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UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia

20 July 1968

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY E (PROVISIONAL), 5th SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (ABN), 1st SPECIAL FORCES, IN THE AIRBORNE ASSAULT OF DIA DIEM BUNARD, SOUTH VIETNAM, 30 MARCH TO 2 APRIL 1967. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND OBSERVATIONS OF A STAFF OFFICER.)



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Certain elements have been purposely omitted from this monograph in an attempt to avoid security classification under the provisions of AR 380-5.



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### INTRODUCTION

The sparsely settled highland plateau area adjoining the apparently deserted village of Dia Diem Bunard in Phuc Long Province had long been a North Vietnamese/Viet Cong stronghold. This agriculturally rich rice-producing province was conveniently located adjacent to Cambodia and separated by approximately 75 kilometers of international boundary. The area provided the transient North Vietnamese Communists with a refuge area in which they could pause to rest, regroup, and refit prior to the continuation of their long infiltration trek southward towards war zone "D." The refuge area also provided the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong (NVA/VC) with an excellent supply base from which food and equipment could be replenished while units rested, trained, or made preparations for future operations.

In early 1967, the 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.) decided to establish a Special Forces "A" camp site near the village of Dia Diem Bunard. This "A" camp would conduct combat operations against the enemy using Civil Irregular Defense Group soldiers and gradually create a relatively secure area to which a degree of RVN governmental control could be restored.

Furthermore, the location of the para-military operational base in this area would deny the Communists continued freedom of movement and disrupt their long established lines of communications in Phuoc Long Province. (Annex B, Intelligence)

In mid-March 1967, an area assessment team composed of a small group of officers and men of Company A, 5th SFG (Abn.), with a security element of indigenous soldiers, were helilifted into the remote and hostile area near Bunard. Their mission was to assess the area for the future establishment of an "A" camp. Furthermore, they were to select a number of tactically sound locations to recommend to the Company A commander for the actual "A" camp location. The area assessment team made heavy contact with an estimated company-size enemy force as they neared the village of Bunard on the third day of the assessment. After the enemy broke contact and disappeared into the thick forests which had almost obscured National Highway 14, the area assessment team was extracted by helicopter from the area. Fortunately, by this time the team had made a thorough reconnaissance, and the detailed assessment of the area was near completion. The report of the area assessment team became the basis for subsequent planning by the Special Forces and other U.S. forces for the initial establishment of the Bunard Special Forces camp.

#### THE 5TH SFG (ABN) PLAN

Operation HARVEST MOON, to establish the "A" camp

at Bunard, was to be conducted in three phases. The first phase, involving Company E (Prov.) and the Nha Trang Mike Force, was to conduct an airborne assault into the Bunard area to establish and secure an airhead for the subsequent helilift of additional forces into the area. The second phase initiated when the helilift of additional indigenous combat troops and U.S. Army Special Forces personnel terminated. This phase encompassed the movement to the proposed "A" camp location, the securing of that location and the initial local security search and clear operations. The third and final phase of the operation was the actual preparation of defenses and initiation of camp construction while concurrent combat operations were being conducted in the areas surrounding the "A" camp site. These combat operations would provide security for the early stages of the camp construction. The responsibility for the first phase of the operation, the airborne assault, was given to Company E (Prov.). The second and third phases of the operation were the responsibilities of Company A, 5th SFG (Abn.) and their subordinate B and A detachments. (Annex A, Organization and Command Relationship)

#### THE EXISTING MILITARY SITUATION

The terrain surrounding the Bunard area consisted primarily of rolling hills covered with dense evergreen vegetation, bamboo thickets, and up to triple canopy tropical broad leaf forests. Visibility and fields of fire of ground troops was severely restricted

by the dense undergrowth covering much of the area. Foot movement off the existing trail systems and the partially overgrown National Highway 14 was difficult and slow. Numerous small cultivated clearings dotted the area, in addition to small plots which had been apparently deserted earlier in conjunction with the local Montagnard slash and burn techniques of farming. Concealment in the area was excellent, and generally favored the enemy, while cover available ranged from good to poor favoring an area-type defense.

Reconnaissance and reports from the area assessment team confirmed that the village of Dia Diem Bunard was deserted. Many of the dwellings which had once supported a population of over 200 had been burned or otherwise destroyed by Communist forces.

The weather during the latter part of March and the first part of April was generally good in the Bunard area. The temperature ranged from a comfortable 72 degrees F. during the night to a blistering 103 degrees F. during the afternoons. Visibility was greatly restricted almost daily by low-hanging ground fog which normally evaporated by approximately 0930 each morning producing unlimited ceilings and scattered clouds with occasional thundershowers. Generally, the air and ground operations in the Bunard area were not significantly hampered by the effects of the weather in early April 1967.

Special Forces and other intelligence sources agreed that the 272nd Viet Cong Main Force Regiment

was operating and had been operating in the Bunard vicinity for an extended period of time. This enemy Regiment possessed a vast array of weapons ranging from Chinese-manufactured SKS rifles to rocket launchers, 12.7mm heavy machineguns, and 82mm mortars. The consensus in intelligence circles was that elements of the 272nd Main Force Regiment were responsible for maintaining numerous caches, major food production areas, and the conduct of combat operations against military forces threatening the security of their area of operations and influence.

