



517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team



PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

MailCall No. 2363

July 16, 2017

*517th Parachute Infantry Regiment
460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion
596th Parachute Combat Engineer Company*

MailCall News

From: <https://www.facebook.com/QuartermasterSchool/posts/1619323858098067>



2nd Battalion XO, Tom Cross.

Once a Rigger, always a Rigger. The son of **COL (Ret) Thomas R. Cross** who designed the first Parachute Rigger badge in 1948, sent our QM Museum a photo of COL Cross still wearing his distinctive red rigger hat at age 98.



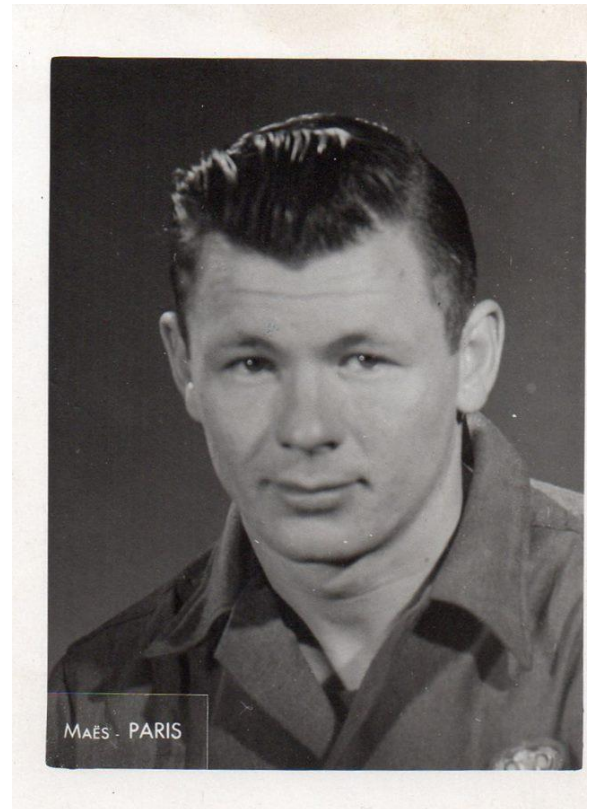


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on 517TH Family and Friends Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1472895329686741/>

From Valerie Szakacs Heyden:

My father **Elmer Szakacs** was in the 596th Engineer Company. He's in the passenger's seat of the jeep.



Note: The vehicle is a German Schwimmwagen



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I ran across a story in the paper the other day that related to a former 442nd RCT member. That brought back a memory from years ago. I don't know if I ever related it in an earlier in MailCall..

There were safe locations set up where wounded and others could be placed. It was called rear-echelon. Field kitchens were usually operating there and food could be hauled up to the troops in insulated containers. The unpleasant tasks such as washing pots and pans, peeling potatoes, hauling water for washing mess kits, etc. were usually assigned to our German prisoners. They didn't mind because it assured them of good meals. On one occasion some members from the 442nd Anti-Tank company were going through the chow-line for breakfast. The English speaking German, when seeing the 442 members, asked, "Japanese prisoners.?"

The response was, "No, hasn't Hitler told you? They've given up and are now fighting with us."

There were many puzzled looks on the other German prisoners serving food in the chow-line when the English speaking German translated the response.

Merle McMorrow

Glad to see Iron Mike is back and to know the source of the rocks he is standing on --- Mt. Currahee!
How fitting.

Pat Seitz

I came across this old training org chart I have for my brother **Ismael Ramos** Co H historical file. I am not sure if I have shared this with you for the 517th archives. All I have are these two pages.

I found him on the ship returning from Europe H Company manifest page 19 #199

[http://www.517prct.org/documents/madawaska_victory/Madawaska_Victory_August_20_1945.pdf]

Anything else of interest?

Keep of the great work you still are providing I follow each edition. They are almost gone. I am getting there too.

