

## OPERATION WHEELER

Operation WHEELER, the most significant operation in which the 1st Brigade participated in 1967 and the largest in which it was involved during its tenure as a separate brigade in Vietnam came next. Task Force OREGON, now redesignated as the 23d Infantry Division (Americal), directed the 1st Brigade to conduct search and destroy operations northwest of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, beginning 11 September.

The area of operations, thought to be a base for the 2d NVA Division, was dominated by rugged mountains, covered with dense tropical jungle. Two major rivers, the Song Chang and Song Traur, traversed the area and provided the enemy with lines of infiltration and supply. These rivers also were an obstacle to U. S. troop movement. The area of operations was bounded by a major valley in the north, serving as a natural boundary between Quang Tin and Quang Nam provinces, and by Highway 1 along the coastal lowlands in the east. The enemy had taken advantage of natural terrain features by constructing numerous bunkers on the lower mountain slopes near supply sources in the valleys. Large open rice paddies provided the hidden enemy with both food and clear fields of fire. The weather also favored the enemy, particularly in the early portion of the operation, when frequent afternoon rain storms hindered observation and forced curtailment of U. S. air activity, including resupply efforts. Enemy attacks frequently coincided with these rains. Temperatures often reached 94 degrees, and 99 per cent humidity and thick mud made overland movement and combat extremely fatiguing activities.

The 2d NVA Division consisted of an estimated 5,000 men. Its major subordinate units were the 3d and 21st NVA Regiments, the 1st VC Regiment, and support units, including engineer, artillery, anti-aircraft, and signal battalions. Other VC forces in the area included the 70th VC Battalion, attached to the Quang Nam Province headquarters; the 72d Local Force Battalion, and seven local force companies. These units also had the support of much of the local population, since some districts in the province had been under Communist control for twenty years.

On 11 September 1967, the 1-327th began the operation with an air assault into multiple landing zones in the southern hills of the area of operations. On the next day, the 2-327th and the 2-502d moved into the northern and western portions of the area. The 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, under the 1st Brigade's operational control, was reserved to exploit quickly any intelligence gained during the initial stages of the operation. The brigade's maneuver battalions assumed a semi-guerrilla role, using saturation patrolling, ambushes, stay-behind patrols, raids, a large and flexible area of operations, and limited resupply procedures, to elicit contact with the enemy. Contact with the enemy, however, for the first weeks of the operation was light. Intelligence reports

from numerous sources began to indicate that large size enemy forces, including the 2d NVA Division Headquarters, were located some ten miles west of the brigade's initial area of deployment.

On 26 September, Operation WHEELER entered a second phase, as brigade units were redeployed to exploit developing intelligence. Between 27 and 30 September, several significant encounters took place. Meanwhile, enemy activity was noted in the area initially explored by the brigade, and the 23d Infantry Division placed an additional battalion under the 1st Brigade's operational control for use in that area.

On 8 October, Company A, 2-327th, encountered two NVA companies, and in a fierce fight, including hand-to-hand combat, lost seventeen men. These casualties comprised one of the largest single encounter losses suffered by the brigade since arriving in Vietnam. Seven Silver Stars and a Distinguished Service Cross were awarded as a result of this action.

Aided by bad weather, the enemy avoided contact in the western portion of the area and sought to move eastward. On 9 October, the 1st Brigade reoriented its activities to the east on the original area of operations. Simultaneously with reorienting units, the brigade began rotating companies back to the brigade base camp at Chu Lai for standdown.

By 14 October, after thirty-three days of contact under adverse weather conditions, enemy units were contacted. On the following day, SSG Webster Anderson of Battery A, 2d Battalion, 320th Artillery, added his name to the honor roll of 101st Airborne Division Congressional Medal of Honor winners. When his battery's defensive perimeter was breached by an NVA unit, Anderson directed the defense while heroically exposing himself to enemy fire. Seriously wounded by three grenade explosions -- one resulting from his throwing an NVA grenade back at the enemy -- he refused medical aid until his unit's position was secured.

On 22 and 27 October, significant contacts were made with battalion sized enemy units, but lack of contact from 28 October to 4 November indicated that the enemy was attempting to break up into small units and flee the battle area. The 1st Brigade intensified efforts to locate the 2d NVA Division. Intelligence sources estimated the enemy division headquarters to be north of the brigade, and the Americal Division developed a new scheme of maneuver. The 1st Brigade was employed as a blocking force to the east and southwest of the suspected enemy position. A U. S. Marine battalion was stationed as a blocking force to the northwest, and elements of the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) served to block to the northeast and to attack in that direc-

tion. This phase of the operation produced numerous small unit contacts with the enemy, and one more significant action on 11 November when Company C of the 2-327th encountered an estimated NVA Company.

1st Brigade intelligence estimated that approximately one-third of the 2d NVA Division was either killed or wounded. Confirmed enemy losses amounted to 1,105 killed. By the end of the operation, the "Always First" Brigade had destroyed a battalion base camp, numerous weapons, and almost 200 pounds of marijuana valued at \$100,000. From 23-25 November, the 1st Brigade's three battalions were relieved in place by elements of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. The 1st Brigade displaced to Tam Ky Airfield and moved by U. S. Air Force C-130 aircraft to the brigade base camp at Phan Rang for a four-day Thanksgiving standdown.