

Study on the Iz albany battle history essay



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The battle in review is LZ Albany. This battle took place during the Vietnam War under Operation Pleiku. LZ Albany was an ambush on American troops en route to landing zone Albany by NVA regulars. The battle took place on the afternoon of November 17, 1965. The fight involved the US Army 2nd battalion of the 7th Cavalry (2/7) and the NVA 8th battalion of the 66th Regiment. Although the end result of the battle is considered an American victory, the losses suffered were horrendous. It is safe to say this was a pyrrhic victory for the US, only due to the fact that they held the ground at Albany at the end of the battle. This did alter the amount of troops the NVA could attack LZ Columbus with as a side effect. The battle itself would teach many lessons to the US army in regards to the importance of security and the role support by fire played in this theatre of combat.

The Vietnam War was a civil war in which the United States was actively involved in. The Northern faction of Vietnam adopted Communism, and thus gained Russia and China as allies. Vietnam until this point was a French territory which was in the process of being liberated by the North Vietnamese. They had defeated France and driven them from parts of the country. France and South Vietnam sought aid from the United States. In reply the United States rendered aid and advisors to South Vietnam. This was due to US foreign policy at the time and staunch opposition to Communism by the US government. If Vietnam fell to Communism it also posed a great economic threat to US interests in South Asia as well. By 1965 the US Armed Forces no longer played the role of advisors for the South Vietnamese in the Vietnam conflict. We were at the point of actively engaging the North Vietnamese in combat. (Stewart 386-320) Under

Operation Pleiku, US Army divisions were first employed against the North Vietnamese. This is exactly what the North Vietnamese commander Gen. Nguyen Chi Trinh had desired. His main strategy encompassed liberating a vast majority of South Vietnam from southern control and inflicting mass casualties on US forces. The idea was that the American public would not support a war in which multitudes of American soldiers lost their lives. His intent was to shatter the American public's support and thus drive another foreign imposer out of the country. This plan was titled the Dong Xuan Campaign. (Coleman. 51) American forces had already been occupying the provincial capital of Pleiku. Frequent attacks and skirmishes by the NVA gave the impression that they were probing for the best possible place to attack to retake the city. This indicated to US commanders that there was a sizable force of enemy soldiers in the Northern plateaus that needed to be dealt with. A series of landing zones were reconnoitered for probable attack positions. The Army's objective was simple: to destroy the enemy threat in the area and their will to fight. After securing LZ X-ray, it was the job of the 2/7 Cavalry to sweep the gap between LZ X-ray and LZ Columbus, which held US artillery. Their mission was also very simple: to sweep the area between LZ Columbus and LZ Albany, and engage whatever enemy they found.

The setting of the battle is the Ia Drang Valley. This section of land is based off of the Ia Drang River and consists of heavily forested jungle accompanied by varied plateaus with clearings. Various sectors had high grass, ant hills, and heavy undergrowth. (Coleman 234) Other than that, the setting included many of the stereotypes the Vietnam climate is infamous for: Heat, humidity,

mosquitoes, and more humidity. Both the NVA and the 2/7 Cavalry were decently supplied at their encounter. After the battle American troops reported 212 assault rifles and carbines, 39 light machine guns, 3 heavy machine guns, 6 (82mm) mortars, and 8 rocket launchers confiscated. (Coleman 248). US soldiers were sporting the new M16-A1 assault rifle, M-60 Light machine guns, various small arms, and mortars. Equipment-wise, both forces were fairly matched. The 2/7 however did have a great advantage in the form of immediate air and artillery support. The major match between the two forces was that of experience and leadership. The 2/7 originally was an infantry battalion from Ft. Benning but was reorganized under the 2/7 as a Cavalry unit when the Army restructured for deployment. Prior to deploying to Vietnam, they had little to no air assault training but were a solid infantry unit. Lt. Col. McDade, The commanding officer, was new to the combat battalion. He had only transferred from the Personnel branch a few months prior to deployment. The Company Commanders included some of the best in the brigade, and NCO leadership included many combat hardened veterans. The bulk of the fighting force however was composed of volunteers and draftees, who were on average a slightly older crowd than most of the fighting forces that would be employed in the next two years. (Coleman 232) Due to the terrain, both the NVA and the 2/7 Cavalry had just about the same amount of intelligence in regards to each other. The 2/7 knew they were to expect contact in route to Albany, and the NVA new that American forces were patrolling the areas surrounding LZ Columbus and LZ X-Ray. Both had higher missions than immediate contact with the enemy however given the circumstances of the events that took place, neither faction could complete their ulterior motives after the battle.

