

Events of 26 May 1967
Alpha Company Ambush, 2nd Bn., 14th Inf
By Forward Observer Lt. John Ricca

On 26 May 1967, I was the Forward Observer (FO) attached from the 7th Battalion, 11th Field Artillery to Alpha Company, 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, of the First Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division, operating out of the U.S. Cu Chi base camp. My radio call-sign was Cannon Five-One.

Either the night before, or early that morning, Alpha Company commander “Dragon Alpha Six”, Captain John Byers, received our mission.

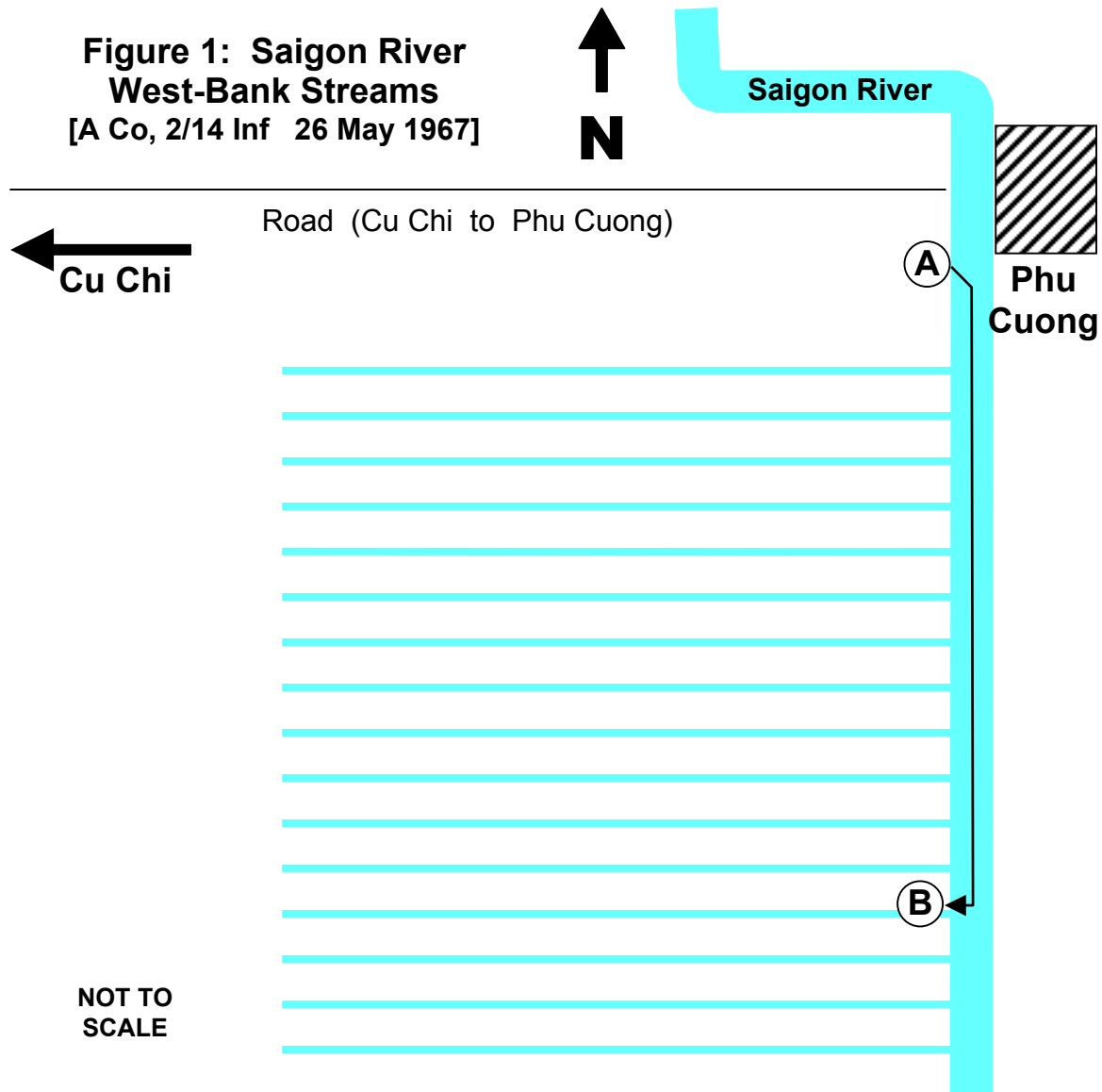
Intelligence had determined that there was significant Viet Cong (VC) activity west of the Saigon River, south of Phu Cuong [located approximately 10 kilometers east of Cu Chi]. At approximately 0700 hours, we were to truck from Cu Chi to a pick-up point on the west bank of the Saigon River, just south of Phu Cuong; the pick-up point is shown as Position A in Figure 1. We were to board six ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) river assault boats, travel south about two kilometers on the Saigon River, make a landing on the west bank between two of the streams [feeding into the Saigon River], shown as Position B in Figure 1. We were to proceed west on a search and destroy mission with the goal of finding and destroying any enemy weapons or military supplies.

