



Dak To:

'33 Days of Violent, Sustained Combat'

In November 1967, the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade slugged it out with four NVA regiments in the Central Highlands. The centerpiece of the battle was the 110-hour fight for Hill 875.

by Tim Dyhouse

In November 1967, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units were determined to rid the Central Highlands of American forces. The NVA poured thousands of troops into an area where the borders of Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam meet.

Specifically, they sought to destroy Special Forces camps at Ben Het, about five miles east of the Cambodian border, and at Dak To, some 10 miles east of Ben Het. The U.S. camps represented a major roadblock at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Americans reacted to the NVA buildup by launching *Operation MacArthur*, with the 4th Infantry Division assuming operational control over the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

The 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade included the 1st, 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 8th Inf. Regt.; 1st and 3rd

battalions of the 12th Inf. Regt.; and the attached 2nd Sqdn., 1st Cav Regt.

The 173rd Airborne Brigade fielded the 1st, 2nd and 4th battalions of the 503rd Inf. Regt., and supporting units such as the 335th Aviation Company.

Some 15 Army artillery batteries along with tactical air support provided immense firepower.

1st Cavalry Division units—1st Bn., 12th Cav Regt., and 2nd Bn., 8th Cavalry—also played a part in the campaign.

The 23rd and 26th Mike Force companies (indigenous outfits led by Green Berets) were engaged as well. Also in the mix were six ARVN battalions.

Opposing them at one time or another were the NVA's 24th, 32nd, 66th and 174th regiments, totaling 7,000 men, constituting the NVA 1st Infantry Division. One paratrooper



U.S. paratroopers of the 173rd Abn. Bde. battle an entrenched and virtually invisible NVA on Hill 875. Some 27% of the brigade's GIs were either killed or wounded, with rifle companies sustaining 90% of the casualties.

said of the enemy: "They fight like they're all John Waynes, three clips and making every bullet count."

'A Merciless Land'

Combat was brutal, close and fought in the unforgiving terrain of the Central Highlands.

"It is a merciless land of steep limestone ridges, some of them exceeding 4,000 feet," wrote Robert Barr Smith in *Vietnam* magazine. "The sharp ridges are covered with double- and sometimes triple-canopy jungle. The draws between the ridges are dreary, tangled places of perpetual twilight. The jungle is laced with vines and thorns, and in it live diverse snakes, a million leeches and about half the mosquitoes in the world."

Another historian called the terrain "probably the wildest in South Vietnam if not all Southeast Asia."



GAMMA LIAISON

The weather, however, during the Nov. 1-23 continuous battles was “excellent,” according to F. Clifton Berry, Jr., in *The Illustrated History of Sky Soldiers, The Vietnam War*, with dry conditions and daily high and low temperatures between 91 and 55 degrees.

Deadly Prelude

The Battle of Dak To was actually a series of intense clashes culminating in the decisive battle for Hill 875. Leading up to that climactic end, the 173rd Airborne Brigade fought several engagements south of Ben Het. (See the sidebar on page 36 for the 4th ID’s role.)

A recon patrol made the first contact on Nov. 2, briefly skirmishing with NVA, resulting in one U.S. KIA.

Four days later, A, B, C and D companies of the 4th Bn., 503rd Inf., fought the NVA for four hours in the Ngok Kam Leat chain of hills and adjacent Hill 823, losing 16 KIA and 37 WIA.

On Nov. 11, A, C and D companies of the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf., engaged the NVA for eight hours at two separate locations south of Ben Het sustaining 21 KIA and 128 WIA.

On Veterans Day, Task Force Black (170 men of the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf.) was inserted into a landing zone on Hill 823 and wound up losing 20 KIA, 154 WIA and two MIA.

The next day, Pfc. John Barnes of C Company earned a posthumous Medal of Honor when he saved the lives of several wounded men by throwing himself on a grenade. Before this heroic act, according to his citation, Barnes “dashed through the bullet-swept area, manned the machine gun [the team had been killed] and killed nine enemy soldiers as they assaulted his position.”

Following on the heels of TF Black’s ordeal, A and B companies from the 2nd Bn., 503rd Inf., fought for more than four hours near Fire Support Base 16, located about five miles south of Hill 823. B Company counted 21 KIA and 17 WIA after the firefight.

Nov. 18 saw the 1st Bn., 503rd Inf., lose seven KIA on Hill 882, while D Company of the 4th Battalion had six dead to “friendly fire.”

Before Hill 875 was even assaulted, the 173rd had already sustained 79 KIA and 287 WIA.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS (Posthumous)

CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR SOCIETY PHOTOS



Pfc. John Barnes

On Nov. 12, 1967, Pfc. Barnes manned a machine gun after its crew had been killed. He then eliminated nine enemy soldiers who were assaulting his position. While retrieving more ammo, Barnes saw a grenade tossed among a group of severely wounded soldiers. In an instant, he leaped on the device, shielding the blast with his body.



