

INTERVIEWER: Sir, what did you do to prepare yourself for command?

GEN GORMAN: Not much. After all, I'd been thinking about commanding a battalion of infantry for years. I had been in combat as a platoon leader, and I commanded a company in an armored rifle battalion in Germany. I'd observed up close good commanders and bad commanders. I knew I could do the job, and I was impatient for the War College course to end so that I could get on with it. The one thing I did that was specifically oriented on Vietnam was to help form a self-study course in the language at the NWC, using some booths and audio tapes at the top rear of the building.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, was your battalion what you expected?

Well, yes and no.

I arrived at Tan Son Nhut Airport in the early morning hours of 9 June. After daybreak an officer from 1st Division headquarters picked me up, and we drove across the Saigon River to Di An, where Division Rear was located, for an interview with the G-1. He told me that as soon as I finished in-processing, I was to assume command of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, that the unit was then under the OPCON of Divarty, and that the battalion CP was nearby in Phu Loi.

The G-1 was very solicitous. He told me that the Division Commander had removed the previous commander, and that a Major was temporarily in command pending my arrival. He offered to help in any way he could to obtain personnel for me, and told me to call him personally as soon as I knew what I needed. That put me on the alert, so I listened carefully to the talk as I was passed among the staff principals. The

general attitude of my informants when they learned that I was the new DOBOL 6--that was to be my call sign on the Division command net--was doleful sympathy, as if they had been informed that I had a fatal malady. I was given to understand that: first, Relief of battalion commanders was not uncommon--the CG was particularly hard on infantry commanders; and second, among infantry units, the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry was lowest in the CG's regard, and had been assigned a "pacification" mission guarding the Division rear because it was not considered capable of hunting enemy main force units.

It was a classic introduction to a new unit. I was picked up by an ill-maintained jeep driven by an unkempt sergeant from the 26th who chose to drive me past the division's mortuary unit at Phu Loi, and to comment lugubriously that it had been busy of late. But when we reached the nearby battalion CP -- an indifferently erected, cluttered squad tent-- it was like coming home after a long stay away-- familiar people were there: company commanders, staff officers, NCOs, soldiers. With most of them, I was instantly comfortable, and they were responsive.

I arrived expecting to take over a savvy outfit, since the unit had been in Vietnam for nine months, was a veteran of a number of battles, and should have known the enemy and the terrain. I was sorely disappointed. What I found was a pretty run-of-the-mill leg infantry outfit, not too sharp professionally, inclined to be pro forma rather than proactive. When we drove up, I noted that the CP's 292

antenna was missing ground planes. More importantly, the staff was kind of down in the mouth, conveying to me in their briefings a consensus that the battalion had been dumped on. Throughout the unit, I found few who were up-beat about the current mission. I figured that I would have to work on that, and decided to put out periodically a written review of what the unit had been doing so that soldiers could read about their achievements, and mail it home if they wanted to.

I soon appreciated, however, that the Blue Spaders were willing to learn, and eager to do the job right. Also, they had a great cadre of NCO's and lieutenants. We learned together. My time in command was one long learning experience.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, when you took over, did you get any command guidance from division or brigade?

GEN GORMAN : Yes. As I remember it, Colonel Sid Berry flew into Phu Loi and we talked at my CP. He was preoccupied with the battles up north, and did not have much to say, aside from stating that he was working to get me returned to his operational control. He told me that the CG did not pay much attention to the usual alignment of the battalions with the brigades, and that there was no telling when our current mission would terminate, and to which brigade we would then be attached. I had worked for Sid before, and was mighty glad to see him, but his news was, I admit, a bit unsettling.

INTERVIEWER: What were your first impressions of General DePuy?

GEN GORMAN: You can bet I was apprehensive when we first met. He flew in, unexpectedly when I was out on patrol, walking with a rifle platoon. I had a radio call from DANGER 77 saying that he was inbound. Then the helo landed, and we talked. He asked me what I was doing, and I told him --he seemed to approve. Then he said that he wanted me to know that we had an important mission: maybe, he said, the most important mission of any battalion in the whole division. He said the division had to learn how to secure its rear area, and that I was to work with the Revolutionary Development Task Force that he had set up, call sign HELPER, to discover the right mix of force and persuasion to eliminate the VC local forces, and to persuade the people to cooperate with the government. To do so, he said I would have to make the 26th Infantry more mobile, and to make it more lethal, and to insure that it would perform in combat. He said that the infantry's job was to find the armed enemy, and then it was up to me and my company commanders to apply the right mix of maneuver and firepower to kill or capture them. If we ran into a big VC unit, the full resources of the division stood behind us. Our operations would have to provide the secure environment within which the Viet Revolutionary Development cadres could operate. He knew that it was hard doing those military jobs when civilians were all around, but he knew I would take care that we wouldn't do anything dumb.

He told me that the 26th had to be ready for action at any time --he looked around, and pointed out that the sun was out, the temperature was moderate,

the flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and everything seemed peaceful. But if any of us in the 26th believed that, he was making a big mistake, because even as we spoke some enemy was watching us with murder in his heart. Then he left.

On that first occasion and thereafter I usually found myself in instant agreement with every point he made. He told me he wanted the 26th to be fast, adaptable, and hard hitting. He wanted us to maneuver swiftly, and to use all available fire power. He drew a distinction between tactics and techniques: tactics had to be left to the leader in command at the scene of any combat; but the techniques of getting into contact with the enemy, of fires and movement, these could be trained --I remember him saying rehearsed-- in advance of combat, and should be embedded in every soldier's mind. He told me that he'd drop in to see us from time to time, but that if I needed help, especially in battle, I was to call him. I really liked his approach.

