

vietnam—the fourth year

march '68–february '69



a pictorial history of the

173d airborne brigade

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company d, 16th armor

A direct descendant of the 16th Cavalry Regiment which was organized in 1916, Company D is unique in that it is the only airborne separate tank company in the Army. It was reactivated in June 1963 and assigned to the Brigade on Okinawa.

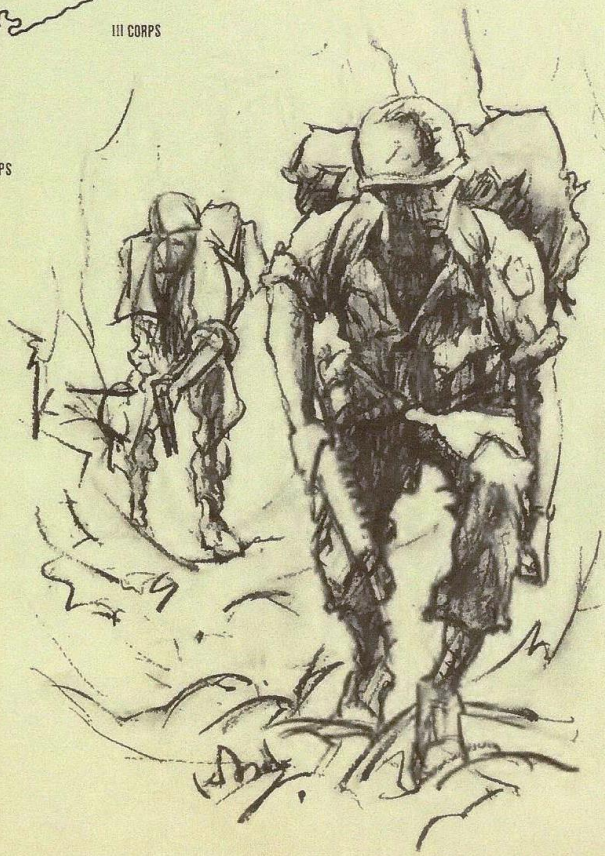
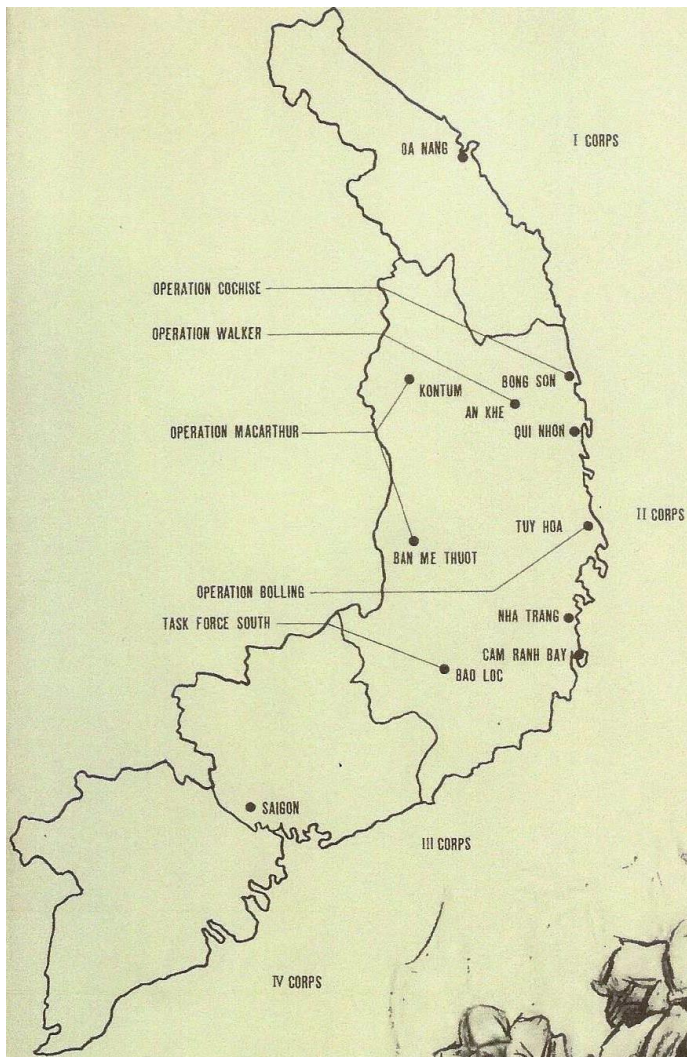
Mounted in their armored personnel carriers, which they operate in lieu of their authorized Sheridan tanks, the airborne armormen are capable of everything from fire base security to reconnaissance-in-force missions and night ambushes.

