

1/4 CAV

MECHANIZED OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM

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Major John B. Hubbard, USA

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INTERVIEWEE: MAJ JOHN B. HUBARD

UNIT: TROOP COMMANDER, TRP C 1ST SQDN, 4TH CAV, 1ST INF DIV;
THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 1ST SQDN, 4TH CAV S-3, 2D SQDN,
17TH CAVM 101ST AIRBORNE DIV

SUBJECT: ARMOR

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This is Major John B. Hubbard, presently I am at the Armor Board, Chief of Armor Section, Maintenance Evaluation. The information I'll attempt to go through here is to give a thumb-nail sketch of what I did in Vietnam and my interviewer will ask questions as I cover the material, presumably to fill in what I've got here in my notes.

First of all, I was assigned to my first armored unit in Vietnam when I was transferred, well when the troop commander, a CAPT John Ridge was wounded. He was the troop commander of Charlie Troop, 1st Sqdn, 4th Cav, 1st Div. At that time I was assigned to Task Force Alpha, which eventually became, by the way, Field Forces One. But at that time I was assigned to Na Trang. I applied for, through a friend, and eventually was assigned as troop commander of John Ridge's old troop. This was in late January, 1966. At that time I had been in country approximately six or seven months, so this was to me--I was quite happy because at this time of the assignment, whole American Army only had three armored cav troops in the entire country. I stayed in the assignment as troop commander until I was wounded in April of 1966. If I remember correctly, it was the 16th. This was a

and mine incident right near Ben Can. I was on a convoy security operation and I happened to slow down on a sandy part of the road and I learned otherwise.

In any event, what we covered during the time frame was, and I'll go through very quickly--again, we were the only armored unit, American armored unit in country, and consequently a whole host of doctrine had not yet been developed, or I might say theories of operations of tactics had not yet been developed for the use of armor. Essentially, during the time I was there, the 1st Division employed us like they did most any infantry battalion or any other tactical maneuver unit. We were given areas of operations. We were given at times roads to secure; base camps to secure; and vast areas of jungle to, say patrol, or paddy land, as the case may be, to patrol to search for and destroy any enemy units found in those areas. Well, this, of course, opened Pandora's Box. In one regard, we had no constraints as far as what we could not necessarily how we did it. As a consequence, I felt somewhat unimpeded--the whole philosophy of the unit at that time was to get out and find the enemy and kill him. To give you an example of the lack of constraints, the 1st Division later adopted the philosophy of digging in, establishing base camps every time they moved and they would leap-frog these base camps, each one which took anywhere from a day, a couple days, or sometimes a week to finally prepare. During the early part of '66, without these constraints, simply because of the lack of experience, we had a totally different tactic. We would move until just before dark, set up a quick perimeter defense, by just everybody circling in round robin--or rather round wagon style, and throw out some concertina between vehicles and everybody would sleep either under or right near their

racks or inside their tracks. Provided there was no immediate cover to our immediate front or anywhere, say within 100 yards in front of us, we felt we were fairly secure. The enemy at that time, by and large, didn't bother us except for an occasional sniping round and generally we were out of range of their RPG2s. The RPG7s, you see, had not really appeared in country to any great extent. And I might also add that the enemy activity at the time was against American, any American unit, was largely restricted to battalion and regimental size attacks. They didn't play around with us in terms of, they never sent against us any way, squads, platoons, or anything of that nature. They would recon a US position until they felt they had it pretty well nailed down, then they would throw in a regiment. So, if you ever had enemy contact in general, it was not contact with small units, you either had a major battle on your hands or you had nothing. This was manifested later in the famous battles of Min Ton, Highway 13, and some of the others. In any event, our tactic then, was considerably different from the normal procedures which, of course, later developed. That is, digging bunkers, digging in concertina, and engineer tape, and land mines, and claymores, and the whole thing. We also had constraints, logistical constraints. We had very few claymore mines, very little barbed wire, so what we did have, we put it down in such a way that it would be a minor hindrance to the enemy, but we could pick it up quickly the next morning, throw it back on the track and use it again at a later date. I would say that most tracks had probably no more than one or two coils of barbed wire, or concertina wire on it.

Now, there were some tricks to the trade used here. Since we had

ery little action against us in these night defensive positions, whether they were successful or not, I can't say. We felt they were successful. We frequently would, the idea any way was to keep light and move frequently. The idea was to establish a position, say just before dark or maybe an hour before dark, look like you are about to dig in, and then just at dark or just a few minutes before, move a few hundred yards, and the next morning break camp just before dawn, be prepared to move out. The idea--the philosophy at the time was keep moving and they'll never be able to pinpoint you, and consequently, you'd never get attacked. Again, as I mentioned earlier, whether it was successful or not is probably anybody's guess. You'd have to ask the enemy for that.