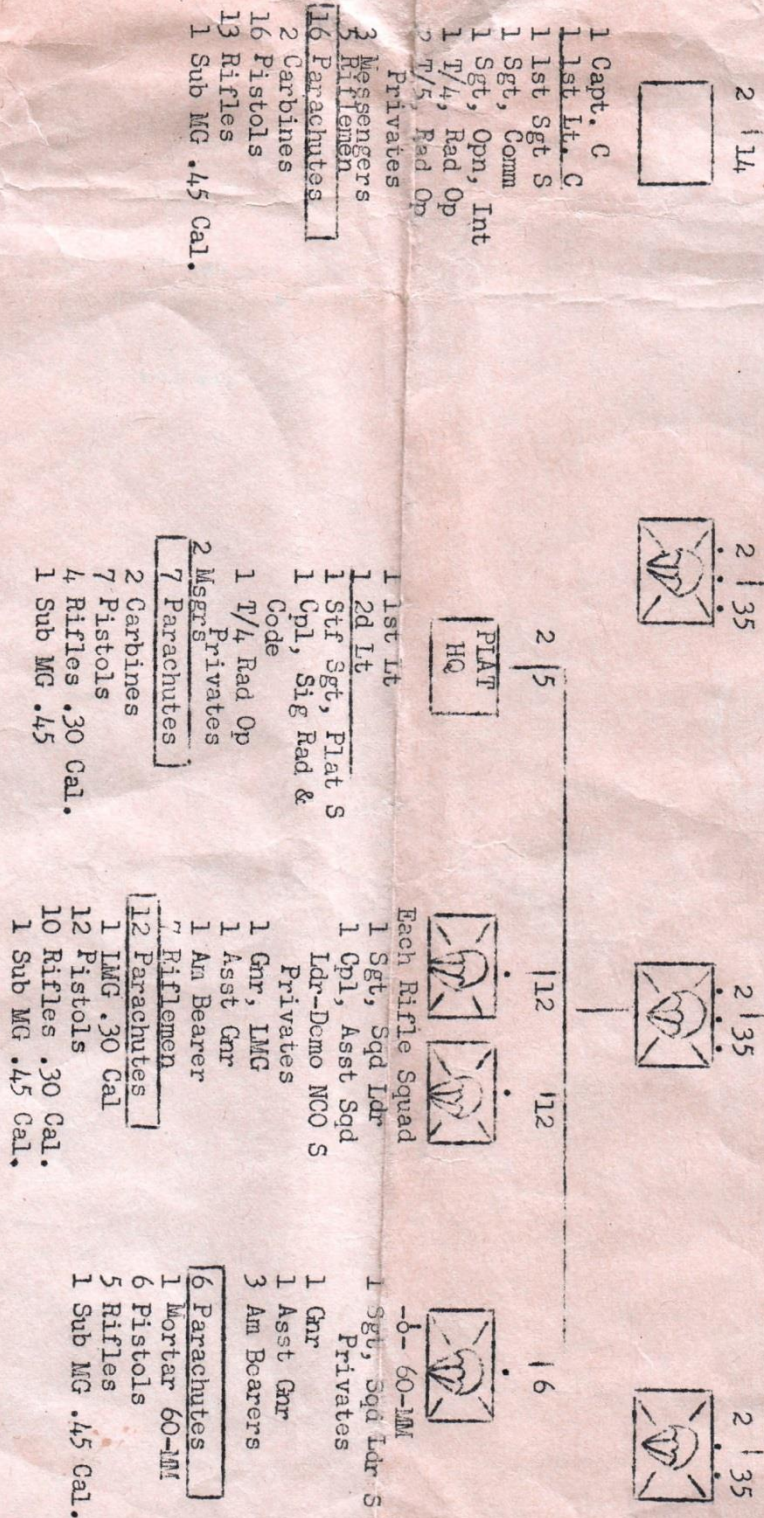
Frank Ramos



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INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY, PARACHUTE

