

THE U.S. ARMY IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1965-1973

GORDON ROTTMAN

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In Gordon's Rottman's book entitled THE U.S. ARMY IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1965-1973, he has managed to get it wrong again not only in regard to facts but also the terminology and unit designations as well. Some of the corrections are listed below for just one unit, 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division which is on Page 66:

*The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division didn't arrive in Vietnam on 29 July 1965 because the 101st Airborne Division didn't have a 1st Brigade in July, 1965. The 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam on July 29, 1965. The 1st Brigade (Separate), which came to be known as the "Nomads of Vietnam" (not the Eagle Brigade), wasn't comprised of "troops being drawn from other divisional units" as the author asserts. All of the brigades of the 101st Airborne Division were under-strength at that time and a number of replacements were added to the brigade prior to deployment. This was, and is, a standard procedure within the U.S. Army, as it is with most armies. The authorized strength of a battalion in the 101st Airborne Division in 1966 was 792 but by 1968, that was increased to 920. This is indicative as to just how thin the long green line within the 1st Brigade (Separate) really was—short one maneuver battalion, several support units, and 128 men in each infantry battalion by the U.S. Army's own subsequent reckoning.

*Rottman fails to mention that the 173rd Airborne Brigade "Sky Soldiers" was comprised of four maneuver infantry battalions and was commanded by a brigadier general. The 1st Brigade (Separate) was commanded by a colonel (later a brigadier general) and had only three maneuver battalions. This made the 1st Brigade (Separate) very maneuverable, which is why General Westmoreland used it as his "fire brigade." It never failed him, no matter how outnumbered. The brigade was always under-manned, under-equipped, and under-supported. Despite this, by January, 1966, the "Nomads of Vietnam" had the highest operational tempo of any U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps unit in country, and that included the larger 173rd Airborne Brigade and the much, much larger 1st Air Cavalry Division.

*Rottman makes the mistake of implying that the 1st Brigade (Separate) was physically where the base camp was according to the official records. In point of fact, the "Nomads of Vietnam" arrived on 29 July 1965 and didn't even establish a base camp until November, 1965. This was due to the pace of the 1st Brigade (Separate)'s combat operations which allowed no one to spare for such a frivolity as a base camp, unlike every other combat unit in South Vietnam over the duration of the war.

*Within days of debarking from the USNS General Leroy Eltinge, elements of the 1st Brigade (Separate) began combat operations. Prior to leaving the United States, the then S-3 Operations officer, Major David Hackworth allowed the USNS General Leroy Eltinge to unit load the brigade's equipment, rather than combat load it. This meant that essential supplies, such as water and water tankers ("water buffalos") and ammunition, were on the bottom of the holds, and therefore the last to come off the ship. Being unacclimated to South Vietnam's summer heat and after days of inactivity aboard ship, a large percentage of the 1st Brigade (Separate)'s soldiers wound up as heat casualties.

*On 22-25 August 1965, the "Nomads of Vietnam" descended upon Qui Nhon for Operation HIGHLAND. Lasting from August, 1965 until 1 October 1965, the 1st Brigade (Separate) cleared the passage to and the area of the base camp for the 1st Air Cavalry Division. Unlike the "Nomads of Vietnam" upon their arrival, the 1st Air Cavalry Division arrived to a carefully pre-selected base camp, and a covering force to keep them safe. To do so, the "Nomads of Vietnam" had to clear the infamous Highway 19 and, by heliborne assault, the famous pass wherein French Mobile Group 100 was virtually annihilated. Twenty-three separate company or larger-sized operations were conducted by the "Nomads of Vietnam" during this period, to ensure the safe arrival by the 1st Air Cavalry Division. In the event, there wasn't a single 1st Air Cavalry casualty while under the protection of the 1st Brigade (Separate).

