

81st AIRBORNE RANGERS II

The **81st Vietnamese Airborne Rangers** started out as an elite battalion sized reconnaissance and combat unit of Project Delta. They were organized and advised by the 5th Special Forces Group and made many major contributions to the Vietnam War; patrolling along the western borders of South Vietnam and engaging in many fierce battles in the Ashau Valley, Saigon, Hue, An Loc, Nha Trang and many other locations. When the 5th Special Forces were withdrawn from Vietnam, the Special Forces Advisors were replaced with Red Hats (advisors to the Vietnamese Airborne Division) **JIM COLLIER. ETC**

Dia Chi Lien Lac has

81ST AIRBORNE RANGER: THE LAST DAYS OF APRIL 1975

Throughout the year 1974, the 81st Airborne Ranger Group was assigned to operate under the command of the Military Region III as a reactionary force. The unit had been divided into many groups in order to meet the requirements of the military situation. As a military intelligence group, the 81st placed numerous reconnaissance teams deep into the enemy control area along the border between Vietnam and Cambodia to monitor enemy movement. The six-man teams were lightly equipped in order to maneuver more easily within enemy lines. Their area of responsibility covered the military zone of Duong Minh Chau, the "D" zone, the jungles of Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, Binh Long, Phuoc Long, Binh Tuy, Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh, and Bien Hoa. Even though the 81st served mainly as a reconnaissance unit, they engaged in actual combat according to the military situation, such as the Tet Offensive in Hue and Saigon 1968, An Loc 1972, and Quang Tri in 1973.

January 1, 1975. The 81st received a most challenging order to rescue the city of Phuoc Long, which was under heavy attack and surrounded by three divisions of the enemy NVA. This order came during the operation at Black Virgin Mountain (Nui Ba Den) to depressurize the enemy threat on the communication relay center of the III Corp at the border town of Tay Ninh. Three hundred Airborne Rangers, led by **LTC VU XUAN Thong** and **MAJ NGUYEN SON**, were lifted by helicopters into the hopeless city of Phuoc Long on January 4, 1975. They engaged in desperate fighting for two days. Out-numbered and without reinforcements and firing power, they had to retreat from the city two days later.

Returning from Phuoc Long, **COL PHAN VAN HUAN**, Commander of the 81st, re-structured his unit into three "detachments", each group consisting of about a thousand soldiers. These detachments would be more independent, mobile and could react faster to the changing military situation. The First Tactical Operation Detachment (TOD) was commanded by **LTC VU XUAN THONG**, the second TOD by **MAJ NGUYEN SON**, and the third TOD by **MAJ PHAM CHAU TAI**.

Meanwhile, the 81st continued to run their normal reconnaissance operations in the jungles of the III Corp.

March 10, 1975 The North Vietnamese launched the general offensive with an attack on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands of Military Region II. The VC overwhelmed Ban Me Thuot within two days, and then turned on Pleiku and Kontum. President Thieu ordered ARVN forces to withdraw from the Highlands.

The new line of defense was in Phan Rang Province, but when it collapsed, **GENERAL NGUYEN VINH NGHI**, **GENERAL SANG** and their staff retreated deep into jungle of the III Corp. The 81st was ordered to form a special team for a rescue mission. The rescue team would dress in NVA uniforms and be led by Lt. Nguyen Van Minh. The operation was cancel at the last minute when III Corps Headquarter communicated that Generals **NGHI** and **SANG** were captured by the VC at Phan Rang. **1LT MINH** and his team were then reassigned to another recon mission in the military "D" zone. This was his last mission; the recon team was captured by the VC on May 14th while on their path of retreat out of Dai An Jungle.

