DEADLIEST VIETNAM BATTLES

Hell Night at Henderson

In a 45-minute melee at Firebase Henderson on May 6, 1970, 27 men of the 101st Airborne Division lost their lives.

by Charles F. Hawkins

Photos courtesy Ed Schultz

The nighttime assault came with little warning. There was no drumroll of artillery to pave the way for teams of black-painted sappers, or give alarm to U.S. and South Vietnamese defenders of this rugged outcrop of mountain in northern I Corps.

Specially trained North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltrators, armed only with high-explosive satchel charges, were supported by infantry with rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns and AK-47 assault rifles. At least one Soviet-made flamethrower was part of their arsenal. Backing them up were NVA crews manning mortars and deadly effective recoilless rifles.

With uncanny stealth, the sappers closed within feet of thinly spread GI defensive positions before they were detected. Then they struck violently, breaching the perimeter and turning their attention to high-value targets—the tactical operations center (TOC), 105mm howitzers and a large amount of high-explosive ammunition.



A wounded Sgt. 1st Class Edward J. Carlyle surveys the damage in the aftermath following the attack on Henderson, May 6, 1970.

Fire Base Henderson shuddered to the bark and bite of bursting satchel charges. Small-arms fire ripped across the hilltop and tracers stabbed the night sky—red for American, green for the North Vietnamese. Then, "a terrible explosion" roared across the mountaintop. Lt. Jim Knight recalled that "it was so deafening it drowned out all the other sounds of fighting." It was past 0500 hours.

The great blast was a massive detonation of artillery ammunition. It lit up the pre-dawn sky with a vivid firestorm that consumed friend and foe alike. When it was over, more than a score of American soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry (Geronimo), 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), lay dead or missing.

Somewhat surprisingly, the story of the action at Henderson was shunted to page 17 by *The New York Times*, where the nation's largest newspaper had only this to report: "Early this morning [May 6, 1970], Fire Base Henderson, six miles southwest of Cam Lo near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), was attacked and 29 Americans were killed, 31 were wounded and two were reported missing. This was the largest American loss in a single action in more than a year." (These casualty figures were not correct.)

No doubt the events at Henderson were overshadowed by the tragedy at Kent State, and also by allied operations in the Cambodian incursion. Here's what happened south of Quang Tri River.

By early 1970, American troop withdrawals from Vietnam began affecting unit strength including the 101st, although it was scheduled to be the last combat division to leave Vietnam. A full-strength airmobile rifle company could boast almost 140 soldiers, but most were operating at about 65% capacity, with a foxhole strength in the neighborhood of 80-90 infantrymen.

Adding to the challenges facing American commanders was the policy of "Vietnamization"—turning the conduct of the war over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam



NVA sappers took advantage of the situation at Henderson and left a trail of destruction by targeting artillery pieces and the ammunition dump in a night attack. U.S. troopers fought back during the horrific firestorm, however, killing 29 of the enemy.

(ARVN). This meant two things: first, U.S. troops increasingly assumed defensive postures on and around fire support bases; and second, combined operations of ARVN and U.S. forces were necessary to affect the transition.

Henderson typified the former and was an example of the latter. Of course, there also was the problem posed by the NVA, no small matter in itself.

Henderson: The Buildup

In April, the 101st senior command and the 1st ARVN Division decided on a combined operation in the ARVN area of operations to interdict enemy forces moving south across the DMZ. The ARVN would retain tactical control and the 3rd Brigade of the 101st would reopen FSB Henderson to provide for ARVN and U.S. artillery support to ARVN ground units.

In addition to this division operation, brigade commander William Bradley said, "Third Brigade continued defensive missions with three fully committed infantry battalions 20 miles to the south."

Caught between enemy outside the wire and bursting shells behind, [Lt. Richard] Hawley's scouts were consumed by the massive firestorm. Foxholes became death traps.

During the last few days of April, the allied buildup at Henderson began.

U.S. defenders, D Co., 1st Bn., 501st Inf., commanded by Capt. William Whitaker, arrived by helicopter. Whitaker and his men did not stay on Henderson very long, a bit more than a week, but in that time they noted some critical details. The rocky outcrop of mountain was big, larger than Whitaker's company could defend easily. In addition, "there was high ground on three sides," Whitaker remembered. There were also plenty of signs of enemy activity in the area.

Late on May 4, Bradley was ordered to return Whitaker's company to 2nd Brigade for other operations. Taking its place in defense were 84 troopers of A Co., 2nd Bn., 501st Inf., commanded by Capt. Jim Mitchell. The change was to take effect the following day.

Whitaker's outfit numbered about 120 men for field duty, an above-average strength for which he was grateful. By contrast, Mitchell's A Company from the 2nd Battalion was 30% less in strength. Whitaker wondered about the additional combat strength that Mitchell needed for defense.

When they departed Henderson, one of Whitaker's soldiers motioned to the incoming troopers and said, "Sir, they're all wearing new boots," a reference to replacements that Mitchell's company had recently received.

All told, 162 Americans were on the firebase. Among them were men of A and C companies, 2nd Bn., 501st Inf.; B Btry., 2nd Bn., 11th Arty; a squad of B Co., 326th Engineers; a detachment of the 501st Signal Battalion; and a mortar platoon of E Company. The remainder of the 311 allied forces there were ARVN.