Indications based on a series of contacts with elements of the VC Main Force Regiment by combat patrols from the Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai, approximately 20 kilometers southwest, were that the 272nd Main Force Regiment contained NVA advisors or attached elements down to and including company-sized units. The indications were further supported by the facts that the enemy units contacted by friendly patrols in the Bunard area fought hard, seeming to be disciplined and aggressive. They usually attempted to maneuver their forces, rather than immediately breaking contact and melting into the dense forests as did many local Viet Cong guerrillas. Numerous reports turned in to Special Forces channels from February until April by the Air Force Forward Air Controllers and Army Aviators claimed that they had been drawing occasional ground fire from heavy machineguns and some small arms fire in the vicinity of Dia Diem Bunard.



Many of the villagers who had once inhabited the sprawling village had been forcibly conscripted and pressed into service for the Communists. Some of the villagers joined the ranks of the Viet Cong while others simply did as they were instructed for fear of reprisals. Those villagers not initially pressed into active service for the Communists fled their village to areas offering a greater degree of security from the threats and propaganda of the Communist Vietnamese. The presence of numerous well-cultivated farm areas dotting the thick forests for a radius of 10 kilometers from the deserted village of Dia Diem Bunard accounted for some of the sympathetic VC villagers. Food grown from these farms and harvested during periods of reduced visibility eventually found its way to Communist consumption.

Although the exact locations of the 272nd Main Force Regiment's subordinate battalions were never determined, indications were that at least one Main Force Battalion was located east of Dia Diem Bunard in the vicinity of the Da Pantan stream. Elements of a second Main Force Battalion were believed to have been operating northwest from the village in the vicinity of National Highway 14.

Several agent reports processed by Special Forces elements near the end of March 1967 became a matter of concern when it was reported that the NVA 101st Regiment had moved into Phouc Long Province on the way south towards war zone "D." During the period prior to, and

immediately after, the airborne assault the 101st NVA Regiment remained unlocated by U.S. intelligence agencies. The agent reports remained unconfirmed, which created the possibility of the 101st NVA Regiment being in a position in Phouc Long Province where it could commit reinforcements if the Main Force Regiment became decisively engaged.

The enemy in the Bunard area possessed the capabilities to attack in up to regimental strength, defend, fight a delaying action, reinforce, or withdraw. Indications compiled by various intelligence agencies suggested that the enemy would conduct a delaying action in conjunction with a withdrawal rather than becoming decisively engaged. (Annex B, Intelligence)

In summary, the majority of the military aspects of the Bunard area of operations favored the enemy prior to and during Operation HARVEST MOON.

#### COORDINATION AND THE CO. E (PROV.) PLAN

Upon receipt of the planning directive, a careful analysis of the mission was performed by the Company E (Prov.) commander and his staff. Key information essential to the operation had to be collected from Company A in Bien Hoa. A coordination visit was made during which arrangements for administration, logistics, communication, intelligence, fire support, and pathfinder support were discussed. Follow-up action by messages between the Company E (Prov.) commander in Nha Trang

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and the Company A commander in Bien Hoa was the only action required to finalize many details of the operational planning.

Immediately after returning to Nha Trang from the coordination visit, the Company E (Prov.) commander held a staff meeting. The entire Company E (Prov.) staff and the Mike Force commander were present. The meeting developed into a planning conference during which the tactical plan was developed by the Company E (Prov.) commander with the Mike Force commander. The plan called for a headquarters element and three Mike Force rifle companies to jump on the primary drop zone. The airborne assault force was designated a task force by the Company E (Prov.) commander. Once on the drop zone, the companies would assemble and seize three assault objectives, consolidate the initial airhead, and provide security for the subsequent helilift of approximately five additional indigenous rifle companies and their Special Forces advisors. When the helilift of the additional indigenous combat forces was complete, phase I of Operation HARVEST MOON would terminate. (Annex C, Ground Organization) At this point the Company E (Prov.) Task Force would come under the operational control of the Company A commander or his designated representative for the remainder of the time the Company E (Prov.) Task Force was needed in the operational area. (Annex A, Organization and Command Relationship)

The contingency plan for the airborne assault on

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the alternate drop zone was basically the same type plan. The necessary tactical compensations and re-arrangements were based on the location of the alternate drop zone, and the standard military tactical considerations applied to that specific area. (Overlay Number 1, Drop Zones, to Annex B)

The fire support planned for the airborne assault was limited to total dependence on Army helicopter gunships and Air Force tactical air. No artillery units were available due to range considerations. Army helicopter gunships were to rake the flanks of the drop zone with machineguns at the direction of the pathfinder control element. The pathfinder element furnished by Company A was to precede the assault force on the drop zone by fifteen minutes, mark the drop zone for the jump, and initially direct the Army gunships. Tactical aircraft were to be on station above the drop zone where they could be used on an "as needed" basis or as directed by the Company E (Prov.) Task Force commander when he reached the DZ.

