Anatomy of a Disaster:
Fire Support Base Mary Ann, 28 March 1971

By John Walker

A Terrible Night

The evening of 27 March 1971 at Fire Support Base Mary Ann began normally for the men of the *1st Battalion, 46th Regiment, 196th Light Infantry Brigade*: some target practice at a makeshift firing range, the evening meal, then a move to the 22 perimeter bunkers by the infantrymen of *C Company*.

The base was located in the western reaches of Quang Tin province in northern South Vietnam, and had been probed numerous times by the enemy during the 13 months of its existence. The most recent time was on 13 August 1970, but there had never been an actual assault. The soldiers of the *1/46* had therefore come to regard Mary Ann as being in what amounted to a rear area rather than the *23rd Infantry Division's* most forward outpost in Military Region One, also known as *I Corps*.

The whole facility was soon scheduled to be turned over to soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and most of the brigade's mortars, artillery, and perimeter sensors had therefore already been withdrawn. It had been a long time since reconnaissance patrols had been sent out, and successive commanders had decided maintaining listening posts outside the wire entailed too much risk.

To the Americans in Mary Ann, the war had thus come to seem far away, but for the enemy then just moving into positions outside the wire that night the view was different. Some 50 Viet Cong sappers were slowly approaching in the foggy darkness, and they were about to bring the war to the 231 American and 21 ARVN soldiers on the ridge-top base.

C Company's commander, Capt. Richard Knight, killed in action during the attack.

In the Wire

Those infiltrators belonged to the *409th Viet Cong (Main Force) Sapper Battalion.* ("Main Force" meant it was a full-time unit, not one made up of part-time soldier/farmers.) They came in from the southwest. The outer apron of concertina wire was 100 meters from the bunker line, and the sappers had soon cut four gaps in it while also disabling the Claymore mines they came across. They cut four more gaps in the next wire barrier, 50 meters closer in. It was then just another 30 meters to the third and final barrier, which was 20 meters from the bunker line. After they'd breached that final barricade, the attackers spread out into teams of three to six-men each, ready to move inside the perimeter when mortar rounds signaled the opening of the attack. Their plan was to strike simultaneously from the north, south and west, and then exit through the trash dump outside the northern portion of the base.

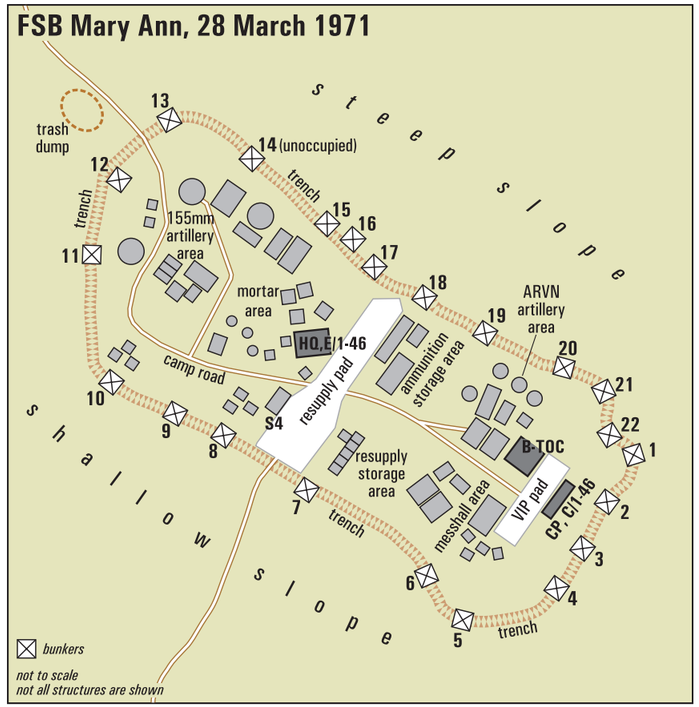
At 2:00 a.m. on 28 March the night erupted with the sound of those mortars. Primary targets were the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (B-TOC) and *Company C's* command post. Both were soon heavily damaged and burning. The sappers, meanwhile, charged inside the base, slinging grenades and satchel charges into position after position, then shooting stunned survivors as they tried to scramble out. The sappers were well inside the perimeter before the first of the *1/46* infantry successfully got out of their sandbagged bunkers and started firing.

Most of the Viet Cong carried folding-stock AK-47s, while others were armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPG). The satchel charges were each 25 lbs. of C-4 explosive packed into flat canvas bags with pull-fuses and straps for throwing.

