
NO TIME FOR REFLECTION: MOORE AT IA DRANG

Nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a
battle won.

—Wellington, Dispatches from Waterloo, 1815

BACKGROUND

During November 14–16, 1965, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division of the U.S. Army fought a battle in the Central Highlands of Vietnam that fundamentally changed the character of the war. Also a very bloody conflict—the bloodiest of the war—the four days of fighting caused the 7th Cavalry Regiment to suffer a higher percentage of casualties than had any regiment, Union or Confederate, at Gettysburg.¹

On February 6, 1965, an attack by Viet Cong forces on the U.S. Advisor compound at Pleiku left eight Americans dead and over one hundred wounded. This was a serious escalation of the war. Up until that time, U.S. involvement had been characterized by small counterinsurgency operations conducted by Special Forces and Army advisers throughout the country. These operations were oriented primarily toward eliminating local support for the Viet Cong and enabling local villagers to defend themselves.

In response, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Forces in South Vietnam, asked for, and got, a battalion of Marines to guard the airbase at Pleiku. In April, he asked for two more battalions of Marines and permission to transition from strictly defensive duties to actively seeking to engage the Viet Cong. The Marines, plus

¹Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*, New York: Random House, 1992, p. xx.

the Army's 173d Airborne Brigade and a newly designated helicopter-borne division, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), were mobilized and deployed to Vietnam in the summer of 1965.² In late August, the 1st Cavalry Division moved into permanent quarters at An Khe in the geographic center of South Vietnam's Central Highlands (see Figure 7.1).

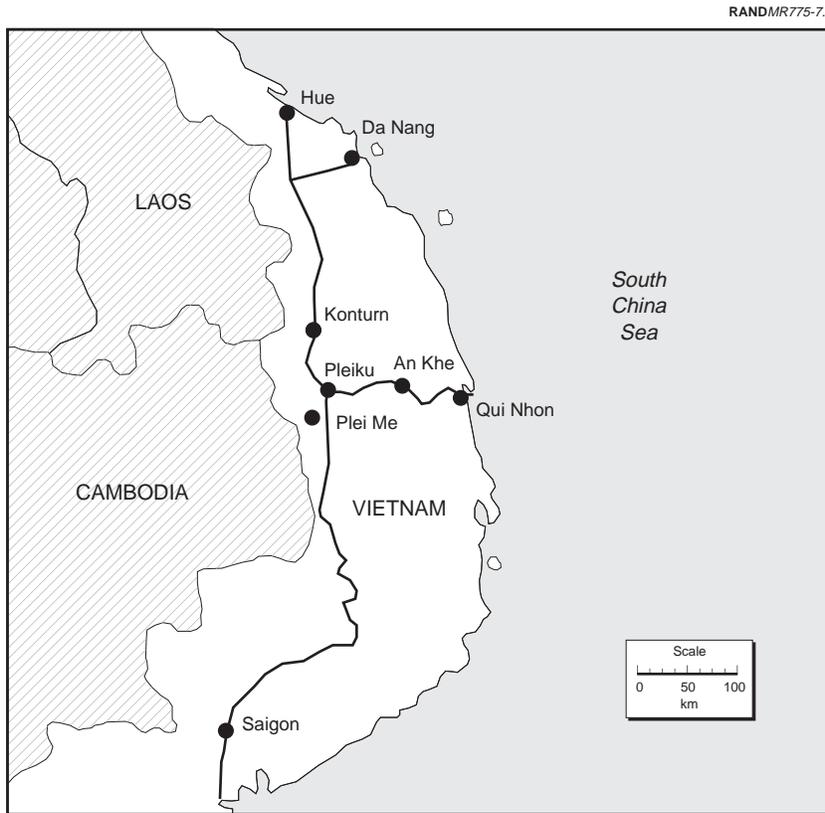


Figure 7.1—II Corps' Tactical Zone

²Moore and Galloway, 1992, pp. 14–15.

At the same time, North Vietnamese General Chu Huy Man, Commander of the Western Field Front Headquarters, ordered preparations for conducting a general offensive to wrest control of a major part of the Central Highlands (Kontum, Pleiku, Bin Dinh, and Phu Bon Provinces) from the South Vietnamese government. His objectives were to destroy Special Forces Camps at Plei Me, Dak Sut, and Duc Co and the district headquarters of the Saigon government at Le Thanh, and to capture the city of Pleiku. To accomplish these tasks, he had at his disposal three regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments, the 32d, 33d, and 66th.³

In mid-October, shortly after the 1st Cavalry Division moved into its new quarters at An Khe, General Man kicked off his campaign with an assault on the Special Forces camp at Plei Me. This attack, conducted by the 32d and 33d NVA regiments, was unsuccessful, largely as a result of the Americans' skillful use of fire support. General Man's regiments withdrew toward the Cambodian border, having stirred up a hornet's nest of American activity in response. For the next two weeks, troopers of the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade pursued and harassed the withdrawing NVA units in intensive search-and-destroy and reconnaissance operations.

