

# What Happened Here?

by Dr. John Thiel

On 31 January 1970, the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division lost seven men when a single helicopter was shot down in an action north of Tay Ninh. The day before, a light observation helicopter (LOH) received ground fire from the region of the saddle due north of Tay Ninh. An NVA unit, variably estimated as the size of a battalion or a regiment, had been spotted in the open. Company B of the Regulars (3/22d Infantry) reacted quickly via heliborne assault. The men were on the ground for only a short time when they began to take fire from a nearby wood line. Under the cover of organic weapons, they pulled back and let the artillery and air strikes pound the area thoroughly. Company C and tanks from the 2/34<sup>th</sup> Armor soon joined Company B.

The enemy retreated into a finger of woods, and Company A was inserted on the other side to operate as a mobile blocking force. As B and C Companies moved into the woods, they continued to receive sporadic sniper fire, but soon found themselves in the midst of an enemy regimental headquarters and staging complex. The main enemy force had withdrawn to the north, deeper into the jungle. The engagement continued into the next day, 31 January, when, at approximately 1000 hours, a UH-1H helicopter came into the area at treetop level. The men in the cargo area were dropping CS gas to the ground. Despite the covering fire of the door gunners' machine guns, the aircraft was brought down by the enemy. It exploded on impact and burned. All aboard died. The site was secured by troops from either A or B Company, according to a member of C Company who was there.

There are many unanswered questions about this action. They range from the simple like the direction in which the aircraft was flying to the complex like why three Chemical Corps officers were aboard the same aircraft. In between, are questions like was A Company inserted on the east or west side of the finger of jungle, what was the situation on the ground that required a CS drop, what was the nature of the CS munition used, what were the results/benefits of the CS drop, did the aircraft crash in jungle or open terrain, did the aircraft drop to the ground or "auger in", what was the aircraft's mission prior to this last action. Based on my experience and knowledge of Chemical Corps activities in Vietnam, I can develop a good story that explains everything, but it would be only speculation without eyewitness testimony or operations journals that describe what actually happened. So, whether you were directly involved in the action that day or not, on the ground or in the air, in a TOC at battalion, brigade, or division level, or with the 9<sup>th</sup> Chemical Detachment or Division Chemical, any information whatsoever about this incident would be greatly appreciated.

This is an important event for the Chemical Corps, and that's what got me interested in it. I have since learned that none of the flight crew was decorated for their actions that day on what was obviously a very dangerous mission. I would like to correct that, if possible. Finally, but most importantly, family members find great comfort in learning how their loved ones died, and we can make that happen.

The helicopter, tail number 68-15462, was from B Company, 25<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion. The aircraft crew members were:

CW2 Fulton, Ronald Joe	Aircraft Commander
2LT Arrants, Michael Lorrel	Pilot
CPL West, Jerald Dale	Crew Chief (posthumously promoted to SGT)
SP4 Rodgers, John Thomas	Gunner (posthumously promoted to SGT)

The men dropping the CS were:

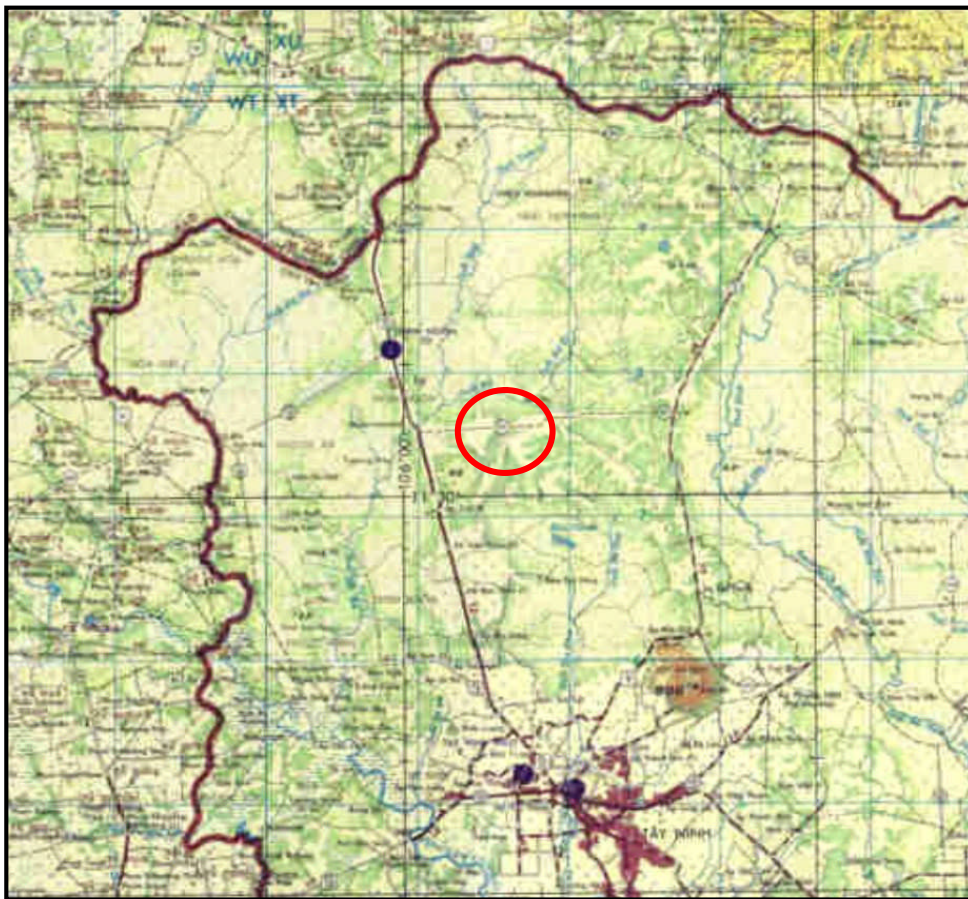
CPT Beek, John Lawrence (Larry) Assistant Division Chemical Officer



CPT Bowman, Paul Barkley  
CO, 9<sup>th</sup> Chemical Detachment



CPT Denny, Jerry David  
1st Brigade Chemical Officer



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About the author: Dr. John Thiel was a Chemical Staff Specialist with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in 1968 and 1969. His primary mission was clearing tunnels and bunkers and contaminating them with persistent CS. He was severely wounded by mortar fire on two occasions and medically retired from service as a result. He then earned a doctorate in business administration from Indiana University. Dr. Thiel's Chemical Corps historical research earned him election to the Chemical Corps Hall of Fame in 2013.