that afternoon Allen decided to break contact and return to base , to avoid fighting a battle that could last until the evening . In the meantime , however , he called in air @-@ strikes to inflict further damage on the base camp of his primary target , the 271st Regiment . That evening Brigadier General William Coleman and other senior officers of the 1st Infantry Division visited the 2nd Battalion 's camp , where they praised Allen 's men for their efforts , and presented First Lieutenant Clark Welch ? commander of Delta Company ? with a Silver Star for his actions earlier in the day . Allen then decided to launch a full @-@ frontal attack against the 271st Regiment 's base camp , to determine if the enemy unit was still there . However , due to the lack of sufficient manpower , Welch suggested that Allen should either call off the assault or get more soldiers on the ground for the operation . Allen dismissed Welch 's suggestions , and responded by giving Captain James George ? commander of Alpha Company ? the responsibility of leading the attack instead of Welch .

Meanwhile , Triet 's 1 @,@ 200 @-@ strong regiment was joined by 200 soldiers from the C1 Company of Rear Service Group 83 ? under the command of Captain Nguyen Van Lam ? and they set up a three @-@ sided ambush and waited for the arrival of a reported U.S. battalion . At around 8 : 00 am on the morning of October 17 , the 2nd Battalion departed from their night defensive position with Alpha Company in the lead followed by the Battalion Command Group , and the tail of the formation was covered by Delta Company . Bravo Company stayed behind to protect the battalion 's base , along with the mortar sections of Alpha and Delta Companies . In accordance with the 1st Brigade 's policy , Allen personally led his unit out as part of the Battalion Command Group , although he preferred to supervise actions from a helicopter . For artillery support , Alpha Company was authorized to call upon the 105mm and 155mm howitzers located at Fire Support Bases Caisson V , Caisson III @-@ S and Lorraine III .

Allen 's men marched southward from the base , with the intention of entering the enemy base camp from a slightly different direction to the west . Preceded by marching artillery fire , the 2nd Battalion stopped periodically to conduct cloverleaf patrols to their front , rear and both flanks . At 9 : 56 am the lead element of Alpha Company stumbled upon a northeast @-@ southwest trail , which appeared to have been used within the last hour . The 1st Platoon Leader then requested and received permission to make cloverleaf patrols to the east and west of the trail . Almost immediately , the 1st Platoon sighted a Viet Cong soldier while scouting west of the trail and another group of Viet Cong soldiers soon appeared . George then ordered the 1st Platoon to set up a hasty ambush across the trail , but by the time they were in position the Viet Cong soldiers had disappeared and everything was quiet . About 10 ? 15 minutes later , the 1st Platoon Leader reported that trees were moving , in addition to the sound of weapons clicking and the rattle of ammunition .

In response , George ordered the 1st Platoon to reinforce their ambush position . While that was happening Alpha Company 's right flank , which was covered by the 2nd Platoon , began to receive sporadic enemy fire . The rest of the 1st Platoon was then pinned down when the Viet Cong , from within concealed bunker positions , fired on them using captured M60 machine @-@ guns . The Viet Cong steadily increased their fire which came in the form of various small arms , .50 caliber and 12.7mm machine guns . Unable to communicate with the 1st and 2nd Platoons , George moved forward with the 3rd Platoon only to find his lead platoons held in their positions by enemy fire . A M18 Claymore mine then exploded in front of Alpha Company 's command element , killing the radio operator and severely wounding both George and his Forward Artillery Observer . At around 10 : 40 am gunfire had died down , but Alpha Company was virtually destroyed during 30 minutes of fighting , with the company commander wounded and the leaders of 1st and 2nd Platoons both killed .

To break contact with the Viet Cong units which fired on Alpha Company from the western flank ,

First Sergeant Jose Valdez quickly organized an assembly area on the eastern side to round up the survivors . Shortly after the assembly area was established George , who was severely wounded from the Claymore explosion , turned his company over to Valdez . Allen then ordered Valdez to lead the survivors of Alpha Company northward to join the rest of the battalion . The survivors , mostly from the 2nd and 3rd Platoons of Alpha Company , were then ordered to withdraw through a perimeter formed by Delta Company . As the surviving elements of Alpha Company pulled back , Delta Company began to receive sporadic fire from their southern flank , so Allen ordered his command group to remain in place near a prominent anthill with the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Delta Company . The 3rd Platoon , on the other hand , was instructed to move forward to assist the wounded men from Alpha Company .