Pfc. Carlos Lozada

On Nov. 20, 1967, Pfc. Lozada stayed behind and poured deadly machine-gun fire on an advancing NVA force, allowing his company to safely withdraw. Nearly surrounded, Lozada jumped from his covered position and fired his M-60 from the hip, providing further cover for fellow soldiers when he was mortally wounded.



**Maj. Charles J. Watters
Chaplain**

On Nov. 19, 1967, Chaplain Watters repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire in order to aid fallen men outside the perimeter. Five times troopers tried to hold him back, yet Watters persisted in aiding and carrying the wounded back to safety. He was hit and killed later, still tending to the wounded.

'Get up the Goddamn Hill'

By Nov. 19, the NVA's 174th Regiment, moving south along the Laos/Cambodia border, had covered the retreat of the 66th Regiment. The 174th set up on Hill 875 about 10 miles southwest of Ben Het and less than a mile east of the Cambodian border. The 173rd's 2nd Bn., 503rd Inf., led the assault.

Companies C and D started up the hill at 9:43 a.m., with A Company providing rear security and attempting to cut out a landing zone at the bottom. C and D companies soon found themselves absorbing small-arms fire and grenade attacks from seemingly every direction.

"Jesus, they were all over the place," one paratrooper recalled. "The non-coms kept shouting, 'Get up the hill, get up the goddamn hill.' But we couldn't. We were surrounded, and we were firing in all directions."

Company commanders pulled their troops back and called for more firepower. Artillery from A Bty., 3rd Bn., 319th Artillery Regt., and air strikes started ravaging the hilltop.

Meanwhile, NVA soldiers began a ferocious attack on A Company at the bottom of the hill. Pfc. Carlos Lozada, after receiving orders to retreat back up the hill, provided covering fire, at times walking backward up the hill spraying M-60 machine-gun fire into the brush on either side of the trail. When his weapon jammed, an NVA bullet ripped into his head. Lozada's actions garnered him a posthumous Medal of Honor.

The surviving paratroopers of A Company hustled up the slope and into a perimeter formed by the beleaguered C and D companies.

"By 3 p.m.," Terrence Maitland and Peter McInerney wrote in *A Contagion of War*, "the C Company commander reported they were surrounded by 200 to 300 NVA and under attack by mortars, automatic weapons and B-40 rockets."

Six helicopters from the 335th Aviation Company attempting to resupply the pinned-down troopers were shot down during the day. U.S. aircraft hit enemy positions as close as 50 meters to the perimeter as GIs dug in for an NVA night attack.

4th Division's Role Often Overlooked

Far too often, the part played by Ivy Division GIs at Dak To is glossed over. And vets of that proud unit feel the sting.

"[The 173rd] were good soldiers and did their fair share," said Steve Stark, who was an artillery liaison specialist with 6th Bn., 29th Artillery, 1st Bde., 4th Inf. Div., at Dak To. "But they certainly did no more than the many other 'non-elites' did, like 4th Division grunts, the artillery and others."

In the days leading up to the fight for Hill 875, 4th ID units sought out the enemy south of Dak To. In fact, the first significant contacts were made by its elements on Nov. 3-4 around Hill 1338.

"On Nov. 3, A and B companies made a combat assault from Dak To airstrip to a ridge line just below Hill 1338," recalled Alex Cooker, then the platoon leader of 3rd Plt., B Co., 3rd Bn., 12th Inf. "We were ambushed by the NVA a short distance from where we landed. Thus began the Battle of Dak To."

On Nov. 7-8, A and D companies of the 3rd Bn., 8th Inf., fought NVA units east of Hill 830, losing 21 KIA and 81 WIA in close combat.

The 3rd Battalion on Nov. 10-11 sustained another 18 KIA and 118 WIA on Hill 724 during a five-hour ground and mortar attack.

A and D companies of 1st Bn., 12th Inf. (the "Red Warriors"), participated in the final assault on Hill 875. Harold B. Birch, battalion commander at the time, recalled that "about 14 Red Warriors were wounded in the attack, some by a misdirected American helicopter gunship."



U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY KEN BENDER

A soldier of D Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, takes a break from the heavy fighting during the battle for Dak To.

Division doctors at Dak To kept busy, too, often getting by on only three or four hours of sleep a night.

"We treated around 1,200 wounded during the period of the battle," said William J. Shaffer, who served as the executive officer of B Co., 4th Medical Bn. "One thing that we took a great deal of pride in was that every wounded soldier, many in very, very serious condition, reached the 71st Evac Hospital at Pleiku alive."

All told, the 1st Brigade lost 86 KIA during Dak To, with the 3rd Bn., 8th Inf., accounting for 46 KIA and 3rd Bn., 12th Inf., sacrificing 24 KIA.