Based in the Tuy Hoa area, they have been used mainly for securing the air base and escorting convoys. On a

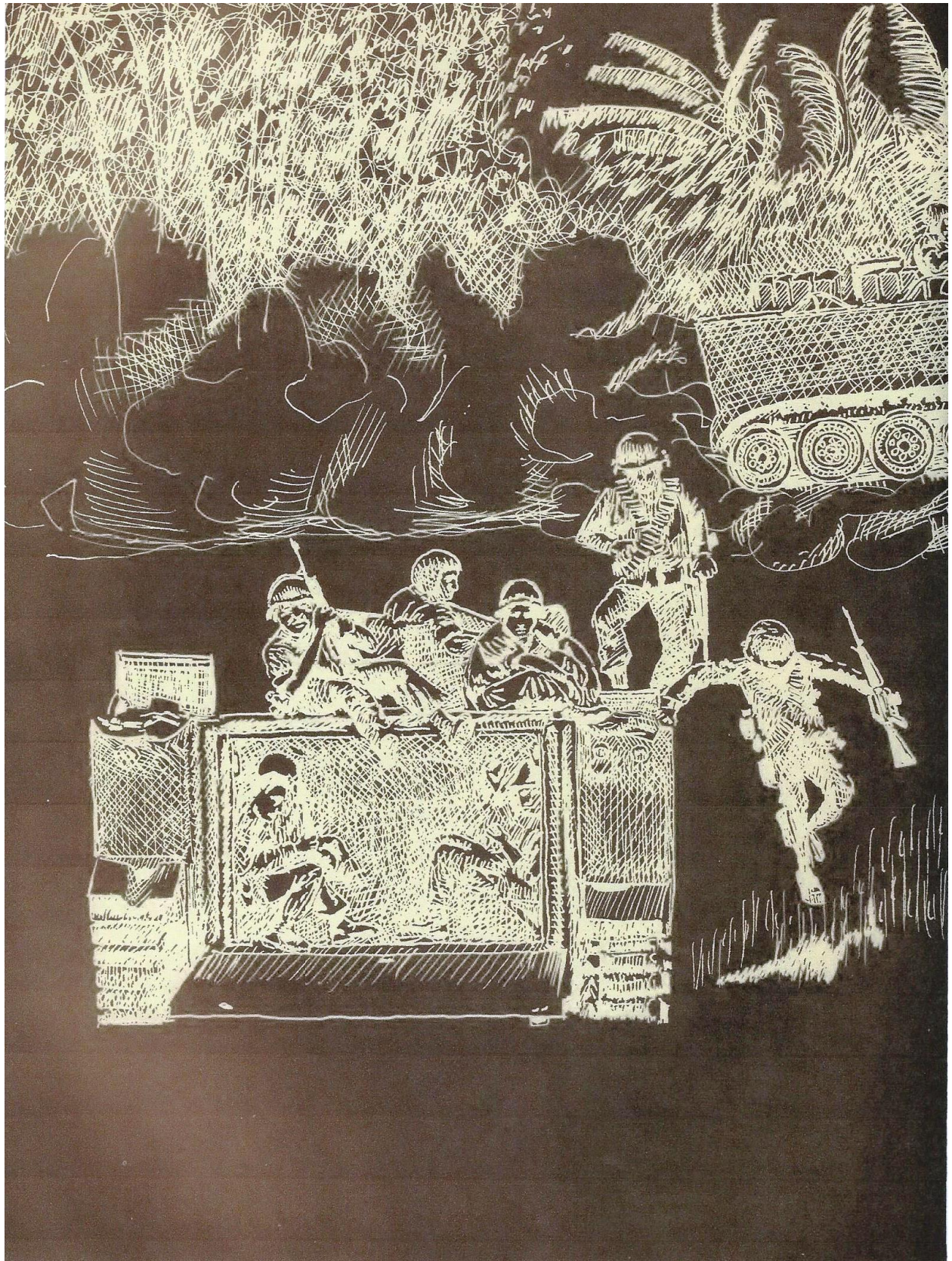
combat operation, they can sweep an area twice as fast as an infantry battalion when the terrain is right. The rice paddies and rolling hills in the highlands around Tuy Hoa are perfect for their tracks. The occasional thick brush presents no problem either as the vehicles can knock down trees up to ten inches in diameter.