OK, where did we operate. Largely in war zone D, the southern part of it, and if I had a map, I could point some of the areas out. That was where we got involved in some jungle operations because we had some AOs and just virtually turned loose. You guys go in the jungles and thrash around and if you can find anything, let us know. We did. We found a few base camps. We beat our way into a jungle one day and just before dark, we didn't want to get caught in the jungle, we virtually couldn't see beyond the muzzles of the tanks in many cases, turned around and came back out the same way we got in, and pulled into an NBP. The next morning we went in and went about 200 yards further and found that we had come that close to what appears to have been, I would say at least a battalion or a battalion reinforced size base camp, which from all evidence was occupied at the time the night before. I might also add that the second day we went into the thing, the reason why we suggested that it had been occupied, was that our tank tracks of the day before were completely covered with Ho Chi

in sandal tracks. They had used our route to get into the camp, beat the day before, as an exit or egress route from the base camp during the night, and of course, leaving behind, not only Ho Chi Min sandal tracks, but covers of thousands of little bitty propaganda, covers of propaganda leaflets and things of that nature. Nevertheless, we still encountered the next, and I'd say about a squad or maybe about a platoon size base camp security force, because we fought off snipers most of the day and had a couple of people wounded. One of our tanks got hit with an RPG2, of course, we didn't know about it until several hours later, when we noticed a lot of diesel oil all over the ground. It got hit in gas tank--or the diesel tank.

If I can make a kind of a general summary of that particular operation, such as it was--we were able to get into the base camp proceeding at, probably no faster than maybe two miles an hour, it's simply hard to work an M48 tank through the jungle much faster than that. But, we got into it relatively safely, not very clandestinely, of course, but we were able to progress at a rate of ground advance faster than any infantry unit could move into the area. Simply fighting your way through that jungle foot, probably they could have gone no faster than one or two miles an hour. It was just an incredibly thick bunch of undergrowth. Large trees were not necessarily a hindrance, because we could generally avoid those. That was the only thing that really sticks with me after all those years.

We made quite a lot of publicity over this and eventually were able to convince a few people that maybe this idea of giving a cav unit an area of operations was not such a bit of foolhardy tactics after all, that, in fact, it does have its benefits. I'm not trying

to run down infantry here, it's just simply the fact that a heavy vehicle can plow its way through about 15 or 20 foot high, thick underbrush, in many cases much faster than an individual walking through it by foot. Now I will caveat that by saying it depends upon the condition of the ground. We were on a dry section of forest. If it had been in a rain storm, or in the monsoon, God knows how we could have made it, because you lose a lot of traction and track'll slip and you may wind up getting yourself bogged down instead of getting anywhere.

OK, to continue the topic. We operated in the southern part of war zone D, moved from there, and I don't recall exactly when, probably middle of February, perhaps late February, over into an operation for about two weeks in the Hoba Woods area, which is not too far from Ku Chi. Now what we were doing as far as the big picture was concerned, I'm not really certain, being only a troop commander, except I think we were covering force for the arrival of the 25th Division. I do know that they had only an advance party in the Ku Chi area at the time this operation was going on. So I suspect that covering operation was the purpose of it. In any event, this was the first time I had ever gotten into any type of a fire fight at all. Up until that time, just sniper rounds and minor stuff. But, our mission most of the time we were there comprised the blocking force of infantry sweeps through the jungles. If you look at the geography of the Hoba Woods area, the northeastern part of it, if I recall, is backed up against, I believe it's the Saigon River--anyway, it's the one coming out of Cambodia. But the areas largely to the south and to an extent to the west of it are open rice paddy areas, which, of course, during the dry season are hard as concrete. We could move

ery rapidly over this type terrain. Meanwhile, they could airlift
n, or walk in--we had very few helicopters, infantry units to conduct
sweep, of course basing part of our block against the Saigon River.
ost of what we encountered are pockets of enemy shifting locations or
attempting just to fire shots at us, to sort of ambush us from a, oh,
undred yard range or something just to cut a whole flurry of RPG2
ounds or rifle grenades and what have you. We'd return fire, attempt
to go after them, usually they would disappear in one way or another;
ometimes we'd get a few. Just a constant nickel and dime type of
thing, but from the attitude of the people in the area, there were a
few, well they used the expression in those days "hard core", now I
guess you call it VC main force units. We encountered no North
vietnamese that I know of; captured a few POWs and a lot of other
stuff of this nature, but it was the first time that in these little
actions, I personally, and many of my tracks had ever been able to
boast of a lot of bullet holes or near misses by RPG2s and stuff of
that nature.