As October drew to a close, it became clear to the division commander, Major General Harry W.O. Kinnard, that the NVA forces being pursued by the 1st Brigade were in danger of slipping across the Cambodian border, which was only 25 miles from Plei Me. He directed his attention toward the Chu Pong Massif, a rugged and remote piece of high ground straddling the Vietnam-Cambodian border—specifically, to the area between the foothills of the massif north to the Ia Drang River—and ordered his Third Brigade commander, Colonel Tim Brown, to search westward toward the Cambodian border (see Figure 7.2).

At this time, General Man was attempting to compensate for the heavy NVA losses at Plei Me by reorganizing for a renewed assault on the compound. The spot he picked for assembling and rehearsing his forces was the same piece of ground that Colonel Brown had

³John A. Cash, John Albright, and Allan W. Sandstrum, *Seven Firefights in Vietnam*, New York: Bantam, 1985, p. 5.

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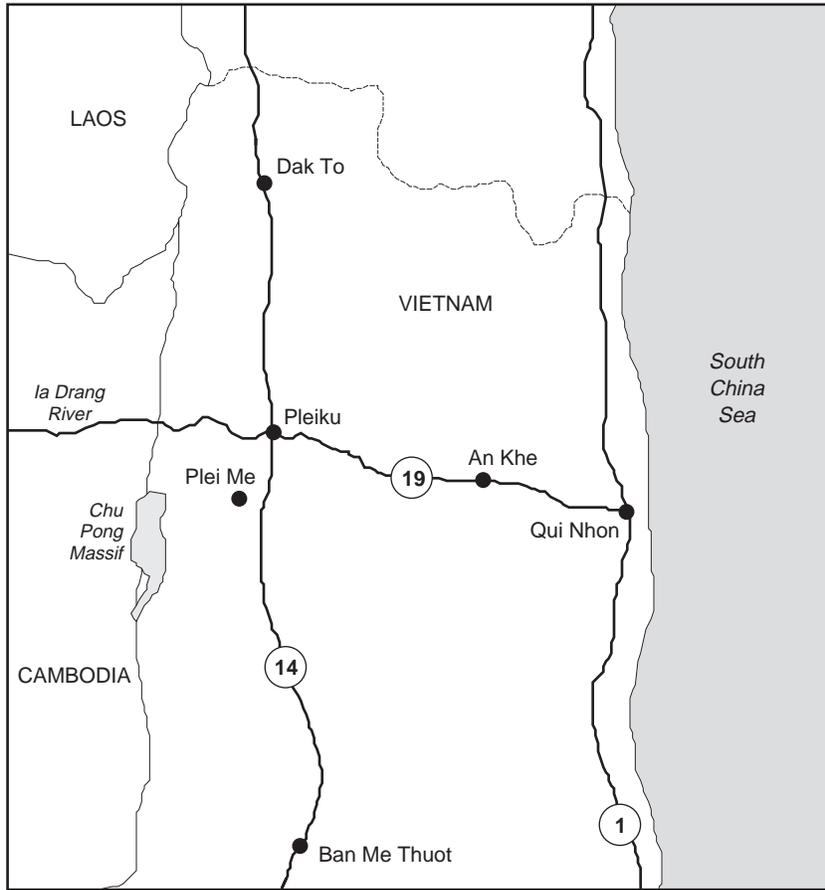


Figure 7.2—Ia Drang Area of Operations

been tasked to search. Thus, the stage was set for the unintended collision of two large opposing forces—the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division and the division-sized North Vietnamese B-3 Front.⁴

⁴Cash et al., 1985, p. 4.