*During Operation GIBRALTAR, planned personally by Major David Hackworth, the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry (Airborne) made a heliborne assault into a landing zone later determined to be a main force Viet Cong battalion command post. Unfortunately, Major Hackworth placed his supporting artillery out of range to support the paratroopers on the ground, who were outnumbered, completely surrounded, and without means of either support or reinforcement. The artillery was placed to fire upon where Major Hackworth expected the enemy to be, and there was a river too deep for fording, between where Major Hackworth positioned them and the closest position from which they could support the paratroopers in the very heated battle. The 1st Brigade (Separate), as small as it was, had no organic aircraft. The U.S. Army aviation company supporting this operation had every one of its aircraft shot down. Only one and a half companies landed in the landing zone, the others being waved off by a captain, who was later killed, as were most of the officers and NCOs. The battle went on for three days and in the end, there were 226 unrecovered enemy bodies on the field of battle. The 1st Brigade (Separate) had given the United States (including both the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps) its first victory over a Viet Cong main force unit in the Vietnam War. (Note: A main force unit was a full-time unit, essentially "regulars", listed in the Viet Cong Order of Battle, but trained and closely advised by, and often under the command and control of, the North Vietnamese Army.) This battle has always been overshadowed by the Ia Drang Valley battle fought shortly thereafter by the 1st Air Cavalry Division and made famous by the book and movie "We Were Soldiers Once....And Young." The only difference between the two battles was the size of the two U.S. Army units involved, the "Nomads of

Vietnam" being smaller, and the subsequent publicity given the 1st Air Cavalry Division Ia Drang Valley battle. The two authors of the book even dismiss the battle fought by the 1st Brigade (Separate), to their own discredit.

*On 28 September 1965, the 1st Air Cavalry Division assumed responsibility for their own protection, from the "Nomads of Vietnam" who were now suffering from a severe manpower and logistical shortage. That same day, the 1st Brigade (Separate) began to return to the port of Qui Nhon to perform the same mission in support of the Republic of Korea Tiger Division (as a footnote to military history, after off-loading the 1st Brigade (Separate) and their equipment, the USNS General Leroy Eltinge was ordered to South Korea to embark the Tiger Division and take them to South Vietnam. Prior to the ship's departure, South Korean officials inspected the vessel and informed the U.S. Government that the vessel wasn't fit for such purpose and the South Koreans would just wait until the U.S. Government was able to provide a "proper" transport vessel.)

*Headquarters Headquarters Company, ("Tiger Force") 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry (Airborne) was formed as a task force as a result of Major Hackworth's blunders on Operation GIBALTAR. After he returned from self-imposed exile in Australia and then New Zealand, to avoid Federal criminal indictment; he re-invented himself as an American "hero" rather than a leading anti-American and anti-nuclear advocate. Hackworth claimed to have created the Tiger Force. That is a lie. Hackworth wasn't yet relieved from the S-3 billet and wasn't even in our battalion. Tiger Force was created by the 1st Battalion commander as a special operations task force, in order to avoid just the type of fiasco that happened to the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry (Airborne). If anything, Tiger Force was created due to Hackworth, not by him.

*In November, 1965, the "Nomads of Vietnam" rolled into Phang Rang and established a base camp. They set up tents, cots, and retrieved their duffle bags from connexes where they had been stored since their arrival in South Vietnam in July, 1965. Days later, the "Nomads of Vietnam" rolled back on out and were flown down to the base camp of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa, where they staged before road marching down to Di An, in the area of operations of the 1st Infantry Division ("The Big Red One"). One of the more interesting missions that the Tiger Force participated in was a "box-me-in" fire mission in this area of operations prior to Christmas, 1965. One night, a small Tiger Force patrol was ordered to conduct the above type of mission. As related to this reviewer by a participant in this patrol, he was under his poncho with a red-lens flashlight. Other members of this patrol were strategically positioned when a body of North Vietnamese Army soldiers began to come upon their positions. They were so close, they could smell them and in time, this small patrol was completely surrounded. It was then that the massed artillery of the entire 1st Infantry Division commenced in a "time-on-target" fire mission. Few artillerymen see that done even once in their entire career. The microphone on the Tiger Force patrol's PRC-25 was held up in the air and keyed so the entire 1st Infantry Division artillery could hear the North Vietnamese Army soldiers dying, yards from where the Tiger Force patrol was laying in wait and concealed by their ponchos and the darkness of the night. It was soon after this engagement, that the "Nomads of Vietnam" went back to Phang Rang for Christmas.