Hard Luck Alpha

Alpha Company had been on standdown to rest and refit after turning back a nighttime sapper attack against Firebase Granite barely a week earlier. The fight had been vicious and Jim Knight's 1st Platoon was in the thick of it. So, too, was Lt. Col. Otis Livingston, the battalion commander. "It was close," said Knight, "and Livingston was right there in a foxhole with the rest of us, firing a rifle at the attacking North Vietnamese."

Now, Alpha was back on another firebase, but this time it was detached from the 2nd Battalion. Nevertheless, seasoned veterans were prepared for what might lay ahead. Again, Knight's men would find themselves in the midst of heavy fighting.

Late on the afternoon of May 5, 17 reinforcements arrived at Henderson—Lt. Richard Hawley's battalion Reconnaissance Platoon had been summoned to man a critical portion of the perimeter.

Bradley had choppered in to Henderson that afternoon to make his com-

mand presence felt, and to ensure officers and men on the ground understood the importance of their defensive mission. Shortly after Bradley departed, a resupply Chinook hovered overhead to set down a sling-load of 105mm howitzer ammunition.

With darkness fast approaching, no one bothered to distribute the howitzer shells, fuses and powder bags under secure revetments. It would prove to be a costly and fatal oversight.

As daylight faded, they did what they could to prepare positions in the sector of the ARVN artillery battery. To their left was Knight's 1st Platoon, and behind them were six 105mm howitzers and a huge stockpile of ammunition.

Aftermath

About 5 a.m. on May 6, members of the 33rd NVA Sapper Battalion attacked Henderson from several directions. One assault sliced between Knight's 1st Platoon and Hawley's scouts. One of 1st Platoon's forward positions was cut off. Amazingly, two of the three defenders survived. Others were not so fortunate.

The sappers went for the howitzers and also the ARVN TOC on the hilltop. Medic Spec. 4 Dennis Hughes of B Btry., 2nd Bn., 11th Arty., was asleep alongside one of the wheels of a 155mm howitzer when a satchel charge blew him into the air.

"When I came to my senses, I crawled over to help two guys, one of whom was on fire," he recalled. Despite his own wounds, Hughes tended to others as he moved through a trench system on the hill. His medical bag lost in the initial explosion, he cut strips from his uniform for dressings. Several times, he dashed under fire to pull the wounded to safety. His actions saved several lives, earning him a Silver Star.

Many of the big guns were destroyed by satchel charges, some with barrels peeled back like bananas. Other high-explosive charges (or possibly the flamethrower) set off some of the artillery shells—sympathetic detonation did the rest. This was the "terrible explosion" that Knight reported.

Caught between enemy outside the wire and bursting shells behind, Hawley's scouts were consumed by the massive firestorm. Foxholes became death traps. Hawley and many of his soldiers died at their posts, or in the wire, preferring to take their chances against the enemy.

Jim Knight, exposed to murderous fire throughout the attack, was lucky. As the fighting began to wane, Knight spotted enemy soldiers walking away from the firebase. "They were illuminated by flares," he explained, "and were at sling arms, uncaring, as if we were all dead." Well-aimed fire by American riflemen dispelled that notion.

Most of the enemy fell back into the surrounding jungle before daylight, but NVA mortar and recoilless rifle crews kept firing throughout the day. One mortar round exploded as 3rd Brigade operations officer Maj. Tex Turner, and brigade Command Sgt. Maj. Raymond Long were heading for the TOC. The blast instantly killed Long, the last of the 27 Americans to die on Henderson.

A Company counted the most fatalities with 11, followed by E Company with six. C Company had four KIA, HHC two KIA and B Company one. B Battery lost three artillerymen.

The dead included two missing men—Sgt. Larry Kier of A Company, and Staff Sgt. Refugio Teran, E Company, Recon Platoon. Both were declared dead in September 1978. At least 40 GIs were wounded. ARVN losses were three killed. The enemy left 29 bodies behind during the 45-minute melee.

At Henderson, the enemy took timely advantage of an awkward situation, a changeover in defenders, and an unfortunate event, the massive explosion of artillery ammo. Nothing, however, can detract from the defenders' courage.

When Hard Luck Alpha took to the field again, there were fewer than 40 seasoned hands in its ranks. In the long summer ahead, they would continue to prove their mettle against the NVA. But each May, we remember Henderson and those who fell there, brave men who brought honor to themselves and their country. ✪

CHARLES F. HAWKINS, *a VFW member, is a defense and military operations analyst working in northern Virginia. At the time of the attack on Henderson, the author was a rifle platoon leader with C Co., 2nd Bn., 506th Inf., around FSB Ripcord.*

If you have contracted MESOTHELIOMA or LUNG CANCER due to exposure to



Protect your rights by calling the law firm that has achieved over $1 BILLION in verdicts and settlements for clients all across the USA.

Weitz & Luxenberg, P.C.
LAW OFFICES
700 Broadway • New York, NY 10003
Call now for a free consultation
Free booklet on Asbestos litigation
1-888-411-LAWS
www.weitzlux.com
Future verdicts or settlements can't be predicted from prior results