

THANKSGIVING AT DAK TO

"We're goin' up that hill. We're gonna get ourselves Hill 875 for Thanksgiving Day. Ain't that nice?"

The speaker was a Negro sergeant of the Second Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade, and he was talking to NEWSWEEK correspondent Edward Behr, who, minutes earlier, had been helicoptered from the U.S. base at Dak To onto the slopes of Hill 875 in time to cover the final assault. "You goin' up?" the sergeant asked Behr—who nodded assent. "You'll need a gas mask then," said the sergeant. "We're gonna use tear gas on them bunkers. Connolly! Bring the gentleman that spare gas mask." Then, softly, he added: "Reckon we have spares of pretty well everything in the Second Battalion right now."

"What the sergeant meant, of course," Behr cabled later, "was spares of everything but men. The Second had taken a fearful mauling and the place reeked of death and war. There were piles of rubbish everywhere—spent shells, empty cartridge cases, bloodied bandages. The GI's had the vacant look of men who have been under fire too long.

"Suddenly, out of a bunker a few yards ahead of me, there emerged a company of the 173rd's Fourth Battalion, which had been called in to reinforce the shattered Second. There was a great deal of shouting: 'Now I want you to get up there and get them sons of bitches.'

"As the GI's moved forward, I kept going just behind them. For five minutes the going was good—and I had the wild hope that it would turn out to be a quick, inglorious and safe walk to the top. Then mortar shells began to explode on our right flank. Some of the GI's were yelling 'Go! Go! Go!' Others, nearly beside themselves with tension, poured out a stream of obscenities. We were coming close to the top now and the North Vietnamese were lobbing shell after shell into the advancing line.

Shell Shock: "Soon there came cries of 'litters, more litters.' A man was carried past me on a stretcher. He looked no more than 17, and from his olive skin might have been Mexican or Puerto Rican. He was moaning and looked deranged. 'Shell-shock case,' somebody said, and I looked around. The man who spoke was practically naked from the waist down. Though he was not visibly injured, the blast of the mortar shells had blown off his trousers. He didn't answer when I spoke to him. Temporarily, he was stone deaf.

"I stayed put in an empty bunker, a North Vietnamese one from the look of it, while the GI's advanced to within 20 yards of the crest. I could hear them shouting, and for the first time there was sustained small-arms fire. They were firing into bunker positions, and this was followed by the red-and-black swirl of smoke from flame throwers. Then there was silence and I moved forward again.

"As I did, the stretchers started coming down the hill past me once more. On one was a GI, dead of a hideous wound at chest and shoulder level; I recognized him as a tall, red-haired machine gunner I had walked behind on the lower slope. Scattered all over the hill were vestiges of the battle: abandoned packs, charred helmets and scraps of uniforms, both American and North Vietnamese. Lying outside one bunker was a gray-green object which puzzled me. I looked more closely, and a wave of horror suddenly hit me. It was a man's shoulder and the stump of an arm. Nearby was a charred boot with black, burnt flesh attached.

"We've got the hill," said one gaunt and grimy GI somberly. Others sat, sprawled or lay in the landing zone, waiting indifferently to be helicoptered back to the base at Dak To and a hot turkey dinner. Hill 875 had finally fallen to the Americans after five of the bloodiest days of the Vietnamese war."



In one sense, the capture of Hill 875 was a famous victory. The GI's—chiefly the men of the 173rd Airborne—had fought with almost incredible valor to rout out a deeply entrenched enemy. But at least 158 Americans died in the fight for Hill 875 and 402 more had been wounded. Not since the fighting in the Ia Drang valley two years ago had the U.S. troops taken such a beating, and, inevitably, questions arose: was Hill 875, held for most of the battle by no more than a reinforced company of North Vietnamese, worth such a price? Why, indeed, were the paratroopers fighting there at all?

