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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY A, 4th BATTALION,
31st INFANTRY, 196th LIGHT INFANTRY BRIGADE,
IN THE ATTACK OF A FORTIFIED BASE IN WAR ZONE C,
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM, 2-5 FEBRUARY 1967.
(PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A COMPANY COMMANDER)

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INTRODUCTION

During the period of 2 through 21 February 1967, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade conducted offensive operations in the west central portion of Tây Ninh Province. The area of operations was located in War Zone C, approximately 25 kilometers northwest of Tây Ninh City, and was bounded by the Cambodian border on the west and National Highway 22 on the east (See Map "A"). The purpose of the operations was to conduct search and destroy operations and to block infiltration routes on the Cambodian border during the Tet truce period, 8 to 12 February 1967. The operation, named Gadsden, also served to cover the deployment of additional large forces into the area of operations in preparation for Operation JUNCTION CITY, which began on 22 February 1967. (2:3) Company A, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, participated in both of these operations.

OPERATION GADSDEN

Operation Gadsden was conducted by the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (Reinforced) and the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, under the control of the 25th Infantry Division, which was given the mission to conduct search and destroy operations in the vicinity of the Cambodian border beginning 2 February 1967. (2:2) The 196th Light Infantry Brigade consisted of two light infantry battalions, a mechanized infantry battalion (attached), a cavalry troop for

reconnaissance and security, a 105-mm howitzer artillery battalion (DS), and other combat support and combat service support elements.

(3:4)

The brigade's main effort, in conjunction with the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, was to locate and destroy enemy troops, command groups and installations, and to block infiltration routes across the border. It was estimated that elements of the 271st Main Force Regiment, the 680th Training Regiment, the 70th Security Regiment and certain Viet Cong command headquarters units were located in the Gadsden operational area. (2:3-4)

Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles, 196th Brigade Commander, issued his order at 271830 January. His concept was for the brigade command group, an artillery battery and a small security force to move overland from the brigade base camp at Tây Ninh on D-1 to Xã Hao Duoc (XT 128835) and establish an artillery fire support base (FSB). On D-Day, 2 February 1967, the mechanized infantry was to attack to the northwest and conduct a river crossing, then move west to secure an advanced landing zone (LZ), where an infantry battalion and the remainder of the artillery battalion would establish a FSB. In the later phases, mechanized infantry and light infantry battalions would attack to secure objectives in the vicinity of the border to conduct search and destroy operations prior to the Tet ceasefire period.

(6:3) (See Map "B")

The 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, minus C Company, which was designated the brigade ready reaction force, was to air assault A Company at H-hour to secure both sides of the Súi Bón Đá River

for an engineer bridging site (XT 053683). The 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, would cross and attack to seize Objective 2, and the rest of the 4th Battalion would then airmobile to secure a firing position for two artillery batteries at Objective 2 and conduct search and destroy operations in that vicinity. The battalion was also to be prepared to conduct a combat assault to secure FSB "D" on D +3. H-hour was designated as 020730 February. Pre-H-hour preparation of the bridge crossing site was to include a tactical air strike, and 105-mm and 165-mm howitzer fires from the FSB at Áp Trai B1 (XT 115705). (6:3)

A Company, reinforced with the battalion reconnaissance platoon, would air assault two platoons on the south side of the river while the remainder of the company, with one 81-mm mortar, would secure the northern bank (See table 1 for organization of rifle company). The 175th Engineer Company and their bridging materials would be lifted in to complete the pontoon bridge in time for the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, to continue on to Objective 2. The bridge would then be dismantled and lifted out and A Company would be air lifted to rejoin the battalion at Objective 2 before nightfall. (6:3)

OPERATIONS ON 2-3 FEBRUARY 1967

At 0737 hours on 2 February 1967, the lead elements of A Company began the air assault into LZs 1 and 2 in two lifts. The landing was unopposed and the company quickly established a security perimeter around the crossing site. Squad-size security patrols were combing

the area 500 to 600 meters in all directions when the first loads of engineers and their bridge equipment were landed by CH-47 "Chinook" helicopters shortly after 0800 hours. These patrols uncovered recently used trenches and a cache of 500 pounds of sale. (3:5)

The advance unit of the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, completed the link-up with A Company on the south bank at 1130 hours and shortly after 1200 hours the engineers were ready for the first armored personnel carriers to cross. However, the loose, muddy soil and steep banks on each side of the river slowed the operation considerably. After two or three carriers crossed, the bridge approach on the south bank had to be rebuilt with logs and dirt. As a result, it was 1545 hours before the mechanized ~~unit~~^{unit} completed the crossing. The possibility of A Company closing into the battalion base at Objective 2 that night was remote. The last of the engineers and their bridge were finally picked up from the south bank by Chinooks after dark and A Company dug in defensive positions and settled down for a long, but uneventful, night five kilometers from the closest reinforcements.