After that, we then moved over into the Swon Lok area in a series
of operations--General Lepugh had just taken command of the division in
the Swon Lok area--in an attempt to clear out the area south of Swon
Lok, apparently prior to the arrival of the 11th Armored Cavalry, of
course, destined to occupy Swon Lok as a base camp. The mission of
the squadron, of course, I had pieces of it, was to escort the
division trains from Xeon, Lai Kai, and Fukvihh areas over into the
series of fire bases established south of Swon Lok and I can't recall
the name of the plantations, I think they were Courtenay, was one of
them and I don't recall the others off hand, but I think if you look

n a map, you'll see the area. While there, the type of missions I as assigned didn't really materially from the stuff we had gotten earlier. Some base camp security missions, again employing the move very day or so type tactic, light layers of concertina in front, maybe an occasional claymore if we can find one; relying heavily upon imply the 50 calibers on the vehicles and the canister of the 90 mm, and then also backing away from any tree lines for any great distance, try and stay as much as possible way out in the open. And just staying generally vigilant, making certain that anybody wandering through the area--that is Vietnamese--kept distant, and was escorted if necessary, and whatever, in other words just maintain simple common sense type of security measures, additionally, convoy escort or highway clearing operations. Quick reaction type forces--we had a few quick reaction type forces which I always felt was very much within our capabilities. The division had, for example, a somewhat tentatively guarded, or poorly guarded water point, and it turned out that a supply truck/water truck one day from one of the artillery battalions was ambushed in route to the water point. We had to reply to it and we got, unfortunately the information of the ambush, only one truck was involved, two Americans killed, was received late. I think we arrived on the scene within minutes after getting the notification, we were the only unit that could move that quickly, but nevertheless, the ambush had pretty well been over with, I'd say a good 30 minutes by the time we arrived there. We assisted the local ARVN, RF/PF, Regional Forces and Popular Forces, in evacuating a few villages, moving them down towards Bongtau. We escorted the column. Again the local VC made an attempt to intercept the column a few times, which involved deploying a little bit, mostly fire power, by

etting a few tracks off the road to kind of act as a base of fire, part of a platoon leader's type war as far as that's concerned. But I encountered a few of these actions while trying to get the villages evacuated. At the end of this operation, and again I don't recall exactly, I don't recall the name of the operation so much, but it ended some time in early April. The division plans at that moment, then, were to return to its base areas and then prepare for Operation Birmingham. It was in escorting the division, the 2d Brigade trains back to Lei Kai, when a LTC Luwayne took over the squadron, and I'd say the very next day, as a matter of fact, I had my little traffic accident with a command detonated mine and that pretty well ended my commandership.

A quick summary of the commanders. Squadron commander during the majority of my tour was a LTC Paul Fisher. He is now a full Colonel. I think he is retired and the last word I got was living someplace in northern Virginia. I suspect Manassas or somewhere. He was replaced in or about the 15th of April, 1966, by LTC Luwayne. The S-3 under COL Fisher, and later under LTC Luwayne was at that time MAJ George E. Taylor, now a full Colonel and assigned someplace in the Washington area. I encountered him recently at Ft. Hood, but I don't recall his exact assignment. Unfortunately, I do not recall very many of the staff officers. I understand the S-2 and the S-4 are now out of the service. The other troop commanders, or other personnel involved--let me just say that my own platoon leader, I still kept up with some of the addresses, and if anybody would like to talk to them in more detail, I am certain I can get in touch with them for whomever wants to get a hold of them. Now, I might add that after I was wounded, my

Executive Officer took command of the troop and shortly after that, perhaps the next month or so, they got heavily involved in Operation Birmingham, and then later into the operation up in the Min Ton plantation areas. The people who commanded the platoons of Charlie troop during those actions, I can give, I can get the addresses, and you can send letters or people to interview them as the case may be. I can still, I am certain I can dig those names up.