#### THE MIKE FORCE (BACKGROUND)

Since Company E (Prov.) was assigned the task of conducting the 5th Special Forces Group's first combat parachute assault, three rifle companies of U.S. Special Forces-led indigenous paratroopers from the Nha Trang Mike Force were tentatively alerted.

The Mike Force, which composed the combat force, under the direction of the special projects Company E (Prov.) was organized to train, equip, and command

a reinforced battalion-sized force of indigenous troops for combat operations against the enemy. An inherent operational mission was to constitute a highly mobile strike force capable of being deployed on a moment's notice anywhere within the borders of South Vietnam, to conduct separate special operations, or to relieve or reinforce any Special Forces camp under serious threat of being overrun by the enemy. Frequently, this Mike Force was utilized by the commander of the 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.) as his personal reserve force which he could commit to favorably influence the outcome of a ground battle or to counter a sufficient enemy threat. Because of the Mike Force's inherent operational mission, it was necessary that the indigenous troops hired by that organization be kept in a high state of training and readiness while properly motivated and disciplined. The requirement for continuous combat training of individuals and units was met by the careful selection of indigenous leaders to form a cadre which conducted supervised training under the watchful eyes of the responsible Special Forces soldiers. In order to meet the requirement of being deployed anywhere in South Vietnam on a moment's notice, the entire Nha Trang Mike Force was trained in methods of airmobile deployments, utilizing various types of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft as delivery means into or near an objective area. The Mike Force also parachute-qualified its combat forces after one week of

intensive pre-jump training culminated by two live training jumps, if possible, onto a drop zone near the base compound. The parachute training also aided in developing a highly motivated, aggressive, self-confident indigenous soldier which formed the backbone of the Nha Trang Mike Force. Although trained for delivery by parachute, the Mike Force had not been committed to an airborne assault until Operation HARVEST MOON.

#### THE MIKE FORCE PLAN

The airborne assault was to be made by the 3rd, 4th, and 5th rifle companies of the Mike Force in addition to the task force command and control element. The companies were to leave their parachutes on the drop zone and move to predesignated assembly areas marked by colored panels. After each company had at least 75 per cent of its combat troops assembled, they would leave a small element at the assembly area to gather stragglers, while the main body of the companies would move to seize their assigned assault objectives. Once the assault objectives were taken, local security patrols would be established. Each company was to establish physical contact with the unit on its right flank. When the airhead was initially consolidated, the drop zone and landing zones would be secured and additional troops could be safely helilifted into the operational area.  
(Annex C, Ground Organization)

Each of the Mike Force elements was additionally given "be prepared" missions based on the implied tasks of the mission analysis. These were: be prepared to provide terminal guidance for the helilifts, be prepared to conduct a movement to contact from the vicinity of the drop zone to the proposed "A" camp site, and be prepared to conduct search and destroy operations under the operational control of Company A.

### NARRATION

#### THE MOUNTING PHASE

The mounting phase of Operation HARVEST MOON began with the receipt of the planning directive on 30 March 1967. Immediately the principal staff officers of Company E (Prov.) began initial coordination with the 5th Special Forces Group headquarters. Projected requirements for troop airlift and delivery of approximately 400 paratroopers were given to the 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.) Air Force liaison officer by the Company E (Prov.) operations officer. The intelligence officer obtained area studies of Phouc Long Province, enemy order of battle holdings for the operational area, map coverage, and climate and light data studies for the month of April. The S4 conducted close coordination with the 5th Special Forces Group S4 and the Logistical Supply Center. Arrangements were made for the procurement of additional parachute helmets, M-79 grenade launchers, and M-60 machinaguns. The 5th Special Forces Group parachute riggers were taxed to

inspect and prepare enough personnel parachutes to support a battalion-sized airborne assault, in addition to maintaining a suitable stockpile for emergency purposes. Plans were tentatively made for the parachute rigging of emergency resupply pallets of combat-essential items prepacked by the Mike Force. While the initial coordination between Company E (Prov.) staff officers and their counterparts at higher headquarters was taking place, the Company E (Prov.) commander was in an operational conference with the 5th Special Forces Group commander. Upon the close of the conference, the Company E (Prov.) commander issued the warning order to the Mike <sup>Force</sup> commander: "Be prepared to conduct an airborne assault into 3rd Corps Tactical Zone within the next few days." Additional details available at that time were given to the Mike Force commander to assist him in his preparation. The Mike Force commander was assigned the marshaling area control and organization responsibility. To accomplish this task, the Mike Force commander assigned his executive officer as the Marshaling Area Control Officer. The Mike Force executive officer was to remain in Nha Trang with the remainder of the Mike Force while the Mike Force commander accompanied the airborne assault element on the operation.