I want to emphasize that my initial impression was consistent with our relationship over the nine months I served under him in Vietnam, and the nearly four years I was with him at TRADOC. He truly gave me both complete freedom and assured support. He was an ideal commander. Above all, I learned to respect his instincts for finding the enemy, and anticipating his next moves. He knew the larger aspects of the war, and its finest details, right down to the rifleman's level. I consider him an authentic military genius.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, what kind of action did you get involved in during that "pacification" mission? Could you describe a typical operation.

GEN GORMAN. There was no such thing as a "typical action" in LAM SON II--that was the name the division gave to the pacification campaign. Every day and every night brought new challenges, and we had to keep learning how to deal with these. We really did make it up as we went along.

But I have some pictures here of one incident, a small dust-up involving Company A on the 20th of June.

It was around mid-day, and I had been walking with a rifle platoon, when DOBOL Alpha 6--the company commander-- reported that Alpha was in contact, and that the company had taken casualties. My helo, an H-13 was inbound to pick me up, so I got airborne and flew to where the action was. I found Company A in a long column, with considerable distances-- around 500 meters-- between platoons. The commander had apparently been with the lead platoon, which had been fired on from a trenchline under some scrub on the north edge of an open field. Our troops returned the fire, and succeeded in getting into the trench, but the enemy had successfully withdrawn southward across the field, and were firing from the opposite woodline. A6 told me on the radio that the field was mined, and that one of his soldiers had been wounded by a mine or booby trap. The VC were firing automatic weapons at them from what appeared to be another trenchline, and had them pinned down. I asked Alpha 6 what he was

going to do, and he said that he was bringing up the rest of his company, and he intended to attack around to the left when they came on line. I told him to get some fire on the enemy to fix them in place, and that I would try to hasten the arrival of his platoons.

Well, it was a hot, bright afternoon, and the next platoon was plainly visible some 500 meters north of there, moving slowly along a trail in two columns. They were in the open, and the grass was low, so I could see that they were ambling--a very deliberate walk, not a forced march. I landed and talked to the platoon leader, an NCO. I told him that his commander urgently needed his platoon forward, and showed him on the map what I knew of the situation. I then got airborne again, and the platoon resumed its march. I could see no difference in their demeanor, just more ambling.

I then called my FAC (Forward Air Controller) and told him what we were up against. Within minutes I could see him flying off to my left. I asked Alpha 6 if he had called for artillery, and he said he had, but that his FO had not yet received clearance to fire. The FAC broke in to report that he had an aircraft on station with CBU (cluster bomb units) and napalm, so I directed Alpha 6 to throw smoke, and the FAC to mark the target for an east-west run along the treeline. The FAC fired a white smoke rocket exactly where the VC gun flashes had been seen, and the fighter rolled in and laid the CBU right along the edge of the trees, then turned around and delivered the napalm in the same place.

The enemy fire stopped, and Company A advanced. These pictures show you what they found.

[Document insert: Alpha Company Destroys a Viet Cong Base Camp 20 June 1966]]

Here's the diagram of the VC positions: this is a well-built local force base camp. Each was different from the others, but they usually featured narrow trenches, and neat, sod-covered, nearly invisible bunkers and tunnels. This one sure had those features. In the aggregate, there was enough overhead cover to accommodate a battalion, but probably the place was used from day to day only by a guard detachment of local guerrillas.

That detachment was what Company A had encountered. Its members all got away, but not without loss: Company A found pools of blood and fresh bloody bandages. Here are pictures of the mines and booby traps that the VC had emplaced out in the fields of fire in front of their fighting positions. Here is a sign in broken English they had erected on a tree at the edge of the open field, saying, in effect, "If some one agressed in your country, what would you do?" My Vietnamese colleagues told me that those signs served the purpose of warning local people of the booby traps and mines, as well as unsettling Americans. Whether the sign figured or not, DOBOL Alpha 6 was clearly shaken.

Just walking through that VC base camp taught me some powerful lessons. If we were going to outfight these peasants, we had to upgrade our field craft. The VC were masters at building trenches and bunkers. We had to match or surpass them. I had

always believed that the Army's standard, open front foxholes were exactly wrong, and that the sandbag castles of bunkers we built in Korea -or that I later saw at Phuoc Vinh- were disastrous. It turned out that General DePuy believed, as I did, that our troops should dig deep, invisible holes with overhead and frontal cover, and with ports for firing across in front of flanking positions. In that kind of defense, teamwork and interdependence was as important in the defense as it was in the attack. I resolved then and there to make DOBOL a premier defender as well as an effective predator. During Lam Son II we didn't need to defend often, but afterwards we had ample opportunity.

The next day General DePuy flew in, and asked me about the action. I described what happened, and told him that I had decided to remove the company commander and the platoon leader. He replied simply that he would get me replacements. I asked him also to get me authority to clear fires, so that we could avoid delays in using artillery. He said he would --and he did, that very day. We discussed the implications of VC defenses. Again, I found him understanding, supportive and responsive.

INTERVIEWER: Did you remove many leaders like that?

GEN GORMAN: If you mean after a fire fight, no. But I did eventually replace all the company commanders. I would say that they were each relieved to be relinquishing command.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, why do you suppose that was so?

