

Ground Attack on Cu Chi Base Camp 26 February 1969

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The summary of the G3 Duty Officer's Log for MAJ Ronald C. Meeks of the 25th Infantry Division for 26 February 1969 reads as follows: At 0343 hours - Cu Chi DISCOM put the camp on Red Alert because bunkers number 19 and 20 had movement and number 22 received mortar fire. At 0440 hours the main gate received small arms fire and bunkers number 19 and 20 received small arms, and RPG fire. Spooky was now on station. At 0425 hours it was determined by the MPs that NVA were inside the base camp so the Ready Reaction Force was committed. At 0730 hours the alert was called off. The results of the action are as follows: 14 US KIA, nine CH-47 helicopters were destroyed and two have moderate damage, 31 NVA KIA (by body count), and 8 Prisoners of War (PW). At the same time Cu Chi was being hit, Fire Support Bases St. Barbara, Reed and Patton were receiving rocket and mortar fire.

Summary of enemy activity by Headquarters, 25th Infantry Division for 26 February 1969: Significant Activities – 260400 Cu Chi Base Camp vic XT6515 received SA/RPG/mortar fire on the northwest portion of the bunker line. Fire was returned with SA/AW/dusters/LFT/Arty/Spooky. At 0430, the Base Camp began receiving 122mm, 107mm, rockets and 75mm RR fire. At 0445, heavy SA fire was received in the western sector, and the enemy penetrated the perimeter in the southeast sector destroying 9 CH-47s and damaging 2. By 0630 fighting had subsided to occasional sniper fire. Results of the contact were 31 NVA KIA (BC), 8 PWs, 36 RPG-2RLs, 1 9mm pistol, 3 AK-47 rifles, 28 HGs, 175 sapper charges, 16 rds of RPG-2 ammo, 250 rds of SA ammo, 1 Bangalore torpedo, 10 lbs of TNT, 1 pr of wire cutters, 1 walkie talkie, and 1 lb of documents evacuated. US casualties 13 US KIA, 28 US WIA.

Daily weather summary: skies were partly cloudy during the reporting period. Winds were variable becoming southwesterly at 3 knots by late morning. The maximum temperature was 96 and the minimum temperature was 69. There was no precipitation. There were no air strikes cancelled due to the weather.

These are very terse summaries of a night at Cu Chi that those of us who experienced will never forget. A more detailed account of part of the action is in a Memorandum for Record written by 1LT David D. Zaus, S2 of the 554th Engineer Battalion (Const) titled, "Ground Attack on HOTEL Sector, Cu Chi Base Camp by NVA Forces on 26 February 1969." 0200 hours - 1LT Stares, the Officer of the Guard, called DISCOM for flare support, received it, and reported a negative sighting. 0330 hours - 1LT Stares fired hand flares and M-79 rounds at enemy in wire and again reported a negative sighting. 0400 hours - RPG and small arms (SA) fire received in A and D Company areas. DISCOM called alert for ground attack and the 554 siren sounded. SP5 Johnson of D Company while enroute to showers was shot and killed by NVA. SP5 Jackson and SP5 Goodale of A Company were killed by enemy RPG and SA fire in company area. Companies were notified to reinforce secondary line on perimeter. Bunker 66 was blown by satchel charges from NVA Forces – SP4 Koski and SP4 Tennant were KIA, SP4 Ervie WIA. This report was not confirmed until 0630.

0410 hours - Two NVA killed in A Company areas – one of these was seriously wounded and later died about 0500. Two NVA killed in D Company area, one by 1LT Benson. The other was killed in motor pool area. He was carrying satchel charges – because of this it was at first thought the body was booby-trapped. This was later disproven. Incoming mortar round from Vinh Cu village hit helicopter rearm point behind bunker 63 and 64. This caused secondary explosions to continue until approximately 1300 hours.

0415 hours - RPG hit roof of EM barracks in C Company area. C Company went to man secondary positions behind bunkers 70 – 73. When 5-ton dump truck stopped to unload 1st platoon personnel, 2 RPGs were fired at point blank range killing 4 US: PFC Alferink, SP4 Barnett, SP4 Pearson, and SP4 Quigley. Five others were seriously wounded. Captain Calek's driver, SP4 Taylor, killed this NVA with SA. Two water trucks destroyed by RPG fire near A Company showers. Companies A, B, C, and D in position on secondary line. One NVA killed by RPG misfire as he attempted to destroy bunker in A company. SP5 Williams of C Company killed one NVA moving toward perimeter road from $\frac{3}{4}$ Cav area.