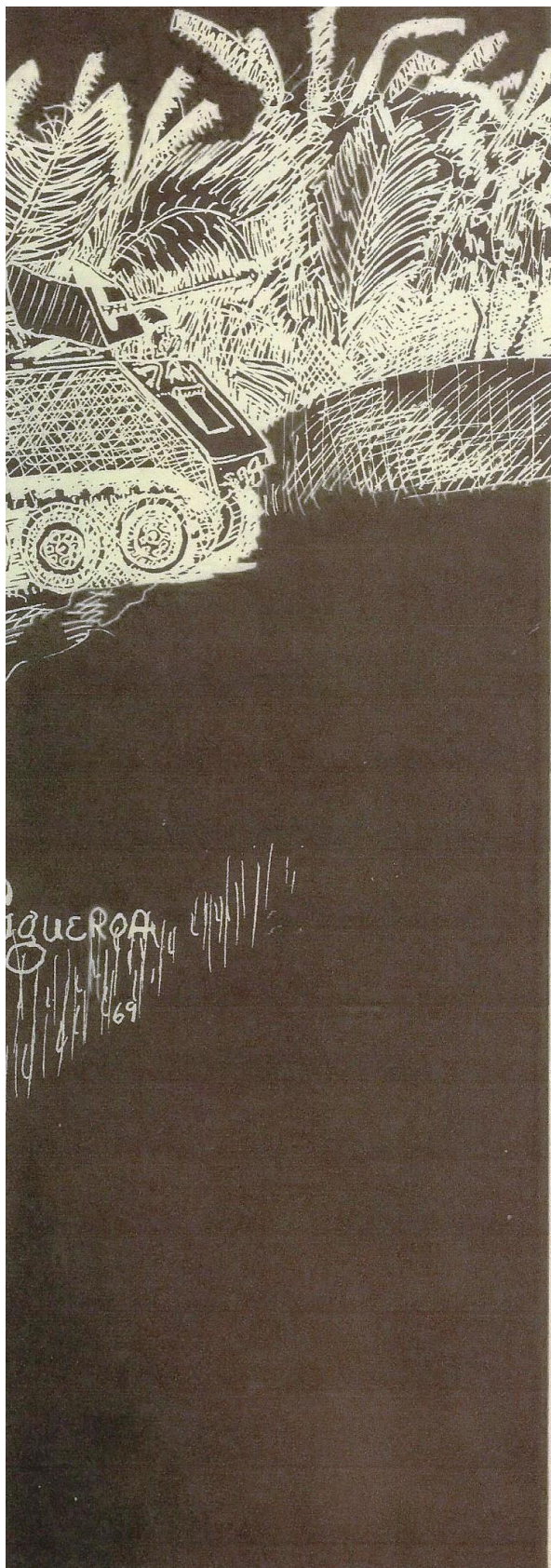
Each personnel carrier is armed with a .50 caliber machine gun, two M-60 machine guns, and a rocket launcher. In addition, three of them carry 90mm recoilless rifles, making the company a formidable force which the enemy tries to avoid.