GEN GORMAN: They had been in command in Vietnam for nine months or more. They had been in a base-centered, road-bound, three hot-meal outfit. They were used to riding around in jeeps, and to sending platoons off to do their bidding. Now they were being required to lead on the ground, to walk all day, and frequently all night, for days at a time. They had to carry their creature comforts on their back, and while generally that region was very pleasant, sometimes it could be very wet, and often very hot. It was plain hard work.

I had a major tussle with them over their practice of calling for medevac helos (DUSTOFF) to extract soldiers who had succumbed to heat prostration. Finally, I just flat forbade to approve such helo missions. I told them that if they enforced the disciplines of force-feeding salt tablets, and of carrying sufficient water to support drinking on demand, they would not incur such casualties. And even if they did, I said, a medevac was dangerous, because the arrival of a DUSTOFF would signal their location to VC for miles around, putting the whole company at hazard for one man. Rather, I said, their choices were either to halt in place while they revived the victim, or they could carry him, but there would be no DUSTOFF except for combat casualties. They did not like that, individually or collectively, but I was relieved to note that the incidence of "heat prostration" dropped off to zero within a week or two.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, I'll bet you had a lot of volunteers to command companies, didn't you?

GEN GORMAN: As a matter of fact, no. The division G-1 lived up his promise, and sent me five captains, but only one volunteered to take a company. I gave him the job instantly, and later on he got promoted to Major and became my Executive Officer. The other captains told me they wanted a staff job so they could observe and learn before they took command. I didn't hire any of those. Then I lucked out: two more captains came into the division, both requesting rifle companies: one was Jim Madden, and the other was George Joulwon. These two had been platoon leaders together in the 30th Infantry Battle Group, 3d Infantry Division in Germany when it had been commanded by Colonel William DePuy. They were knowledgeable, and hot to trot, keenly competitive with one another, and a pleasure to command. They were both the sort of officers that needed no prodding, and required only an occasional word of guidance to lead a rifle company in a thoroughly outstanding way. I was just delighted to get them. Their spirit was contagious, and the whole battalion took on new life.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, did you operate at night often?

GEN GORMAN: Yes. In fact, I tried to deprive the VC of the advantage of concealment offered by darkness. Here's a summary of our operations that I published so the troops would appreciate what they had accomplished. I think we fulfilled our mission of finding out how to perform the LAM SON II mission, which we turned over to the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry in late July. Incidentally, the commander of that battalion was Lieutenant Colonel Jack Conn, with whom I had served in Korea, back in 1952-1953.

[Document: LAM SON II report]

INTERVIEWER: What was your mission after Lam Son II?

GEN GORMAN: As I remember it, we were attached to 1st Brigade, and positioned to secure the road designated Route RED, which ran from Phuoc Vinh south toward Bien Hoa, while truck convoys carried supplies north to the brigade's base camp. That was not unlike LAM SON II: I had a very good NCO killed trying to defuse a VC booby trap, and we had a few trucks damaged from command detonated claymore mines. I resolved that the next time we had a similar mission we would take more active countermeasures.

Then we were sent back to Phouc Vinh, and I got my first good look at that place. I didn't like what I found.

INTERVIEWER: Sir, what was wrong? The defenses?

GEN GORMAN: Oh, sure, they were bad. But more important than the ridiculously vulnerable bunkers and washed out trenchlines, there were the shanties that had been built by officers. I found out that individuals or groups had paid out substantial sums--up to hundreds of dollars--to buy wood and sheet metal to fashion these, and to equip them with lights and air conditioners. The expectation was that as each "owner" left, his "turtle" or successor would recompense him for the original investment. This cost would then roll over to the next arrival, with no depreciation, and in more

than a few cases, some plus up. That bred more than few arguments. I became aware that this practice was causing significant trouble; I even got a formal letter from a departed officer complaining that an officer had failed to honor a debt, and demanding that I take official action. Well, I wrote him that I had taken charge of the post, and that from my perspective all structures within view were government property, so there was no debt. I had copies circulated to all officers. There was a particularly elaborate hut that had belonged to the former commander. This I converted into the 26th Infantry Room, and had the unit colors displayed there, together with a map of the division area where new arrivals could be briefed. I set up my office and a cot in a hex tent.

That short period at Phuoc Vinh was useful in several other ways. we practiced airmobile operations, and worked out an airmobile SOP. Also, I caused a number of the battalion's trucks and other property to be turned into division. We were authorized 108 trucks--one for every eight men authorized. We hadn't been using most of these vehicles in our operations. Yet the battalion's practice was to leave a driver for each at Camp Weber, together with an appropriate number of mechanics and supervisors. I wanted to be wholly airmobile, and we needed to free up manpower for use in the field, so I got rid of wheels. I turned 71 trucks and 59 trailers over to division. I also stripped each rifle company of a squad's worth of spaces to build around the anti-tank assets a consolidated Base Defense Section in Headquarters Company. That put all the defense of Phuoc Vinh under one commander, so that rifle company commanders could focus on the

out-of-base war. My intent was that the rifle companies and the Reconnaissance Platoon should be wholly dependent on outside vehicles, mainly helicopters.

INTERVIEWER: That suggests that the personnel system was letting you down. How bad was the problem?.

GEN GORMAN: No, it was not the personnel system. We were doing it to ourselves.