0418 hours - Medics called to evacuate C Company killed and wounded. 0420 hours - A Company barracks belonging to 515th Asphalt Platoon destroyed by RPG and satchel charges. 0435 hours - Personnel in bunker 64 knocked out enemy machine gun firing from village with M-79 fire (no body count (BC)).

0430 hours - NVA deployed themselves between bunker 69 and 70 in drainage ditch. SSG Covington and SSG Bailey crossed perimeter road to their front and fired at enemy. NVA returned AK-47 fire and hit SSG Covington. At this time 1LT Titus crossed road to aid SSG Covington who later died from his wounds. SP5 Brown, SP4 Maxwell, and 1LT Titus evacuated SSG Covington, after throwing several hand grenades at the enemy position. SSG Bailey provided covering fire this whole time. 1LT Stares and SP5 Brown assaulted and killed two NVA beside bunker 69 with hand grenades and SA fire.

0615 hours - Elements of A Company were responsible for capturing several (6) prisoners of war. 0620 hours - Headquarters Company started sweep of battalion area for NVA stragglers, booby traps, satchel charges, etc.

0745 hours - DISCOM called a stand-down and all units were dispersed back to their area. EOD team arrived on bunkerline to clear area for sweep. 0750 hours - D Company platoon led by 1LT Benson made a sweep of bunkerline area. Many blood trails were found leading to Vinh Cu village. Protective barbed wire was completely cut through by NVA sappers between bunker 69 and 70. At bunker 66, the two inner most wire barriers had been cut. 0800 hours - Headquarters Company sweep team reported negative findings.

RESULTS: 10 US KIA, 29 US WIA, 11 NVA KIA (BC), 6 NVA POW. CAPTURED 6 AK-47s, 1 pair of wire cutters, one 9mm pistol, one RPG-2 launcher, an unknown

number of SA rounds, RPG rounds, ChiCOM grenades, homemade satchel charges, and several documents identifying enemy units and individual soldiers.

As I remember the sequence of events in late February, the Cu Chi Base Camp was under progressively higher alert status until being put on a red alert on 24 February 1969. I remember this because most of us were ordered to man second or third levels of defense for the night. We were deployed in pairs throughout the 242 Assault Support Helicopter Company area. I was issued an M-60 machine gun (helicopter door gun) and given a civilian tech rep for my partner. When I discovered he was a gunner on a torpedo airplane in the South Pacific during World War II, he became the gunner and I was his ammo barrier. We spent the night on top of a bunker in the officer hootch area where we got acquainted. I asked him what he thought about being the gunner on a machine gun again as a civilian. His response was that he was supposed to show his civilian ID card if he got attacked; however, he thought the machine gun was a more practical alternative. After daylight, the red alert was called off so I turned in my assigned M-60. The man in the armory said, "There is that M-60 I was looking for!" I asked why, and he said, "because it does not have a firing pin in it!" Some expert machine gunner that civilian was. As it turns out, all we had that night for self defense was my 45 cal pistol.

On 25 February, the alert was downgraded to yellow. With a red alert, we had two men stationed on each of our 16 Chinooks with one of them awake all the time. With a yellow alert, only one man slept on each ship. I was not scheduled to fly on 26 February 1969, so I had gone to bed well after midnight. I was awoken shortly after going to sleep by my hootch mate, Mike Ryan, who yelled at me to get under my bed because we were under a mortar and rocket attack. This was approximately 0420 according to 25th Division Duty Officer's Logs. Suddenly I realized there was also small arms fire which meant we were under a ground attack. We spent the next couple of hours crouched behind the sand bags in front of our hootch with drawn 45 cal pistols. We had no plan for what we were supposed to do in case of a ground attack and none of our leaders showed up with orders so we stayed put. In hind sight that was probably a good thing because running around in our company area could have gotten us shot. After the shooting stopped, I got my super 8 movie camera and went to the flight line to record the carnage. A short piece of that tape is at <http://www.242ashc.org/vhpa.mpg>