THE PLANS

General Man's operational concept was fairly simple. North Vietnamese strategic objectives would be well served by a war of attrition: By denying victory to the U.S./ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces, the North Vietnamese would eventually win. By raising the casualty rate, this process could be accelerated. Therefore, General Man's objective was to inflict as many casualties as possible on (1) the Special Forces garrison at Plei Me, (2) the ARVN relief column that would certainly be sent to their rescue, and (3) the U.S. force that would be sent to rescue the first two:

"We wanted to lure the tiger out of the mountain," General Man said, adding: "We would attack the ARVN—but we would be ready to fight the Americans. . . . Headquarters decided we had to prepare very carefully to fight the Americans. Our problem was that we had never fought Americans before and we had no experience fighting them. We wanted to draw American units into contact for the purposes of learning how to fight them. We wanted any American combat troops; we didn't care which ones."⁵

The American forces were driven by a much different, reactive concept. They viewed themselves as exterminators called in to eradicate a particularly troublesome pest, rather than as military-political operators whose aim was to destroy the will of the North Vietnamese to fight. Therefore, when NVA forces were located, the immediate objective was to engage and destroy them. The implicit notion behind the American strategy was that, if this tactical objective could be achieved a sufficient number of times, then the overall strategic goal of maintaining a political order in Saigon friendly to U.S. interests could be achieved.

This unarticulated strategic concept served as the basis for the operational command concepts of the U.S. forces throughout the Vietnam War. The U.S. approach is well illustrated by the following passage from an account of a fight at Dak To in 1967:

⁵Moore and Galloway, 1992, p. 15.

Regardless of the risks involved in attacking the enemy on terrain of his own choosing, the rare opportunity to catch the North Vietnamese in any concentration of forces could not be passed up.⁶

The assumption built into this concept was the idea—an arrogant one in retrospect—that finding engagement opportunities was the problem, not defeating an enemy under any terms of engagement. That assumption was remarkably persistent throughout the war, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary.

Thus, at 1700 hours on November 13, Colonel Brown ordered his 1st Battalion Commander (1/7 Cav), Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore, to execute an airmobile assault into the Ia Drang Valley northeast of the Chu Pong Massif early on the morning of the 14th, and to conduct search-and-destroy operations through November 15. He would be allocated 16 helicopters for the assault. Fire support would be provided by two batteries (12 guns) from the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery. They would be firing in support from Landing Zone (LZ) FALCON, 9 km east of the search area.⁷ Helicopter gunships with rocket artillery and fixed-wing tactical air (Air Force) support would also be on call.⁸

As Moore began planning, he decided that, with a potentially large enemy force in the area, it would be safest to put his entire battalion into a single LZ, where he could concentrate his combat power most effectively. An aerial reconnaissance on the 14th confirmed that, of four potential sites, only one site, LZ X-RAY, would be suitable, since it could handle about eight ships at one time. This capacity would enable Moore to put about one rifle company on the ground with each flight, landing in two lifts each.

Having chosen X-RAY, Moore briefed his company commanders that intelligence estimates placed an enemy battalion approximately 5 km northwest of X-RAY, another force of undetermined size just south of X-RAY, and a hidden base approximately 3 km to the north-

⁶Allan W. Sandstrum, "Three Companies at Dak To," in Albright et al., *Seven Fire-fights in Vietnam*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History (OCMH), 1970, p. 88.

⁷Cash et al., 1985, p. 5.

⁸Cash et al., 1985, p. 7.

west (see Figure 7.3). The 1/7 Cavalry would conduct an air assault into X-RAY, then search for and destroy enemy forces in the area, concentrating on streambeds and ridgelines.⁹ Once the battalion was on the ground, it would leapfrog forward by companies to the west, seeking contact with the enemy.