Let's be sure you remember that August 1966 was the eleventh month from the date most of the troops in my battalion had left Fort Riley enroute to Vietnam. The "personnel system" had been trying to cope with a big turnover in the 26th Infantry, and had been offering rear echelon jobs to my riflemen so as to even out the flow of replacements into the line units. That did not work well.

I know from my notebook that on 29 July, when we were still in the field, the battalion had better than 100% fill--854 assigned against an authorization of 829. But on that date I had only 478 deployed in the field-- only a little more than half those assigned. That was frustrating to me, because I had really been pushing to get the field strength of the rifle companies up. We were taking better care of that base at Phuoc Vinh than our mission. Moreover, I was determined to be airmobile, and I couldn't imagine how owning trucks and trailers helped that objective.

Most importantly, I wanted the rifle companies totally free of responsibility for Phuoc Vinh's

security. So I developed a modification to our Modified Table of Organization and Equipment, bringing the rifle companies down to 174 each, and setting up a Base Defense Section with Headquarters Company under one commander to look after security there. Of course, I did all that after getting approval from my brigade commander, Colonel Berry, and the division commander, General DePuy. Both approved, and eventually, the whole division adopted a similar scheme.

INTERVIEWER: General DePuy had a reputation for having a hair-trigger temper, and for relieving commanders at the drop of a hat. How did that reputation match your experience?

GEN GORMAN: General DePuy did not suffer fools gladly, and he could be brusque. He may have relieved around a dozen commanders in Vietnam, but the instances I know about were all pretty well warranted. Usually he simply moved the object of his ire out of the division without writing a report, so that most of them never even had an entry in their record.

INTERVIEWER: Could you cite an example of what you mean by "warranted"?

GEN GORMAN: Well, there was a case of a newly arrived infantry battalion commander who allowed his unit to dig in right in front of a rice paddy berm, so that the fields of fire were less than grenade range. As a matter of fact, that position was at Tan Binh where the 26th Infantry had

made a similar mistake in February of 1966. That new commander had had the time to check those defensive positions, but when the CG asked about them, he could not even state what was wrong. DePuy waved him off the mound, and brought in another officer whose basic infantry skills were more advanced.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back to the 26th Infantry. What was the mission that they disliked so much? What did you do about that?

GEN GORMAN: In May of 1966 the CG had decided that the GVN (Government of Vietnam) could not provide for security in the immediate vicinity of the division's rear area, both because of ARVN ineptness and the skill and efficiency of the enemy district and provincial units. So he worked out with the GVN authorities a plan for a combined pacification campaign to be called "LAM SON II," calling for the GVN to commit a Revolutionary Development cadre and elements of the 5th ARVN Division, and the 1st Division to furnish an infantry battalion and a task force equipped to provide psywar, intelligence, and other support. Beginning in mid-May, these launched a campaign to establish an "oil-spot" of security and GVN control in the vicinity of Phu Loi and Di An. The 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry was brought down from Phuoc Vinh, and bivouacked inside the perimeter of Phu Loi and Di An.

Now this job was not glamorous, and plainly the CG's attention, and that of his staff and his brigade

commanders, remained concentrated on the main force war well to the north, along Highway 13. We got scant help in figuring out what we were supposed to do, but I saw it as a great chance to raise the professionalism of the battalion, and I sold it to my company commanders and staff principals as a challenge to their soldiering skills. I also emphasized that ours was a mission that had to be successful if the division's support bases were to function without enemy harassment and interference--in short, we were as vital to the success of the division's campaign against the main force as any of the battalions operating up north.

It was grubby work: lots of patrolling, much of it at night. Small unit fights against handfuls of VC. Mines and punji pits, claymores and mortar attacks--the grungiest sort of combat. But it gave me an opportunity right at the outset of my command to spend about one half-day on patrol with each rifle platoon, observing its technique, and assessing its professional skills. Soon I had worked out my teaching objectives, and began, through the company commanders, to provide remedial on-the-job-training.

INTERVIEWER: Could you specify some of those objectives?

GEN GORMAN: Sure.

The main lesson was to think through each situation and deal with it in its own terms. Time after time officers and NCOs tried to apply some procedure or tactic they had

learned elsewhere in a circumstance where a moment's thought would have shown them it would be disastrous. They wanted rules or maxims they could invariably apply, and I tried to bring them to understand that there were few such rules or guidelines, and their first concern had to be for the urgencies of the moment. Our was a new form of war, I said, and so we had to invent new ways of fighting. I praised innovation, and lauded initiative, especially if worked. I preached that every leader had to think on his feet as he acted. In fact, that became our motto in the Blue Spaders, "We Made it up as We Went Along."

The concomitant of that motto was my maxim that "every day in combat is a day in training." I held that a leader ought to be able, at the end of every action, to recite what he had learned, and to describe what he had done to insure that good performance was praised, poor performance identified, and ameliorative action prescribed. I often called for such a review.

INTERVIEWER: I can see how that would apply to the Revolutionary Development mission. That must have seemed very new to most of them. But what about the main force war? Wasn't that pretty much textbook warfare?

GEN GORMAN: I think that innovation and initiative was as necessary against the main force as it was against the village guerrilla. I think the techniques we worked out applied to both, whether it was making a night approach march in column holding onto a rope, or digging foxholes

to that were invisible from the front and to secure from overhead fire.

There were a lot of small performances that in the aggregate made a significant difference no matter what the enemy force.

