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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST COMPANY, 2D BATTALION, 49TH
REGIMENT, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION (ARMY REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM),
IN A SEARCH AND DESTROY MISSION ON 29 APRIL 1967 IN HAU NGHIA
PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF AN
ASSISTANT BATTALION ADVISER).

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INTRODUCTION

During the Lunar New Year (TET) of 1967, the United States and the Republic of Vietnam curtailed the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia for 4 days. This bombing halt allowed the Viet Cong guerrillas to move huge amounts of war materials and supplies into the 3d Corps Tactical Zone. Immediately after the Lunar New Year, the volume and frequency of guerrilla activity increased considerably in the area between Saigon and the Cambodian border.

THE DIVISION PLAN

In ~~May~~^{April} of 1967, the 25th Infantry Division was deployed in Long An Province south of Saigon. The division also had one regiment deployed in Hau Nghia Province west of Saigon. The division was responsible for the outer security on the west and south sides of the Capital Military District around Saigon. The division headquarters was located in the village of Duc Hoa in Hau Nghia Province. The division conducted extensive regimental size search and destroy missions during the daylight hours. At night, they would return to a defensive type posture around the villages and heavily populated areas. Secondary roles for the division included interdicting the guerrilla routes of infiltration between Saigon and the Cambodian border and protecting the rich rice crops in this area.

THE REGIMENT PLAN

The 49th Regiment, 25th Division, was deployed in Hau Nghia Province. Hau Nghia Province is located 20 miles west of Saigon approximately half way between Saigon and the Cambodian border. (See Map "A") The regimental commander, LTC Ma Sanh Nhon, was also the Province Chief of Hau Nghia Province.

In early April 1967, elements of the 25th Division received rural developments (RD) support missions. The 49th Regiment headquarters, which had been located in Cu Chi, moved to Bao Trai, the province headquarters. This move facilitated changes in the missions for each of the four organic battalions of the regiment. The 1st and 3d Battalions were relocated to secure Bao Trai and the regimental headquarters. The 2d Battalion was assigned a RD support mission in Duc Lap. The 4th Battalion was relocated to Duc Hoa to secure the division headquarters. (See Map "B")

The regiment assigned areas of operations to each battalion to saturate the terrain between the Vam Co Dong River on the south and west and Highway 9A on the east. The area was bordered on the north from Highway 9A westward along the Thay Cai Canal to Ap Moi 1, south-west back to the Vam Co Dong River. (See Map "B") The only route into this area by vehicle was Highway 8A from Cu Chi to Bao Trai. All other roads had been destroyed by guerrilla forces. Highway 10 which runs from Duc Hoa northwest to Trang Bang had been closed for 21 years.

THE EXISTING SITUATION

The 2d Battalion was assigned a RD support mission in Duc Lap on Highway 8A between Cu Chi and Bao Trai. Two additional hamlets were established northeast of Duc Lap by requiring the people in the surrounding areas to move into these secured hamlets. The new hamlets were named Duc Hanh "A" and Duc Hanh "B", Duc Hanh "A" was secured by the 1st Company. Duc Hanh "B" was secured by the 3d Company. The 2d Company secured Duc Lap and was the reaction force for the battalion. The battalion headquarters was located on the southeast of Duc Lap and was secured by the headquarters company. This was possible because of the elaborate compound which was built by Vietnamese engineers. (See Map "B")

The battalion conducted search and destroy missions within its area of operations during the day. At night, they returned to defend the hamlets. In ~~May~~ of 1967, the battalion started conducting company-size operations throughout its area. By the end of ~~May~~ 1967, the people began to realize that government forces were in the area to stay. Slowly, they began to support the battalion, and an effective intelligence network was being formed by the battalion.

The terrain in the battalion's area of operation consisted primarily of rice paddies with jungle-like growth around the villages and hamlets. Two major terrain features were prominent in this area. One was Highway 8A, and the other was the low ground extending approximately 3 kilometers south of the Thay Cai Canal. This area was near sea level, and the water ranged in depth from 1 to 20 feet deep. A reed-like plant grew from 1 to 2 feet out of the water. Numerous canals interlaced this entire area, but they were covered by the reed-like plants. (See Map "B")

The Viet Cong guerrillas controlled the countryside while government forces controlled the villages and hamlets along the major routes in this area. The local enemy threat consisted of local guerrillas and the 269 Viet Cong Battalion. These units were well trained, and they were well supplied. The enemy had the capability to mass multibattalion forces to attack any target within Hau Nghia Province. The enemy units were dispersed in small groups of three to four men throughout the province.