At daylight the north bank was again secured and the company completed a river crossing with one pontoon boat left by the engineers the night before, and were ready at the pick-up zone when the first lift of UH-1Ds landed at 0812 hours. The company closed into the fire support base at 0841 hours. (3:6) The men received a resupply of water and the company commander met briefly with the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James P. Coley, to get a verbal order for the operations that day. The reconnaissance platoon returned to battalion control and A Company was ordered to sweep north,

making a detailed search of the area, to establish a company ambush site between Objective 2 and the brigade coordination point (XT030752), and to make physical contact at that point with a unit of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. (1:3)

The platoons moved along separate routes about 500 meters apart in the dense jungle to adequately check the area and did not close into the new company base until 1630 hours. The search uncovered a small, abandoned base camp and several, well used trails. (1:4) Security patrols were out and the troops were digging in for the night when the company commander received an urgent message at 1715 hours from the battalion S3 to return immediately to the FSB. The emphasis on speed during the return move enabled the company to close into the battalion defensive position as darkness fell.

The reason for the hasty change of plans was soon clear. The 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, had made heavy contact with elements of a Viet Cong main force battalion about four kilometers southwest of the FSB that afternoon (WT 999699). A mechanized company had run into a well entrenched V. C. ambush force and several of their carriers were damaged, including one destroyed by recoilless rifle fire, and they had suffered several casualties. Most of the battalion had been engaged before the V. C. broke contact. (3:7)

The new mission of the 4th Battalion was to attack on order to the southwest to secure Objective 5 in support of the attack of the 1st

Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, to seize Objective 4. (See Map "B"). The brigade commanders' instructions were simple and straightforward: Find the V. C. and destroy them. (5:3)

THE BATTALION PLAN FOR 4 FEBRUARY 1967

At 2100 hours, 3 February 1967, the battalion commander issued his attack order to the unit leaders present at the FSB: A Company, B Company and the Reconnaissance Platoon. C Company was to be released as the brigade ready reaction force and would be lifted into the FSB at 0730 hours, 4 February 1967, in time to move with the battalion.

The commander's concept was for A and B Companies to begin moving as the lead elements toward the southwest as soon as C Company had closed in and was ready to join the move. The battalion objective was to secure a clearing, shown on the map as a dry-lake area called Báu Som Rúot, as a harbor site for the evening of 4 February 1967, to accomodate multiple resupply helicopters. (1:5) That LZ was the planned location of the battalion patrol base for the next two days for company and platoon saturation patrols to conduct a detailed search of the area.

NARRATION

MOVEMENT TO CONTACT

At 0805 hours, the battalion moved out on a wide axis, with the two lead companies moving about 500 meters apart to cover a larger area. The reconnaissance platoon with the battalion headquarters group followed to the right rear of A Company, while C Company

moved in the reserve position, about 500 meters behind the leading units. The battalion commander and artillery liaison officer were overhead in an OH-23 helicopter throughout the day for command and control purposes. (1:5)

A Company, on the left, was the base unit for the movement and used what was called a "box" formation to get a maximum number of personnel forward to search the area. (See Table 2) Each of the leading platoons used a fire team about 100 meters in front as their point element and each team had radio communications, reporting to their platoon leader. Even in the dense jungle, the platoons were able to maintain three columns, each within visual contact of the others at all times.

Each company carried an 81-mm mortar and at least 35 rounds of ammunition, as directed by the battalion. This load cut down on their speed and ease of movement and reduced the unit's flexibility of using a fourth rifle platoon, but each leader felt the time would come when the quick response fire support of the company mortars would be required.

The pace was deliberately slow, with maximum security to each side and the front. Several stops were made by each company to check out suspected areas and it was soon quite clear that the many trails were well traveled by the V. C. The front units made liberal use of artillery fire support during the move through the jungle thicket. This fire ranged from 200 to 800 meters out to the front of the point team and the open flank of each company, without setting any particular

pattern. To merely "walk" artillery to your front while moving will only succeed in alerting the V. C. to your direction of movement and encourage an ambush.