For example: communications. In mid June, the 26th simply was not getting full measure from its radios. Companies did not routinely carry the 292 antenna, and I discovered that few soldiers in the battalion knew how properly to erect same. We eventually got every company in the field equipped with a 292 complete with carrying case and instructions. Many an officer and NCO had misappropriated an antenna section to use as a pointer--a practice I stopped by offering an Article 15 fine for anyone who used one in my sight. Field maintenance for radios was deplorable, but when I began demanding that companies stay in the field for a week at a time, commanders began paying attention to preventive maintenance and spares. We learned to wrap handsets in a plastic bag secured with a rubber band, and to change swiftly from blade antenna, to whip, to 292 depending on the movement posture of the unit. We learned brevity of transmission, and we learned to assure 24-hour continuity of communications. We learned to carry and to signal using air panels and pyrotechnics. In short we got serious about using what the Army had provided, and that made us better in any sort of operation.

Or as another example, weapons. I was thoroughly dissatisfied with what I found with the handling of infantry weapons and ammunition. There was a general practice of carrying machine gun belts Pancho Villa-style across the chest, and of diverting machine gun ammo cans to almost any use except to protect ammunition from dirt and wet. I collected examples of MG belts twisted and mired to the point that a stoppage was patently guaranteed, and when I could, I staged demonstrations of the difference in firepower that accrues to a unit that carries its MG ammo boxed versus one who does not: I simply caused two platoons to cross a rice paddy by fire and movement--almost invariably gunners with the cross-chest belts would jam up their gun, while the boxed-ammo shot reliably. Now that helps no matter what the fire-fight.

And there was the M-16, the rifle newly arrived in the 26th, and foreign to most of its officers and NCOs. On my initial checks in the field, I found no cleaning rods, patches, or lubricants. We eventually got that fixed, with assistance from the division G-4, and a lot of help from the mail bags -- the troops wrote home for help.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's see: you have been in country nearly three months now, and it sounds like it was mostly small unit training and skirmishes. Is that right?

GEN GORMAN: Pretty much. We fought a couple of stiff actions at the company level, and one battalion airmobile operation into a hot LZ along the Saigon River in mid-August. But there were no really big battles until 25 August, and that one was a really wild affair involving four US infantry battalions trying to encircle the VC provincial battalion --the Phu Loi Battalion.

INTERVIEWER: Was that a result of intelligence?

GEN GORMAN: No, we literally blundered into the enemy's base camp. My battalion was along Route Red, south of Tan Binh. I had two companies deployed along the road with elements of the 1st Engineers. My headquarters and Company C, in reserve, were south and east of Tan Binh. To the north of us, DRACULA, the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, was securing that portion of Route Orange between the Song Be and Tan Binh. Late on the 24th, DRACULA Charlie had sent a small patrol westward --I think there were fifteen in all-- to scout the jungle beyond the rubber plantation. As I remember it, Bill Mullen, the company commander, had obtained some camouflaged fatigues --we called them "tiger suits"-- and formed his own Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol or "Lurp". As far as I know, it was their first outing. They snooped a ways westward from the road, and then hunkered down for the night. The next morning they found that they had over-nighted in a

VC base camp of some size and that they were surrounded by armed VC. Sometime around 0700 they radioed Mullen, and told him the good news. Then the enemy discovered the patrol, attacked it, and there were the inevitable last desperate appeals for help, then silence.

Captain Mullen informed his battalion that he was going with his company to rescue his patrol, mounted his troops on vehicles of Troop C, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and started.

1st Brigade ordered me to dispatch my battalion reserve to assist Mullen. Division had declared a tactical emergency, which meant that all helicopters supporting the division were diverted to 1st Brigade, but 1st Brigade allocated only one H-13 to us. So I mounted Company C on whatever vehicles I could find, moved them to Tan Binh, and, the vehicles finding the stream bed un-fordable, put the company on foot due south of the last reported position of the patrol. I steered the column from overhead in an H-13 helo, and landed to give Jim Madden a last minute update.

I hadn't paid much attention to DRACULA up to that time, because they'd been mainly operating up north against enemy main force units. They wore a black kerchief like I had in Navy boot camp. Their commander, Dick Prillaman, was a very experienced soldier, having been in Vietnam for nearly two years, but I don't think I knew that at the time he

was on leave in Hong Kong, and that DRACULA was under the command of Major Clark, Prillaman's executive officer.

Well, Mullen crashed into the base camp, and immediately got enmeshed with a very determined and numerous enemy. The patrol was still missing. Major Clark went forward to take command at the scene of the battle, and was almost immediately killed. The brigade commander, Colonel Sidney B. Berry, went to the scene of the engagement to restore order. There he encountered Jim Madden, who had left his company just to the south in an attack position, and moved forward to reconnoiter the situation.

Madden had already been wounded in the leg, and remembers that he could find no cohesive unit on the scene other than his own. DRACULA Charlie had been fragmented and shot up pretty badly. There was a little clearing with a wrecked Air Force helicopter and one or burning armor vehicles, but the whole area was being swept by enemy fire, including that from snipers up in the trees. Madden proposed to Berry that DOBOL CHARLIE would envelop the east flank of the enemy position, and seek to attack from that direction, but as they were discussing coordination, Madden was struck in the chest, and knocked down. Berry insisted that Madden be evacuated, and dispatched him, protesting, aboard an armored personnel carrier full of wounded. Berry

then called me, and told me to disregard any previous instructions and to get up there with all my battalion as soon as I could.