April 26, 1975 **COL HUAN** was ordered to deploy one of his tactical headquarter units as reinforcement for the defense of the ARVN Joint General Staff located near Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon. Major Tai and his third tactical unit were assigned for this mission. He positioned his troops on the tall buildings across from the ARVN Joint General Staff (next to the former American Third Field hospital) and the perimeter area around Tan Son Nhut aAirport. Colonel Huan and his other two tactical headquarter units were stationed at the northern end of Bien Hoa Airport. At noon, **GENERAL NGUYEN VAN TOAN**, commander of the III CORP, radioed to **COL HUAN** for an emergency military meeting. Present at the meeting were Colonel Luu Yem, the Chief Staff of Bien Hoa province, **LTC LO**, the commander of the 7th Airborne Battalion, and about twenty other staff officers of the III Corp headquarter. **GENERAL TOAN** gave the order to abandon Bien Hoa on April 29. All combined force units had to retreat from Bien Hoa to form a new defense line at Thu Duc. The 81st Airborne Ranger was assigned as a back line security in this order. Their mission was also to destroy the bridge on the Korea Highway near Bien Hoa Airport to stop the VC tanks.

After **COL HUAN** returned from the meeting, he immediately moved his troops into the Bien Hoa Airport. The Third Air Force division had abandoned the airport days previously. That night, the North Vietnamese forces attacked and seized the post of an armor unit nearby. The 81st counter attacked to retake the post the next day, on April 29. At the same time, two jet fighters bombarded the stockpile of bombs at the airport; the 81st was pinned down for more than five hours during this massive explosion and sustained some casualties.

At nightfall, the 81st began their retreat from the airport. **COL HUAN** ordered **CPT HIEN** to lead a convoy to carry all of the heavy equipment and the wounded

soldiers through a different route to the 81st main headquarters at Hoc Mon, near Saigon. When the convoy arrived at Binh Phuoc Bridge about 0300 hours on April 30; local armed forces at Binh Phuoc informed them that the enemy had seized the 81st Headquarters and most of the military posts in the area. **CPT HIEN** re-directed his convoy over the Binh Trieu bridge to find his way to the ARVN Joint General Staff, where the third tactical detachment of the 81st, commanded by **MAJ TAI**, was stationed.

At 0530 on April 30th, **CPT HIEN** and his convoy linked up with the 3rd detachment of the 81st Airborne Rangers at the ARVN Joint General Staff. In the meantime, the main detachment of the 81st was moving along the Korea Highway maneuvering to avoid the enemy; they blew up a bridge along the route to delay enemy pursuit. At that moment, the Saigon radio station broadcasted the demand by **MR. VU VAN MAU**, the new Prime Minister of South Vietnam, that all Americans withdraw from Vietnam within twenty four hours. In the shocking turn of events, **COL HUAN** decided to move his troops deep into the jungle of Co Mi. He then tried to make contact with his superiors and other friendly forces in the region, but was not successful. All of the radio frequencies were dead.

At 0200 hours on April 30, the Viet Cong attacked the back gate of the ARVN Joint General Staff. The 811th Company of the 81st, commanded by **CPT TRUONG VIET LAM**, engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. Fighting was intense with grenades and huge explosives. The battle lasted for about 90 minutes before the enemy had to disengage from the fight at 0600 hours on April 30. Another battle broke out at Bay Hien Junction located between the base camp of the Airborne Division and Tan Son Nhut Airport. The combined forces of a unit of the Airborne Division and the 81st engaged in a brutal battle with the enemy. Four of five T-54 tanks were destroyed in front of the airport gate.

At 0700 hours on April 30, a squad of the 81st used M72s to destroy a T-54 tank at the front gate of the ARVN Joint General Staff, but they were all killed by the second tank firing directly at them.

At 0900 hours the morning of April 30, 1975, the President of the Republic of Vietnam ordered all of the ARVNs to lay down their arms. At 1000 hours, **MAJ TAI**, Commander of the 3rd Tactical Operation Headquarter of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group, contacted the President's Palace from his post at the Joint General Staff. He reported to **GENERAL NGUYEN HUU HANH**, Commander of the Armed Forces, and **PRESIDENT DUONG VAN MINH** that the battle situation around TSN airbase, the enemy's violation of the cease-fire, and the violent fighting still ensuing in his area. He then suggested sending his troops to rescue the President. **PRESIDENT MINH** turned down his proposal.