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operations

The beginning of the Brigade's fourth year in Vietnam found the 173d conducting three major operations in the II Corps Tactical Zone.

The 4th Battalion and Company D, 16th Armor were responsible for protecting the rice harvest of the rich coastal plains near Tuy Hoa in Operation Bolling/Dan Hoa. The 2nd Battalion was charged with securing the Brigade basecamp at An Khe and protecting Highway 19, the main communications route from the Qui Nhon docks to the Central Highlands, from An Khe pass to Mang Yang pass in Operation Walker.

The Brigade Forward Command Post and the rest of the 173d was in the Central Highlands near Kontum, conducting reconnaissance-in-force missions under the operational control of the 4th Infantry Division in Operation MacArthur.

The first big enemy contact came on March 4 when Company D, 16th Armor and units of the 47th ARVN Regiment tangled with a two-battalion VC/NVA force. The airborne armormen had been called to the rescue when the enemy attacked the 47th's headquarters north of Tuy Hoa City from three well-fortified villages to the east.

One platoon from D/16th deployed in full defilade as a blocking force between the enemy and the ocean to the east while the ARVN's blocked from the south and west. The remaining two platoons of armored personnel carriers, backed by ARVN infantrymen and supported by gunships and fighter-bombers, began assaulting the villages from the north.

The paratroopers quickly smashed through fierce enemy resistance to clear the first two villages. As the attack continued into the third village, the fighting became especially vicious as the APC's approached the enemy CP and the ARVN infantry withdrew.

After several of the tracks took direct hits from B-40 rockets and recoilless rifles, the lack of supporting infantry and the rapidly approaching darkness forced the armormen to withdraw. But they still managed to recover their wounded and destroy all damaged equipment.

Over 200 enemy were killed during the seven-hour battle, 137 of them credited to Company D. Korean and Vietnamese units completed the mop-up of the battlefield the next day.

In late October, Alpha Company, 3/503d uncovered an immense Viet Cong jungle hospital in southern II Corps. MACV medical authorities termed it the most sophisticated enemy hospital complex find of the war. Bravo 3/503d also pushed an NVA rear-guard unit out of its basecamp near Dalat, killing 10 in the process.

The month of November and December saw old patterns repeated as the enemy continued to avoid contact with the Brigade. Whenever intelligence reports indicated an enemy build-up, they would fade away after little or no contact when friendly forces entered the area.

Since the enemy had decided to go back to his old game of breaking down and operating in small units, the 173d followed suit. Squad-sized Hunter-Killer or Hawk teams were organized in the line companies and began ambush-infiltration routes and well-used trails.

These Hawk teams and LRP patrols accounted for most of the 81 enemy kills credited to the Brigade in AO Dan Sinh during November. Paratroopers continued combing the Tiger, Nui Mieu, Vinh Thanh and Suoi Ca Mountains, turning up numerous caches and basecamps.

Activity in AO Walker increased in December with two large enemy build-ups, but neither yielded much contact when friendly forces entered the area. The 4th Battalion, which made the move to An Khe from Tuy Hoa at the end of November to counter another threat from the 95B NVA Regiment, made the biggest find—a large medical and food cache. The 2nd Battalion also moved to An Khe in December, but returned to Bong Son a month later after little significant contact.

December also saw Brigadier General Richard J. Allen, after a very successful nine months with the Brigade, hand the 173d colors to Brigadier General John W. Barnes.

Diligence paid off for the continuously searching paratroopers in January as they uncovered two of the largest enemy caches ever found by the Brigade. The 1st Battalion turned up another medical cache—300 Pounds of surgical instruments, drugs, plasma, bandages and a microscope—the biggest of its kind in 173d history.