On 30 March 1967, the Company E (Prov.) operations officer arranged for a U1A aircraft to take the commander, his S2, S3, and commo officer to Company A at Bien Hoa for a coordination visit and recon. On the



early morning of 31 March, the party was met at the Bien Hoa airfield after an uneventful flight from Nha Trang by representatives of Company A. The Company E (Prov.) commander and his staff were taken in for an informal conference with the Company A commander which eventually resulted in a pairing up of the staff officers for detailed administrative and tactical discussions of all phases of the impending operation. The results of the area assessment, which had been conducted earlier by members of Company A, were presented to the Company E (Prov.) commander and his staff. Specific information of intelligence or operational value on the Bunard area was extracted and evaluated by the Company E (Prov.) staff officers for its relationship to the upcoming operation. The Company A staff discussed their plans for the second and third phases of their operation to establish a new Special Forces camp at Bunard. The subject of command and control was discussed in detail by both Special Forces company commanders. Command of combat elements, phasing of the operation, and sequence of activities were agreed upon by both commanders for planning purposes and execution.

The Company A S3 recommended three areas for use as possible drop zones. Out of these, the primary and alternate drop zones were selected by the Company E (Prov.) commander after a helicopter recon of the Bunard area and recommendations from his S2 and S3 officers. (Overlay Number 1, Drop Zones, to Annex B)

The final decision on drop zone selection was based on the considerations of size, shape, surface, recognition characteristics from the air, open quadrants, and development of tactical plans.

The air recon of the Bunard area was conducted by the Company E (Prov.) commander, his S2, and S3 while they were en route to detachment B-34 in Song Be for additional detailed coordination. The Company E (Prov.) commo officer remained at Company A in Bien Hoa to coordinate for the communications portion of the operation. At Song Be, the detailed coordination which had been conducted at Company A in Bien Hoa was virtually duplicated. Detachment B-34 was responsible for the area in which Bunard was located. The A detachment designated to establish the new camp site was a subordinate of detachment B-34. The value of the close coordination with the B detachment was manifested in the addition of reliable tactical and intelligence information related to the Bunard area. Steps had been taken by the B detachment and the company at Bien Hoa to cloak the establishment of the new Special Forces camp at Bunard in secrecy. At Song Be, the Company E (Prov.) party learned of an unintentional security breach which had been unknowingly committed by the 5th Special Forces Group Logistical Supply Center (LSC) in Nha Trang. At the LSC, detailed logistical planning had been conducted which involved the pre-positioning of as much of the material required for the establishment of the new Special Forces (SF) camp as possible.

The bulk of the supplies and material was consolidated in a holding area at Song Be for timely automatic resupply into the operational area. To insure that the supplies reached their proper destination, the personnel outloading the supplies from the LSC in Nha Trang had carefully written "Song Be for Bunard" on many of the large boxes and pallets. The counter-intelligence effort of the B detachment at Song Be consisted of a bucket of paint and some brushes. As quickly as any supplies were unloaded at the airfield their addresses received a coat of paint. The extent of information, if any, gained by the enemy by the addressing of the supplies will never be known. Common knowledge among SF personnel having been involved in the establishment and building of any new SF camp is that the camp is most vulnerable to enemy action during early stages of construction. If the location for the new SF camp was compromised, the surprise effect gained by an initial airborne assault into the area would hopefully compensate for it.

If B-34 or Company A made any alterations or changes to the operational plans, they would notify Company E (Prov.) by secure RTT means. As an added measure, the Company E (Prov.) S3 or his representative would return to Company A at Bien Hoa for last-minute coordination NLT 12 hours prior to the start of the operation signified by the parachute assault. Additionally, air recon of the Bunard area were to be limited in number so as not to draw undue attention to that area.

The Company E (Prov.) coordination party boarded the UH1D helicopter and returned by the most direct route to Bien Hoa. There the commo officer was picked up, along with a few maps and several air photos of the drop zone areas. The party then boarded the U1A "Otter" at Bien Hoa airfield and settled down for the return to Nha Trang.

The coordination visit had taken approximately twelve hours, including flying time. On the flight to Nha Trang, the Company E (Prov.) commander received initial staff recommendations from his S2, S3, and commo officer pertaining to the conduct of the parachute assault. The commander mentally organized and sorted the large volume of information as he prepared his notes for the staff meeting and planning conference (see Coordination and the Company E (Prov.) Plan) which he held immediately upon return to Nha Trang.

During the absence of the Company E (Prov.) commander and his staff party from Nha Trang, the deputy commander directed and supervised the preparations and planning for the upcoming operation. The Company E (Prov.) staff sections provided maximum support in response to requests from the Mike Force. The preparation and planning of Company E (Prov.) and the Mike Force resembled the close-knit teamwork of a winning ball club.

The Mike Force commander decided to increase the organic firepower of the companies making the airborne

assault. Additional M-79 grenade launchers, M-60 machineguns, and automatic weapons were distributed to the selected units. Plans were made to bring the light mortars and their ammunition into the operational area by subsequent resupply rather than on the parachute assault.

The Mike Force commander and his NCOs conducted inspections of individual equipment and test firing of weapons. No detailed tactical information was given to any of the indigenous personnel until the indigenous leaders were briefed on the operation on the night of 1 April 1967. When the Mike Force commander had received his warning order from the Company E (Prov.) commander, he restricted the entire Mike Force to their compound. Counterintelligence measures were conducted routinely prior to each planned operation to deny information from enemy informants within or near the Mike Force.