Added confusion on the American side was due to the VC 82mm mortar crews using a combination of high-explosive (HE) and CS tear gas rounds. Some of the satchel charges also contained tear gas.

"We didn't have a chance," recalled Specialist 4th Class Gary Webb, a machinegunner in the platoon that covered bunkers 1 to 8, the part of the line that began at the base's south end, below the B-TOC and the *C Company* command post. "There wasn't a man out there that wasn't a good man in our company. We'd been in firefights before and we had a lot of kills credited to us, but that was one time that I was just helpless. All I could see were shadows coming from everywhere."

The B-TOC bunker was hit by well directed mortar fire, then suffered three suicidal satchel charge attacks in quick succession. Inside the bunker the explosions and tear gas fumes incapacitated the battalion commander, Lt. Col. William Doyle. By



the time he regained consciousness, the south end of the B-TOC was burning furiously after a satchel charge caused a case of white phosphorus grenades to ignite. Despite suffering from severe wounds, Doyle killed one sapper and made his way out of the B-TOC firing his M-16, only to be knocked unconscious by a grenade.

At 2:51 a.m. radio telephone operator (RTO) David Tarnay managed to raise Landing Zone Mildred to request close-in artillery support and illumination rounds.

When he reawakened, Doyle linked up with one of the battalion's most experienced soldiers, Capt. Paul Spilberg, who'd previously been at Mary Ann as a company commander and had choppered back in several days earlier with a three-man training team from Chu Lai, the location of division headquarters.

While the B-TOC was being demolished, *C Company's* CP was overwhelmed. Capt. Richard Knight, the company commander, was killed immediately. The company executive

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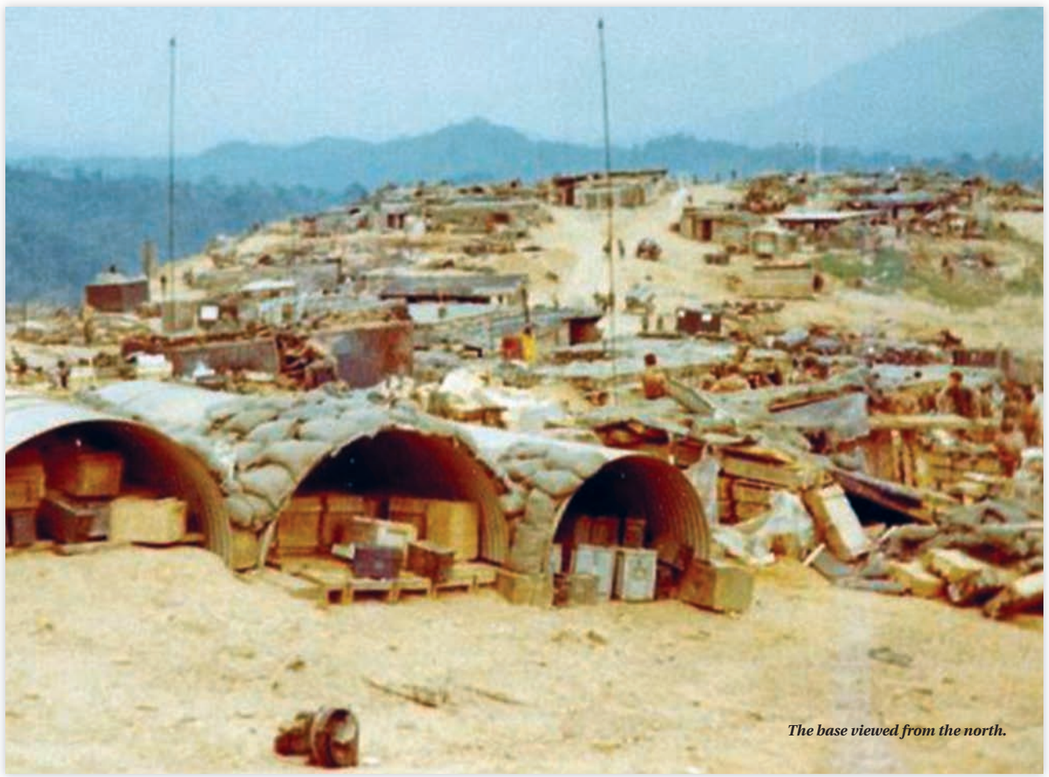

The base viewed from the north.

