



***The Hump: The 1st Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry in the  
First Major Battle of the Vietnam War***

**By Al Conetto**

**Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015,**

**206 pages**

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Fifty years after the first major battle of the Vietnam War, an extraordinary account of the operation finally appears in print by one of the officers engaged in the fight. Rarely does any rendering of battle weave such a detailed picture as seen through the eyes of a large array of the participants. With vivid accounts from individual paratroopers and their officers who directed the battle, Al Conetto has elegantly achieved his purpose of paying “tribute to the hundreds of young paratroopers who for two days in War Zone D, Republic of Vietnam, fought against a reinforced Vietcong/People’s Army of North Vietnam (VC/PAVN) regiment and destroyed it.”

In addition to weaving a sequential view of the battle through multiple perspectives, Conetto provides a compelling story of his own journey as a young lieutenant through his continuing struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its impact on his life. He masterfully draws into his narrative the near-simultaneous battle in the Ia Drang Valley fought by the 1st Cavalry Division made famous by the book and movie *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young*. In pulling together both battles, he provides a historical perspective on the origins of America’s ultimate failure to succeed in Vietnam and traces it to the current debacle in the Middle East.

As the first Army combat unit deployed to Vietnam in 1965, the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) was destined to play a significant part in the escalation of the war from an advisory strategy in support of the South Vietnamese to a combat role directed by the Americans. Conetto not only does an excellent job of capturing the history of the brigade, but more importantly, he paints a superb picture of the key leaders who shaped the personality of the 173rd, in particular BG Ellis W. “Butch” Williamson. Seasoned by the conduct of numerous exercises throughout Southeast Asia, the 173rd was well rehearsed and prepared for its mission in Vietnam.

Operation Hump gained its name because it represented the halfway mark of the 12-month tour of duty for individuals, and thus the paratroopers were crossing over the hump to the downhill side of their tour. While there had been some sharp encounters with the Vietcong during those first six months, the contacts were typically brief engagements that ended with the enemy melting away. Operation Hump changed all of that for the 173rd and the U.S. Army!

The objective area, War Zone D, was situated a mere 10 miles from the 173rd’s base camp at Bien Hoa Air Base. The operation included the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment and the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry supported by the 3rd Battalion, 319th Artillery (both elements of the 173rd).

The operation order directed the two infantry battalions to air assault into War Zone D and conduct search operations for the Vietcong’s Q762 Regiment and D800 Battalion. Operations commenced on 5 November 1965 with minor weather delays. The following two days found the Soldiers fighting their heavy combat loads, dense jungle, heat and humidity, leeches, red ants, and the draining boredom of movement — but no Vietcong! Conetto is at his best in capturing the grind of jungle operations through the memories of the young American paratroopers he walked beside and led.

The battle began on 8 November at 0800 with a squad leader in Charlie Company, 1-503 IN (SSG Andrew Matosky) encountering a squad of “regulars” in North Vietnamese uniforms. His quick action eliminated the enemy squad, though one of his Soldiers, PFC Julius House, suffered the first wounds in a battle that would ultimately claim 49 American lives and leave 83 wounded. Hill 65 was now on the map of American military history and remains there

today. Charlie Company, under the command of CPT Sonny Tucker, would fight for its life the rest of the 8th and on into the night and following day with elements of Soldiers separated by circumstances and the fortunes of battle. Paratroopers take great pride in ensuring that no fellow Soldier is left behind on the battlefield, and Charlie Company fought valiantly and suffered to preserve that legacy.

Much of the fighting on 8 November hinged on Bravo Company, under the command of CPT Lowell Bittrich, which provided the flexibility and maneuverability to keep the enemy at bay through numerous attacks and counterattacks. Conetto affords CPT Bittrich particular praise for his indomitable will in sustaining the fight, having a keen sense of the tactical situation and exhibiting great skill in directing aviation assets against the larger enemy force.

Alpha Company, in which Conetto led a rifle platoon under the command of CPT Walt Daniel, played a key role in the relief of Bravo and Charlie Companies and the ultimate extraction of the battalion from the battlefield.

Two of the many heroes in the battalion were a medic, Specialist 5th Class Lawrence Joel, and a chaplain, CPT Jim Hutchens. Both saved countless lives and were wounded multiple times during the battle. Joel was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Lyndon Johnson.

Weaving the fabric of a complex battle like the one that took place on Hill 65 requires numerous threads. Conetto's tenacious use of original sources — more than 30 firsthand accounts — provides the reader an exceptional view of the battle as it unfolded. His research, diligence in tracking down participants, and relentless scholarship are all worthy of great praise. Missing from this volume is a much-needed series of maps that would add immeasurably to the reader's understanding of the flow of battle. The book was inspired by his original master's thesis in 1993 and further encouraged by his professor at San Jose State University, Dr. Larry D. Englemann. That the book appeared literally on the 50th Anniversary of the Battle for Hill 65 is a tribute to Conetto's own sense of history and a celebration of his personal efforts to tell a story that he needed to tell on behalf of himself and those who fought on Hill 65.

The most poignant chapters in *The Hump* are those devoted to Conetto's own life from aspiring childhood where he was "...entranced with the concepts of honor, sacrifice, daring, courage, glory, patriotism, and military tradition" to his lifelong struggle with PTSD. After his initial obligation that included his service in Alpha Company, he left the Army briefly but then returned guilt-ridden that he had survived Hump while many of his close friends and fellow Soldiers had not. Following another three years that included a second tour in Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division including command of a rifle company, Conetto left the service for good. The second tour in Vietnam only added to the guilt and bitterness that began with Hump and has continued to this day. This book is a remarkable tribute to Conetto's courageous lifelong battle against a wicked personal enemy, PTSD.

From the perspective of 50 years, Conetto has gathered a serious collection of "lessons learned" from both the tactical/strategic to the military/political. He cites a number of authorities including COL Walt Daniel, who had commanded Alpha Company in Operation Hump, and LTG Hal Moore, who had commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry in the Ia Drang. Daniel focuses on the American failure to reinforce units, which in the "search" phase made significant contact but then failed to add additional combat power to seek the total destruction of the enemy force. Moore addresses the strategic limitations placed on American forces in Vietnam by allowing sanctuary to the North Vietnamese in Laos and Cambodia. Moore cites another tragic political limitation when General Westmoreland was advised of a Chinese soldier by a 1st Cavalry Division officer and was told, "You will never mention anything about Chinese soldiers in South Vietnam! Never!"

In honoring the enlisted Soldiers, NCOs, and officers in the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) and the 1st Cavalry Division with whom he served, Conetto describes them as "America's finest!" He renders an equally emotional description of the politicians who "...were not of the same caliber. Many brave men gave their lives only to be sold down the river by those in Washington, D.C." In concluding, the reader finds a mature author, proud of his service and the opportunity to have led American soldiers in combat. You cannot help but be proud of Al Conetto for this significant achievement.

*MG (Retired) Chegar served in the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) from its beginning on Okinawa in 1963 and in the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry during 1965-66 including Operation Hump.*