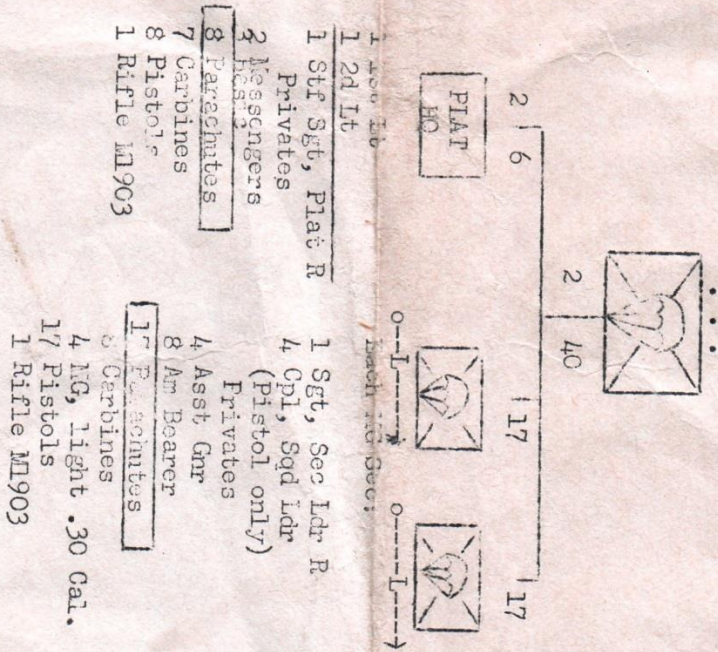
Note: All Parachutists.
 All armed with pistol in addition
 to other weapon.
 C Carbine
 S Sub Machine Gun





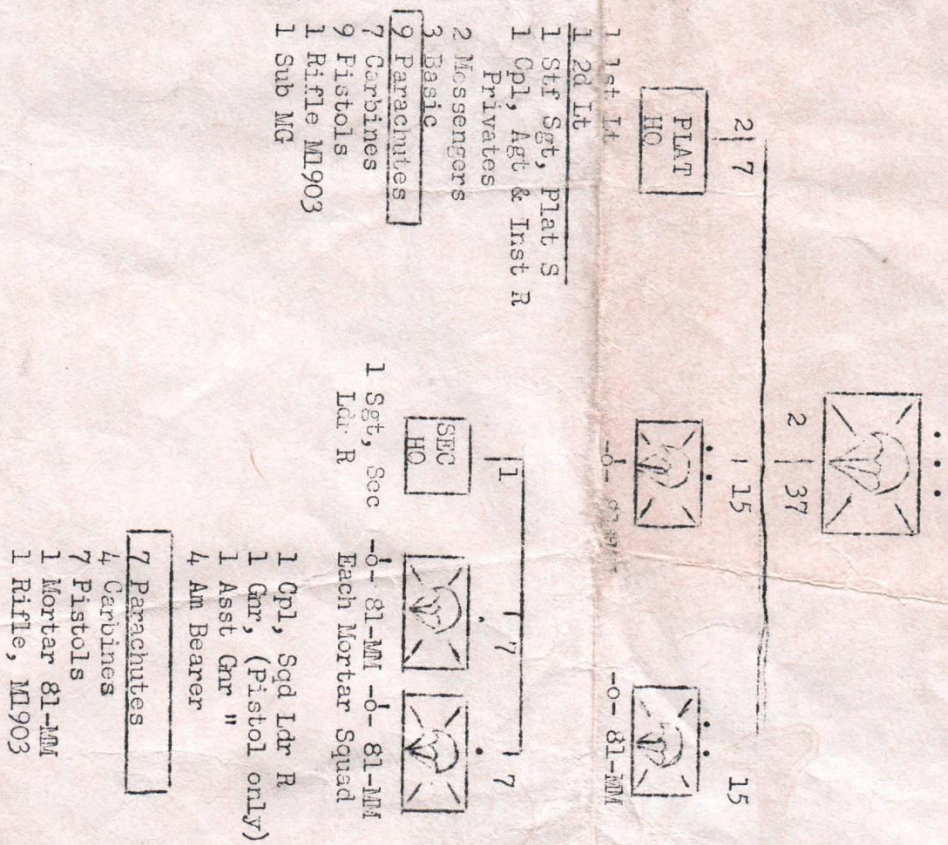
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Light MG Platoon



HEADQUARTERS COMPANY (Continued)

81-MM Mortar Platoon





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Hi Bob; Not sure this will be of much, if any, interest to those who visit the 517th website. I came across this thesis from a student at the Command & General Staff College while noodling through their digital library. I didn't realize **Gen. Zais** Commanded the 101st at the time the ball for Ap Bia mountain (aka "Hamburger Hill") was fought. It's an comparative study of his time during the Battle for Ap Bia and what the 517th went through in the vicinity of Sospel. Hope you are well. Thanks!

