

0. DEATH AT LZ ALBANY - Story Preface

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Two U.S. Cavalry battalions left the area targeted for Air Force B-52 bombing. The 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry led the way and made it safely to [Landing Zone Columbus](#). The 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, followed in a column of marching soldiers about [550 yards](#) long.

Unknown to anyone in the 2/7 column, hidden North Vietnamese were waiting to ambush them.

General An had issued orders to his men:

When you meet the Americans divide yourself into many groups and attack the column from all directions and divide the column into many pieces. Move inside the column, grab them by the belt, and thus avoid casualties from the artillery and air. (We Were Soldiers Once...and Young, page 249.)

Huge ant and termite hills dot the Vietnamese landscape. (Some Vietnam Vets recall that the countryside seemed like one [giant anthill](#).) Those hills are big enough to lean against. They are big enough to hide behind. As rifleman Jim Young remembered the events of November 17, 1965:

We got on line and we walked right into an enemy ambush. They were behind trees, anthills, and down on the ground. (We Were Soldiers, page 264.)

And they were firing. To kill. Lieutenant John Howard said:

They suddenly appeared behind anthills and up in the trees, sniping at anyone who moved, and we found ourselves shooting at them in all directions. As we crawled around in the tall elephant grass it was very difficult to tell where anyone was, or whether they were friendly or enemy. (We Were Soldiers, page 266.)

Because it was [impossible to tell Americans from Vietnamese](#), air and artillery support were not immediately available to help the trapped and wounded soldiers at [LZ Albany](#). Major Roger Bartholomew, flying in the sky above, tried to figure out how his helicopters could assist:

It didn't help because everybody was so mixed up by then on the ground. We had tactical air, ARA, and artillery and still we couldn't do a damned thing. It was the most helpless, hopeless thing I ever witnessed. (We Were Soldiers, page 267.)

Specialist 4 [Jack Smith](#) (son of legendary CBS commentator Howard K. Smith and himself a lead correspondent for *This Week With David Brinkley* two decades later) was sure he would die:

There were PAVN with machine guns hidden behind every anthill. The noise was deafening. Then the men started dropping. It was unbelievable.

I knelt there staring as at least 20 men dropped within a few seconds...We were even being fired at by our own guys. No one knew where the fire was coming from, and so the men were shooting everywhere...The noise of firing from all directions was so great that I couldn't even hear a machine gun being fired three feet in front of me and one foot above my head...Bullets by the thousands were coming from the trees, from the L.Z., from the very ground, it seemed...

The sound of those voices, of the enemy that close, was the most frightening thing I have ever experienced. Combat creates a mindless fear, but this was worse, naked panic.

The ferocious battle continued into the next day. General An correctly believed his troops had the advantage:

We had some advantages: We attacked your column from the sides and, at the moment of the attack, we were waiting for you. This was our reserve battalion and they were just waiting for their turn. The 8th Battalion had not been used in the fighting in this campaign. They were fresh. (We Were Soldiers, page 249.)

Jack Smith (who died from pancreatic cancer in 2004) had other words for what happened:

This was a massacre.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DEATH-AT-LZ-ALBANY-We-Were-Soldiers>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DEATH-AT-LZ-ALBANY-We-Were-Soldiers>

Media Stream



Giant Ant Hill - Vietnam War

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