

# A CONTAGION OF WAR

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## Combat Support

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On its third day Operation Masher began to unfold as planned, as the brigade set about combing through the paddies and villages, trying to trap remnants of the enemy battalion between attacking and blocking forces. Companies A and C of the 2/7, so battered for two days at LZ 4, swept north out of their cemetery bivouac at 7:30 A.M. on January 30. The relieving battalion, the 2/12, marched on the east flank in parallel formation. In one hamlet of Tan Thanh Village, just a kilometer north of LZ 4 they located an enemy company ensconced in what Colonel Moore called “a rat’s nest of trenches and bunkers and spider holes.”

Artillery and tac air pounded the enemy positions, and then the infantry moved through the hamlet yard by yard, firing rifles and machine guns and throwing hand grenades. Some 100 meters from the trenches, the two battalions split to stage a double envelopment maneuver. Some enemy soldiers bolted from the trenches and the Americans cut them down. Gunships flying over the scene tracked down others. In spite of heavy fire from the trenches, the Americans suffered light casualties.

The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, kept on the move northwest of LZ 4, shuttling between landing zones and patrolling on foot to intercept the withdrawing enemy. Late in the day of January 31, Company A encountered a reinforced enemy company in a hamlet of Luong Tho Village, and a furious firefight broke out. For over an hour the fight raged at distances too close to allow artillery or air support. Companies B and C from the 1/7 fought their way toward the village and provided enough fire to allow Company A to pull back its wounded far enough so that artillery and air support could be called in safely just before darkness fell.

Company A commander Captain Ramon (“Tony”) Nadal had a dozen seriously wounded men. As darkness approached, Nadal reached Colonel Moore on the radio and requested a medical evacuation helicopter. But a night landing in a hot LZ, located in the center of a hamlet, had a negligible chance of succeeding. Moore told Nadal there would be no medevac until morning.

In his UH-1D helicopter, Major Bruce Crandall, commander of Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, heard snatches of the conversation between Nadal and Moore. Crandall had to fly one more short mission to the north of Bong Son before he could park his Huey for the night, and out of curiosity he detoured over Luong Tho hoping to catch a glimpse of the stranded company.

As Crandall returned to base, Nadal raised him on the radio. The two were friends, and each had distinguished himself at the battle of LZ X-Ray, Nadal with his rifle company and Crandall flying in desperately needed supplies and evacuating numerous wounded. “Serpent 6, this is Firechief 6,” Nadal called. “Do you read me? I got serious problems.” “So what’s new, Tony?” Crandall responded. “Every time you

call me, its trouble.” Nadal explained the situation, and Crandall agreed to give it a try. After he refueled in the dark at Bong Son, the group commander came on the radio network and told him that he didn’t have to go. Crandall acknowledged that the mission was voluntary. He had confidence that if he crashed, Nadal’s men would cover and rescue him. At 7:30, lifting into the night sky without lights, Crandall proceeded north.

As the helicopter arrived over the hamlet, Nadal, carrying his flashlight and radio, crawled into the tiny landing zone, surrounded by palm trees and brush. The LZ was so small that Crandall would have to descend and ascend vertically instead of approaching at an angle on the helicopter’s normal glide slope. Such a vertical descent and ascent was possible only with a light load. Hunkering down as low as he could, Nadal turned on the flashlight and began to talk the pilot down. Tracer bullets flew across the pitch-dark LZ.

Crandall couldn’t see the trees. Or the LZ. He nudged the stick softly toward the needle of light that kept going dark as the NVA fired at it. “Crandall heard Nadal talking, easing him down, bravely failing to mention the enemy fire that forced him to shut off the light and scramble a few yards away before flicking it on again. Peering down into the darkness, Crandall wished he could shine his searchlights for just an instant to fix the trees. But that would allow the enemy to sight their aimless fire. He was almost down now. The light was close. As Company A laid down a tremendous base of suppressing fire, the helicopter, with the chop of its rotor adding to the roar, settled and hovered and touched down.

Men raced to the helicopter with the most seriously wounded. Because of the weight restrictions on the vertical ascent, Crandall could take but a half dozen. The loading consumed five minutes, as the firing continued, and then Crandall lifted off. “Coming out was tough because I had to pull up and take those people out without any forward movement,” he said. The helicopter cleared the trees and banked south.

Crandall delivered the casualties to Bong Son, but the job was only half done. He returned to Luong Tho. Following the same procedure, he descended for the remaining casualties. This time everyone knew what to do and it went more quickly. Crandall spent perhaps two or three minutes on the hot LZ before getting out. Later he explained his heroism (he did not call it that but it earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross) in terms of mutual respect. “You always had great confidence in the infantry,” he said. “You supported those guys as well as they supported you.”

The day’s combat had cost the 1st Battalion 13 men killed and 33 wounded. But the 1/7 had inflicted greater losses on the enemy, having counted 67 bodies, with another 100 estimated killed by artillery and tac air. The attacking and blocking tactics, made possible by air mobility, were proving effective.