Late during the evening of 31 March 1967, word was received from the Air Force liaison officer that the 14th Air Commando Wing would provide eight C-123 Providers for delivery of the airborne assault force to the drop zone. The Mike Force executive officer, working through the Company E (Prov.) operations section, had been assigned a parking ramp on Nha Trang Air Force Base for a marshaling area. The Air Force had been given the location and description of the primary and alternate drop zones as soon as the information became available to the Company E (Prov.)

operations section. The Air Commandos planned a one-ship air reconnaissance to determine the exact locations of the drop zones, flight routes, tactics, and other necessary technical information. The Air Commandos requested a detailed ground intelligence briefing at their flight crew briefing prior to take off on the 2nd of April.

By knowing the number and type of aircraft available, the Mike Force commander and the appropriate Company E (Prov.) staff sections began developing the airloading plan and tables. These plans were completed in relation to the ground tactical plan. Provisions were made to have a Special Forces jumpmaster-qualified soldier jumpmaster each plane load. Additionally, the troops were to be cross-loaded to allow each respective plane load of troops to exit in a closer proximity to their particular assembly area on the ground. The unit integrity of the assault force was preserved as much as possible. The Air Commandos would carry 46 combat-equipped paratroopers per aircraft. However, more indigenous paratroopers could be carried in emergency due to their smaller size and reduced weight, as compared to the 260-pound calculation figure used for a U.S. combat-equipped paratrooper.

A unique system of manifesting was used by the Mike Force to account for each indigenous paratrooper. All the soldiers of the three companies participating in the assault were manifested by name and a number

prior to marshaling area reporting time. The night before they were to jump, when they were given their final inspection and broken down into plane loads, each man was issued a tag bearing a number which corresponded to his number and name on the typed manifest. Each paratrooper was given instructions to turn his numbered tag in to his American jumpmaster before boarding the aircraft in the morning. The jumpmaster could then confirm by name the paratroopers present on his aircraft without the use of an interpreter.

On 1 April 1967, additional NCOs were requested by Company E (Prov.) from Headquarters Company, 5th SFG (Abn.) to ride on each aircraft as safety NCOs. Jumpmaster personnel were composed of officers and NCOs from the Company E (Prov.) Task Force. Based on the Company E (Prov.) commo officer's recommendation, two additional radio operators were attached to the task force from the Signal Company. This gave the Company E (Prov.) Task Force an added degree of flexibility and commo depth once on the drop zone. Two riggers from the parachute-rigging platoon were also attached to assist in the recovery of the personnel parachutes from the drop zone when and if possible. The Company E (Prov.) S1 and his section provided excellent assistance in the rapid preparation of manifests for the U.S. and indigenous personnel.

Early on the morning of 1 April 1967, the Company

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E (Prov.) commander called a briefing for all the Special Forces personnel participating in the parachute assault. Emphasis was placed on the intelligence and operations portion of the briefing. Details were repeated and discussed until the Company E (Prov.) commander was satisfied they were completely understood. At the end of the briefing each Special Forces officer and NCO was questioned on his job during the operation, contingency plans, and contents of the briefing he had just received.

Final preparation was made for the pre-positioning of the necessary trucks to transport the three Mike Force rifle companies to the Nha Trang Air Force Base marshaling area. The Company E (Prov.) S4 also arranged for indigenous rations to be available to the troops at the marshaling area prior to enplaning. A time schedule was published and issued to each of the Special Forces personnel taking part in the operation. The schedule expressed all times from the first call of the Mike Force troops to the take off time for the first Air Commando C-123 from Nha Trang Air Force Base. A detailed time schedule of events for an operation of this type is instrumental in the success of the mounting phase.

A jumpmaster briefing was held early in the afternoon for all Special Forces personnel participating in the operation. Techniques, jump procedures, emergency procedures, flight routes, and checkpoints were discussed and reviewed in detail in relation to the ground



tactical plan. The Company E (Prov.) commander insured that all the U.S. personnel were thinking the same way due to the fact that this was the first airborne assault, and no standard operating procedures had yet been developed by the unit. Instructions were issued to each jumpmaster so each plane load would have a standard reaction if an emergency developed en route to the drop zone. The standard jump warnings would be relayed to the jumpmasters by the Air Force crew chiefs. The Forward Air Controller flying in the vicinity of the drop zones would relay weather and visual recon reports to the lead C-123 when the troop ships came into communications range. The reports would then be relayed to the jumpmaster of each plane. This allowed the jumpmaster to be aware of the weather and apparent situation in the drop zone area prior to the actual exit time. Additionally, if the task force commander flying on the lead aircraft made the decision to drop on the alternate drop zone, each jumpmaster would have a few extra minutes to attempt to orient his plane load of indigenous paratroopers. Some of the aircraft had interpreters aboard to assist in command and control. The aircraft without interpreters relied entirely on the jumpmaster's hand and arm signal proficiency to communicate. The jump doors would be removed from the aircraft prior to station time at Nha Trang Air Force Base. The lead aircraft jumpmaster was to cause his paratroopers to exit over the drop zone at a parachute