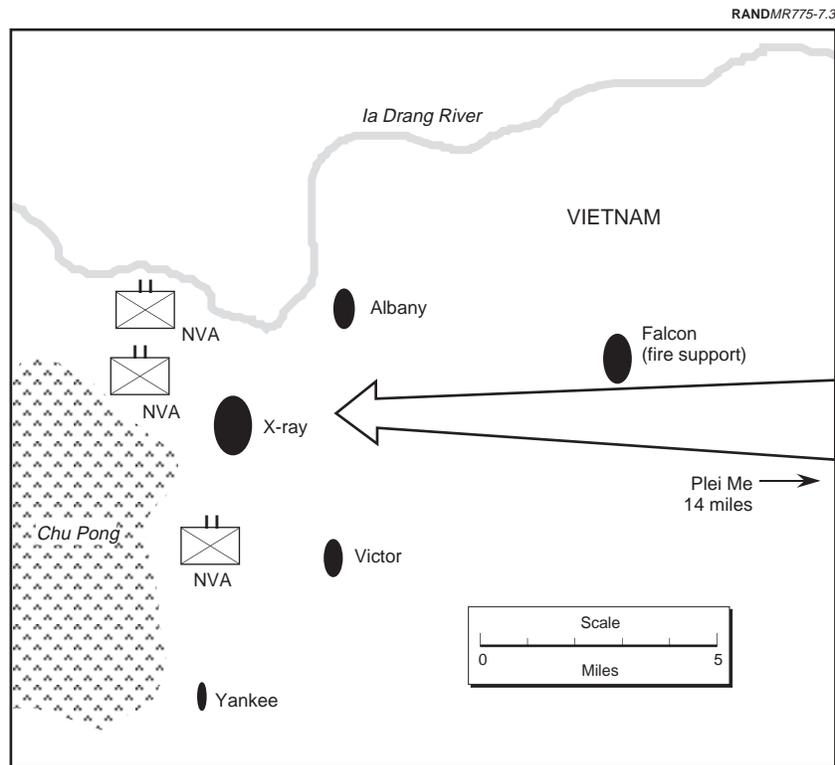


Figure 7.3—Moore's Plan

⁹Cash et al., 1985, p. 9.

THE BATTLE

Following intense artillery preparation from his fire support base, LZ FALCON, Moore's B Company was airlifted into LZ X-RAY early on the morning of November 14. Sprinting from their helicopters, the soldiers of B Company swiftly secured the LZ without encountering any enemy. They settled in to await the 30-minute turnaround of the transport helicopters. As A Company was arriving around 1120, the aggressive probing of B Company turned up a prisoner, a North Vietnamese regular, who confirmed that there were three NVA battalions on Chu Pong Mountain, anxious to kill Americans but as yet unable to find them.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, B Company found itself in a major contact: At least a company-sized NVA force was trying to overrun the LZ. It became difficult to land. Not until 1330 hours were A Company's last platoon and the lead elements of C Company able to land. The intensity of the NVA pressure on the LZ continued to increase. At 1420, the remainder of C Company and elements of D Company landed in the fifth lift. By 1500 hours, Moore estimated that he was opposed by 500–600 NVA, with more on the way.

Through skillful positioning of his forces and judicious use of reserves, Moore was able to beat back the initial onslaught and get the remaining tactical elements of his command into the fight. By 1630, D Company had landed and Moore threw them immediately into the fight to push back the attackers. However, General Man's forces persisted and continued to push against the American battalion. By 1700, Moore was fighting three separate actions: One force was defending X-RAY; two of his companies were attacking; and one platoon from Bravo Company was isolated, fighting for its life several hundred meters from the LZ (see Figure 7.4).¹¹

During the night of the 14th, the 66th NVA Regiment moved its 8th Battalion south to the battle area and charged it with applying pressure against the eastern sector of X-RAY. Meanwhile, General Man

¹⁰Cash et al., 1985, p. 20.

¹¹Cash et al., 1985, p. 24.

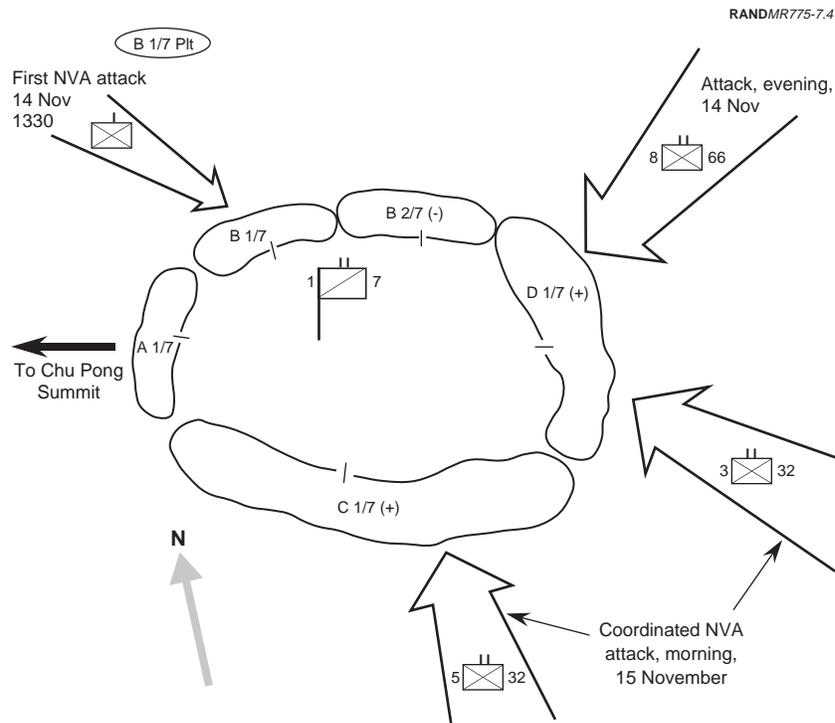


Figure 7.4—LZ X-RAY, November 14–15, 1965

ordered the H-15 Main Force Viet Cong Battalion and the 32d NVA Regiment, some 12 km away, into the fight.¹²