Resupply the day after the attack.

US Army Organization in Vietnam

US Army divisions during the Vietnam War were organized under the ROAD system. ("Reorganization Objective Army Division" – which is so clumsy a phrase one can't help but feel they first thought up the acronym and then went hunting for words to fill it in.) Under it, each division had three subordinate maneuver brigades, an artillery command of four battalions, a support command for logistics, plus armored cavalry, engineer, aviation and signals battalions, along with military police and intelligence companies. Combat battalions included various mixes of armor, mechanized infantry, infantry, airborne and airmobile units, averaging a total of nine. Divisional commanders were to place those battalions under the maneuver brigade headquarters to form customized task forces for specific missions.

There were some major variants. Airmobile and air cavalry divisions had an entire aviation group of three or more helicopter battalions. Most of the divisions in Vietnam were augmented with additional artillery, intelligence, long-range reconnaissance, public information and other units.

Another peculiar element of the ROAD system was its break up of the Army's historic infantry and armored regiments into separate battalions. For reasons of military tradition, however, regimental titles were then still retained. For example, *1st Battalion, 46th Regiment, 196th Light Infantry Brigade (1-46/196)* was a battalion that carried the lineage of the old *46th Infantry Regiment,* but there was no longer a *46th Regiment* headquarters. Higher command in that case came from the *196th Light Infantry Brigade*, which in 1971 was part of the *Americal Division.*

The Army's infantry battalions originally went to Vietnam with a "headquarters and headquarters company" (HHC – which was actually one and same formation), three rifle companies, and a combat support company (CSC)—the latter with heavy weapons, combat engineer and scout platoons.

Experience in the field changed that organization. Heavy weapons, such as mortars and recoilless rifles (the latter intended for anti-tank and bunker-busting work), were usually left behind in base camps. When the infantry needed additional firepower they could call it in (usually) from the efficient artillery system or from the numerous helicopter gunships and tactical aircraft. Consequently the CSC was often used to defend the battalion base camp, or sometimes as an additional rifle company in the field. The Army officially recognized the evolving situation by issuing a modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), adding another company to the battalion.

Like the battalions, the companies would usually leave their mortars at base camps, and use the mortar platoon personnel as additional infantry. The Army assigned radios down to platoon level and sometimes lower. Communication networks were vital for controlling units dispersed in the field and for calling in fire support.

The platoons, in theory, had three rifle and one heavy weapons squad, the latter with M-60 light machineguns and recoilless rifles. The machineguns were usually assigned directly to the infantry squads, and the recoilless rifles were rarely taken into the field. Any need for such heavy weapons could usually be met by carrying LAW (Light Anti-tank Weapon, a one-shot rocket light enough to be carried by individual infantrymen). Each squad was supposed to be split into two fire teams, but manpower shortages often meant they fought as single teams, usually centered around the firepower provided by an M-60.

Small-unit infantry tactics were based on fire and movement. Alternating elements would lay down heavy fire to suppress the enemy, while others would move forward. Once fire superiority had been attained, the entire unit was supposed to close with and destroy the enemy; however, the availability of artillery and airpower often meant tactics revolved around expending masses of munitions to simply pulverize an enemy or cause him to break off.

Other elements that might be attached to infantry in the field included artillery and aerial forward observers, combat medics, intelligence personnel, armored vehicles if available and the terrain was suitable, and anyone or anything else the command or the troops thought useful.

— Joseph Miranda

The Americal Division shoulder patch, showing the Southern Cross constellation, the most prominent in the southern hemisphere.

Americal Division infantry preparing to load into helicopters to be flown out to a base camp.

The Americal Division

If it's true every war produces "hard luck" units, that dubious distinction for America's long involvement in Vietnam goes to the *23rd Infantry Division*, also known as the *Americal Division*. After four years of combat in two of South Vietnam's northern provinces, Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, both communist strongholds, the division left the war zone as part of the US withdrawal and was then disbanded.

Two of its three light infantry brigades, the *11th* and *198th*, left Vietnam in November 1971. Its third brigade, the *196th*, was then reconstituted as a "separate" (organizationally independent) formation and remained in-country until 29 June 1972, when it became the last American ground combat unit to withdraw from Vietnam.