release point marked by a colored smoke grenade from the Pathfinder team. The Air Commando co-pilot would manipulate the red and green jump lights for each aircraft. The task force commander directed each jumpmaster to insure that all of his paratroopers exited the aircraft as quickly as possible. The primary drop zone was approximately ten seconds long for a C-123 flying at an airspeed of 120 knots per hour. Some of the troops in the Mike Force rifle companies had undergone the one-week ground training phase of jump school, but had had no opportunity to make any live training jumps. Consequently, there were a number of indigenous soldiers scattered throughout the rifle companies who would make their first parachute jump heavily laden with combat gear from an altitude of 700 feet actual onto a DZ in a hostile area. The jumpmaster was the final authority in each plane on when and if to jump. The Air Commandos indicated that since they would not be using the computed air release point system (C.A.R.P.), they would turn on the green light when it appeared safe to jump. It then became the jumpmaster's responsibility on when to unload his paratroopers. If the Pathfinder element was in the proper location on the DZ and kept a continuous smoke marker displayed, there would be little problem. However, if there was no smoke marker displayed, the exit was based on the jumpmaster's judgment.

As it became dark in the Mike Force compound on 1 April 1967, there was an unusual scurry of activity.

The compound lights had been turned on to allow the indigenous paratroopers from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th rifle companies to lay out their equipment for inspection by their cadre and Special Forces company commanders. Prior to the inspection, the indigenous leaders had been briefed on the details of the combat parachute assault mission. As each company was inspected, they were broken down into predesignated plane loads or chocks, were issued manifest tag numbers, and received special instructions. The rifle companies then received a refresher course in jump procedures and training using the training devices available in the Mike Force compound. After the brief refresher course, the indigenous leaders gave the paratroopers a general tactical briefing. The briefing included the drop zone descriptions, assembly plans, schemes of maneuver, actions on the drop zone, assembly area, and assault objectives. The indigenous briefings were presented well and were received by the troops with a great degree of interest. Only one element had been purposely eliminated, and that was where the drop zones were located. The troops would receive that information early on the following morning at the marshaling area control officer's (M.A.C.O.) briefing.

At 0300 on the morning of 2 April 1967, the three Mike Force rifle companies were anxiously waiting to be dismissed from formation so they could eat a quick breakfast and make final adjustments to their equipment prior to their final inspection. Each unit was inspected

prior to boarding the trucks which would take them to the marshaling area at the departure airfield. Individual soldiers were inspected to insure they were carrying a double basic load of ammunition, parachute helmet, grenades, three days rations, two canteens of water, and that they were wearing colored scarfs which designated their assigned company. Corrections were made on the spot by the inspectors. At approximately 0400 hours the first truck of the convoy transporting the troops to the marshaling area rolled onto the secure pre-selected convoy route. Twenty minutes later the convoy came to a halt at the departure airfield. The troops, with their equipment, detrucked and met guides who led them to the designated marshaling area. The M.A.C.O. had organized a briefing area and had large portable lights installed which provided illumination on the area. A portable loud-speaker system was also procured to assist the M.A.C.O. during his briefing. The Air Commandos had flown their aircraft into the air base during the night and had parked them near the M.A.C.O. briefing area on the ramp. A parachute issue point had been established in a convenient location by the riggers who had been requested to support the marshaling area operation. A class I distribution point had been set up to give the indigenous soldiers candy, gum, fruit, or extra rations of rice. Several low parachute landing fall platforms had been brought to the marshaling area to allow each paratrooper to execute several falls prior to being issued his main and reserve parachutes.

At 0430 hours the M.A.C.O. started his briefing from the elevated beds of two two-and-one-half ton trucks parked side by side. His perch allowed the indigenous troops to sit on the ramp and yet see and hear everything. Great effort had been put into the preparation of large charts of the primary drop zone, assembly areas, objectives, jump commands, and five points of performance. The briefing took longer to present due to the fact that interpreters were used. The majority of the three rifle companies were ethnically Montagnard, but could understand Vietnamese language. The minority of soldiers who could not understand Vietnamese had the briefing translated into their tribal dialects by their friends. The M.A.C.O. briefing was given in a clear, concise, and complete manner, yet in sufficient detail to allow the individual indigenous soldier to fully understand what was expected of him.

After the briefing, the soldiers were broken down into their predesignated chinks and guided to their respective aircraft. They were lined up in reverse stick order behind each aircraft's tailgate. The troops grounded their combat equipment and were guided by plane load sequence to the parachute landing fall area and parachute issue point, respectively. When all of the troops had been issued their air items and had secured them with their gear, they were allowed to go to the class I distribution point, if they desired.

