



A Co.: Staff Sgt. Willie C. Johnson, Jr. (KIA), far left, was shot 100 times.



D Co.: Steven L. Ostroff (KIA), left, with two unidentified buddies.

## 'Black Lions'

# Battle at Ong Thanh

On Oct. 17, 1967, A and D companies of the 2nd Bn., 28th Regt., 1st Inf. Div., engaged in one of the Vietnam War's most ferocious fights. Claiming 64 American lives, the battle report was not declassified until 1991.

by Susan Katz Keating

In the fall of 1967, the 1st Infantry Division's 28th Infantry—the famed "Black Lions"—dispatched its 2nd Battalion to participate in *Operation Shenandoah II*. The mission sought to seek and destroy the enemy in numerous locales between Saigon and the Cambodian border, including areas west and northwest of Lai Khe.

In mid-October, *Shenandoah II* turned brutal for the 2nd Battalion, when the unit suffered staggering losses during the grueling battle at Ong Thanh.

On Oct. 8, the 2nd Battalion responded to intelligence reports that an enemy main force regiment was close, near the village of Chon Thanh. Three of the 2nd Battalion's rifle companies—Alpha, Bravo and Delta—departed their base at Lai Khe and assaulted to a site about 21 kilometers to the northwest. The 2nd Battalion's Charlie Company was detached to protect the supporting 15th Field Artillery element.

From Oct. 8-15, the forward-deployed Black Lions made almost daily contact with Viet Cong. On Oct. 16, after moving to a new night defensive position near Ong Thanh Creek, the 2nd



Battalion fought against troops from the primary target unit: Col. Vo Minh Triet's 271st Regiment, a crack Communist unit.

"We fought brilliantly," says Clark Welch, who was the lieutenant in charge of D Company. "It was a textbook version of a search-and-destroy mission," with some 20 enemy killed. That night, visiting brass from division headquarters flew

into the 2nd Battalion's camp and praised the soldiers, awarding Welch a Silver Star on the spot.

"They told us the next day would be the same," Welch recalls. "We were going to conduct a frontal assault on the enemy. It was going to be a great day for the Black Lions."

### Outnumbered 10-to-1

Some in the 2nd Battalion questioned the frontal assault and other aspects of the plan. Welch tried to convince the 2nd Battalion's commander, Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr., that the plan placed the soldiers at excessive risk. Nevertheless, the order stood.

At 8 a.m. on Oct. 17, the Black Lions embarked on their



D Company commander Lt. Clark Welch, far right, describes skirmishing with the enemy on the evening prior to the battle to senior officers Col. George Newman, Lt. Col. Terry Allen, Jr., Maj. Donald Hollender and Brig. Gen. William Coleman. Allen made the decision to proceed with a frontal assault on the enemy base. He was killed in the battle.

mission. Bravo Company remained in place to guard the night defensive position. Alpha Company moved out in the lead, followed by Delta. Embedded within Delta was a Headquarters Company of 10 officers, including Allen. Sources place the number of troops who entered the jungle as somewhere between 142-155 men. There is no question, though, that both Alpha and

Some of the enemy were hiding in tall trees, concealed by foliage. Others were lodged inside well-fortified bunkers that first had been used by the Viet Minh in their fight against the French.

Later, it would emerge that Col. Triet had intended to pass through the area on the way to points west. But the 271st was out of food, so it stopped at a base camp near the Ong Thanh to await a shipment of rice. The 271st dug in and hid, waiting for the Americans to leave so that the unit could receive its rice. Eventually it became clear that the Americans did not plan to leave.

On the morning of the 17th, the enemy waited in silence as the Black Lions advanced ever closer to the Communist camp.

From time to time, A Company stopped to conduct cloverleaf maneuvers, in which small groups of men fanned out into the jungle, then returned to report what they had found.

Staff Sgt. Willie C. Johnson, Jr., a platoon leader, came back from one of these maneuvers and reported that he had seen footprints. His men saw movement in the trees.



3rd Squad, D Co., members are, front row: Fred Kirkpatrick, Emil Megiveron (KIA), Gary G. Lincoln (KIA); back row: Frank McMeel, Donnie Hodges and Reynolds Loneflight.



D Co.: Daniel Sikorski (KIA), left, and an unidentified companion fill sandbags.

**“We did not see or hear the enemy.  
But they were all around us.”**

—Capt. Jim George, A Company

Delta marched at far below full company strength.

The column moved directly south. The men picked their way through dense, thick jungle, advancing only 800 meters in two hours. “We did not see or hear the enemy,” says Jim George, the captain in command of Alpha. “But they were all around us.”

The unseen enemy consisted of 1,200 members of the 271st, along with about 200 guerrilla fighters. In all, the Communists outnumbered the Americans by about a 10-1 ratio.

At 10 a.m., Col. Triet gave the prearranged signal: three sharp taps on a block of wood.

**‘Overwhelming Assault’**

The enemy opened fire on A Company. At first, some of the soldiers from Delta, as well as the A Company commander, heard what sounded like a firefight. But this was no skirmish.

“It was a sudden, overwhelming and unbelievable assault,” Welch says.

The attack included rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) coming down from the trees, machine gunfire from ground level and explosions from Claymore mines.