The division had been formed in May 1942 as one of only two unnumbered divisions to serve in the US Army during World War II. In the immediate crisis following Pearl Harbor, the US sent three separate regiments to defend New Caledonia against an anticipated Japanese invasion. When those units were put together to form a new division, its new commander asked it be known as the *Americal*, a contraction of "American New Caledonian." The division was deactivated after the war and then reactivated in December 1954 as the *23rd Infantry Division*, retaining the name *Americal* as part of its official designation. It served in Panama until April 1956, and was again deactivated.

The *23rd* was called on again in 1967, being reformed from three separate light infantry brigades the Army had already deployed in Vietnam. Despite its overall exemplary service in numerous battles and campaigns, it was also involved in several disastrous engagements.

Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of all allied ground forces in Vietnam at the time, first created a division-sized grouping known as *Task Force Oregon* to support US Marine Corps operations in parts of Military Region One (*I Corps*), in the highlands of northern South Vietnam. Brigades from *25th Infantry* and *101st Airborne Divisions*, as well as the *196th Infantry Brigade*, an independent unit that deployed to Vietnam in 1966, were combined and ordered to operate in close coordination with *1st Marine Division*. As new brigades arrived in-country, they were assigned to the task force, which received a new commander, Maj. Gen. Samuel Roster, and was designated the *23rd Infantry Division (Americal)*. Its final makeup consisted of the *11th*, *196th* and *198th Light Infantry Brigades* (LIB), along with support units and a squadron of armored cavalry.

It proved difficult to integrate those units into a cohesive combat force. Some blame Westmoreland for merging separate brigades into a division before they had time to be properly trained up together. In particular, the *196th* had a separate identify and its troops balked at the idea of wearing a divisional shoulder patch. The division's size alone—at times as many as 24,000 soldiers, the largest in South Vietnam—made it unwieldy. The *11th Light Infantry Brigade* was supposed to have 30 days of in-country acclimatization training before it was committed to major combat operations, but within two weeks of its arrival it was attacking in the My Lai area.

"There wasn't a veteran in the unit," recalled one general officer. The *198th* was deployed only five months after it had originally been activated. The *Americal* artillery units were brought in and, like much of the division, had to finish training under actual combat conditions. The *Americal*, nevertheless, went on to serve during the Tet Offensive and the Battles of Lo Giang and Nui Hoac Ridge (Hill 352), among others.

The division didn't fight in any of the largest battles, like Hue or Khe Sanh, or in the more glamorous war of the air cavalry units. Instead, it slugged it out, day-by-day and village-by-village, in one of the most hostile areas of South Vietnam, in what had been communist strongholds since the end of World War II.

"This division had some of the most violent combat in the country," said Maj. Gen. Frederick Kroesen, *Americal's* last commander before it was disbanded. "There never was a day some unit didn't have major combat in which men were killed."

Another officer, Col. Reamer Argo, explained the nature of the division's war in this way: "[It] saw more of the enemy and less of the enemy than any other division. They were sitting on top of that huge area, grinding it out, never really in contact with the enemy, and always suffering from him."

During its stay in Southeast Asia the division sometimes performed as though plagued by an unnamed malignancy. *C Company* of *1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment*, with Lt. William Calley as a platoon commander, was responsible for the 16 March 1968 massacre of between 340 to 500 Vietnamese civilians in My Lai and My Khe hamlets. In 1969 there were several occurrences of squads, platoons and even companies balking at orders to advance on enemy positions, a failure known as "combat refusal." The overrunning of Fire Support Base Mary Ann should therefore be viewed in regard to that larger picture.

More than 100,000 men wore the *Americal* patch during the course of the war; of them, more than 22,000 were wounded and 3,400 killed in action, a high rate for any US division.

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officer, 1st Lt. Daniel Mack, was struck in the leg by an AK-47 round that shredded his calf. He feigned death as a sapper took the watch off his wrist.

The base's organic fire support was quickly knocked out when both its 155mm howitzers were destroyed. A number of Americans who survived the initial onslaught mounted a counterattack, but not before most of the sappers had begun to move back out through the razor wire surrounding the base. Sgt. Maj. Carl Presser and PFC John Bruno manned a quad .50-caliber machinegun, while Specialist Freddie Fillers, a cook, commandeered an M-60 light machinegun. Between those two weapons they loosed hundreds of rounds, cutting down several sappers as they tried to make their escape.