Meanwhile, at 0600 hours the pilot and aircrew

briefing had started in the 14th Air Commando briefing room near the marshaling area. The Company E (Prov.) Task Force command and control element, composed of the Company E (Prov.) commander, his S2, S3, commo officer, and the Mike force commander <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~ in attendance. The Company E (Prov.) S3 had returned from a final coordination visit to Company A at Bien Hoa the night before. No major changes or alterations had been made to Company A's portion of the operation which would affect the airborne assault. The Air Commando commander had given a brief introduction and was followed by the Company E (Prov.) S2 officer who gave a detailed ground intelligence briefing of the Bunard area. The Company E (Prov.) S2 was followed by senior Air Force officers giving detailed instructions to the air crews on navigation, altitudes, formations, tactics, and emergency procedures. As the briefing drew to an end, the Company E (Prov.) commander took the floor to discuss a few operational aspects of the assault. The briefing ended on a note of thanks from the Company E (Prov.) Task Force commander for the outstanding support and professionalism displayed by the Air Commandos in support of Operation HARVEST MOON.

The air crew briefing ended approximately fifteen minutes prior to station time. While the briefing had been in progress, the jumpmasters, riggers, and safety NCOs had been preparing the indigenous paratroopers to jump. Each individual was given a complete safety

inspection by a jumpmaster backed up by a rigger. The safety NCOs had inspected each C-123 inside and out to insure that the aircraft would be safe to jump. Approximately 350 indigenous paratroopers were sitting in the web seats of the eight camouflage-colored C-123 Providers at station time. Radios and other sensitive equipment were inspected in the parachutist's adjustable equipment (PAE) bags to insure proper packing and serviceability of the bags. The PAE bags were being jumped by experienced SF officers and NCOs in an attempt to preclude damage to the equipment.

At 0750 the engines of the C-123 Providers began to roar. Pilots and crews conducted their last-minute preflight checks. Warning bells rang and jump lights flashed as the Providers vibrated on the parking ramp. Gradually, the aircraft began a slow turn and rolled from the parking ramp one by one until all were lined up on the taxiway. A spare C-123 Provider joined the formation as the file began a slow taxi to the southeastern portion of the runway. The spare C-123 was an empty aircraft which accompanied the troop-filled aircraft only as far as the southeastern runway entrance. This contingency allowed for a complete personnel transfer if one of the other troop-carrying C-123's experienced preflight difficulty and had to abort the mission at the last minute prior to take off. Fortunately, no transfer of troops and equipment was necessary. At 0815 the wheels of the lead C-123 Provider

left the runway as the eight troop-laden aircraft became airborne.

#### THE AIR MOVEMENT PHASE

The C-123 aircraft circled over Nha Trang Air Force Base until all eight were airborne. The estimated flight time to the primary drop zone was approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. The general flight route extended from Nha Trang south following the Vietnamese coast line to the vicinity of Phan Thiet. From Phan Thiet the route turned west until the checkpoint of National Highway 14 and the Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai was in sight. From Dong Xoai the route followed National Highway 14 generally northeast until it crossed the long axis of the primary drop zone. The flight altitude and formations were directed by the flight leader and changed several times during the flight. (Annex D, General Flight Route)

At 0910 hours the twenty-minute warning was given to the jumpmasters. Each jumpmaster and his assistants helped various indigenous paratroopers make adjustments to their parachutes and combat gear. A verbal ten-minute warning was given to the jumpmasters by the crew chiefs, followed four minutes later by the six-minute warning. The pilots turned on the red warning jump lights and maneuvered their aircraft to stay in a staggered trail formation. The jumpmasters began their sequence of hand and arm signal jump commands. As the formation of aircraft approached the Dong Xoai



checkpoint, it turned and began a gradual descent to the 700-foot jump altitude. Approximately two minutes away from the primary drop zone, two aircraft were hit by hostile ground fire. Fortunately, no casualties were taken in either aircraft. Alert crew chiefs responded to the ground fire by pitching colored smoke grenades out of the open doors. The general vicinity of the enemy ground positions could then be determined by back estimating along the flight path from the smoke.

At approximately 0929 hours the one-minute final warning was given to the paratroopers. Jumpmasters strained in the open doors against the prop blast to see the drop zone through the small patches of morning haze. Air speed was reduced to approximately 120 knots per hour when the lead C-123 pilot saw the smoke marker and adjusted his approach to the drop zone. Green jump lights flashed on as each aircraft entered the airspace directly above the drop zone. Jumpmasters began unloading their aircraft and in seconds parachutes filled the Vietnamese sky over drop zone Ballmont.

#### THE ASSAULT PHASE

The airborne assault permitted a rapid, near simultaneous delivery of approximately 370 personnel prepared for combat upon making contact with the ground. The delivery of eight plane loads of paratroopers took less than four minutes to accomplish.

The last-minute DZ approach adjustment made by the lead C-123 on the smoke marker thrown by the Pathfinder element caused the entire aircraft formation to be slightly off the planned track of 55 degrees. The track on which the troops were dropped was about 65 or 70 degrees grid azimuth. The slight error caused some of the paratroopers to land in dense bamboo thickets on the forest's edge of the drop zone. Other more fortunate troops soon discovered that the majority of the drop zone was covered by tall grass and moderate to thick secondary undergrowth. Parachutes and air items were discarded where the paratroopers landed. Soon small groups of indigenous soldiers were weaving through the undergrowth towards their respective assembly areas. Colored cloth panels displayed high in the trees at each assembly area aided the soldiers in a rapid assembly. Each indigenous soldier wore a colored scarf which corresponded to the colored panels displayed at the company assembly area.