Alpha Company was significantly under-strength (compared with TOE authorized numbers); I think that with all attachments (including medics, artillery persons, etc.) we had approximately 80 soldiers move to the field that morning. The 2d Rifle Platoon was to be on point on the left flank and board the first two boats. The Company HQ and the 3d Platoon would board the third and fourth boats, and the 1st Platoon would board the fifth and sixth boats. The 3d Platoon was to be on point on the right flank. The Mortar Platoon would remain behind and join the company later that day. The ARVN soldier attached to Alpha Company as the Company Interpreter/Translator was not available; I do not know if he was ill or had another mission.

While giving the mission to the platoon leaders, Alpha Six (CPT Byers) made the first of several key decisions that would eventually save many of the lives of the Alpha Company soldiers who survived that day. He directed the platoon leaders to proceed very cautiously to ensure that the point men would have the maximum probability of detecting any booby-traps or ambush positions. We were in no rush to reach any specific terrain objective by any specific time.

The terrain that we were to enter was a series of deep streams that were separated by more than 100 meters. From Phu Cuong, the Saigon River flowed in a direction of approximately 180 degrees, almost due south. At the mouth of each stream, where it met the Saigon River, the streams were approximately 30 meters wide, and were very deep. The streams were narrower farther inland, but even a kilometer inland, they were still several meters wide. There were more than a dozen streams, all running in a direction of approximately 90 degrees, from west to east.

**Figure 1: Saigon River
West-Bank Streams**
[A Co, 2/14 Inf 26 May 1967]



The truck ride out to Phu Cong had no incidents. At approximately 0730 hours we boarded the river boats. SFC Convoy [Platoon Sergeant, 3d Platoon] spoke to the boat pilot and observed that none of the ARVN soldiers manning the boat spoke any English. SFC Convoy spoke directly to CPT Byers and expressed concern that because our interpreter was not with us, if anything happened that needed immediate communication with the boat pilot, it would be a problem. From the expression on his face, it appeared that CPT Byers had already thought about that. On the boat ride south, I intentionally stood near SFC Convoy and 1LT Doug Necessary [Platoon Leader, 3d Platoon] so I could hear any comments made by SFC Convoy because he was the most experienced soldier in the company. [CPT Byers recognized SFC Convoy's experience and well developed instincts, and referred to SFC Convoy as "the Nose" because he could smell an ambush before it occurred, and often said, only half jokingly, "the nose knows."] On the boat SFC Convoy explained that the proper tactics called for the boats to travel as close to the west bank as possible, which would minimize our exposure if enemy forces had been set up to engage. When we got to the intended point between the proper streams, the boats should

assault the shoreline as quickly as possible, again to minimize our exposure time. Instead of following these tactics, the boats traveled south in the middle of the river [approximately 200 meters from the shore line]. When we reached the appropriate stream, the boats turned to the east / left, circled toward the east bank, then lined up to assault the west bank. Initially, as we began to travel toward the west bank, we were approximately 300 meters from the bank. We were fortunate that there were no VC set up to defend the shore. It seemed that it took almost 60 seconds for us to reach the west riverbank, which seemed like an eternity.

At approximately 0745 hours, the first boats landed just north of one of the streams, and more than 100 meters from the next stream to the north (to our right). The 2d Platoon landed first and moved inland to the west, moving along the south stream, which was to our left. I think that Alpha Two-Six, the Platoon Leader of the 2d Platoon was 2LT Rosenberg, and SSG Moultrie was the Platoon Sergeant. The Company HQ and 3d Platoon landed next. The Company HQ consisted of Alpha Six (CPT Byers), two radio-telephone operators (RTOs) [one carried the radio on the battalion net, and one carried the radio on the company net], the First Sergeant, the company medic, Sp4 Wheeler, who everyone called Doc Wheeler, the FO (me), my RTO, PFC Mike Hammer, and the field artillery Recon Sergeant CPL Michael Mount.