Mark Landreth

Major General Melvin Zais and Hamburger Hill

A Monograph
by
Major Kelly Owen Carl Boian
U.S. Army



School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

AY 2012-002

Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

I included a few excerpts on the following pages. The full document, 56 pages, is on the website at:

[Major General Melvin Zais and Hamburger Hill](#)



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14. ABSTRACT

Major General Melvin Zais, a second generation Russian American, orchestrated the battle between the 29th Regiment of the People's Army of Vietnam and the 101st Airborne Division around Dong Ap Bia (Hamburger Hill), Vietnam. General Zais, focused operations on and around Hamburger Hill to prevent build up of men, weapons, and supplies in the A Shau Valley which would have allowed for VC and NVA forces to conduct another Tet Offensive. As General Zais developed the situation in Thau Thien Province, similarities can be drawn to an offensive he assisted in coordinating within southern France in World War II. This familiarity in size of terrain, enemy presence, and friendly tactical actions assisted Zais in his understanding of the situation, and conducting continuous assaults up the 937 meters of Dong Ap Bia to destroy the 29th Regiment of the People's Army of Vietnam, and prevent the perceived threat of another Tet Offensive.

Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais's experience as an airborne regimental executive officer in southern France during World War II prepared him for the struggles he later faced as the commander of the 101st Airborne in Vietnam. As a regimental executive officer, then Lt. Col. Melvin Zais, assisted in leading the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, the "Battling Buzzards," against German fortified positions in the mountains of the Maritime Alps.⁵ Allied boundary adjustments provided a seam that the veteran German 34th Infantry Division, fresh from northern Italy, was able to exploit as it reoccupied the high ground around Col de Braus, resulting in an uphill slugfest to secure the town and surrounding area.⁶ General Zais was reminded of the fight for Col de Braus as the 101st Airborne advanced into the A Shau Valley and the high terrain around Dong Ap Bia to defeat North Vietnamese forces that had reoccupied the valley. The rigorous conditions, a determined and entrenched enemy, and the reliance upon combined arms maneuver laid the foundation for the major engagement Major General Zais orchestrated in the jungles of Vietnam. Unlike Vietnam however, the loss of life to secure Col de Braus had operational linkages to securing the eastern flank of the US VI Corps, and opening the heavily defended Sospel Valley and northern Italy, setting the stage for the strategic goal of liberating Italy, entrance to the so-called "soft underbelly of Europe," and exposing the German heartland along two fronts.⁷ In contrast, the actions at Hamburger Hill killed numerous North Vietnamese soldiers, but had no operational linkages to other objectives outside of the A Shau Valley. Finally, the objective itself, Hill 937, did not have any strategic importance tied to winning the war in Vietnam.



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To begin understanding the rationale for the decisions General Zais made, it is beneficial to first attempt to understand the man who made the decisions. Melvin Zais was a first-generation Russian-American, his father having arrived in the United States in 1892 as a Russian refugee when he was twelve years old.¹² Being from modest roots and with equally modest income, the family settled in a Fall River, Massachusetts neighborhood that was rough and wild, resulting in Zais's introduction and participation in numerous street fights. Though the Zais family's fortunes improved and then declined with the Depression, Melvin Zais's experiences with the impoverished neighborhoods and poor families gave him a toughness he carried with him throughout his time in service, and a "compassion for people who did not have much." This combination of compassion and toughness is what the soldiers of the 517th PRCT remembered of Major General Zais as they fought Italians and Germans through Italy, France, and Germany, or even when they met a couple unruly Rangers in a posh dance bar in Paris where Zais knocked the Rangers down, helped them back up, and then bought them a drink. Over the years, he matured from a young, tough junior officer, to a more mature, yet still tough senior officer, willing to make the hard decisions when required. His capacity for handling difficult decisions and maintaining a professional bearing were highlighted during the Battle of Hamburger Hill when he continued the engagement and piled on reinforcements, and in his diplomatic handling of a reporter who was a little too nosy in second guessing Zais's decisions regarding Hamburger Hill. Overall, Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais was a hardened professional soldier, counted on by his subordinates, peers, and seniors to make the right decisions in difficult situations, but with the necessary compassion to ensure he took care of his men without sacrificing what was necessary to accomplish the mission. From World War II to Vietnam, Zais compiled experience and judgment to add depth and clarity to his decisions. Little did he know his experiences in southern France would revisit him through doctrine, the enemy situation, and terrain in an isolated part of the A Shau Valley in Vietnam.