THE OPERATIONS PLAN

On 28 April 1967, the 2d Battalion, 49th Regiment, received an overlay with orders for an operation that would be conducted on 29 April 1967. The organization for the operation consisted of one company of the 2d Battalion and the 3d Battalion, 49th Regiment. The company from the 2d Battalion was to establish a blocking position in the vicinity of Duc Ngai (3) within the 2d Battalion's area of operation. The 3d Battalion was to move by convoy from Bao Trai to the outpost at So Do northwest of Bao Trai. From there, they would conduct a search and destroy mission north to seize the village of Tan My (Objective 1). Then they would attack to the northeast to seize the village Xom Bao Cong (Objective 2). After seizing this objective, they would move south to seize Ap Lap Dien (Objective 3). (See Map "B")

THE PREPARATION

The 1st Company, 2d Battalion, was selected for this operation. They were selected where they could become more familiar with the population in the rural areas near the village they secured. Also, the company commander was on leave, and the battalion commander thought this would be a good operation for the executive officer to gain additional combat experience.

The 1st Company received the order on 28 April 19~~67~~⁶⁷. The company's executive officer received a briefing from the battalion commander at 1600. Because this was a routine-type operation, no special preparations were made. However, the executive officer coordinated with the 3d Battalion to ensure that the two units would not engage each other by fire during the operation. Also, he requested and received a forward observer for the 105 millimeter howitzer battery located at Bao Trai.

NARRATION

At 0630 on 29 April 1967, the executive officer of 1st Company moved the 1st Platoon across the open terrain northwest of Duc Hanh "A" to secure the woodline. At 0700, the 2d Platoon departed Duc Hanh "A" in column formation. They were followed by the company command element and the 3d Platoon. Upon reaching the woodline, the 1st Platoon moved west in a line formation. The 2d Platoon with the company command element continued to move northwest in column. The 3d Platoon, after reaching the woodline, moved to the north in a line formation. (See Map "B")

THE BLOCKING POSITIONS

The move from Duc Hanh "A" to the blocking positions was uneventful. The 1st Company established blocking positions with three platoons on line. The 2d Platoon with the company command post established a platoon blocking position just inside the woodline in the northwest corner of Duc Ngai (3). The 1st Platoon established a platoon blocking position on the trail on the west side of Duc Ngai (3). The 3d Platoon established a platoon blocking position on the northeast side of Duc Ngai (3). The 2d and 3d Platoons were oriented to the north. The 1st Platoon was oriented to the west. From these positions, 1st Company could observe up to 3000 meters to the west, north, and east. (See Map "B")

THE CHANGE IN MISSION

At approximately 1100, 29 ~~May~~^{April} 1967, the 3d Battalion had departed Tan My enroute to Xom Bau Cong. The lead elements had reached a point just south of the old French fort when the 2d Platoon, 1st Company, 2d Battalion, observed 12 Viet Cong guerrillas running east on a trail approximately 1400 meters north of its blocking position. The guerrillas were fleeing the approach of the 3d Battalion and were trying to reach the hamlet to their east.

The Viet Cong guerrillas were immediately taken under fire by the organic 60 millimeter mortar squad of the 1st Company. A request for artillery fire was denied. A helicopter gun team and a request

for a change of mission was requested through adviser channels. The request, if approved, would allow 1st Company to leave its blocking positions to pursue the enemy force.

An United States Army L19 aircraft that has been flying a reconnaissance mission reported on station. Because 1st Company could observe the south, west, and east sides of the village where the guerrillas were heading, the L19 pilot was requested to observe the north side of the village. This also allowed the mortar squad to continue firing.