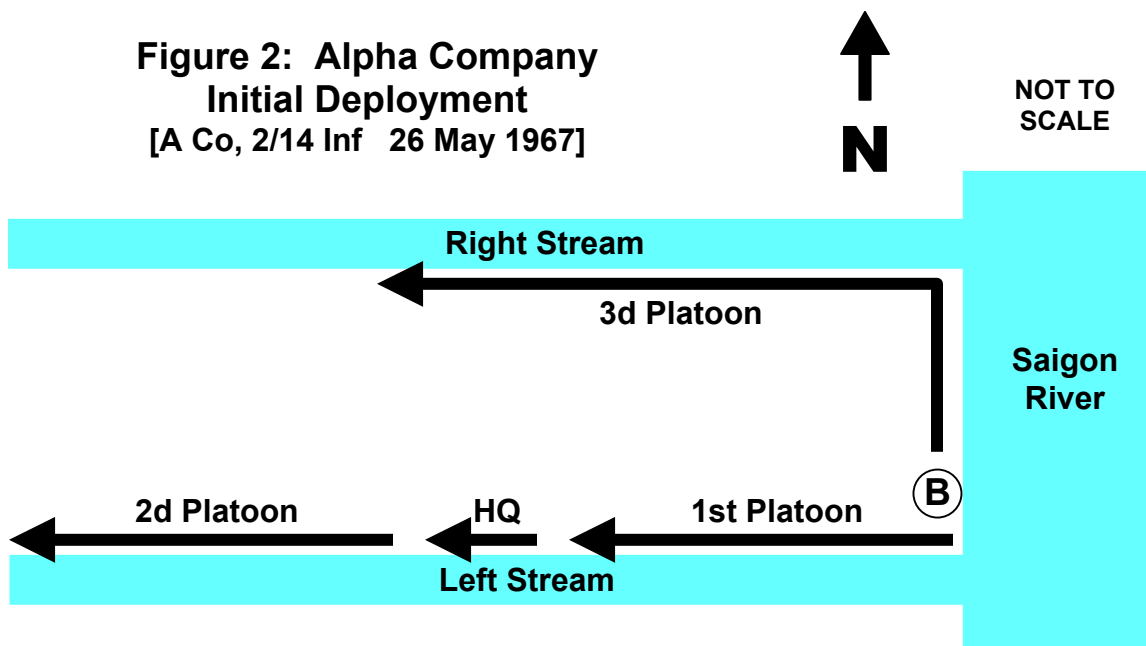
Alpha Six (CPT Byers) directed (by radio) Alpha Three-Six (3d Platoon Leader, 2LT Doug Necessary) to move to the Right Stream and proceed west. He also confirmed with Alpha One-Six (1LT Tom Waldera) that the 1st Platoon would take up rear security when their boats landed. Figure 2 shows the landing spot (Position B) and Alpha Company's initial deployment.

In between the streams on our planned route of advance was a series of dry rice-paddy fields that were more than 100 meters wide between the streams (north-south), and almost 200 meters long (east-west). The rice-paddy fields were separated by mud berms that were approximately two feet wide and three feet high. The soil was dry and hard, and walking on it was easy.

[The details of the following events were determined by looking at the ambush positions the following day, after the enemy VC fled the area, and by discussions at a company leaders meetings that Alpha-Six had with the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants, that evening and the following day.]

After moving a few hundred meters to the west, at approximately 0800, we heard a single shot fired to our left front, followed by a second shot several seconds later. From the sound, it was either a carbine or an AK-47 [I cannot remember which, primarily because this was my first experience hearing incoming fire]. The shot was not from an M-16 carried by Alpha Company soldiers. Apparently, the 2d Platoon point-man, moving cautiously, as had been directed by Alpha Six, had just stepped over the mud berm (Position C in Figure 3), and spotted a sniper in

**Figure 2: Alpha Company
Initial Deployment**
[A Co, 2/14 Inf 26 May 1967]



a firing position with overhead and side cover (almost a one-man bunker with a firing port) on the south side of the Left Stream (Position D in Figure 3). At that location, the sniper's position on the other side of the Left Stream was only approximately 10 meters away. The point man was shot in the head as he turned to engage the sniper, and was probably killed instantly. The platoon machine gunner, armed with an M-60, moved up to the berm immediately to reinforce and assist the point man, and was hit by the second shot and probably killed before he could return fire. If the point man had been more rushed and less observant, he would have continued past the first VC position, and possibly led the entire company into what was the killing zone of an L-shaped ambush.