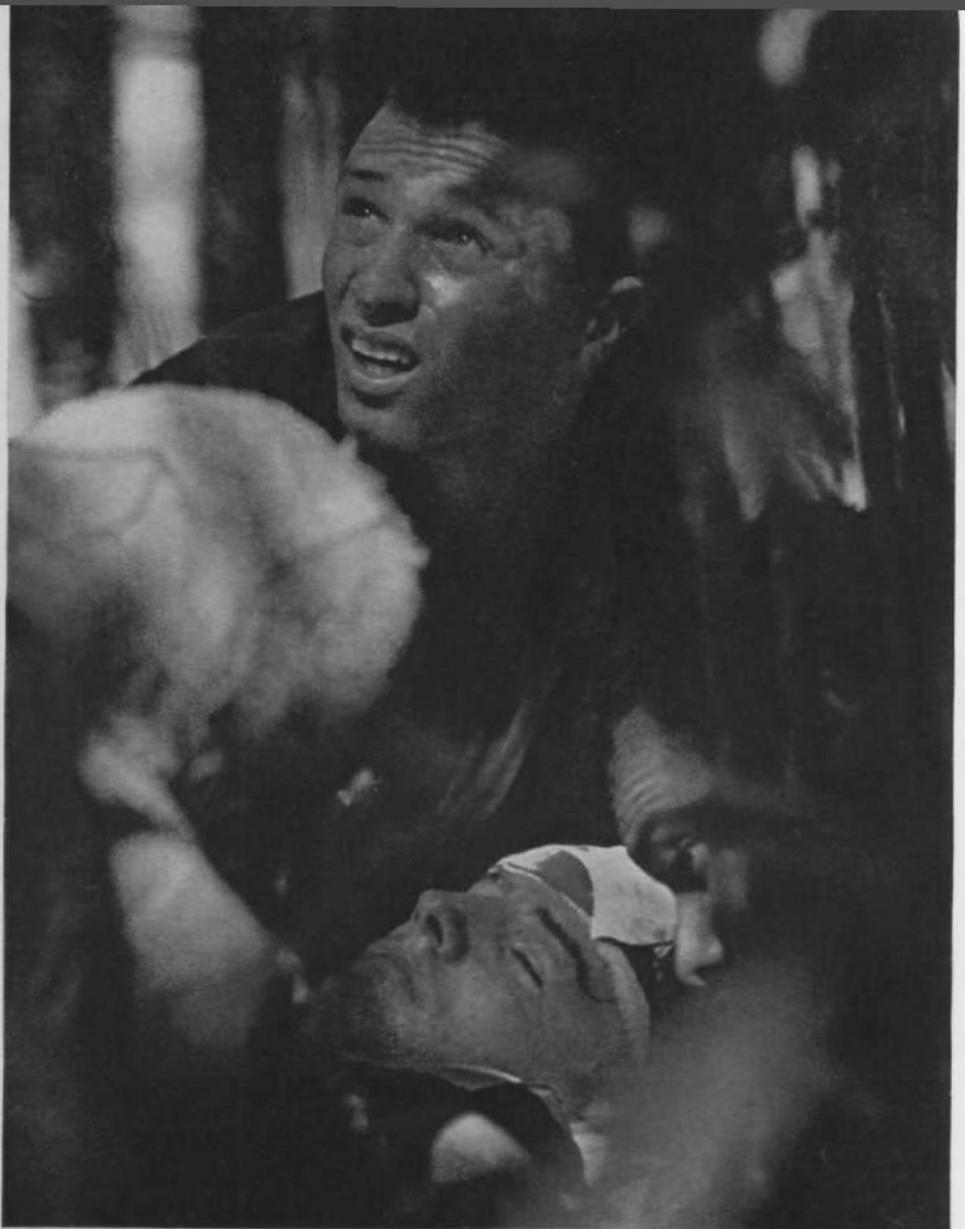
Trail's End: The answer to that lay in the town of Dak To in Vietnam's central highlands. A scruffy village 20 miles from the juncture of the Laotian, Cambodian and South Vietnamese borders, Dak To is not much to look at and would not be worth fighting over—except for one thing. It sits at the terminus of many of the trails that meander down from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia and along which flow supplies and reinforcements for the North Vietnamese troops fighting in South Vietnam.