At approximately 1400 hours the point team reached the edge of the triangular shaped, grass covered clearing. Rifle squads thoroughly cleared the north and east edges and an artillery fire mission was called to hammer the tree line on the south side. Over sixty rounds of high explosive were used by the two batteries in their fire-for-effect. A Company had the task of securing the south side while B and C Companies took the north and east portions respectively. Because the company sector was approximately 350 meters long, all three rifle platoons were used on line and instructed to prepare defensive positions about 15 meters inside the tree line, with the first platoon on the east, second in the center and the third on the west. All units were faced with dense woods and undergrowth to their front, except for the right half of the third platoon sector which had a deep thicket of grass and bushes but no tall trees (See Map "C"). The company's reserve consisted of the mortar platoon, less one crew to man the gun, and company headquarters personnel.

INITIAL CONTACT

The platoon leaders had located their positions for the night and the men were busy digging in when the company commander received a call from the third platoon leader at 1420 hours that they had found a fresh grave to their front.

A trail leading directly from the clearing into the woods formed the tie-in point for the second and third platoons and a machinegun from the third had it well covered. The grave was beside the trail about 20 meters in front of the gun position and was spotted by a fire team heading out to set up an observation post. By the time the C.O. arrived to take a look, the team had uncovered a pajama-clad V.C. wrapped in dark plastic and possessing several very recent bullet holes. The C.O. gathered some items that might be of some intelligence value and headed back toward the clearing as the fire team resumed their trip out to the front at 1430 hours.

The team was hit almost immediately by automatic weapons fire and three were wounded in that first burst from an assault rifle from behind a tree before the team leader killed the V.C. gunner. The immediate ^{action} ~~section~~ of the squad leader in rushing the rest of his squad and the machinegun crew up front took the pressure off the hard hit team and covered their return to the first line of foxholes. The squad was very much occupied with machinegun and small arms fire from well concealed positions on the east side of the trail. (1:6)

The C.O. had the artillery forward observer get a fire mission going right away to put a wall of fire behind what was estimated to be a reinforced V.C. squad before they could pull out. The second platoon leader already had the rest of his men on the move to link-up with his squad and eliminate the guerrilla unit. Our next requirement was for something to fill the time gap until the artillery arrived on target. This was the reason for lugging the 81-mm mortar through

the jungle, and it was quite obvious the crew had anticipated the need. The first round was sliding down the tube as the C.O. called the order.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITUATION

Two significant things happened at this point that immediately changed this small fire fight into something quite different. As the mortar crew was firing the first rounds, they suddenly came under fire by what turned out to be a 60-mm mortar. Although ten rounds fell right around the gun, no one was hit and the crew kept up the rate of fire. The second incident was a brief, but furious, exchange of automatic rifle fire in C Company's sector. The company commander's report over the battalion command net told of a V.C. ambush of a security squad on patrol in front of his perimeter and several casualties. (1:6) The meaning of these events was clear: There was something decidedly larger than the estimated squad, they were now on at least two sides of the battalion (B Company was soon to report activity in front of their positions), and they were reinforced with machineguns and mortars. (See Map "D")

The artillery rounds were now falling heavily about a hundred meters to the front and this provided the opportunity to get the second platoon back to our positions and to use the fire support to our advantage. The entire platoon had run into two more machineguns and several bunkers on a line to their front, and were engaged with V.C. only fifteen meters away. The F.O., with two batteries firing in close support, began to walk the artillery onto the bunker positions

and within about fifty meters of our shallow holes.

PREPARATION AND CONDUCT OF THE FIRST ATTACK

The deluge of high explosive shells resulted in a rapid decline and then a complete stop in the firing coming from the bunkers so close to the front. An urgent call from the battalion operations officer assured us the medical evacuation chopper was on the way, that tactical air was overhead and to use it. A brief rebuttal by the company commander that artillery was doing the job was overruled and the Air Force forward air controller (FAC), known as "Isher-42" on the radio circling overhead in his "Bird-dog", was contacted over the battalion command net. He rapidly put a flight of two F-100s through several strikes parallel to the tree line and about 150 meters from our positions, bringing them closer with each strike until all cannon, bombs and napalm were depleted.

(1:6)

Before the fighters pulled off the target, the second and third platoon leaders and the F.O. met with the C.O. for a brief order on the attack of the bunker positions. The third platoon would attack on the right flank, across the trail to the east, to attempt to get behind the line of bunkers. The second platoon would support by fire from their present positions. An artillery preparation of the known bunker positions would pick up as soon as the air strike was completed, and their fires, along with the supporting fires of the second platoon, would be shifted at the command of the third platoon leader.