SSG Moultrie, followed by several soldiers moved forward to the berm and returned full-automatic fire directed across the Left Stream. This was probably ineffective against the VC soldiers in the prepared positions, but may have been effective to prevent the VC that were in prepared positions west of the initial contact (Positions E in Figure 3) from moving east (red dashed line) to flank Alpha Company on the left (Positions F). VC from several prepared positions returned fire, and the level of intensity quickly increased to become a platoon level firefight.

Alpha Six gave radio directives to the 1st and 3d platoon leaders to halt and secure their positions. That decision, to halt rather than move forward and assault, definitely saved the lives of all who survived (including me). As illustrated in Figure 4, if Alpha Six had decided to move forward to out-flank the VC on the other side of the Left Stream (shown by the black dashed lines), it would have put the majority of the company in the killing zone of a VC L-shaped ambush (shown by the red dashed box). The following day we observed the prepared positions on the south bank of the Left Stream (shown as line E), and on the far side of the next berm to the west (shown as line F).

After about 30 minutes into the firefight, 2d Platoon soldiers brought two or three WIA soldiers back to the company HQ position for med-evacuation [slang term: *dust-off*]. Alpha Six stated that we had two problems. First, a possible med-evac landing point in the middle of the field would not be secure because the incoming rounds from VC fire were intense in the area all the way to the Right Stream, and an attempted med-evac would draw increased fire. Alpha Six reported to the battalion operations center that we could not get a dust-off in at this time. This was the third decision that probably saved lives because not only would all personnel on the helicopter be well above the ground in what was becoming a more intense field of incoming fire, but all helping to carry the WIA soldiers would also be well above the ground.

Figure 3: Alpha Company Initial Contact
 [A Co, 2/14 Inf 26 May 1967]

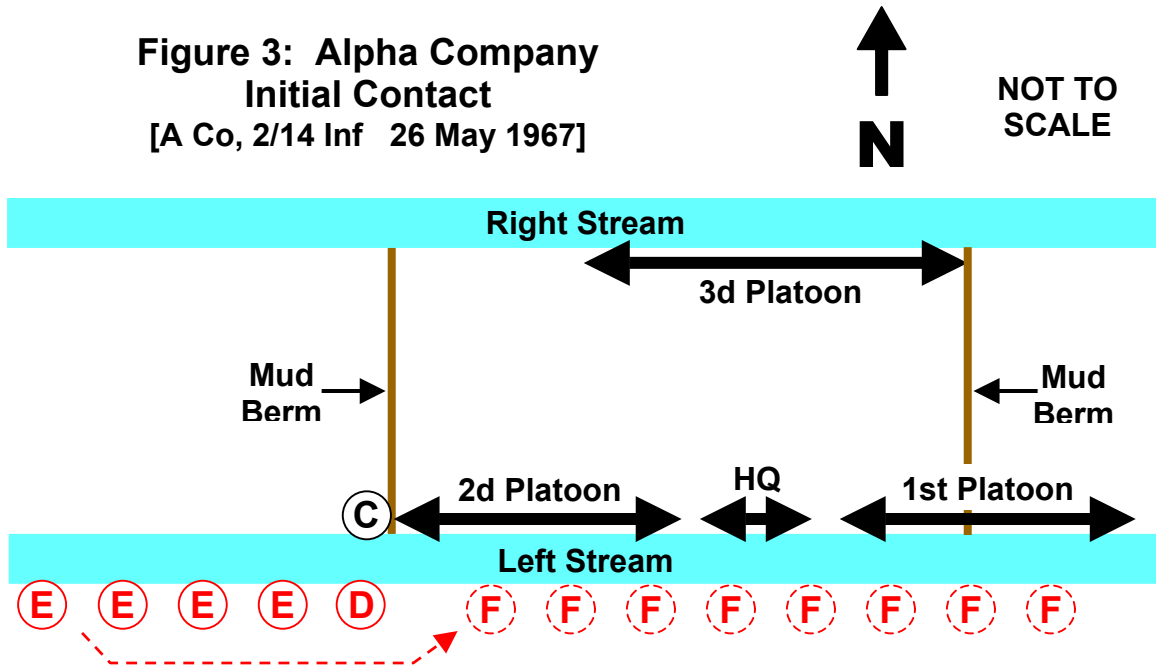


Figure 4: VC L-Shaped Ambush
 [A Co, 2/14 Inf 26 May 1967]