THE PURSUIT

The 1st Company received orders immediately to pursue the enemy force. Because of the distance between platoon blocking positions, 2d Platoon led the pursuit. The 1st Company pursued initially with platoons in column. The 2d Platoon was followed by the 3d and 1st Platoons, respectively. In order for the 1st Company to reach the enemy force, they had to cross an open area approximately 1000 meters wide. They also had to cross a canal which was chest deep in mud and water. The platoons crossed the canal in column. After the 2d Platoon had crossed the canal, it assumed a line formation behind the rice paddy dikes on the north side of the canal to cover the 3d and 1st Platoons' crossing. After the 3d Platoon had crossed the canal, it assumed a line formation on the right flank of the 2d Platoon. When the 3d Platoon was in position, the assault on the village began.

THE ASSAULT

The 1st Company assaulted the village with two platoons on line. The 2d Platoon was on the left, and the 3d Platoon was on the right. The 1st Platoon followed the assault element by bounds in column. After reaching the woodline, all firing ceased because no fire had been received from the village. (See Map "B")

The L19 pilot reported no movement in the village. He also reported that the village livestock had all been tied in revetted areas within the village. At this time, a helicopter gun team reported on station from the 25th Infantry Division (United States) from Cu Chi. They were given a low level reconnaissance mission in front of the assault element over the village.

THE SEARCH

The assault continued through the hamlet. The assault elements made a hasty search of the village as it passed through. The 1st Platoon, which was trailing the assault element, conducted a detailed search of the village. They also interrogated the villagers. During their search, they discovered there were no men in the village. They only found one 20-pound mine and one sandbag filled with Communist propaganda. They also found a young girl that had four men's wrist watches in her possession.

The assault elements continued their assault to the northern edge of the village without contact. Because the 1st Company observed the south, east, and west sides of the village during their approach, it

was determined that the Viet Cong guerrillas had to be hiding in the water somewhere north of the village. This determination was made because no tunnels or hiding places were found in the village. This determination was also verified by the fact that the watches found on the young girl belonged to some of the guerrilla soldiers. The guerrilla soldiers did not want to carry their watches into the water, which was the only place they could hide.

The soldiers of 1st Company were reluctant to search for the enemy in the water. After some indecision, the 1st Company began to assemble to return to their blocking positions to the south. Because of this, the helicopter gun team was requested to fire along the canals out in the water north of the village. After they had begun to fire, they were also requested to drop a smoke grenade in the water within 150 meters of the 2d and 3d Platoons of 1st Company. The helicopter gun team dropped a yellow smoke grenade approximately 60 meters out in the water just north of the lead elements of 1st Company. Without command, the 2d and 3d Platoons assaulted in line formation toward the smoke. Within 10 meters of the smoke grenade, five Viet Cong guerrillas were killed by 1st Company.

THE ISOLATION AND CAPTURE

By chance, the guerrillas had been found. They were hiding under the water and reeds by using reeds and small hollowed pieces of cane to breathe while under the water. The helicopter gun team continued to fire farther out in the water north of the village. Soldiers of the 2d and 3d Platoon continued their assault northward until they were chest deep in water. The 1st Platoon secured the northern edge of the village to provide security for the assault element.

Within 1 hour, the helicopter gun team and 1st Company had killed 12 and captured two Viet Cong guerrilla soldiers. One of the helicopters from the helicopter gun team was used to transport soldiers of 1st Company out to the bodies of the guerrilla soldiers that had been killed in deep water. Some of the enemy soldiers had been killed as far as 1800 meters north of the village. Because of the difficulty of searching the bodies in deep water, the slain enemy soldiers were brought back to the company command post on the dry land just north of the village to be searched.

Because of the wide dispersion of the enemy soldiers and because the area was under water, only one Swedish submachinegun, one homemade .45 caliber pistol, and one .50 caliber ammunition can of Communist documents were found during the search. Any other weapons or war materials that the enemy soldiers may have been carrying were lost in the water.