At approximately 1620 hours, the troopers of the third platoon began their move with two squads on line toward the trail, about 100

meters away. All was well until they approached the west side of the trail and called ~~from~~^{for} the supporting fires to shift to the east. The entire eastern side of the trail exploded with fire from two machineguns and numerous small-arms weapons at very close range. The fire was intense and both sides exchanged grenades, but the dense undergrowth made it all very ineffective and prohibited the use of our M72 66-mm rockets to destroy the bunkers. Once again the artillery gave precious time for the lieutenant to get his whole platoon back without a scratch. (See Map "E")

"Isher-42", the Air Force FAC, was overhead again with another flight of F-100s to take another shot at our target. Yellow smoke spotted the right and left flanks and the forward positions of A Company and assisted his adjustment of the strikes onto the bunkers. The closeness and violence of their attack indicated to the men on the ground that the target must surely have been destroyed.

CONDUCT OF THE SECOND ATTACK

The lengthening shadows indicated time was running short and in order to be set when darkness arrived, the company needed to know what was left in front of them. The second platoon was instructed to execute an attack into the left flank of the area of the first bunkers to see if the air and artillery had completed the job. If we could find the flank of the bunkers, we would be able to rout the remaining V. C. from their positions and destroy them before dark. The company commander specified that if they once again became heavily engaged,

they were to pull back and use the artillery. The forward observer was moving with the lead squad and he had an on-call fire mission ready to go as they silently probed the dark unknown. They were very close to the unseen bunkers when a heavy burst from a machinegun hit the right flank squad. Four troopers were down, including the F.O., as our machinegunners sought to eliminate the V.C. guns. The fire was intense before the first bunker was silenced, but increasing fire from mutually supporting positions on the right and left did not permit us to hold our newly-won position. (See Map "F") The F.O., bleeding from a head wound, and his radio operator were laying directly in front of the V.C. guns calling in accurate fire just twenty-five meters away. He maintained that position until the wounded were dragged safely to the rear and he was ordered to move back. Once again the company had been unable to put sufficient combat power at the decisive place and time to destroy the enemy in their fortified positions.

REORGANIZATION AND DEFENSE

The Air Force FAC put in one last, heavy strike on the bunker line before dark as the entire battalion dug deeper in expectation of an assault by the enemy force that night. Because of the close proximity of the V.C. positions, listening posts were not used as security. Each platoon prepared three-men, mutually supporting positions as close together as possible and the importance of fire discipline in the defense was emphasized to everyone.

The first probe came at 2045 hours in the third platoon sector, near the trail, in an apparent effort to determine the locations of

our machineguns. After a brief exchange of grenades, the V.C. withdrew with unknown casualties. The troopers of the third held fast and were unscratched. At approximately 2200 hours, the V.C. probed again in front of the second platoon. This, too, only consisted of a few inaccurate grenades and a dispirited rush of two positions that quickly stopped the attack with small-arms fire and grenades. The V.C. left two dead in front of the positions.

(1:7)

This was to be the last contact that night and was apparently executed to cover the withdrawal of the rest of the force from the bunkers in the rear. By 2300 hours all was quiet except for the periodic burst of artillery interdiction fires on possible routes of escape to the south and west.

A heavy preparation by the artillery at first light the next morning and an assault by the first platoon from the left rear of the bunker complex proved unnecessary as the Viet Cong had completed their evacuation under the cover of darkness long before. What they left behind explained their determination to defend.

THE RESULTS OF THE OPERATION

Friendly Losses: 7 WHA (one wounded by shrapnel of 105-mm HE round short of target).

Enemy Losses: 5 KIA by body count and 5 KIA possible.

Captured Equipment:

One partially destroyed rifle

Six rounds of 60-mm mortar ammunition

300 rounds of linked .30 cal. MG ammunition

Nine Chicom hand grenades (potato-masher type)

Approximately 600 rounds of assorted small-arms ammunition and empty 12.7 mm shell casings.

Assorted individual equipment

Assorted documents, including diaries, reports, letters and training literature printed in Vietnamese, Cambodian and Chinese. The documents identified the C-17 (recoilless rifle company) and the C-18 (engineer company) of the 271st Main Force Regiment.

(3:8)

Base Camp: The bunker complex consisted of twenty-eight large (6'x8'x4' deep), well constructed (logs and three feet of dirt for overhead cover) bunkers. Each bunker was estimated to be large enough for four to six men to live. Only one of the bunkers had been destroyed by the air strikes. The camp was rectangular in shape, oriented toward the clearing, and included a very large (8'x8'x6' deep) bunker for command and communications purposes. This bunker included telephone lines running to key positions in the enemy's perimeter. Within the complex were several neatly constructed and well used cooking and eating areas. The V. C. had left large quantities of ammunition, clothing, documents and food, including freshly cooked fish. All of their wounded personnel and servicable weapons had been evacuated, but quantities of bloody bandages were found in the position. (1:10)

On 5 and 11 February 1967, Major General Frederick G. Weyand, Commanding General of the 25th Infantry Division, awarded seven decorations for valor to men of A Company, including two Silver Star medals and five Bronze Star medals with Combat "V". (1:13)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A search and destroy mission involves two tasks: Gaining contact with the enemy and destroying him through offensive combat. Rarely in a counterinsurgency environment is the force conducting search and destroy operations able to fix the exact location of a sizable guerrilla unit. To take advantage of such situations, flexible and thorough planning must be made at all echelons of command, and must provide for search forces, adequate and flexible reserve/reaction forces and fire support.