The 242 ASHC Company area was infiltrated by sappers who destroyed nine Chinooks with satchel charges and rocket propelled grenades. My recollection of the events are that we had approximately 40 VC and/or NVA sappers come through the wire between us and Cu Chi village. They were using a map drawn by one of our local labor force members. The NVA were being covered by their own rocket and mortar attack while they ran down our flight line and threw satchel charges in most of our 16 Chinooks or hit them with RPGs at close range. Because we were on yellow alert that night, we had one crew member sleeping on each ship. SP4 Isaac Stringer, Jr. was the door gunner on CH-47A 66-19012. It was his turn to sleep on the aircraft that night. He was found about two thirds of the way between 012's revetment and the ammo bunker. He had been decapitated by a direct hit in the head with an RPG. He was the only Muleskinner killed that night.

We had six wounded. One crew member ran around a revetment and ran directly into a VC/NVA. Neither had a gun, but the VC had a knife so our crewman outran the VC and hid in a ditch. We did not find him until almost noon. He was assuming the worst, since in addition to destroying nine Chinooks and damaging all but two of the rest of the 16 Chinooks, the VC/NVA had ignited Cu Chi's POL (fuel farm). I have been told that this crewman was reported KIA to his family and after a few days, he was returned to the U.S. because his mother complained. Needless to say it was a very 'colorful' night with a Spooky gunship working our perimeter most of the night. Of the 31 VC/NVA killed and 8 captured that night, 2 were killed in our company area.

The nine Chinooks destroyed were 64-13106, 64-13146, 65-08024, 66-19012, 66-19013, 66-19014, 66-19015, 66-19016, and 66-19022. After a few parts were salvaged, the remains were buried by bulldozers in our company area. These helicopters were replaced by other units' "lemons" so we had a lot of maintenance problems after that.

Also from the Headquarters, 25th Infantry Division report: Intelligence received from the eight NVA PWs who were Ha Chi Loi, Nguyen Van Cau, Doan Van Nhut, Nguyen Xuan Thuong, Do Van Co, and Ngo Van Hwan was as follows: The above PWs were captured on Cu Chi Base Camp during an attack on the morning of 26 February. Preliminary interrogation has indicated that the attacking force was composed of a variety of sapper elements some of which were recently formed in War Zone C by personnel apparently drawn from existing units. One of the units indicated as contributing personnel was the B-16 Sapper unit (aka D5 Sapper Bn). Elements of this battalion were recently identified in sapper attacks against Dau Tieng Base Camp. One of the PWs, Nguyen Can Huan indicated that two platoons from his company did not come directly to the Cu Chi area but were to attack another base camp, unknown to source, and possibly a reference to the Dau Tieng attack.

Most of the PWs had not been aware of the specific objective of the attack until immediately prior to the action against the base camp. With the exception of Nguyen Xuan Thuong, the PW's indicated that they had received little or no sapper training in preparation for their attacks. Thuong stated his unit coordinated with local force VC elements in the Cu Chi area on the evening of 25 Feb. (at which time they received hand drawn maps.) Thuong's unit of approximately 18 men started moving forward and working their way through the base camp perimeter at about 0130 hours. The PW further indicated that once inside the base camp, he was to find the largest weapon possible and use it to fire against targets within the camp. Two personnel, who had been trained to operate Allied tanks, were to locate a tank and drive it off the base camp if possible. The remaining personnel in Thuong's unit were to advance toward the Division Tactical Operations Center (DTOC). Subsequent to the attack, the PW's unit was to be met by commo-Liaison personnel and led to an unknown location. Two of the PWs indicated a specific interest in destroying tanks, APCs and bunkers, while the remaining two PWs said that they were to search for and destroy the most lucrative targets they could find within the base camp.

Two PWs indicated they were supposed to return to Katum after the attacks. “In conclusion, we believe that the 3rd Sapper Bn with a strength of approximately 300 personnel was primarily responsible for the attack on Cu Chi Base Camp and was also involved in the recent attack on Dau Tieng. The attack was evidently supported by a rocket and/or artillery unit and possibly by other smaller sapper elements which have not thus far been identified. We believe that the attack was centrally planned and controlled by COSVN.”