A Night Hawk Huey gunship flown by Capt. Norman Hayes of *Troop D, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry*, with a night-vision starlight scope aboard, was the first aircraft to arrive on scene. When its searchlight illuminated some VC in the wire, they opened up on the gunship with small arms fire. "We could actually see the VC in the wire," Hayes said later. "It looked like they were trying to take people out of the wire. We engaged, and I know that anything we fired on ceased firing at us."

above — Another view of the men sitting atop the bunkers prior to the day of the attack.

below — Clean up and reorganization began shortly after the attack ended.

He made repeated runs over Mary Ann, strafing targets of opportunity, but he soon had to return to Chu Lai to refuel. Meanwhile the brigade and division headquarters continued to believe Mary Ann had been subjected to nothing more than mortar fire. That was owing to the breakdown in communication as the base was pummeled. Hayes had time to return to Chu Lai, refuel, reload and clean his guns, and fly back to Mary Ann before medical helicopters began arriving.

Picking Up the Pieces

As dawn broke, 15 enemy bodies were found in and around the base, along with blood trails indicating the enemy had dragged away even more casualties. The attack had lasted just one hour. Thirty American soldiers—24 infantry and six artillerymen—had died; another 82 were wounded.

Maj. Gen. James Baldwin, the *Americal Division's* commander, arrived at dawn. "The firebase was a shambles," he wrote in a letter home, "with things still burning all over the place. There were many soldiers who were sitting around with rather dazed looks on their faces, and another group which was actively and energetically trying to pick up the pieces. There were no in-betweens."

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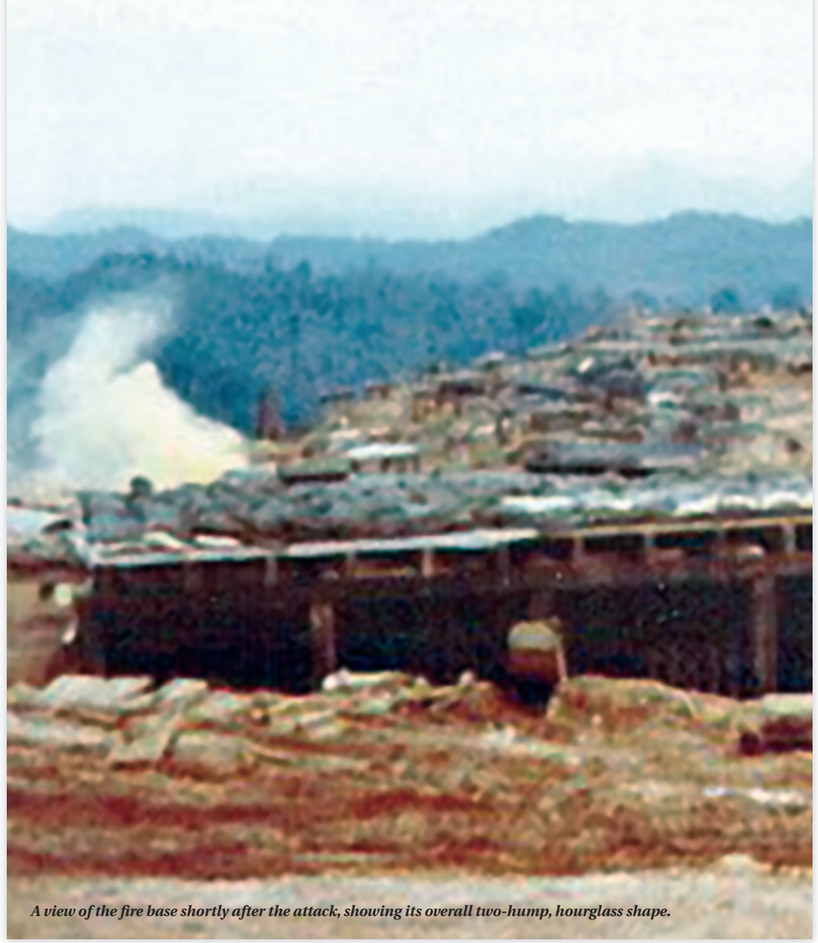

A view of the fire base shortly after the attack, showing its overall two-hump, hourglass shape.

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Background to Disaster

Fire Support Base Mary Ann was originally intended to be only a temporary installation. It was built in early 1970 to support an operation by *1st Battalion, 46th Infantry Regiment (1/46)* against the "K-7 Corridor" and the "Dak Rose Trail," two branches off the Ho Chi Minh Trail the communists used to shuttle men and materiel from Laos east toward the coast. The base didn't occupy commanding terrain; it was built on a bulldozed crest of a ridge running northwest to southeast, occupying two humps with a shallow saddle in between. It was 500 meters long, 75 meters wide across the saddle, and 125 meters wide at either end. Steep slopes dropped away on its east side, and there were hills around its other three flanks.