As Viet Cong fire increased in intensity , the soldiers of Delta Company picked up the distinctive sound of a U.S.-made M @-@ 60 machine @-@ gun firing from the southern flank . Allen assumed that Alpha Company was approaching his perimeter , so he ordered them to cease @-@ fire because he feared his rifle companies were firing on each other . However , the order was also passed down along the formation of Delta Company , which enabled the Viet Cong soldiers of the 271st Regiment to gain fire superiority . At around 11 : 35 am , Triet unleashed his 2nd Battalion which was placed in reserve during the battle , and they attacked Welch 's Delta Company from three different directions . During that time Allen tried to request artillery support , but that had become impossible due to the close proximity between U.S. and Viet Cong soldiers . In a scene that had characterized the destruction of Alpha Company earlier , both Allen and Welch were wounded in battle as Viet Cong snipers fired down from the trees . Nonetheless , just before 12 : 00 pm , Allen instructed Delta Company to begin a northward march toward the battalion 's base , and Bravo Company to move forward to cover the withdrawal .

The withdrawal quickly descended into a scene of chaos , as U.S. soldiers scrambled to avoid heavy enemy fire . During the last moments of the battle , Allen was struck in the head by machine @-@ gun fire which grazed his helmet , and was finally killed when another burst of machine @-@ gun fire hit him . At around 12 : 20 pm Newman flew into Ong Thanh to assume command of the 2nd Battalion , while Coleman took control of the 1st Brigade . Meanwhile , Alpha Company had linked up with Bravo Company , which had taken up positions about 450 meters ( 1 @,@ 480 ft ) to the south of the battalion 's night defensive position with the task of assisting the wounded . At around 2 : 00 pm that afternoon , the 2nd Battalion 's Charlie Company was airlifted into Ong Thanh from FSB Caisson V , as Bravo Company moved into the battle area to help evacuate the wounded . Coleman , who was coordinating the evacuation of U.S. casualties from a helicopter , decided to assemble the bodies of the dead in an area and protect it with artillery fire . By that stage , however , Triet 's 271st Regiment had withdrawn from the battlefield , and medivac flights were only challenged by sporadic sniper fire .

= = Aftermath = =

At around 12 : 00 pm Triet had already ordered his troops to disengage from the battle without annihilating the remaining Americans caught in his ambush . His men were tired and hungry and he was behind schedule in his movement toward his next assignment . Moreover , he feared that American air power and artillery would begin to inflict heavy casualties on his unit .

The battle at Ong Thanh was a costly affair for the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion , 28th Infantry Regiment . During two hours of fighting the 2nd Battalion lost 64 men killed in action , including Lieutenant Colonel Terry Allen and every member of the Battalion Command Group , as well as 75 wounded and 2 missing . For their efforts in the battle , 13 American soldiers were awarded the Silver Star , while Allen and Welch received the Distinguished Service Cross . Forward Observer Second Lieutenant Harold B. Durham , who was attached to the 2nd Battalion on the day from the 15th Field Artillery Regiment , was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions . Despite the losses that had been inflicted on the 2nd Battalion by the Viet Cong , the U.S. military told the media that the fight at Ong Thanh had resulted in a major American victory .

General Hay initially portrayed Ong Thanh as an American victory and cited 101 enemy dead in the

battle . However , American veterans who survived the ordeals of the battle were adamant they were ambushed and defeated by the Viet Cong 's 271st Regiment . The estimate of 101 enemy dead officially provided by the U.S. military was likely much inflated to emphasize the scale of the ' American victory ' . For retired U.S. Army Brigadier General James E. Shelton , who was then a major and served as an Operations Officer with the 2nd Battalion , the lack of reliable intelligence and overconfidence on the part of Allen as the battalion commander , were some of the factors that led to the disastrous outcome in the Ong Thanh battle . Furthermore , the American soldiers under Allen 's command lacked fighting experience , whereas the Viet Cong soldiers of the 9th Division were tough and experienced light infantry . The Viet Cong 271st Regiment , after their victory at Ong Thanh , withdrew back towards their base area near the Cambodian border .

Meanwhile , the rest of the Viet Cong 9th Division was planning for a major attack on Loc Ninh , with the objective of capturing the district town and the Special Forces Camp . To accomplish their goals the Viet Cong deployed the 272nd and 273rd Regiments , reinforced with two battalions from the 165th Regiment and the Vietnam People 's Army 84th Artillery Regiment . During the days before the battle , U.S. military intelligence had noticed the build @-@ up of Viet Cong units around Loc Ninh . Hay , in response , planned to insert four battalions of the 1st Infantry Division and position them around Loc Ninh , thereby trapping the Viet Cong inside the town . On the evening of October 28 , the 272nd Regiment marched into position from the northeast , and the 273rd Regiment from west . At 1 : 15 am on October 29 , the 273rd Regiment began assaulting the Loc Ninh Special Forces Camp , but they were quickly repelled by U.S.-led Special Forces . At around 6 : 30 am the remaining elements of Bravo and Charlie Companies 2nd Battalion , 28th Infantry Regiment , were airlifted onto the Loc Ninh airfield , to set up a firebase at the field 's south @-@ western end . The soldiers of Alpha and Delta Companies were sent back to their Base Camp at Lai Khe to adjust to the losses they had suffered , and to be kept away from enemy activity .