Doctrine during WWII

The success of the 517th PRCT in southern France can be contributed to the personal identification and selection of qualified soldiers, their airborne training, and the study and application of doctrine its officers used during the planning and execution of operations. Field Manual 100-5 (FM 100-5), Operations, and Field Manual 70-10 (FM 70-10), Mountain Operations, both published in 1944 are examples of doctrine that provided the leadership of the 517th PRCT the capability to develop its understanding for a firm basis of action to react to enemy activities, maneuver, and capabilities.



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FM 100-5 provided the airborne infantry officer with a fundamental understanding of what army officers should know in order to quickly react to situations they might encounter in combat. As it related to the Col de Braus operation, FM 100-5 outlined the infantry's capabilities, how an enemy established in a well-organized defensive position might degrade the attacker's combat power, and the required the use of combined arms, artillery, armor, and combat aviation, to defeat the enemy. FM 100-5 emphasized the need to fight by combining fire, movement, and shock action to complete the destruction of the enemy in close combat. The manual also highlighted that the purpose of offensive action was to destroy hostile armed forces in order to facilitate the capture or destruction of a physical objective, be that a body of troops, dominating terrain, or anything else designated by the commander. These guidelines, combined with the regiment's training and leadership, were the key elements in the 517th's seizure of Col de Braus.

It was the combination of naval gunfire, indirect artillery fire, direct fire from small arms, bazookas, and grenades, and maneuver skillfully integrated into the assault on the physical objectives of Col de Braus, Tete de la Lavine, and Ventebren that provided the shock action to not only seize the objectives, but to seize them in a manner that maximized enemy casualties while protecting the 517th PRCT soldiers. The final aspect of FM 100-5 addressed leadership. It enjoined officers and noncommissioned officers to provide the motivation and demonstrate the determination needed by soldiers to achieve the objectives tasked to the unit. FM 100-5 also highlighted the need to recognize the exceptional services of soldiers, to provide encouragement during adverse conditions, and to lend assistance to soldiers' efforts.

Lieutenant Colonel Zais embodied what FM 100-5 described as leadership when he provided immediate recognition to one soldier, Woodrow McQuaid. McQuaid, a G Company soldier who took part in the fight for Col de Braus, heroically climbed on top of a pillbox as friendly forces engaged it. He captured eight German soldiers after forcing them out by putting a white phosphorous grenade down the ventilation pipe. Zais's actions not only endeared himself to McQuaid, but also earned the respect of the soldiers within McQuaid's squad and platoon. As Clausewitz wrote, "Of all the passions that inspire a man in a battle, none, we have to admit, is so powerful and so constant as the longing for honor and renown."

Leadership was one thing, but mountains were another. FM 70-10 provided the basis to understanding the hazards faced in the mountains of southern France. Key areas the field manual outlined were the basis for attacking fortified positions in mountainous terrain, tactical advantages provided to the defender, and the application of engineer training for use in the mountains. The main point to attacking fortified positions stressed by FM 70-10 was the need to take additional time to plan the attack due to the restrictive terrain, but also the need to conduct a combined arms



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attack to accomplish a breakthrough against enemy fortifications.⁴⁹ Colonel Graves, during the planning for the final attack on Tete de la Lavina and Ventebren, allocated five days for planning to ensure that coordination between all units were conducted, and that indirect fires were coordinated to support the maneuver.⁵⁰ The advantages FM 70-10 listed for the defense in the mountains is fairly elementary, but when combined with planning for employment of engineers in support of operations, the manual provided a basis for ensuring the right assets were prepared for the right mission. The engineers assigned to the Buzzards, the 596th Parachute Engineer Company, conducted typical mine and obstacle reduction operations, but also had to build bridges and maintain roads to ensure that casualties and supplies could move back and forth between Col de Braus and PRCT Headquarters. The 596th engineers called the maintenance of the L'Escarene-Col de Braus road, "The toughest and most important job the outfit ever had".

