

LIBERATION OF QUANG DIEN

2nd Brigade paratroopers fought bravely for four months so 50,000 South Vietnamese people would not have to choose between death and slavery as a way of life.

By Spec. 4 Robert P. Johnston

The story of Quang Dien District is a story of South Vietnamese people who learned that life without freedom is no life at all. It also concerns a brigade of American airborne soldiers who gave their strength and some of their lives so that the district's 50,000 people would not have to choose between death and slavery.

Early in February, during the stormy weeks surrounding the Communist Tet offensive, this patchwork of flat, coastal ricelands only an afternoon's walk from Hue's Citadel was the undisputed home of two North Vietnamese Army regiments and a strong infrastructure of local Viet Cong.

Feeding like giant leeches from the lifeblood of the cone-hatted farmers, fishermen and small merchants, the enemy soldiers and Viet Cong ruled absolutely. The people did not have to build bunkers and give up their rice; but the alternative was always a bullet in the head.

The only American presence then was a five-man MACV advisory team, holed up like prisoners at the district headquarters with only a small contingent of district Popular Force (PF) soldiers for protection.

"They could have overrun us any time they wanted," said the team's commander, Capt. Robert A. Selzer, Merritt Island, Fla. "We asked a captured prisoner why the NVA didn't come and massacre us, and he said it was because nobody told them to."

On March 1, the 2nd Brigade moved south from Quang Tri and pushed the NVA off an abandoned French airstrip along Route 1 a few kilometers west of Quang Dien. Springing up there almost overnight, the brigade's base camp was dubbed Landing Zone Sally, the new home of the "Ready To Go" paratroopers.

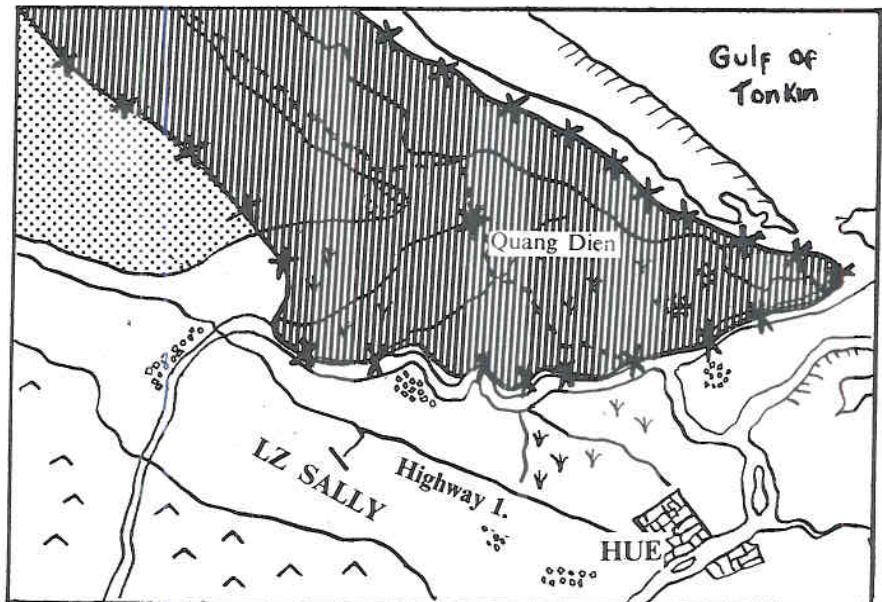
For the liberation of the district, brigade commander Col. John H. Cushman, Lexington, Mass., chose the 1st Bn. (Abn), 502nd Inf., commanded by Lt. Col. Bertram J. Bishop, Springfield, Va.

The first thing Col. Bishop noticed

was the steady, silent streams of villagers leaving his new turf. Sensing a fight, many of the people hastily migrated to the homes of friends and relatives farther south.

Then began some of the most bitter and bloody fighting of the Vietnam Conflict as the "First Strike" Battalion mounted a war of attrition against the wily and well-dug-in NVA and VC. Every village and hamlet meant another prolonged battle; every hedgerow meant another fight. A single error or misjudgment could have cost an entire company of paratroopers.

With the Airborne providing the



Quang Dien District north of Hue.



2nd Brigade paratroopers invade rich rice basin of Quang Dien district in search of harassing NVA soldiers.

Higgs

muscle and mobility, and the PF's furnishing the intelligence reports, detainee interrogation, and scouting knowhow, the allies hounded the NVA in every known sanctuary in the district.

"Col. Bishop used the PF's just as they should be used," Capt. Selzer said, "and he treated them with the same consideration and respect as his men."

It was the PF intelligence officer, the young and talented Nguyen Van Hue, whose accurate and timely information led to the two landmark battles of the Quang Dien campaign.

The first was Ap Dong Lam, where the "First Strike" battalion, plus D Co., 2nd Bn. (Abn), 501st Inf., and the PF's hemmed in an estimated reinforced battalion of the 803rd NVA Regiment. The four-day struggle cost 222 dead enemy soldiers and put the NVA on the run throughout the district.