*Phang Rang was 175 miles north of Saigon and it was a mile-square base camp located on coastal shrub land. Except for a small contingent of support troops, the sick, the wounded not yet ready to return back into combat, and incoming replacements; in two years this base camp only saw the assigned units for a total of 21 days. But for three weeks in two years, the 1st Brigade (Separate) were in combat. In point of fact, the "Nomads of Vietnam" saw more time in continuous combat than any other unit in the history of the U.S. Army.

*At My Canh II, on 7 February 1966, Tiger Force made the bayonet attack against concrete machine gun bunkers across an open field and into a trench line of North Vietnamese Army soldiers. A battle for which Major Hackworth was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) from his vantage point on the other side of the river behind us. The rest of the soldiers of that unit were awarded Purple Hearts. By this point in time, Tiger Force and the rest of the "Nomads of Vietnam" were just going from one operation to another; time and place running together in a mosaic of green foliage, red blood, and the wounded and dying.

*At Dak To in June, 1966, the "Nomads of Vietnam" fought one of the most vicious battles of the Vietnam War. As one of the seasoned brigade veterans said upon getting off a C-130 at the airstrip alongside the Special Forces camp at Dak To: "I've never seen Dien Bien Phu, but this looks like the description." It did, it was, but this time it was a defeat for the 24th North Vietnamese Army Regiment. At the end of the battle-day and night, from bunker to trench line, to spider hole, to bamboo thicket, in a non-stop green hell. Vicious firefights from both sides of a steam bed, by men weakened by thirst in desert temperatures in a jungle hell, but unable to get precious water from the stream....and still be alive to pull the canteen from the water. Tiger Force, down to not very much more than a reinforced rifle squad, was hit by a two company North Vietnamese Army attack, which was first beaten off and then followed by a counterattack. Defensive perimeters were so small that some helicopters had to come in almost above the positions to prevent killing our own wounded or being hit by enemy ground fire while dropping much needed ammunition through the thick jungle canopy. Many of the paratroopers were down to only three or four rounds of ammunition while listening to the NVA preparing yet another attack. When the battle was over, the surviving members of the "Nomads of Vietnam" looked the survivors of Guadalcanal. The opposition, the 24th North Vietnamese Army Regiment was destroyed. They suffered more than 1,200 KIA or killed in action. Lt. General Stanley R. Larsen, then commanding general of I Field Force, Vietnam publicly declared the 1st Brigade (Separate) to be "the best fighting unit in Vietnam." President Lyndon B. Johnson assigned to Tiger Force the title "elite", the only U.S. Army unit ever to be so designated by a President of the United States.

*Apparently none of this means anything to Rottman, however. He doesn't mention any of this. Indeed his history of this unit makes no sense at all. This is a writer out of control, he isn't a scholar and his credentials have been made more arcane over the years, to the point wherein it can be suggested that the publisher's biographical summary may be technically true, but it isn't honest.

*Rottman also appears not to mention unit awards, which for the 1st Brigade (Separate) alone during the period of 1965-1966 includes, but

isn't limited to the following: Presidential Unit Citation (Army) for Dak To, Vietnam 1966; Valorous Unit Award for Tuy Hoa; and Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army) for Vietnam 1965-1966.

A good scholar or a good military historian simply doesn't go to one or two sources and doesn't copy that information by putting it in his book. That is called plagiarism. I also have talked to two well known military historians who have given Rottman photographs and information from their personal collections. Both individuals stated to me that he was only allowed a one time use of this information and photographs and to give them credit for providing it but Rottman has used it more than once (I have documented this and sent it to a well-know publisher for possible legal action) and he fails to give them credit.

All information needs to be confirmed and Rottman's Order of Battle (OB) for the 101st Airborne Division is wrong. There should be one for the 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division and another for the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, effective the date that the 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division stood down and was immediately re-constituted as a maneuver brigade of the division. For, until that very moment, the brigade commander held an independent command and stood equal to the division commander, in fact not in rank. As an Order of Battle (OB), Rottman's book also misidentifies unit designations and fails to indicate when some of these units joined the brigade. Not all the units cited by Rottman deployed with the brigade originally. If the entry for the 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division is indicative of this book, Osprey needs to pull this book, before it impeaches its own integrity and credibility, which Rottman has been pushing to the breaking point. Rottman no longer has any credibility as a scholar. He, at best, is a technical writer who needs to be followed around by a committee of fact checkers. If this entry is typical, this is one very bad book.

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Memorial
Wall facts

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