1. The search forces for the operations of 4 February 1967 were companies moving in a dispersed battalion "V" formation. This enabled the company and battalion commander to maintain sufficient reserve forces during the movement. A more effective search may be conducted by companies and platoons working separately, 500 to 1000 meters apart, thereby searching a wider area while still being within supporting or reinforcing distance of each other. A search of this type can be most effectively controlled from the air.

When the battalion harbor site had been secured, all three rifle companies were committed to the defense of the large

clearing. The company reserve forces were extremely limited with all maneuver platoons employed on the perimeter, and the battalion reserve consisted of the reconnaissance platoon as the immediate reaction force. As a result, the flexibility of the battalion to conduct either offensive or defensive operations in that situation was severely limited. The planned use of a mechanized infantry company as a reinforcement did not materialize because the unit was withdrawn by brigade for employment in the area of another action.

2. Adequate fire support, by both artillery and tactical air, was available for all levels throughout the operations. Proper utilization of fire support, once contact with the enemy is made, gives the commander a marked advantage in combat power, especially against a numerically superior force which lacks similar fire support. The plan of fire support must be comprehensive and flexible so that it can be applied at the proper time and place. The tactical air support available throughout the afternoon to supplement the artillery fire greatly facilitated the probes of the enemy positions by the rifle platoons. Each soldier must be accustomed to constant utilization of close fire support and expect it at all times. Violent contacts at close range require that leaders be able to effectively use all types of fire support in close and flexible support of their scheme of maneuver.

3. As the initial contact was made with the enemy by the second platoon, it was difficult to accurately determine the strength, composition and disposition of the enemy force. The

Viet Cong are masters of camouflage and concealment, and demonstrate excellent fire discipline. Only the forces in immediate, physical contact with the attacking platoons opened fire and our attempts to flank the enemy forces uncovered more gun positions. This action deceived A Company as to the actual size of the enemy force encountered.

4. Once gained, the contact with the enemy must be maintained and the battle field isolated. Escape or reinforcement must be prevented. Contact was maintained by the squads in the forward positions immediately adjacent to the enemy forces; the battle area was effectively isolated during the day by mortar and tube artillery fires and tactical air strikes, and by the continuing presence overhead of the forward air controller. However, the inability to position blocking forces and to cut off routes of withdrawal permitted the enemy to escape under the cover of darkness.

5. A Company was able to retain the initiative at the point of action primarily through the use of overwhelming fire support provided by mortars, artillery and tactical air. However, the platoons were unable to maneuver into positions favoring a subsequent assault, and additional combat power was not available from any source to commit at the decisive time and place. As a result, the company had limited freedom of action to maneuver and was only able to execute a series of piece-meal attacks, which did not achieve any decisive results or permit exploitation by other forces.

6. The security and integrity of the unit was maintained during

the repeated assaults by the effective actions of individual platoons, the decisive leadership, control and fire discipline of squad and platoon leaders at the critical time, and the coordinated employment of all supporting fires. The most important ingredient, however, was the aggressiveness of the individual trooper and his professional spirit under the most difficult situations.

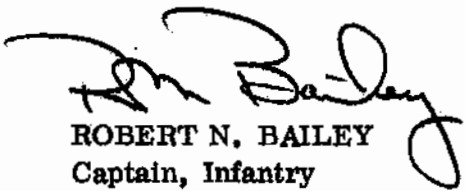
LESSONS LEARNED

1. Units at all levels on search and destroy operations must always be provided with adequate and responsive reserve/reaction forces.

2. Coordinated fire support must always be planned for and used by search and destroy forces. The commander closest to the fight must decide the best means to employ and must be able to directly control it.

3. Planning at all levels of command must be comprehensive in scope, detailed in analysis and coordination, and flexible in concept and execution. Freedom of action at the lower levels of command must not be sacrificed to facilitate greater control by a higher echelon.

4. Once contact is gained, it must be maintained and pursued, and the battle area isolated so that decisive combat power can be applied to destroy the enemy.


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