Dak To, with its airstrip and U.S. Special Forces camp, is part of the system of border bases set up to staunch that flow, a job that until early this month was carried out by a handful of U.S. troops and a band of local Montagnard tribesmen. But then, with intelligence reports showing that the North Vietnamese had massed some 7,000 men in the hills surrounding Dak To, Gen. William C. Westmoreland rushed elements of the Fourth Infantry Division, the First Cavalry Division, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade into the area. Ever since, they and the enemy have been carrying on a bloody,

The victors: On a hill called 875, paratroopers charge toward the summit, leaving behind them the wounded and tarp-shrouded dead



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The way up: At the foot of Dak To's bloody Hill 875, a skirmish in the jungle, a daring helicopter rescue and a lull during a battle in the twilight zone

Photos by Bruce Allen (Empire News—Black Star)



on-again-off-again duel in the jungle—a duel that reached its crescendo in the battle for Hill 875.

The fighting on Hill 875 started on a Sunday morning when the Second Battalion of the 173rd Airborne was sweeping the area southwest of Dak To in search of enemy troops. Orders were given to get to the top of the hill before dark, and the paratroopers moved ahead without incident until they were about midway to the crest. Then, abruptly, mortar shells came pouring into their column, while North Vietnamese small-arms and machine-gun fire came clipping through the bamboo. "Jesus, they were all over the place—in bunkers and tied in trees and everything," one paratrooper told NEWSWEEK's John Donnelly; "The noncoms kept shouting: 'Get up the hill; get up the goddam hill.' But we couldn't. We were surrounded and we were firing in all directions."

Terror: After the first onslaught, dead and wounded paratroopers lay on all sides, but the Second Battalion managed to set up a perimeter at mid-slope as night began to fall. It was to be a night filled with terror. GI's, living and dead, were crowded body to body in the shell craters and under the trees inside the perimeter, and all night long the enemy attack went on. "They were hitting us with mortars and recoilless-rifle fire all night, and everybody was trying to get underground," a survivor from the Second Battalion remembered later. "Every time you tried to dig, you put your shovel in somebody. The dead guys were everywhere."

In the morning, with 71 paratroopers lying dead on the slope and another 86 wounded, medical-evacuation helicopters came over to try to lift out the casualties. But heavy enemy ground fire knocked eight of the choppers out of the sky and quickly drove the others back to Dak To. Now U.S. airplanes were overhead constantly, striking at enemy positions on the top of the hill and downward to within 50 yards of the beleaguered troopers. Then, sweeping past at 300 miles an hour, a U.S. F-100 fighter-bomber dropped a 500-pound bomb into the U.S. perimeter. The bomb exploded at treetop level, showering the area with shrapnel. Recalls Pfc. Johnnie Hayes: "A lot of guys died from that bomb. It just blew the dead and wounded all over the place. God, it was awful."

Trapped and decimated, with most of its officers and medics dead, the Second Battalion could only hang on. Walking among the wounded, trying to keep up morale, Sgt. Maj. Hector Lehva told one paratrooper with a long red beard that he intended to get emergency resupply of two items right away. "What, Sarg-Major," came the reply, "beer and cigarettes?" "No," said Lehva. "Razor blades and shoe polish . . . so you guys can look like paratroops again." As he told the story after the battle, Lehva's voice kept catching. "Those kids lying in there," he jerked out. "They kept holding up their thumbs and saying 'Airborne.' They're good kids."

Relief: Late Monday afternoon, a column made up of elements of the 173rd's Fourth Battalion climbed Hill 875 and linked up with their battered comrades. A landing zone for the helicopters was hacked out, and by noon Tuesday—with U.S. air strikes continuing to pound the enemy positions—the med-evac choppers were able to lift out the wounded. By nightfall, the medical clearing station at Dak To was jammed with casualties. The seriously wounded were tended first—if the doctors thought they could be saved. Then, after quick treatment to staunch the flow of blood or bind up an ugly wound, they were rushed onto C-130s for a flight to the hospital at Qui Nhon.

Many of the wounded troopers at Dak To, after three days under heavy fire with little food and water, were still in shock. Griny, bearded, their uniforms stained almost red from the dust, most of them had little to say. But one soldier, a tall Negro with his left leg and foot hanging in red tatters, came off the med-evac chopper with tears running down his face, screaming: "That goddammed hill. Those goddammed gooks. I ain't never goin' back. No one can make me."

