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Philip Keith, *Blackhorse Riders: A Desperate Last Stand, an Extraordinary Rescue Mission, and the Vietnam Battle America Forgot*. New York: St. Martin's, 2012. Pp. xviii, 331. ISBN 978-0-312-68192-0.

Review by William A. Knowlton Jr., National Defense University (knowltonw@verizon.net).

The Vietnam War was predominantly a war of small unit actions. Except for major battles like Hue and Khe Sanh in 1968, most combat actions were fought by US battalions or companies (that is, between eighty and twelve hundred men). In *Blackhorse Riders*, Philip Keith, a decorated veteran of three tours in Vietnam as a naval aviator, tells the story of an action on 26 March 1970 that involved three company-sized units, two of which prevented the almost certain annihilation of the third;¹ the action never received an official name and for decades was familiar only to its participants.²

Keith begins in chapters 1-4 by setting the stage for the battle, identifying which companies were involved and why. A Troop operated exclusively with tracked armored cavalry assault vehicles (ACAVs)³ and M-551 Sheridan light tanks. An armored cavalry troop also had mortar-equipped M-113s and tracked command-and-control and maintenance vehicles. In short, an armored cavalry troop had tremendous firepower and could often operate independently. A Troop was detached from its parent battalion and placed under the operational control of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry, home to Companies A and C. The latter were infantry units that moved on foot, sometimes after being air-assaulted in by helicopters. On 11 February 1970, Company A had linked up with A Troop, whose ACAVs and Sheridans gave the infantry greater mobility; Company A also provided A Troop with additional soldiers for dismounted operations. Designated "Team Alpha," this new, combined unit was commanded by Capt. John Poindexter of A Troop,⁴ an experienced combat leader. Poindexter and Team Alpha had already clashed with North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units on 25 February, killing or driving off enemy troops manning a bunker complex. Team Alpha continued to conduct "reconnaissance in force" during February and March, making sporadic contact with enemy forces. On the evening of 25 March, it was in a night defensive position (NDP) in a heavily wooded area of War Zone C, near the Cambodian border.

Company C, commanded by Capt. George Hobson, had seen considerable action and sustained casualties in February and March and was viewed as a hard-luck company. By mid-March, searching for the enemy in heavily forested areas near Fire Support Base (FSB) Illingworth, it found evidence of large NVA units preparing to attack the base, but was ordered to gather more intelligence about the size and composition of the enemy forces. On the evening of 25 March, Company C had stopped for the night in the jungle a couple miles from Team Alpha, but not in direct communication with it.

As the day ended, about three hundred American soldiers, slightly fewer than two hundred infantry, slightly more than one hundred cavalry, are far out in no-man's land, way in advance of any other friendly forces, except for one small, stationary fire support base. They are beyond reach, except possibly by helicopter, and even at that, only the men encamped with Team Alpha are in a position to accept helicopter traffic. Their only orders are to recon the enemy, find them if you can, destroy them if you do. That is all they know, accept, and understand about their orders.... They are pretty remarkable men even though they are, in truth, fairly unremarkable in terms of the entire hierarchy of the American fighting machine.... They have been thrown together by circumstances

1. Specifically, A Troop (the equivalent of "company"), 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment; and Companies A and C, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment—referred to hereafter as "A Troop," "Company A," and "Company C."

2. A Troop was given long overdue recognition when President Barack Obama awarded it the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) on 20 Oct 2009.

3. Mostly up-armored M-113 personnel carriers each equipped with three machine guns.

4. Capt. Ray Armer, Company A's commander, was subordinate to Poindexter.

from every corner of America and all walks of life.... These “average Joes,” who were way out in the boonies, with absolutely no idea of what would happen next, would be called upon, in the next twenty-four hours, to exert incredible courage in the face of frightening odds.... This is the heart of this story: what ordinary soldiers ended up doing under extraordinary circumstances. (60–61)

In chapter 5, Keith concludes his setting of the scene with a disaster that befell Team Alpha around midnight: during “harassing and interdiction” firing by one of A Troop’s mortar tracks, an 81mm round exploded prematurely in the tube, destroying the track, killing three crew members, and creating chaos in the NDP, where many at first believed they were under enemy attack. This was a prelude to much worse to come the next day.

Chapters 6–18, the core of the book, describe the events of 26 March, which began with Company C continuing to search the jungle for more signs of the enemy. Around 11:30 a.m., they were ambushed by a large NVA force after entering an enemy bunker complex. They were taking losses and quickly using up available ammunition. Fighting in dense jungle with friendly as well as hostile forces nearby, they could not request artillery fire from FSB Illingworth. Enemy fire and the lack of a landing zone also ruled out evacuation of casualties by air. In short, Company C was in imminent peril of being overwhelmed by the stronger enemy force.

Team Alpha was close enough to hear the firing from the assault, and Captain Poindexter quickly gleaned from radio traffic that his was the only force close enough to save Company C before its annihilation. On his own initiative, he decided to ride to the sound of the guns and try to extract the beleaguered company. Over the next four hours, Team Alpha broke through the dense jungle in three columns with Sheridans leading and made contact with Company C by 4:00 p.m.