McDade issued his order to company commanders that morning before moving out. " Enemy situation is presently unclear, but there are definitely PAVN units in the area. Terrain is high grass, ant hills, and heavy undergrowth. 2/7 is moving from XRAY to LZ ALBANY to prepare a landing zone for probable pickup and evacuation back to Pleiku"(Coleman 234) The 2/7 moved out from LZ X-Ray in a battalion column, with Charlie Company lagging behind slightly. Alpha company in the led was the only company that took a combat ready stance, with flank security and alertness. All others were in a rough formation following the lead of Alpha. Around mid-day on their march, roughly 200 meters from the Albany clearing, Alpha Company had reported that they had captured to NVA prisoners. McDade decided to stop and interrogate the prisoners, but ordered Alpha Company to proceed to the clearing. Meanwhile formation discipline crumbled in the halted column. Men started sitting, smoking, sleeping, eating and conversing while awaiting further orders for movement. It had been a long march that morning and many were weary from carrying full combat loads on their long march. The two NVA soldiers captured were part of flank security for the 8th NVA Battalion. Others from the unit informed their commander of the enemy location. It turned out the Americans were travelling exactly perpendicular to their position. Due to lack of security, the 2/7 had no idea the NVA battalion was present. The NVA battalion commander immediately deployed his first company to set up an ambush for the Americans. The plan was to form an L-shaped ambush, based on the assumption that the opposition was simply an American rifle company maneuvering in the jungle. The NVA troops could only set up a hasty ambush; however they did have some time to conceal themselves and wait.

McDade moved his column forward and arrived at the clearing of Albany. Upon arrival, he called for his company commanders to come to his position for a meeting. They happened to bring with them their 1st Sergeants and RTO's. The idea was to assign them sectors of fire to cover in the clearing. Once again the column had stopped, and discipline deteriorated amongst troops. When the company commanders arrived at McDade's position, the firing began and the ambush had commenced. (Coleman 236-237) The NVA had positioned snipers in the trees, machine guns on ant hill tops, and were barraging the 2/7 with mortars. McDade's column stretched some 600 meters long, and the entire length was attacked at point blank range. (Moore 115). From then on the battle was a fight for survival. The 2/7 fought back ferociously for the next 18 hours. Unlike the battle at X-Ray, the majority the NVA casualties were not made by indirect fire, but by close quarters combat and machine gun fire. During this time, brigade had little knowledge of what was happening on the ground. By the time they were partially informed, they had very little ground intelligence to provide assistance. The men on the ground eventually got a communication through for an air strike and Aerial Rocket Artillery. The ARA fires were immediately launched, followed by napalm airstrikes. The airstrikes broke the enemy attack; however one of the commanders had to watch in horror as a canister of napalm opened up directly over one of his platoons. Fratricide was rampant among American forces due to their surprise and early lack of discipline. Although the NVA attack had been broken, many platoons were now cut off and had to last the night until reinforcements could arrive. The NVA spent the night systematically searching the battlefield and killing survivors. Brigade commander, Gen. Brown, dispatched a company from LZ Columbus to aid

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the troops at Albany that night. Many speculate more could have been done, and some say had Brown dispatched a whole battalion he could have prevented the deaths of those Americans killed by the NVA death squads that night. The end result was 151 killed in action, 121 wounded in action, and 4 missing in action for the 2/7. The number of NVA losses varies from each after action report. Somewhere between 200 and 400 NVA bodies had been found, the number wounded and missing unknown. (Coleman 248-249)

In regards to the actions of the Company Commander, McDade, many of his actions in regards to movement were unwise. The 2/5 had been travelling with the 2/7 for a few days prior to their march. The 2/5 always traveled with a company abreast to the left and right flanks for security. Why McDade did not employ this tactic, is very unclear. In regards to the discipline among the troops in a combat environment they should not have allowed themselves to march in an unsecure formation with no security elements. In any circumstance the experienced NCO's especially should not have allowed this. McDade's mistakes were worsened by his attempt to conduct a company commanders' meeting. When he pulled primary leadership from his column there was no contingency plan for subordinate units nor was the executive leadership present to coordinate a reaction to contact. Although McDade was performing routine procedure, he should have realized the situation he was involved in was far from routine. Furthermore, when McDade issued his order for movement he placed emphasis on the fact that the battalion was en route for probable pickup. This may have given the false impression that there was no need for suspicious alertness because they were en route back to base. McDade sacrificed the principles of objective, security, surprise,

mass, and maneuver. McDade gave up the objective when he thought his choice of his movement technique as well as through his movement order. It seems as if he knew enemy contact was possible, but he did not anticipate it. He violated security, surprise, mass, and maneuver through his lack of stringency. In allowing his troops to travel in such a vulnerable formation, he threw caution to the wind and these four principles with it. The lack of tactical discipline cost many of these men their lives, had they pulled flank security, remained alert, and used proper formations, many of them may have come home that day.

The lessons learned from Albany are very simple. Never assume the enemy doesn't have a say so. Always keep security in mind, even when contact is not probable. Never lose the objective, for once you do the enemy will have gained a key advantage over your operation. Most importantly, although one cannot be ready for every situation, it is wise to be prepared for the job one is to undertake.