Alpha Company’s first platoon took the brunt. The point man, Pfc. Clifford



**MEDAL OF HONOR** (Posthumous)  
**2nd Lt. Harold B. Durham, Jr.**

On Oct. 17, 1967, forward observer 2nd Lt. Durham repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire in order to direct vital artillery support. When the enemy detonated a Claymore mine nearby, he was wounded in the head and suffered impaired vision. In spite of the pain, he continued to direct artillery fire, even calling for strikes directly on his own position. Twice the enemy was driven back. He was then moved to a secondary position, but refused to seek cover, and again exposed himself to better direct the fire. It wasn't long before an enemy machine gun raked his position, mortally wounding him. Even as he lay dying, still clutching the radio handset, he shouted warnings to a nearby soldier about two approaching Viet Cong who were quickly killed.

Lynn Breeden, took six bullets to the torso. Johnson, the platoon leader, would be hit 100 times. (He died in a hospital in Long Binh.)

Men fell in quick succession. Those who were left standing became a unit of heroes. Tom "Doc" Hinger, a medic, raced under fire, frantically trying to save his wounded fellows. Some scrambled to return fire while pulling others out of the kill zone.

George sent in his second platoon as reinforcement. This, too, took heavy casualties. In very short order, key Alpha personnel—the point man, the radio-man, the forward observer—were either dead or wounded.

"A Vietnamese soldier came running toward us with a Claymore in his hand," George says. It killed a number of soldiers, and dealt George a disabling injury. "I started to blow my nose, and I had bone coming out."

George, the company commander, was rendered nearly deaf and blind from a serious wound to the face.

Just minutes after the attack began, A Company was annihilated.

The astonished D Company did what it could to help retrieve Alpha's dead and wounded, along with some weapons and ammunition. Delta soon found itself not only protecting the battalion command post, but also caring for A Company's wounded.

### Battle Rages

Now D Company came under fire. The assault came from the front and the right, from some 10-20 meters away. "All

of a sudden all hell broke loose and we were receiving fire from all directions," recalled Paul D. Scott, radio operator for Lt. Welch. "We had snipers in the trees, RPGs being fired along with heavy machine-gun and small-arms fire."

The VC remained concealed in their dug-in positions. The Americans were fully exposed.

"We had nothing to hide behind," Welch says. "Not even protective gear for our bodies. We just had our T-shirts and fatigues."

Delta could not move. The soldiers were pinned in place.

Bill McGath, a grenadier, was pinned behind a tree by an unseen assailant. The young private first class watched in horror as rounds exploded beside him, over and over again. "He was going to get me, and then he was going to move on to the next man," McGath recalled.

McGath somehow found the presence of mind to use geometry to help locate the sniper. "I used to play a lot of pool back home, so I used an old pool technique to pinpoint the spot," McGath says. The trapped soldier traced with his eyes the intersection of the enemy's firing lines, and lobbed off some M-79 grenade launcher rounds of his own. "After that, he stopped firing," McGath says.

Delta's forward observer, 2nd Lt. Harold "Pinky" Durham, Jr., tried to call in desperately needed artillery support. At first, artillery base personnel resisted Durham's request. Only the lead company—in this case, the decimated Alpha—was permitted to call in artillery. Durham argued vehemently, though, that because

Alpha Company was gone, Delta now was the lead company.

"He was spectacular," Welch says with a catch in his voice. "Absolutely spectacular. He got the artillery."

Durham continued to work under fire to direct artillery and also to help the wounded. He became seriously hurt himself, first by a Claymore, and then by machine-gun fire. Durham used his own last moments to save another man's life before collapsing in death, his fingers still clutching the radio handset.

The battle raged for two hours of pure nightmare. Men continued to fall. All 10 in the headquarters unit, including Allen, died. Men worked mightily to save one another. Sgt. Lee Price insisted on protecting the desperately wounded George with his own body.

"There were a lot of heroes that day," George says quietly.

At noon, Col. Triet abruptly called off the attack. "It just quit," McGath says. "Just like that." Triet later explained during a reunion with Welch that he feared "B-52s," a Vietnamese catch-all term for any form of fire from the sky. Additionally, Triet thought all the GIs were dead.

That wasn't entirely true. But the toll was indeed shocking: 64 Black Lions were killed in action that day. Most of the surviving troops were wounded—132.

George believes casualties would have been higher if A Company had not performed that final cloverleaf. "We tripped the ambush before it was fully set. They were not ready for us. If we had kept going, we all would have been killed."

A virtual locker full of medals went out to the Black Lions for what they did at Ong Thanh. Durham received the Medal of Honor; "Doc" Hinger and 13 others, the Silver Star; Clark Welch and Terry Allen, the Distinguished Service Cross; numerous others, the Bronze Star with "V" device.

"Every last one of our men put up a great fight," says Fred Kirkpatrick, a D Company point man who was sent on R&R shortly before the battle began. "To this day, I am awed and humbled at what our guys endured." ❊

**SUSAN KATZ KEATING** is a freelance writer based in Virginia and a regular contributor to the Vietnam Battle Series. She is author of *Prisoners of Hope* (1994).