INTERVIEWER: What were your previous instructions? Where were you and what was the battalion doing?

GEN GORMAN: We were attacking to the west, trying to cut off the VC at Ap Bong Trang. I had been monitoring the brigade command net, and concluded that there was at least an enemy battalion involved. Around 1000 1st Brigade ordered the whole 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, to reinforce Captain Mullen. Around the same time, division provided DEVIL 6 -- Colonel Berry-- with two additional reinforcing battalions, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, and 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry. My estimate was that Sid Berry had more than enough infantry. The judgement appeared confirmed when, around noon, Mullen reported that the VC had broken contact.

Then Jim Madden's point element took a prisoner, who reported that the enemy wounded were being evacuated to Ap Bong Trang, and that the rest of the unit would rally there. Figuring that it was Berry's intent to surround and annihilate the enemy, I decided to head off his exfiltration. So I had called DEVIL 6 --Berry-- and proposed that my Company B immediately move to Ap Bong Trang, to intercept what I figured would be a whipped and retreating

enemy. Colonel Berry approved. I mounted Company B --George Joulwan's company-- on vehicles of Troop A of the Quarter Horse, that had just come up Route Orange, and had been attached to me.

Here's an eerie coincidence for you: as you may know, the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry was mounted on M-48 tanks and M-113 armored personnel carriers. Those APCs of Troop A on which Company B went into battle on 25 August had once belonged to the Blue Spaders when they were at Fort Riley. We knew that because on at least eight of them, the old 26-I bumper markings were still clearly visible. Anyways, Joulwan's company mounted up, and set off west from Route Orange where it turned south, into the underbrush, proceeding to Ap Bong Trang. That's a move of about eight kilometers from Route Red to Ap Bong Trang. I was again overhead in my H-13, helping the column to navigate. Company A was mounted on engineer dump trucks, and moved to a position north of Tan Binh, near Xom Bong Trang, then dismounted..

INTERVIEWER: Did you make contact with the enemy?

GEN GORMAN: Both places were dry holes. There was just nothing there. Not even a sign that there had ever been buildings, or a railroad, let alone VC wounded. No tracks, no trace of the enemy. Around two o'clock, when we were searching around Ap Bong Trang when I got an urgent order from Berry to "get

up here as soon as possible" and I could tell from his voice that he meant it. I remounted Company B, turned it northeast on its armored vehicles, and told Company A to start marching on foot to the north, hoping that the battalion could converge on Company C. Bravo had about three kilometers of jungle to traverse on vehicle, while Alfa had to hoof it about the same distance.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take to get there?

GEN GORMAN: I'd have to say that I am not sure. I do remember that I was personally in a time bind, because the H-13 in which I was flying was running out of gas, and I knew that without my being overhead to help steer the column from clearing to clearing, the going would have been much slower. You have to understand that this jungle, the Bong Trang is discontinuous, that is, it was patches here and there with places where there were no tall trees, and where the brush was low enough for an H-13 to hover down without trouble. What I was doing was directing the column from clearing to clearing.

Sometime around three o'clock my helo landed me just ahead of the lead tank, and left to get fuel. I got out carrying a PRC 10 (radio), and as the helo took off, I became aware that a shadow to my immediate front was in fact the aperture of a bunker, built low to the ground and very nearly invisible.

Fortunately, it was unoccupied, but I was mighty glad when that tank drove up.

From then on we traveled through an extensive fortified zone, from time to time running into manned positions, but we pushed through hastily.

INTERVIEWER: Were you on foot?

GEN GORMAN: No, I climbed on the back deck of the lead tank, and we pressed on. Once there was a loud explosion, and I tapped the tank commander on the helmet and told him that I'd appreciate being warned before he used his main gun. He said that he hadn't fired, but that a VC rocket had just struck the gun mantle. The sound of small arms firing was now very close. I told George Joulwan to stop in place, to collect his elements, to find Company A if he could and to position them just to his rear. I would, I said, take my battle staff forward, and send further orders once I assessed the situation. I then advanced with one tank, and I think an APC with my S-2, my S-3, and our radio operators.

INTERVIEWER: Were you in the APC?

GEN GORMAN: No, I wanted that tank to lead, so I got on the rear deck again, and rode it right into the east edge of the clearing where the downed helo was. My guess is that it was around 1600. Colonel Berry

ran over to me, reached up to shake my hand, and wished me happy birthday. It was a good thing I leaned over, because just then some sniper started pinging the bustle rack right where I had been standing. I got down in a hurry, and the two of us ran across the clearing to a trench on the west side. My staff followed, but out in clearing some snipers wounded my S-3 and my radio operator.

INTERVIEWER: Who was your S-3 then?

GEN GORMAN: Captain Peter Boylan. He recovered well, subsequently served in the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, and went on to become a Major General before he retired.

INTERVIEWER: What happened next?

GEN GORMAN: Colonel Berry told me to take charge of all the units around the clearing, and he left to get the rest of the brigade under control. That was no small task, because right in my immediate vicinity I found soldiers from four different units: Troops C. 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry; Company C, 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry; Company C, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, and my own Company C. I could get no help from the brigade command post. So I brought Company B forward, and positioned them across the clearing from me, and told them to guide Company A in on their right (east) flank. At the same time, I

got everyone on my side to dig or to take cover in the VC entrenchments, and I started to prepare a sketch of who was where using radio messages, runners, and staff officers. There was mass confusion, particularly as to the whereabouts of the various parts of 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry.