It also helped accomplish something totally unexpected by the Americans. One afternoon in late March, some 2,000 district citizens gathered in the Sia market place to pay tribute to the Airborne combat successes, and to condemn the terrorist tactics of the local Viet Cong. Vowing to fight the VC to the death, the people themselves recorded a stirring moment in their country's history with shouts of "Vietnamese Government Number One! Down with

the VC!"

Such bravado in a secure marketplace would be meaningless unless reflected in the countryside where people were still dying. But it was in the countryside—in the paddies and along the distant canal banks—that a subtle evolution was beginning.

As word of each fresh enemy defeat flashed through the district, the iron grip of fear which had held the people for so long loosened a little more. It became apparent that the enemy's days were numbered, as were those of anyone who voluntarily aided their cause.

Even small children and old women would point out enemy weapons caches and booby-traps. The once-familiar blank stare and shrug of helpless ignorance was gradually replaced by the Vietnamese equivalent of "He went that-a-way."

In late March, April and early May, the 1st and 2nd Airborne Battalions of the 501st Infantry each took a crack at the reeling NVA. In the first week of May, the grim process of extermination culminated in the now-famous cordon of Phuoc Yen.

For four days, companies from all three battalions, plus PF's and the "Black Panther" Co. of the 1st ARVN Division lay siege to the stocking-shaped village complex that intelligence sources

said was harboring an NVA battalion.

The paratroopers were joined by the batteries of the 321st Artillery, helicopter gunships and Air Force fighter-bombers. By morning of the fifth day, the NVA body count reached 419, and another 104 became the largest NVA force to surrender en masse to an American unit thus far in the history of the war.

Except for a few scattered pockets of die-hards, Phuoc Yen marked the end of the NVA in Quang Dien District. Of approximately 1,500 that Lt. Hue estimated to be occupying the district before Tet, more than 800 were killed and the rest fled west to the mountains to lick their wounds and contemplate the "mean little bird" worn on the left shoulders of the Airborne enemy.

Phuoc Yen was also a beginning. "Our PF's had neither the numbers nor the weapons to fight the NVA," said Capt. Selzer. "But now the enemy are Viet Cong, and no one can fight the VC better than the PF's can."

In the last week of May, the Quang Dien PF's pulled a coup that shocked the local Viet Cong. Just before dawn, with the night mist still hanging over a VC stronghold, a small PF band burst through the hedgerows, yelling and shooting. Twenty of the Viet Cong who tried to fight or run were killed.

Six other VC, plus a small arsenal of weapons were easily captured.

To avoid further bloodshed on both sides, a co-ordinated psychological operations (Psy-ops) program was initiated by the 2nd Brigade psy-ops officer, Lt. David Hendry, East Hartford, Conn. The team dropped leaflets and broadcast appeals from former VC, imploring the hardcore Communists to give up a hopeless cause.

"This district is now ripe for psy-ops," said Capt. Donald E. Smalley, Peebles, Ohio, a MACV co-worker of Capt. Selzer. "The Airborne and the PF's have made the remaining VC want to give up safely."

During the first five days in June, 15 former VC decided there was no future for their line of work in Quang Dien District. Marching timidly forward with Chieu Hoi safe-conduct leaflets held protectively aloft, the VC surrendered in two's and three's to the paratroopers of the 1st Bn. (Abn), 502nd Inf. and the government troops.

With most of the enemy dead or on the run, the allies turned their attention to the endless fields of rice, ripe and ready for the spring harvest. Before the Airborne came to Quang Dien, everybody knew that the great bulk of the harvest would be confiscated by the NVA and VC to feed their troops stationed in the villages and mountain base camps.

But now there were no more NVA, and the remaining VC were in no mood to challenge the Airborne companies who threw protective perimeters around the areas being harvested. At the end of May, Capt. Selzer estimated that 90 per cent of the crop was safe in the hands of its rightful owners. By direction of the fiery district chief, Capt. Tran Hhu Hung, the rice was shifted to three secure collection points where each farmer was given a receipt for his crop. Throughout the coming year, the farmers will come to the collection points and receive enough of their rice for their families but not enough to tempt the remaining Viet Cong.

Though he is first a soldier, Capt. Hung is a man of his people. Whenever an important decision loomed, he hop-

ped in his unpredictable jeep with balding tires and drove over miles of unsecured roads to consult with citizens whose lives depended upon his judgment.

Lt. Col. Leslie D. Carter, new battalion commander, gave his medical officer, Capt. David H. Leeper, Padukah, Ky., a free rein in giving the district the best medical service available. The young "Bacsi" discarded the usual one-shot MEDCAP approach and set up a regular schedule for himself and his staff at the district's three hospitals.

Now Quang Dien District bears no resemblance to the field of terror it became under the heel of the NVA.

The people's smiles, once masks of fear and distrust, became the expressions of good feeling and good times. The "big-footed" Screaming Eagles and the wiry native country folk came face to face, and found not monsters and minatures, but merely international variation of themselves.

Today when the people of Quang Dien District speak of the American soldiers who helped transform their homeland from a hell to a haven, they do not say, "the Americans," "the U.S. Army, or "the GI's." They say, "the Airborne," and they say it with a mixture of gratitude and respect.



Morrow



2nd Brigade paratroopers seek protection of a concrete wall near Quang Dien during heavy firefight with NVA regulars.