During the morning of the 15th, C Company, holding the southern side of the X-RAY perimeter, came under a ferocious attack at first light. Shortly thereafter, D Company, holding the southeast quadrant of the perimeter, also came under heavy attack. The fighting was so close-in that enemy grazing fire was traversing the entire LZ. Using massive amounts of artillery and fire support, Moore’s forces stalled and then repulsed the NVA attack. By 1000 hours, the NVA’s

¹²Cash et al., 1985, p. 26.

strong attempt to overrun the perimeter had failed and the attacks had ceased.¹³

Two hours later, three companies of 2/7 Cavalry arrived at X-RAY on foot to relieve Colonel Moore's battalion. Colonel Moore immediately directed an effort to relieve the lost platoon of Bravo Company, which had been cut off from the battalion for two days. This operation was successful. It recovered the surviving members of the platoon, as well as all of the American casualties.¹⁴ The reinforced battalion settled in for its last night at X-RAY. By dawn of the 16th, after heavy probing throughout the night, the enemy attack had run its course.¹⁵

By 0930 on the morning of the 16th, the remainder of 2/7 Cavalry arrived at X-RAY, relieving the 1/7 Cavalry. Colonel Moore's unit marched overland to a nearby extraction zone and was airlifted back to An Khe.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

General Kinnard's operational objective was to inflict losses on a fleeing enemy about whom hard information was scarce. Colonel Brown's own command concept reflected this objective, as well as the implicit assumption that Moore, properly supported, could handle whatever he encountered. Brown's intent, not very well expressed in his FRAGO (FRAGmentary Order), was roughly: "Find the enemy wherever he is and engage and destroy him. You have the force, training, and support to do the job."

During the airmobile insertion and afterwards, the C2 system was used overwhelmingly for control rather than command. Moore was decisively engaged from the moment he set foot on the LZ. All available bandwidth was devoted to killing those forces in front of him that were trying to destroy his battalion—that is, to alerting cavalry of where they were needed. Once Moore gained control of the situation, the C2 system, as he used it, was not adequate to support the

¹³Cash et al., 1985, p. 31.

¹⁴Cash et al., 1985, p. 36.

¹⁵Cash et al., 1985, p. 37.

development and articulation of a new, follow-on concept to destroy the remaining NVA forces.

MOORE'S COMMAND CONCEPT

Although Moore did not explicitly articulate a command concept as such, he did give a very detailed order. Like Admiral Jellicoe at the Battle of Jutland, he seems to have gone into battle more with implicit assumptions than with an explicit vision of what he should and could make happen. From the assumptions embedded in Colonel Brown's Brigade FRAGO—that tactical surprise would be achieved, that air and tube artillery support would compensate for unforeseen difficulties, and that the real fight would commence once 1/7 Cavalry had moved westward toward the Chu Pong Massif—Moore might have developed and communicated the following ideal command concept:

I. ABOUT THE ENEMY AND HIS PLANS:

1. The enemy [the NVA] currently has no more than 2,500 troops in the Chu Pong area. He does not suspect our intentions.
2. The enemy is expected to retire to the west, to sanctuaries in Cambodia, with the intent of reconstituting his strength for a renewed offensive in Pleiku and Bin Dinh Provinces.
3. You [U.S. troops] should expect the North Vietnamese to attempt to break contact and conduct a delay in-sector with two under-strength regiments while continuing to withdraw most of his forces into Cambodia.

II. ABOUT OUR FORCE DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS:

1. We shall conduct an air assault into LZ X-RAY and leapfrog up the Ia Drang Valley to isolate the NVA 32d Regiment as it continues its withdrawal toward the Cambodian border, with the objective of destroying it.
2. We shall land in seven lifts of two flights each over 2-1/2 hours.

3. Upon closure of the battalion into LZ X-RAY, 1/7 Cavalry will conduct a reconnaissance in the zone west to the military crest of the Chu Pong Massif, engaging and destroying enemy forces in-sector.
4. Our operational objective is the relief of enemy pressure in the Central Highlands, but our tactical objective is to destroy the 32d NVA Regiment—commensurate with preserving the ability of 1/7 Cavalry to continue to fight. The measure of tactical success will be rendering the 32d NVA Regiment combat-ineffective.