A week later, a Hawk team from the 2nd Battalion found the biggest weapons cache of the operation in Binh Dinh Province; it included a recoilless rifle, a mortar, rounds for both, grenades, mines, small arms and ammunition.

Alpha Company, 1/50th and D/16th Armor both saw relatively heavy fighting during the month as action increased slightly in Dan Hoa and Walker. Alpha killed 21 NVA in several separate contacts during the first three weeks of January as the enemy tried unsuccessfully to sever Highway 19.

Thirteen more were killed by D/16th when the armored unit combined with elements of the 47th ARVN Regiment in a unique night operation on the 15th. Two weeks later the airborne armormen were called upon to rescue a beleaguered RF unit north of Tuy Hoa. Twenty enemy bodies were counted after the APC's had routed the estimated NVA company.

On the last day of the month, Operations Cochise/Dan Sinh, Bolling/Dan Hoa and Walker were terminated and Operations Dung Cam/Lee, Li Do/Wainwright, and Suc Manh/Marshall were instituted in their places. A total of 929 enemy were killed during Cochise, while 705 were

killed in Bolling and 272 in Walker.

In addition, the end of the operations saw the enemy thwarted in any large scale missions and limited only to hit-and-run tactics. The Brigade had chased the main-force units out of the AO's or else forced them to break down into small units and hide. The local VC also felt the pressure as Hawk teams ambushed their trails and intercepted their couriers, while combined ARVN-U.S. operations continued to destroy the communist infrastructure in the lowlands.

While LRP teams watched infiltration routes for the possible return of the main-force units, infantrymen continued to uncover the enemy's basecamps and caches. As a result, intelligence reports indicated the enemy's morale was extremely low from hunger, sickness and the defeats inflicted by the Brigade.

In February, two tactical concepts began to pay off for the Brigade as over 280 enemy were killed by the Sky Soldiers, almost quadrupling the monthly average for the past year.

Hawk operations, of which almost 4,000 had been conducted since their initiation in November, still continued to account for the great majority of the Brigade's kills. The 1st and 2nd Battalions, 503d Infantry and the 74th Infantry LRP's, operating exclusively in Hawk teams, ranged far and wide in AO Lee. Penetrating even into the enemy's most inaccessible strongholds, they were so successful at disrupting the enemy's activities that the expected Tet offensive did not materialize in Binh Dinh Province.

In addition, the Brigade began keeping a platoon reaction force standing by at a chopper pad so as to be able to react immediately to intelligence and visual reconnaissance reports before the enemy could leave the area. Dubbed "Sky Sweep", the mission was usually supported by slicks, Loaches and Cobras from Delta Troop, 2/1st Cavalry.

The month's most successful Sky Sweep came on the 14th when a Casper Loach killed five Viet Cong on an island off the coast. From documents found on the bodies, an interpreter from the 172nd Military Intelligence Detachment was able to determine the exact time and location of a local VC cadre meeting scheduled for that afternoon.

Hawk teams from Bravo and Charlie Companies of the 2nd Battalion and an RF/PF squad were airlifted near the village meeting place and 24 Viet Cong were killed in the ensuing firefight.

Meanwhile the 4th Battalion, which had moved back to AO Wainwright at the end of January, began a massive cordon and search operation with elements of the Republic of Korea Capitol Division. The biggest day of the operation came on the 4th when the allies killed 21 enemy in several separate clashes. Fifteen more were killed by artillery on the same day.

Still with Task Force South, the 3d Battalion had a successful month, killing 67 enemy in a battle near the III Corps border and uncovering a large cache. Found by Alpha Company, it included 196 B-40 rockets, ninety 82mm mortar rounds, ninety-three 60mm mortar rounds, plastic explosives, and numerous other rocket and small arms rounds.