Overall, the doctrine developed prior to and during World War II provided a firm basis of action at the tactical level to react to enemy activities, maneuver, and capabilities. The leadership at Col de Braus conducted and directed operations with a firm understanding of doctrine and how to use it as a guide for planning. Lieutenant Colonel Zais was not the only officer who confirmed his actions through doctrine and established biases that would carry with him throughout his career.

Col de Braus Lessons Learned

Lt. Col. Melvin Zais was fortunate in his role as the 517th PRCT Executive Officer. He was able to observe and take part in the actions of the regiment at Col de Braus and analyze how they helped or hindered progress in seizing the objective. The lessons Zais took with him from this operation were the use of combined arms in attacking an entrenched enemy on high ground, developing a good understanding of the enemy through reconnaissance, and the validity of doctrine as a template for operational planning.

First, the concept of combined arms warfare was nothing new to the former battalion commander who had conducted calls for fire, and coordinated close air support in Italy and around Les Arcs, France. However, it was Colonel Graves' masterful coordination of assets and his allocation of time to ensure the proper dissemination of the plan that followed Lieutenant Colonel Zais through his career and became evident in his lectures and papers.⁵³ Zais also gained a good understanding of how to attack an enemy who was entrenched or within fortifications in mountainous terrain and how much slower was movement along external lines of communication and how that could influence operations on the objective. These two observations assisted Zais in



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estimating force ratios (the first three days were basically fought 1:1 at Col de Braus), and the speed at which reinforcements could arrive to influence actions on the objective.

Reconnaissance then, as now is the lifeblood for a commander to understanding his environment and visualizing how to influence it. Zais understood that the lack of understanding of the enemy's positions resulted in the surprise attack of the reconnaissance patrol on 3 September, and the initial failed attempts at seizing Col de Braus during the initial days of the battle. He was fortunate to witness what happens when accurate and effective intelligence is acquired, as on the night prior to the attack on Tete de la Lavina and Ventebren on 17 September when the 3d Battalion's S2 conducted a reconnaissance mission of the defensive positions along Tete de la Lavina and was able to adjust the plan according to this intelligence. Zais learned what good intelligence could provide, and that a lack of intelligence often required a loss of life before being acquired.

The final lesson Zais took forward with him was that doctrine was a valid basis to formulate plans. He had already established a good appreciation for its establishing a basis of clarity in an ambiguous situation, but his belief was reinforced as FM 100-5 and FM 70-10 proved beneficial in establishing a means to accomplish the PRCT's mission. Lieutenant Colonel Zais would continually rely on doctrine, and refine it to meet emerging requirements in future operations.

Thus, Zais's understanding of the requirements for attacking an entrenched enemy in dominant terrain, the use of reconnaissance to gain and develop a fuller understanding of the situation and the cost associated without it, and the importance of doctrine in establishing a basis for operations were keys to his development as a commander. As Zais and the 517th PRCT played their small part in accomplishing Allied victory in Europe Day, Zais took with him formative lessons developed learned through experience. Melvin Zais had developed biases from the operations at Col de Braus that colored his understanding of war at the tactical and operational levels. Zais's experience came into play as the commander of the 101st Airborne Division as the Screaming Eagles planned, synchronized, and accomplished missions in Vietnam and at Dong Ap Bia.

Hamburger Hill Lessons Learned

Major General Zais, having fought during World War II and Korea, had learned much about war. It did not seem there was much more another round of combat could teach him. Three



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things, however, came to the forefront of his understanding from the battle of Hamburger Hill. First, the media can be a benefit and a curse that must be dealt with in good and bad times. Second, a reaffirmed lesson from his career was that no matter what the operation entails, if the leadership takes care of the soldiers, they will take care of the mission. Lastly, when doctrine or intelligence fail, an understanding of a situation can be developed based on past similar experiences to accomplish the mission.