The enemy penetrated TSN airbase and increased the intense bombardment of the headquarters of the Armed Forces. **CPT NGUYEN HUU HUNG**, the assistant to Major Tai, and **CPT HIEN** decided to lead the convoy back to Bien

Hoa in hopes to link up with the main detachment of the 81st Group. Eight other M-41 and M-113 tracked vehicles and a group of soldiers who had just retreated from TSN airbase joined them. As the convoy moved along Vo Di Nguy Street, they were ambushed three kilometers from the TSN Airport. **CPT HUNG** and **1LT HIEN** ordered the troops to abandon the convoy, and they disappeared into the crowd to avoid being captured.

At Tay Ninh, **1LT LAI DINH HOI**, Company Commander of the 813th of the 81st Airborne Rangers, moved his troops towards Saigon in an attempt to join his main unit at the 81st Group Headquarter. At 2100 hours, May 1, 1975, they were intercepted by the enemy and had to abandon their arms. Luckily, they made it to the deserted headquarter of the 81st Group around Noon on May 2 and disbanded all of the troops.

In the Co Mi Jungle, **COL HUAN** assembled his troops for the last time. Two thousand soldiers stood silently before him. He faced a very difficult decision: either lead his troops to a long resistance from jungle hideouts as the 81st had planned or obey the order of **PRESIDENT MINH** to lay down all their arms. After a meeting with his staff, he addressed the troops, *"We are living in the South, fighting for Freedom of the South, but the situation does not allow us to continue fighting. We have to obey the order of our President. Do not be afraid. You have no guilt in this course of action; you are only following my orders. If the enemy wants to shoot someone, they will look at me first. Since we are a highly disciplined unit, we will organize ourselves in a four-line formation. I will lead you to meet the new authorities to turn in our arms; we cannot let the enemy look down on us."*

Out of Co Mi Jungle, four lines of soldiers of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group in full combat gear with their unloaded guns pointed down, silently marched for the last time towards their capital city of Saigon on the Korea Highway, disregarding all of the commotion around them. The abandoned troops of the South as well as the North Vietnamese soldiers dotting the highway looked at them in wonder. A few television crews filmed the marching lines. Finally, the troops were intercepted by a delegation of North Vietnamese officers. All of the soldiers were sent home in their uniforms.

Six reconnaissance teams remained deep in the Duong Minh Chau Zone. They lost radio contact with the 81st Operation headquarters on April 29, 1975 because all communication relay stations were shut down. These teams did not even know the South Vietnam had collapsed. Three of the teams contacted each other by radios and used map and compass to walk back to Tan-Uyen. Their 5-day food supply was consumed and they were all hungry on the way to Tan Uyeno. On May 5, 1975 when 18 Airborne Rangers approached Dai-An village, they begged for food from the local civilians. But the VC surrounded the hungry soldiers, disarmed them and put them in jail without giving them food or water. The VC then shot these 18 Airborne Rangers and disposed of their bodies in the Dong Nai

River. A few days later their discompose bodies were buried by local civilians. Eight of the bodies were buried in an empty well; the other bodies were buried along the riverbank. But there was one seriously wounded Airborne Ranger, **DUC**. His life was saved by an elderly couple that hide and feed him. Every year **DUC** returned to visit the elderly couple until 1995 when the couple passed away.

The other three teams also were also captured during May 7 to 15, 1975, but were spared death. They were all sent to prison for many years. **TEAM SERGEANT VO VAN HIEP** and team member **NGUYEN VAN SON** were tortured to dead while in jail. **COL HUAN** and his entire staff officers were released briefly. Then they were arrested and sent to prison in the North Viet-Nam for many years. Many of them died in prison. **COLONEL HUAN** was released after thirteen years in "Communist re-education" camp. He and most of his staff have resettled in the United States. They have formed the Family of the 81st Association as a network of support for each other and their friend's still living in Vietnam.

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