In summary, I felt that there was no tactical appreciation or concept of employment for tanks at the time I took over the troop. I had heard rumors, later verified I might add, that the division left behind two tank battalions when it left Ft. Riley. The two battalions, of course, being the 1st Battalion, 63d Armor and the 2d Battalion, 63d Armor. The two battalions were left behind, as I understand it, because there was not adequate logistical support for armor-type vehicles in Vietnam, i.e., lack of port facilities, lack of logistical back-up, spare parts, and all that other jazz, reinforced by a feeling prevalent among the senior commanders that armor simply could not be used in Vietnam. The use of the 1st Sqdn, 4th Cav in the type of general concept I've explained to you, apparently changed many people's minds, and as I understand it, General Lepugh regretted for a long time thereafter, including General Seman, that the two tank battalions had, in fact, been left behind at Riley. Now, I'd like to say that I was later assigned to the 1st Bn, 63d back at Riley. The 2d of the 63d was deactivated sometime in late 66, early 67, and this was the prevalent feeling among the old people who had stayed behind, plus the few members of the division, who had wandered back, being reassigned to the battalion. This is strictly unverified, but it seems to me to be fairly logical, a fairly logical assumption.

Now, to to into the second part of my tour, or do you have questions for me?

The question is when we operated in war zone D and into the jungle area, did we take tanks with us? Most definitely yes. As a matter of fact, the troop was about 99 percent complete as far as TOE was concerned. That is complete, both personnel wise and vehicularly. At this point here--we used the tanks as kind of a battering ram getting through the jungle. We found the armored personnel carriers were too light. They were helpful from time to time to circumvent, like getting around a tree, when a tank could not neutral steer, but by and large, the heavy mass of the tank was what it took to batter its way through that underbrush. Incidentally, on this point, people have a tendency to think only of the tactics of it. I experimented a number of times with different concepts while I was there. We eventually settled on the following: unwritten but very effective. How do you maintain a troop operational at a time when you have marginal logistical support, a lack of understanding by a lot of people of the need for maintenance in an armored unit. In other words, how did I keep--let me not say how did I keep--how did the troop keep--we don't work independently in this world--how did the troop keep its deadline rate down and its operational ready rate up in spite of an enormous wear and tear on the vehicles. In answer to the question, I would administratively deadline one or two vehicles out of every platoon on a continuous basis. This was an administrative thing, but yet it would be reported as a deadlined vehicle, and if necessary, we would make some fictitious reason for it. The purpose of doing that is that we would leave the vehicle and the crew back at the base camp to be

completely worked over, kind of an extra Q check if you want to put it that way, by the maintenance section and the crew, and we would keep a roster. It was sort of like keeping the old 319 form on the vehicles and in this way over a prolonged period of time, we were able to keep deadline rate at a very consistently low number. I don't recall what TOE we had at the time, but at any time we had no more than one or two vehicles down for combat reasons and maybe one or two down for administrative reasons. Let me retract that--I am trying to recall. I seldom in practical terms, rarely, did I have anything less than, and in a 10 vehicle platoon, anything less than eight or nine vehicles actually operational in the field. So, most of the time, I was able to maneuver with three complete platoons.

Question is what armament did we have. This was stuff straight from Stateside. We had gun shields that were fabricated for the M113s, were fabricated by Post Ordnance at Ft. Riley. They were made out of one inch thick aluminum plate, they were improperly balanced. It took three football players and two strong men to rotate the turret if the vehicle happened to stop on the side of a hill. We eventually took the shields off and with the exception of one or two vehicles, with very strong vehicle commanders, we fought the entire time without gun shields of any kind. We were able to steal, borrow, MR, however by various means, extra M60 machine guns for the loader's hatch in the back of the M113s, but by and large, we were restricted to the one 50 caliber and the one M60 organic to that particular vehicle.

OK, we're back on some of the aspects of the 1st Division's operations in '66. My interviewer is asking me questions here. I might add that as far as I know, we were some of the first units to begin to rip off, or take off the rubber track shrouds on the M113.

we found that they were simply being ripped to shreds by the bamboo and by the jungle underbrush and we also found that the vehicle would float and handle fairly well without them anyway.

I might add that the use of the M48A3 came as a shock to me in the regard. My entire experience at time had been on the 48A2s and a little bit on the 48A1s. The diesel engine with its enormous range, and I might add lack of volatility solved so many problems that people who are not accustomed to gasoline engines, cannot begin to comprehend. First of all, we could operate for three and four days at a time without refueling with the M48A3. Up until that time, a 48A2 for example, would have to be topped off probably twice or about twice a day or at least once a day to its entirety and based upon my experience in Germany with it. Secondly, we did get fuel tank hits by RPG2s. In no case did these hits ever result in an engine fire or any immediate danger to the crew. I had mentioned earlier in the southern part of war zone D a hit that we did not even realize until, oh, perhaps an hour or two later, if I recall, simply by the crew noticing an enormous amount of diesel fuel on the ground. It was then we discovered that, in fact, the tank had been hit by an RPG2, which penetrated, blew a hole in the fuel tank, of course, we lost probably 50 or 100 gallons, I guess, without an engine fire. I feel that is very significant.