After operations at Dong Ap Bia, Zais interacted with the media to ensure the proper story of Dong Ap Bia was told. His largest concern was that the Screaming Eagles would depart the combat zone thinking they had failed at Hill 937, or that their efforts had been worthless.⁸⁹ In his own words, General Zais stated, “I didn’t care about me, but I just thought that we had fought such a gallant and brilliant fight, and that Honeycutt had done well. For those men to think that it had all been a needless, suicidal attack just galled me, and that is why I was willing to talk to the television, radio, and newspaper people who obviously were aware of what Senator [Edward] Kennedy said and were clamoring to talk to me.” General Zais learned that the media can be extremely critical, and later reflected in his retirement that the

media could bolster the military, as occurred in World War II, or undermine it as Maj. Gen. Zais believed it did in Vietnam.

General Zais conducted his interaction with the media in a professional manner, even though he felt the media were ruining the war for the United States. General Zais commented later in his life that reporters covering the war in Vietnam were at a “D” grade level compared to the “A” grade level of reporters during World War II.⁹¹ Even when second-guessed about actions he directed, such as continuing the fight, or not pulling back and conducting strategic bombing on Hill 937, he swallowed his anger and calmly explained why certain actions had to be conducted. Zais emphasized the need to accomplish the mission accomplishment and to avoid losing contact with the enemy.

The media’s reporting on Hamburger Hill became one of the elements in increasing the unpopularity among Americans of the Vietnam War.⁹³ Dong Ap Bia became another rallying point for anti-war protestors and political platforms for politicians to argue against continued U.S. involvement. Media on the battlefield continue to play a critical role in explaining military actions on the battlefield, and are another means of achieving strategic objectives as was evident when Presidential Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler reinforced Zais’ message to the White House press corps 23 May 1969.⁹⁴ The media will always be in the field to gather information for stories that sell best to the public. It is the job of leaders to ensure honest, truthful, and full aspects of the



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situation are highlighted, and to be forthcoming with any perceived negative actions.

Synthesis – What Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais Brought with Him from Southern France

The experiences and resulting biases that Major General Zais witnessed, developed, and used during the battle of Col de Braus also came into play in the battle of Dong Ap Bia. The terrain that the battles were fought on resembled each other in height, enemy tenacity, and in their fortified defensive positions. The doctrines utilized during and between the two wars were identical with exception of changes due to technology. The context varied based on a plan synchronized with an overarching strategic objective, and one that was focused on an incorrect strategic objective. The overall military actions were similar in letting the smallest unit possible attack a well-defended enemy until it becomes obvious that additional support is needed with heavy integration of combined arms warfare. Overall, the situation that then Lieutenant Colonel Zais witnessed as a regimental executive officer was almost identical to the one he later controlled as a division commander.

In four major ways the Col de Braus battle and that for Dong Ap Bia resembled one another. While not exact in comparison, both shared more than merely superficial similarities. In General Zais's mind, the struggle for Hamburger Hill resonated with fight for control of the Sospel Valley. Indeed, that experience in France was more than a simple memory for Zais. In the A Shau Valley it served almost as a template for his division's actions at Hill 937. First, there was the matter of the battlefields' height. Each contest was similar because of the physical elevation of the objectives and difficulties that imposed on planning, executing, and on the soldiers. Secondly, Zais faced well-prepared enemies, skillful in maximizing their combat power through mutually-sustaining defensive positions. The terrain played a major role in the late massing of American combat power. In each case American forces held the disadvantage of exterior lines of operation. Finally, there was the lack of intelligence. While aware of the enemy, in neither case was the American intelligence preparation of the battlefield adequate nor were the commanders' situational awareness optimal. Thus, when General Zais faced Hill 937 he instinctively turned back to experiences at Col de Braus.



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Administrivia

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- At any time, if you want to be added or removed from the MailCall list, just let me know, or just click on the unsubscribe link on the email.
- Send any news, stories, or feedback to: MailCall@517prct.org
- If you send me email that you do not want included in MailCall, just label it as FYEO.
- I now understand how Ben could get confused about what he already posted and what he didn't. If I miss something, please just send it again.
- Donations for any programs involving the 517th should be sent to our new Association Treasurer: Identify the purpose of any donation (Annual Donations, In Memory of... etc.) and make all checks payable to:

517 PRCT Association, Inc.
c/o Miriam Boyle Kelly
19 Oriole Court
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

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