The outer perimeter consisted of a shallow trench line with 22 sandbagged bunkers dotting it. Most of the latter were metal, room-sized shipping containers known as "conexes," with firing slits cut into them. Thirty more hootches (living quarters), bunkers and buildings were spread around the interior.

Located in the southeast half of the base were the all-important Battalion Tactical Operations Center (B-TOC), the *C Company* Command Post (CP), an artillery liaison bunker, a communications center, and several ammunition storage bunkers. The southeast half was divided by a dirt road that exited the perimeter to the southwest, continuing down to the firing range. Another dirt road traveled the length of the northwest half of Mary Ann, where two 155mm howitzers and 20 men of *Battery C, 3-16th Field Artillery (FA)* were deployed, as well as a fire direction control center and the artillery CP. That road exited the perimeter at the base's north end where a trash dump was located. Both roads interrupted the trench line and the three aprons of double-concertina wire that surrounded the base.

Battalion commander Lt. Col. William Doyle had been unable to acquire chain-link fencing to secure those two openings, because the base was about to be turned over to the ARVN. On 27 March 1971 Doyle was just one day away from moving his B-TOC to Landing Zone (LZ) Mildred, farther to the east. Both ground radars and all the night-vision scopes had already been sent to the rear for maintenance. Indeed, the entire *196th* was soon to redeploy north to Da Nang, there to relieve the storied *1st Marine Division*, which was leaving Vietnam.

On the night of 27-28 March, *C Company*, 75 men strong, was on 25 percent alert, which meant one out of every four men on the bunker line was supposed to be on guard. In other words, each of the 21 manned bunkers (one was left unmanned) would have one soldier on top with his weapon, ammunition, grenades, flares and firing mechanisms for its claymore mines ready. Each bunker was supposed to support six to 12 claymores and six to 12 trip flares set up on the slope to its front.

In theory, squad leaders were supposed to move from bunker to bunker throughout the night to ensure the guards stayed awake. In reality, those "bunker-boppers" more often simply gathered at the B-TOC to talk and play cards. Usually, by 2:00 a.m. radio calls from the B-TOC to the bunkers for situation reports failed to get responses because all the occupants were asleep. That wasn't all: on the morning after the attack, the brigade public information officer found and photographed claymores that had been thrown down into the wire: apparently the troops had removed the mines' C-4 explosive to use as fuel to heat their rations.

The irony was the *1/46*, nicknamed "The Professionals," was a well regarded outfit, and *C Company's* operations had generally been successful. Even so, there were also morale and discipline issues related to the unpopularity of the war, heroin use, and combat refusals.

Maj. Alva Hardin, the *196th Brigade* intelligence officer (S2), testified after the battle: "We had no intelligence to indicate there would be an attack upon LZ Mary Ann."

The base hadn't been probed by the enemy since August the previous year, and the battalion's last major contact—a firefight south of the base in which then-commander Lt. Col. Richard Carvell's light observation helicopter had been shot down—had been at that time as well.

The battalion had earlier battled the enemy up and down the jungle-covered mountains around Mary Ann for months, uncovering numerous enemy logistical facilities. In fact, the *1/46* had captured a large supply dump six weeks prior to the attack, on 1 February 1971, and many of the troops later believed the assault on their base was in response.

Whatever their larger motivation, the communists executed a perfectly planned tactical sapper attack, infiltrating the wire, advancing under an accurate mortar barrage, ravaging the base with satchel charges and grenades, destroying communications centers and artillery pieces, setting ablaze the B-TOC and *C Company's* command post, and then withdrawing, all in less than an hour.

The attack doubtlessly had been in planning for weeks or months in advance. The night was perfect for such a mission: moonless, low clouds rolling in over the mountains, socking in the base so heavily that, even when illumination flares were fired, the bunker guards could barely see the concertina wire just 20 meters away.

Repercussions for the botched defense followed swiftly, with what amounted to an officer purge throughout the battalion, brigade and division levels. In his confidential report, the Deputy Inspector General for USMACV (US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, the Army's in-country high command) concluded: "The reduced level of combat activity, and the increasing publicity by the news media focused upon ending the war, tended to create complacency among both the troops and their commanders."