"As far as brutal fighting goes," 4th ID commander Maj. Gen. William R. Peers told news correspondents, "I would say this is the worst we've had."

That was confirmed by the 1st Brigade's Presidential Unit Citation for defeating a "numerically superior enemy during 33 days of violent, sustained combat."

'Slept with Corpses'

Tragically, one air strike hit too close to the paratroopers. At 6:58 p.m., a Marine Corps fighter-bomber mistakenly dropped two 500-pound bombs on the U.S. position. One hit outside the perimeter, killing 25 NVA troops. The other hit C Company's command post and aid station. Some 42 Americans (many of them already wounded) were killed and 45 wounded in the war's worst "friendly fire" incident.

"[There were] heaps of dead after that bomb," a survivor remembered. "You didn't know where to go, you did not know where to hide. You slept with corpses. I slept with Joe. He was dead, but he kept me warm."

One soldier who didn't survive the blast was chaplain Maj. Charles Watters. During the battle, Father Watters had ventured outside the perimeter at least five times, carrying wounded troops back to the aid station. According to

survivors, he was on his knees giving last rites to a dying paratrooper when the bombs hit, killing him instantly. Watters received a posthumous Medal of Honor.

The next morning, Nov. 20, 4th Bn., 503rd Inf., set out to relieve the 2nd Battalion paratroopers. NVA snipers made the going slow, but B Company finally reached the perimeter by dusk. Two more companies arrived after dark and provided much-needed food and water to the exhausted troopers.

“Dawn on Tuesday, Nov. 21, revealed a scene on Hill 875 no survivor of that battle could ever forget,” Edward F. Murphy wrote in *Dak To: America’s Sky Soldiers in South Vietnam’s Central Highlands*. “The enormous amounts of ordnance expended by both forces had turned the once-lush tropical jungle into a scarred and torn landscape.”

Abandoned weapons, helmets, rucksacks, clothing, canteens and empty ration containers littered the battlefield.

“The acrid odor of decaying and rotting flesh combined with the smells of vomit, feces, urine, blood, gunpowder and napalm etched itself permanently into the memories of those who were on Hill 875,” Murphy wrote.

‘Every Objective was Taken’

Throughout the day, U.S. airstrikes and artillery continued to pound the top of the hill, as the NVA lobbed mortars at the U.S. perimeter. The 4th Battalion launched an unsuccessful attack at

around 3 p.m., and pulled back to defensive positions after dark. The battalion lost 12 KIA.

On Nov. 23, the 4th Battalion from the north slope coordinated a final assault on the hilltop with the 1st Bn., 12th Inf., 4th Inf. Div., charging up the south slope. Neither battalion faced heavy resistance as the NVA had decamped during the night, denying the Americans a chance at some revenge. But the GIs had fulfilled their objective.

“To walk away from Hill 875 would have diminished the importance of their sacrifices,” Murphy concluded. “The paratroopers’ esprit de corps, elitism and personal pride would not permit that.”

Though they were severely bloodied, the paratroopers inflicted even heavier losses on the NVA. So heavy, in fact, that the NVA’s 32nd, 66th and 174th regiments were unable to participate in the 1968 Tet Offensive.

“In a strictly military sense, the Dak To fighting has been a victory for the allied forces,” war correspondent Peter Arnett was forced to admit in an Associated Press report filed after spending 10 days at the scene. “Every objective was taken. The enemy loss in lives was about four times that of the allies.”

Despite reportedly higher enemy body counts, Maj. Gen. William B. Rosson, earlier commander of Task Force Oregon, estimated 1,000 NVA were killed.

For the bravery and sacrifices of its

paratroopers around Dak To, the 173rd earned the Presidential Unit Citation.

Lethal Fire: Enemy and “Friendly”

According to the after-action report, GIs sustained 242 KIA and 876 WIA in the battles between Nov. 2 and Dec. 1, 1967. But Murphy says that during the actions around Dak To, 376 Americans were killed and 1,441 wounded.

Of the 3,200 paratroopers from the 173rd deployed to Dak To, 27% were either killed (208) or wounded (645). The 173rd’s rifle companies sustained some 90% of the unit’s casualties.

“The rifle companies suffered 51% losses in just one month,” Murphy wrote. “And about 60 of the dead paratroopers—29%—were killed by friendly fire.”

The single deadliest day of Dak To was Nov. 19, when 83 Americans were killed and 110 wounded. Tragically, 50% of the deaths were due to “friendly fire.” Enemy fire claimed 41 GIs’ lives that day.

For the medics in the mix, casualties represented far more than statistics. The anguished cries of the wounded are what they remember most.

“There is something gut-wrenching about severely wounded men that I will never forget,” recalled Earle Jackson, a 173rd medic who served on Hill 875. “It is that most become delirious and almost always cry out for their mothers.” ★

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