I was assigned as the S-3 of the 2d Sqdn, 17th Cav, 101st Airborne Division in either late September or early October, 1967. At that time, the division was at Ft. Campbell preparing for deployment to Vietnam. Now the condition of the squadron basically was this--of course, the reviewer must understand that the TOE of the airborne

quadron is different than any other divisional cavalry squadron in that we had two cavalry, two ground cavalry troops and one air cavalry troop. Due to the lack of a proper vehicle, that is an air transportable vehicle, or an air-droppable vehicle, the cavalry squadron was equipped with jeeps, 3/4 ton trucks, things of that nature. In any event, the Alpha Troop of the squadron had been sent to Vietnam some, I had forgotten now, two and one-half to three years earlier with its 1st brigade. It deployed from Campbell during the fall of '65 and leaving behind the squadron headquarters, Bravo Troop and (Bravo was the other ground troop) and its one air cavalry troop, Charlie Troop. It was kind of strange situation because you had two troops and an enormous headquarters.

OK, the squadron had had a long history of aggressor details and just kind of a miscellaneous outfit, it could pick up a whole host of non-essential tasks in the division. The training emphasis in the division was largely on the airborne qualification of the individuals plus the training in infantry tactics and so forth. This I accept simply because of a, the tendency of an isolated unit like that sometimes to be forgotten or be misused. No problem.

The squadron was deployed in late November, early December, 1967. They did not have an adequate supply of helicopters to go with the division. Consequently, we left behind our Charlie Troop. Charlie Troop, as a matter of fact, turned in their helicopters to deploy with another air cavalry unit, or helicopter unit, deploying someplace elsewhere in the United States. I don't recall what the name of it was. So what we eventually deployed with then was one headquarter troop, Bravo Troop, and the aero-rifle platoon without an transportation. If you can call that a squadron, I'd be surprised

In any event, we initiated a series of requests to be issued the M113 upon arrival in country, attempting to base our requests on the experience of other cavalry units in country. The requests were turned down. Ostensibly due to lack of a sufficient logistical back-up of M113s. In other words, they didn't have them to issue to us, and if they did, they couldn't back them up with maintenance floats or spare parts and things of that nature. So it was turned down. We were required--in effect then, we deployed as a jeep outfit. Now we were able to substitute, or turn in all of our 106 recoilless rifles and draw to replace them M60 machine guns. So Bravo Troop, then, had no 106 recoilless rifles, but had an over abundance of machine gun jeeps. (End of side 1)

The other two brigades, one going to Fukvihn, and the other to the Kuchi base area. Now I might add that we encountered a problem here which had more to do with training, I guess, than tactics, although it's hard to separate one from the other. As you recall, the 101st Airborne Division was deployed about a month early from Ft. Campbell. In retrospect, I assume this was because of the knowledge MACV had of the upcoming Tet offensive. I can't, of course, be certain of this. But, in any event our training program at Ft. Campbell was cut short. Consequently, the idea, the concept at the time was to deploy the division early, but restrict their deployment, or their employment in country to strictly non-tactical missions in the hopes that by continuing a so-called training program in the immediate area of their base camps, the 30 days of training that had to be eliminated at Ft. Campbell, in effect, could be accomplished in Vietnam. Now an interpretation situation arose in that the directive

from CONUS MACV was worded somewhat vaguely. The division interpreted this 30 day training program to apply to infantry battalions only. Now what this meant was that the 2d of the 17 Cavalry, along with a few other outfits, and I don't recall exactly which ones right now-- certainly some artillery battalions, were excluded from the 30 day restriction. It meant that we conducted to a limited extent some operational patrolling around the periphery of the Benwa base camp. And it also meant that earlier than any of the infantry battalions, we were sent up to Songbai in an operational role to secure and prepare a division base, a division forward, if you want to call it that, in preparation for an eventual division-wide, or probably corps-wide operation into the northern reaches of war zone D. I think the operation, by the way, would have, was supposed to have gone all the way up to the Cambodian border, but again my memory leaves me and I don't really recall specifically. This was the operation, which late in January was canceled as the Tet offensive became imminent, one brigade, the 1st Brigade, which was scheduled to rejoin the division, I'm sorry the 2d Brigade, was deployed north the reinforce Wey, and was in the process of deploying to Wey when the Tet offensive hit us.

OK, now what happened at Songbai to the 2d of the 17 Cav.