"With victories like this, who needs defeats?" muttered one newsman quietly to a colleague. But to the U.S. command in Saigon, the situation did not seem that discouraging. "Senior staff officers," cabled correspondent Behr late last



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Casualty: Wounded paratrooper awaiting evacuation



Newsweek—Ritter

Setting: The bloody hills near Dak To



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Entrenched: Airborne troopers before the final assault



War council: LBJ, Westmoreland, McNamara, Gen. Earle Wheeler, George Christian, Walt Rostow, Hubert Humphrey, Robert Komer, press aide Tom Johnson, Richard Helms, Dean Rusk, Ellsworth Bunker

week, "are convinced that as bloody as the action on Hill 875 was, it may have helped to write finis to a North Vietnamese plan to attack the base at Dak To itself. U.S. intelligence sources agree on the purpose behind the North Vietnamese operations around Dak To since the beginning of November. The enemy, they theorize, aimed to attract large numbers of U.S. troops to the area along the Cambodian border, thus taking the pressure off the hard-pressed Viet Cong in the populous villages in the Mekong Delta and the coastal plains.

"The obvious question becomes: is the North Vietnamese strategy working? More than likely, it is too early to give a final answer. No one knows at this time whether the Viet Cong are making progress in the villages while the GI's are off fighting North Vietnamese regulars in the highlands. And no one knows for certain just how badly hurt the North Vietnamese have been in the Dak To area."

High Morale: "According to U.S. estimates, the enemy has lost 1,400 men since the fighting around Dak To began. (Total U.S. dead so far: 285.) But many observers in the area are inclined to doubt that Vietnamese losses have really been that great. And at the very least, Hill 875 proved that the enemy's morale is still high.

"The realization that this is the case is apt to give a man grim thoughts. When I finally got off Hill 875, I flew back to Dak To with three wounded GI's. 'I'm all right,' one of them told me. 'But, you know, I have the feeling I'll be back for Hill 876—and 877.' Almost without thinking, I gazed out of the helicopter—and saw ridge after ridge stretching off into hazy distance as far as the eye could reach."

Beginning of the End?

Washington has long since learned that no top-ranking official ever returns from Saigon without putting the best face possible on the U.S. effort there, but last week's report from Vietnam commander Gen. William C. Westmoreland, for all its careful qualification, seemed to go further than anything the Capital had heard in a long time.

In private before a special council of war at the White House and then in one public appearance after another, the handsome, black-browed general sounded the same refrain: things are getting better all the time. If current trends continue, he said, the U.S. may be able to begin at least a token phase-out of its troop commitment in Vietnam in two years or less. "We have reached an important point," he said, "when the end begins to come into view."

Interestingly enough, Westmoreland's straightforward optimism sparked only limited criticism in Washington. Perhaps the most outspoken skepticism came from Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. "We should not delude ourselves by such phrases," he warned. "Rather we should face up to the very strong possibility that the war in Vietnam may well take years and require additional input of American forces unless a solution is found."

Westmoreland's most detailed and comprehensive report on the war came in the course of a speech before the National Press Club. There the general analyzed the Vietnam war in terms of four main phases and a timetable for sending some U.S. troops home in 1969. Westmoreland's four phases:

■ Phase One. "We came to the aid of

South Vietnam, prevented its collapse under the massive Communist thrust, built up our bases and began to deploy our forces." This phase, Westmoreland said, was completed by mid-1966.

■ Phase Two. During this period, beginning about the middle of 1966, Westmoreland said, the U.S. "drove the enemy divisions back into sanctuary or into hiding . . . improved the quality of the South Vietnamese armed forces . . . raised enemy losses beyond his input capability . . . [and] unified the U.S. pacification assistance effort for better management." These undertakings will be completed about the end of this year, Westmoreland said.

■ Phase Three. During this period, the general feels the U.S. will reach the "point when the end begins to come into view." In the course of 1968, Westmoreland hopes to decrease the number of U.S. advisers in South Vietnamese training centers, turn a major part of the front-line defenses in the Demilitarized Zone over to the Vietnamese Army, and consequently be able to increase U.S. troop strength in the Saigon delta region.

■ Phase Four. Westmoreland said that the final phase would develop like this: "Infiltration will slow; the Communist infrastructure will be cut up and near collapse; the Vietnamese Government will prove its stability, and the Vietnamese Army will show that it can handle the Viet Cong; U.S. units can begin to phase down as the Vietnamese Army is modernized and develops its capacity to the fullest; the military physical assets, bases and ports will be progressively turned over to the Vietnamese."