After this action, the 1st Company returned to its blocking positions. The two prisoners were carried to the G2, 25th Infantry Division (United States) at Cu Chi by the helicopter gun team. There was no further enemy action during the operation, and the 1st Company returned to Duc Hanh "A" at 1600, 29 April 1967, to terminate the operation. The following is the final results of the operation: 12 Viet Cong guerrillas killed in action; two Viet Cong guerrillas, one submachinegun, one .45 caliber pistol, one 20-pound mine, one sandbag of propaganda, four watches, and one .50 caliber ammunition can of documents captured.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The success of the operation depended to a large extent on the positioning of the 1st Company in Duc Ngai (3) as a blocking force. The enemy was capable of outmaneuvering any foot-mobile maneuver element in this flat, open terrain because they were familiar with the terrain and because they could observe the maneuver element from a great distance. They also had support from the population in this area.

Because this was a routine operation in the 1st Company's own area of operation, there was no enemy action expected. As a result, a young Vietnamese second lieutenant was commanding 1st Company during this operation. Although he gained valuable experience, the operation could have failed due to his indecision at two critical times during the operation. The first was the indecision on whether to pursue or not. The second was returning to the blocking positions knowing that the 12 Viet Cong guerrillas had to be in the immediate vicinity somewhere.

The quick response of the regimental commander in changing 1st Company's orders from a blocking position to a pursuit was instrumental to the success of this operation. Normally, junior Vietnamese officers will follow orders explicitly. This is because the Vietnamese Army is not as liberal as the United States Army in allowing its junior officers to use their initiative. The fact that the regimental commander was also the Province Chief saved considerable time in making this decision.

Also, the Vietnamese do not display the sense of urgency that most Americans display. The Vietnamese soldiers have to fight for the duration of the war where most Americans spend only 1 year in Vietnam. Also, during this time period, the Vietnamese were fighting with World War II weapons. They did not have the combat firepower that American units enjoy. They also did not have the mobile assets to commit their reserves on a timely basis. This, coupled with inadequate fire support, normally prevented Vietnamese units from becoming decisively engaged.

The artillery fire was denied for this operation because at this time the available supply rate for ammunition was nine rounds per tube per day. These nine rounds were fired at night as harassing and interdiction fires. Also, because of the pacification effort, it was very difficult to obtain clearance to fire artillery in a village.

The enemy soldiers made a critical mistake in limiting their maneuver space. Even after they knew they had been seen, they continued moving east into a confined area. The following is possibly several reasons why they continued their flight to the east: they did not want to cross the open area again under mortar fire, they did not know exactly how far away the 3d Battalion was, and they did not consider the immediate use of aircraft to aid in their location.

Indiscriminate firing was the cause of the Viet Cong guerrillas' deaths. With the use of the helicopter gun team, possibly, most of the guerrilla soldiers could have been captured. The two guerrilla soldiers that were captured were taken to Cu Chi without immediate interrogation. Under these circumstances, extremely important potential intelligence sources were lost.

LESSONS LEARNED

Coordination between units is vital when two or more units are working together in the same area. Communications, identification of units and individual soldiers, and supporting fires must be coordinated to the maximum extent. The regiment standard operating procedure (SOP) simplified the coordination for this operation. In addition to normal coordination, it was stated that each soldier would wear a specific colored rag in a specific place on his body. Each company also wore different colored name tags. This aided in the identification of individual soldiers for this operation.

When the civilian population secures their livestock in protected areas and when the villages seem deserted, it is a good indication that enemy guerrillas are in the area.

In order for a unit to be successful, it must be flexible. It must be able to react rapidly to changes in the enemy situation. It must be able to take advantage of any situation and exploit any of the enemy weaknesses or mistakes.

Rapid reports of battlefield intelligence from subordinate units is essential for successful operations. Seemingly insignificant intelligence sometimes means the difference between success and failure. The information concerning the young girl with four men's wrist watches in the area of contact indicated that the guerrillas were hiding in the water or somewhere they did not want to carry their watches. Checking civilians for the smell of gunpowder, grease, strap marks on their bodies, and scars immediately after an engagement often separate the guerrillas from the civilians in a counterinsurgency-type environment.

Unorthodox methods of operating often leads to success in a counterinsurgency conflict. One or two host-country soldiers dressed as guerrillas moving 200 to 300 meters in front of the lead element often produce excellent results. If they do not find the insurgents, they do find their supporters and sympathizers by the warnings they receive from the population. Also leaving two or three soldiers in a stay-behind ambush produces excellent results.

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