Assessing the situation, Poindexter realized the NVA force was too strong and too close for Team Alpha to load up Company C’s men on its ACAVs. He would have to drive back the enemy, now estimated at battalion strength, with his troops’ superior firepower. He gave a quick “Frag Order”⁵ to his platoon leaders to attack; Company A’s infantrymen integrated with the crews of the ACAVs. Over the next three hours, the American forces fought it out with a stubborn enemy force whose rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) damaged or destroyed some of the ACAVs and Sheridans. Both sides took significant casualties, and Captain Poindexter was himself badly wounded when an RPG struck his vehicle. Captain Armer directed soldiers to fill gaps in the line until Poindexter could resume control.

By 6:45 p.m., Poindexter realized that the American and NVA forces were at a stalemate. Given the many casualties taken by his own men and those of Company C, he decided to mount up all the troops, including the dead and wounded, and leave the battlefield. Fortunately, the enemy had not blocked his withdrawal route; by 7:30 p.m., well after dark, all the US elements had reached the Team Alpha NDP and began evacuating the wounded. Poindexter himself refused to leave until all the wounded were cared for, finally turning over A Troop to his executive officer, who had flown in around midnight. He and Team Alpha had rescued Company C, but at a high cost in casualties and destroyed or damaged vehicles.

Drawing on interviews with the men who fought, Keith is at his best in conveying their thoughts and actions in the heat of close combat.⁶ The confusion and chaos of the engagement is evoked in vivid language.⁷ In the following passage, for example, he describes the moment when Sgt. Robert Foreman, the commander of a Sheridan tank was killed:

Sgt. Bill Daniels, the gunner on A-37, was firing round after round of canister into the bunker complex. He felt as if he and his loader were acting like a fine-tuned machine: spot-load-shoot, spot-load-shoot. They were

5. I.e., fragmentary order, which “provides timely changes of existing orders to subordinate and supporting commanders while providing notification to higher and adjacent commands. Commanders may authorize members of their staff to change existing orders by issuing FRAGOs in their name”—US Army FM 101-5, H-3 (31 May 1997).

6. A drawing or schematic showing the formation and location of A Troop’s vehicles during the assault on the bunker complex would have helped readers keep straight where individual actions were occurring.

7. Though Keith occasionally tries too hard to use and explain the slang used by soldiers in Vietnam, his description of the battle is riveting.

working as smoothly and as swiftly as the physics of the gun and its reloading would allow. The noise was deafening, and blasts were emanating from every direction, but there was a symphonic cadence to it all, a combat-generated harmonic: war set to Ravel's *Bolero*.

Then, suddenly, one of the instruments dropped out of sync. It was right after a weird vibrato slammed and shook the tank. Daniels noticed the change right away: The .50 cal had stopped firing. Brass casings were no longer cascading into the belly of the Sheridan.

Daniels hollered into the intercom for his T[ank] C[ommader], Sergeant Foreman, "Shoot, Sarge, shoot!" No response. Daniels glanced over his shoulder and up into the turret. Foreman was standing there, but all Daniels could see of him, as usual, was the lower half of his body. Strangely, his arms seemed to be hanging limply at his sides. Daniels turned back around to look out his view slit—maybe he could see what was happening above.

At that moment Foreman fell on Daniels, a .50 cal ammo can fell on Foreman, and something that was on fire fell on them both. (168–69)

Chapter 19, "Battle of the Senses," immediately following the battle narration, seems out of place; it focuses on the soldiers' sensory perceptions, even describing, for instance, the various rations they ate and how they tasted. Chapter 20, "Recall," outlines the invasion of Cambodia in May 1970; it also mentions the lamentable loss of all official records of the anonymous battle of 26 March. The "Afterword" discusses the feelings of John Poindexter, when, by then retired, he learned in 1999 that few of the soldiers he had recommended for awards for bravery had ever received them. His subsequent ten-year crusade to get his unit collectively recognized resulted in the Presidential Unit Citation mentioned above.⁸

Philip Keith has done just what he set out to: bring wider recognition to the soldiers of Team Alpha, who rescued a sister unit in a fierce battle still unnamed but no longer forgotten. Although *Blackhorse Riders* may not have the breadth of some first-person accounts of armored cavalry operations in the Vietnam War,⁹ it will have strong appeal for both veterans of the conflict and a much broader readership.

8. Keith notes that the Company A soldiers who rode into battle on A Troop's tracks were not included in the PUC through an "oversight" and that Poindexter and Michael Conrad, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry at the time of the battle, are trying to correct this (255, 261). Poindexter has sought no accolades for himself. His only award for the battle was a Purple Heart. Several of his comrades have been attempting to get him awarded a Distinguished Cross for his heroism and superb leadership (273–74).

9. E.g., Michael D. Mahler, *Ringed in Steel: Armored Cavalry, Vietnam 1967–68* (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1986), and Dwight W. Birdwell, *A Hundred Miles of Bad Road: An Armored Cavalryman in Vietnam, 1967–68* (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1997).