Soon I was relieved to hear Colonel Berry on the command net, who directed me to contain the enemy during the hours of darkness, and to plan for an attack in the morning. We agreed that we would use napalm, as the weapon most likely to drive the VC out of their fortifications, or down into their underground tunnels, and then go in after him. He told me that we would have a flare ship overhead all night, that he would arrange for a rapid infusion of resupply and medical aid once we secured the VC base camp.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any thought given to a night attack?

GEN GORMAN: Not by me. The friendly situation was unclear at dark, and all night long Americans as individuals or small groups were milling around trying to find their parent unit. I was worried about firing on friendlies, and every time there would be a burst of fire we'd try to figure out who was shooting at whom. Soon it was apparent that the enemy was in fact moving, and while I assumed that they were trying to exfiltrate, I could not be sure.

In fact, some of the reports would have supported the idea that they were being reinforced, or that they were assembling for a breakout attack. We had a do-nut problem: we were all around the enemy, but I never was sure whether the ring was complete, or indeed, where exactly in the hole the enemy troops were located.

INTERVIEWER: Did they get away during the night?

GEN. GORMAN: I guess that most of them did, but they left a rear guard detachment that was still shooting when the sun rose, around 0630. I remember it being clear under the trees, but with low clouds or fog above the trees. Around 0700 Colonel Berry was overhead, and we decided to go ahead with air strikes.

INTERVIEWER: Could you have used artillery?

GEN. GORMAN: The enemy position was in under tall trees, big one, about one hundred feet tall. There was a secondary growth of brush and small trees. Visibility at ground level was ten meters, more or less, so adjusting artillery had to be done by sound or from above. Every time we'd try to put in a round --and I tried with eight inchers-- we'd get a bleat from one of the units that the round was right on top of them. The hole in the do-nut was just too small.

INTERVIEWER: Did the napalm do any good?

GEN. GORMAN: On the face of it, yes. The enemy was shooting up until the first strikes, then the firing died off. We put in twenty or so cans. When we assaulted into the do-nut, we encountered no resistance. We found only dead VC; no wounded. Obviously, they had managed to get out.

INTERVIEWER: I understand that you dropped napalm on yourself.

GEN. GORMAN: About half of the cans had gone in without incident. Then I looked up and saw one gleaming through the trees right above me, and the tree burst into flames, and started raining napalm. My map and my radio were literally burned up, and I got singed a bit. I asked that they keep laying it in, and they did. Some five or ten cans later, another can fell into our positions. Colonel Berry then decided to call off further strikes. I ordered my battalion to assault, but no sooner had we begun to move than we encountered a terrific blast of fire from the north. It was the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, much closer to us than I had imagined. I had to get them to cease fire so that we could resume our attack. By 0800 we had moved through the complex, and at 0800 the survivors of the patrol from Company C, 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, walked

into the landing zone to the east of the action -- about half of the 15 lived, as I remember. That's about the end of the real story.

The problem was that the friendly casualties from napalm were misconstrued and blown out of proportion. One press report had 22 killed and 36 wounded by napalm, whereas the actual casualties from napalm, according to Colonel Berry were 3 killed and 9 wounded. I know personally of 2 killed and 3 wounded. My own guess is that reporters soon began arriving in the clearing where the dead from the previous day still lay, corpses charred initially in the explosion of the APC, and then burned by the napalm. The reporters immediately assumed napalm had caused the deaths, and in the confusion of reorganizing after the battle and evacuating the wounded, no one set them straight. I sure didn't think about that at the time, although I do remember stopping a video team from shooting close-ups of the dead. In any event, we did it to ourselves twice, once with napalm, and the second time with poor press-handling.

INTERVIEWER: What were casualties in your unit for that battle?

GEN. GORMAN: Relatively light: we had 6 dead, and 12 wounded, compared with 1st of the 2d, which lost 18 dead and 98 wounded.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back, what would you have done differently?

GEN. GORMAN: I'm not sure I could have done it much differently, given the information I had to work with, and my orders. But in Sid Berry's after action report, he observed that he had stopped the 26th on two occasions from trying to flank the enemy, and directed us to remain confronting him head on. He thought that his best chance of crashing into the heart of the base camp would have been to allow DOBOL to attack with Company B and its armor after they broke through the outer defenses around 1630.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have many days like that?

GEN. GORMAN: No, thank God. As a matter of fact, I think the whole division learned a great deal from that experience, from top to bottom. We never again tried to hug the enemy the way 1st Brigade did that day. At the end of October -during SHENANDOAH- Sid Berry got another shot at surrounding an enemy battalion, and this time did it right. George Joulwan's B Company found the enemy, a battalion of the 272d Regiment and the rest of the 26th converged on B, while Berry moved two other battalions to blocking positions, and used air and artillery with telling effect. He reported over 70 dead.

INTERVIEWER: You mean the brigade actually trapped a Main force battalion?

GEN. GORMAN: Well, not in the sense that we ringed them in and accounted for them all. The majority escaped the encirclement, but we hurt them badly while they were doing so: air observers saw their columns carrying the dead and wounded, and we found ample evidence of hasty departure.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that there was a lot of turnover in your unit, troops rotating after the first year. Did that slow you down?