III. ABOUT CONTINGENCIES:

1. Our air support and available artillery support will dominate chance encounters with any NVA force in the area of operations.
2. Our superior training, equipment, and support will enable us to fight and win against a larger NVA force.
3. We shall be deployed so that we can always assume a defensive posture that cannot be overrun by the NVA forces in the area, can be sustained by our superior fire support, and can be relieved by additional units from the 1st Cavalry Division.

This command concept was ideal only in the sense that, if it had been clearly articulated beforehand, Moore could have been absent and the outcome would likely have been about the same—except for the encouragement he lent his troops by his presence. But this concept was embedded in flawed higher-level concepts, concepts like those of the Royal Navy as it set forth to the Battle of Jutland, which also assumed that the salient problem was finding and engaging the enemy. If that could be accomplished, then the superior training, equipment, tactics, and doctrine would provide for success. At Ia Drang and Jutland, that arrogance resulted in costly stalemates.

ASSESSMENT

The above command concept, mostly inferred from Brown's combat order, is basically tactical in nature—about how to move his forces into the fight, about how he was to be supported, and about what he hoped to accomplish by engaging the enemy—but very little about

how the operation might unfold and what could be expected. These aspects seemed to have remained unspoken in training, both tactical and doctrinal. The order paints a clear enough picture of the objective of the mission and criteria for evaluating its success. But the tacit acceptance of the strategic assumptions and the tactical intentions of the enemy almost led to disaster at Ia Drang and ultimately led to a disaster in Vietnam.

The main flaw in the concept—such as it was—is that it did not really address the enemy’s options. It assumed that the NVA had no capability to interfere with the accomplishment of Moore’s objective. If the enemy is assumed not to be able to interfere, the only remaining problems are logistics- and terrain-related. In regarding the NVA as an essentially passive recipient of the violence Moore intended to inflict on it, Moore’s concept did not allow for the contingency that ultimately arose. Moore’s failure was *not* considering what his actions should be if the enemy did not meet his expectations. He neglected both to understand himself and to articulate to 1/7 Cavalry how to accomplish their objective in spite of the possibility of non-fulfillment of expectations. Those contingencies should have been a key component of an *ideal* command concept, and they are missing in Brown’s FRAGO.

Strong evidence of their absence is given by the immense volume and type of traffic over Moore and Brown’s command nets during the battle. Traffic was incessant, chaotic, and almost entirely devoted to retaining control of the situation. Circumstances forced Moore to use his bandwidth in an attempt to save his battalion—which he did—but in so doing he was prevented from using his C2 system to command: to develop and communicate a new concept that would allow him to impose his will on his enemy.

This case is an excellent example of a good C2 system that could not cope with a less-than-well-thought-out command concept. Given the manner in which the C2 system was employed, it failed Moore. It was not organized to peer into the jungle and tell him much about the nature of the enemy, or of its plans, intentions, and likely response to Moore’s actions. And, unlike van Creveld’s ideal commander, Moore had not “discovered what it [the C2 system] could not do and then proceed to do it nonetheless.”

This case provides an excellent opportunity to discuss an extreme example of how our theory deals with a concept that is proven badly wrong by events. Whereas Moore promulgated (notionally) a concept predicated on a lengthy search for and envelopment of a weak and fleeing enemy force, he was quickly presented with evidence that the enemy was neither weak nor fleeing. Although our assessment focused on the failure of Moore's initial concept, we should note that, under extreme time pressure, Moore developed, articulated, and executed at least three separate command concepts over a 36-hour period while in the defense: (1) in shifting forces to keep the LZ open during the insertion of his battalion, (2) in organizing for the attack during the next morning (he expected an attack and had his soldiers execute a "Mad Minute" at dawn, which effectively pre-empted and spoiled the main NVA attack), and (3) in subsequently deciding to preserve and withdraw his force to An Khe.

In our terms of reference, having failed to achieve his initial objectives, Moore deftly crafted and successfully executed three command concepts that (1) were transmitted to and understood by all, (2) were within the capabilities of his C2 system to support, (3) segued from one to another based on his (correct) anticipation of enemy intentions, and (4) were triggered to follow as they did by events that Moore anticipated.

Similarly flawed assumptions underlie the failure of the battle in the next case study, a battle that was structured against available intelligence, rather than in line with it.