GEN. GORMAN: No. You remember that I often told my company commanders that "every day in combat is a day in training." We made it so, and every day we tried to get a little better. For example, the day before Company B went into the jungle on SHENANDOAH at the end of October, they trained at Minh Tanh, where the Special Forces had a firing range. They set up a bunch of targets -probably tin cans, like Teddy Roosevelt used in 1917- and practiced what we called "musketry," in which they were trying to get across how a rifle platoon could deliver maximum aimed, sustained fire. The following day they got to repeat their musketry practice on the VC. I really could feel the battalion pulling together, and increasing in skill. The parts fitted together like

those of a fine watch. Let me quote from some correspondence I received at the time: Colonel Berry noted that while the 26th had once been "ill-disciplined, dispirited, unaggressive, lack-luster" they were by November "disciplined, spirited, aggressive, proud." He considered us "a battalion of high combat effectiveness which could always be relied upon to accomplish its mission with dash, imagination and a high degree of military professionalism." General DePuy wrote about the same time that the battalion "undertook operations which ordinarily would require a brigade...companies operated and covered ground equivalent to a battalion...consistently...made contact with the VC in areas where other battalions did not." That's pretty heady praise, but I truly believe the battalion's performance earned it. I give credit to the officers and noncommissioned officers. I had four First Sergeants who had fought in both World War II and Korea. I may have waived the baton from time to time, but the company leaders played the instruments, and they made the music.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you keep your command?

GEN. GORMAN: A little less than five months. We had had a terrific success during Operation BATTLE CREEK, or as some say, ATTLEBORO. I was really enjoying myself by then, because everything was easy. George Joulwan was a great S-3, and the rest

of the staff was well teamed with him. Without warning, on Thanksgiving Day 1966 —or at the least on the day we were celebrating same— General DePuy flew in and announced that I was to turn the battalion over to Al Haig, and to assume Al's responsibilities as division G-3. I was thunderstruck. It was one of the most professionally devastating blows I had ever taken. I was literally in a daze for days.

We were flown back to Camp Weber, where we had a change of command ceremony, and by the first week in December, I was the Division's general staff officer for Operations and Plans.

INTERVIEWER: That must have been a tough assignment. How did you and General DePuy get along.

GEN. GORMAN: By that time we knew each other very well. I guess that by that time he'd been in command of the division more than 9 months, was supremely confident of its capabilities, and quite relaxed in his job. He was easy to work for, and with. The only trouble with the assignment was that General DePuy left in early February, and Major General John H. Hay, who took his place, was not similarly confident or comparably relaxed. Moreover, Hay knew and liked Leavenworth-style staff work, and was uneasy with the free-wheeling that characterized DePuy's command style, and its associated staff response. In any

event, he had a right to be ill at ease, because II Field Force was about to kick off the biggest offensive of the war: JUNCTION CITY, a massive foray into War Zone C, with the 1st Division in the van, seeking to destroy COSVN. The mood of the division headquarters when he took over was cautious optimism: during 1966, defectors from the Viet Cong never exceed 90 in any single month. In January 1967, in the 1st Division TOAR, we had 576. But General Hay was anxious that his units do well on Junction City, and was looking forward, not making comparisons with the past.

INTERVIEWER: Don't I remember that the 26th Infantry fought another big battle during that operation?

GEN. GORMAN: Indeed. It bears the inelegant name of "Ap Gu," an abandoned settlement near a large clearing, used as an LZ on 30 March 1967. As the G-3, I was on the inside of the story. The 271st Regiment of the 9th VC Division was considered by U.S. intelligence the most dangerous combat force opposing them in War Zone C. Around 23 March, the 271st Regiment was tracked in a swift move eastward to the vicinity of "The Fishhook," and seemed poised to strike at FSB C and Sroc Con Trang. Then, on the 30th, the 271st moved rapidly to the southwest toward LZ George, with the intent, as it turned out, of decisively trouncing the Blue Spaders. The enemy plan was to attack FSB C with rockets and mortars to shut down its artillery, and then overwhelm the

unprotected Americans in LZ George. But they apparently did not know about, or were simply unable to react to, the fact that on the 29th we had slipped three batteries of artillery into FSB THRUST, six kilometers southeast of Ap Gu, for while they successfully suppressed FSB C (and wounded the commander of the 2d Brigade, Col. Alex Grimsley), FSB THRUST was not attacked, and its batteries responded immediately and with telling effect to Al Haig's call for defensive fires. That, and the Dobil Defenses were main contributors to the Unit's winning a Valorous Unit Citation. They creamed the 27st Regiment.

As the G-3, I can testify that we set up a huge reception for the 271st. I talked that evening directly to Haig about artillery and air support of all flavors. We were cocked and loaded. But in the end, it was the Blue Spaders who had to do the fighting and the dying. They had to last until the full weight of our fires could be felt. They did it just right. They lost nine killed and 32 wounded, but the 271st left 609 bodies on the battlefield, and just 5 wounded.

INTERVIEWER: What happened after Ap Gu and Junction City II?

GEN. GORMAN: Well, I left shortly after the battle of Ap Gu for attachment to MACV headquarters. But I know that we subsequently learned that COSVN was sufficiently impressed by the series of costly disasters that befell its troops in late 1966 and early 1967 that it directed its

commanders to avoid further regimental attacks, and to concentrate on small unit operations. Moreover, while we were congratulating our commanders, they were relieving and censoring theirs. COSVN had an unhappy time that winter-spring of 1967. You see, General Rogers was right, those operations - CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY really were a turning point.