Approximately one hour and twenty minutes after the first jumper exited over the drop zone, the three assault objectives were occupied and the airhead was established. (Annex C, Ground Organization) No enemy resistance was encountered during the process of establishing the airhead. Two Special Forces soldiers and four indigenous paratroopers had to be evacuated due to injuries received on the jump.

The airborne assault had gone exactly as planned.

The helilift of the additional combat forces brought phase I of Operation HARVEST MOON to an end.

In summary, the detailed planning and coordination punctuated by the professionalism of all personnel concerned culminated the first parachute assault operation as a military success. The rapid delivery of over 370 combat troops from Nha Trang to the remote drop zone near Dia Diem Bunard had achieved complete tactical surprise. Effective training, discipline, leadership, experience, and attention to detail enabled the Company E (Prov.) Task Force to accomplish the mission. The operation provided a sound foundation for the planning and the execution of subsequent successful parachute assault operations conducted by Company E (Prov.) and other elements of the 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.).

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The techniques, methods, procedures, tactics, and strategy exemplified in this monograph do not disagree with accepted military doctrine related to Army Forces in Joint Airborne Operations. The reader must keep in mind that Operation HARVEST MOON was performed by indigenous mercenary-type soldiers. Consequently, an arbitrary comparison of the Company E (Prov.) Task Force to an American airborne battalion is not necessarily valid.

Military doctrine related to Army Forces in Joint Airborne Operations contributed significantly to the overall success of the airborne assault portion of

Operation HARVEST MOON. Many officers and NCOs instrumental in the planning and execution of the operation contributed through their experience based on service with American airborne units and prior airborne training.

Modifications to doctrine were made based on the military situation and the indigenous combat forces. These modifications were tailored to the needs of the Company E (Prov.) Task Force in ultimate support of accepted military doctrine.

#### COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

Strict security measures were established and enforced by the troop commanders concerned with Operation HARVEST MOON. However, the L.S.C. under the control of the 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.) S4 unwittingly released information which might have benefited the enemy. The addressing of supplies to the final destination at Sunard could have been avoided by various methods of codes, colors, or symbols. The lack of effective counterintelligence supervision at the higher headquarters appeared to be at fault.

#### PATHFINDERS

The Pathfinder element was furnished by Company A, 5th Special Forces Group (Abn.). The composition of the element included one Pathfinder-qualified individual, while senior officers and NCOs made up the remainder of the element. Approximately fifteen

minutes prior to drop time of the assault force, the Pathfinder element parachuted onto the primary drop zone from a CH-47 helicopter. The element experienced difficulty in assembly due to the vegetation and the dispersion pattern of the jumpers on the drop zone. The time allotted by the Pathfinder element to jump, assemble, move to the release point, establish communications, mark the release point, and establish security was completely unrealistic. The Pathfinders ran out of time and threw the smoke marker prior to reaching the selected parachute release point. This action caused the entire C-123 formation to fly the drop zone approximately ten to fifteen degrees off the planned track.

A method of marking the parachute release point for a daylight parachute assault without the use of a Pathfinder element was tested and used by Company E (Prov.) and the Mike Force. This method was tested and used on large drop zones composed of dry or relatively wet rice paddies. A Forward Air Controller with a capable Special Forces member of the assault unit in the observer's seat would precede the troop-carrying aircraft to the drop zone. At the drop zone, computations and wind drift calculations were made by the Special Forces observer. The parachute release point was calculated using the spotting or time-distance techniques commonly used in sport parachuting. The Forward Air Controller would then mark the parachute release point for the lead troop-carrying aircraft

with a smoke or white phosphorus rocket when the lead troop-carrying aircraft was within sight of the drop zone.

A joint airborne advance party could have been effectively used on Operation HARVEST MOON. Electronic terminal guidance navigational aid for the troop-carrying aircraft, in addition to assembly and reorganization assistance provided for the troop units, would have increased operational efficiency on drop zone Bellmont. The responsibility for terminal guidance for the C-123 aircraft should have been assigned to the Company E (Prov.) Task Force commander. This would have maintained a continuity of effort for the entire airborne operation.

#### AIR ITEMS RECOVERY

Standard air items were issued to the Company E (Prov.) Task Force at the marshaling area in Nha Trang. The air items included T-10 personnel parachutes, chest pack reserve parachutes, kit bags, H-harnesses, P.A.E. bags, and some Griswold containers. Although detailed parachute recovery operations commenced under rigger supervision as soon as the tactical situation allowed, many air items were lost or destroyed on or near drop zone Bellmont.

A method of reducing the total cost of the number of air items lost or destroyed on like operations would be to leave the reserve parachute on board the troop-carrier aircraft, to be recovered at the return air field.

Paratroopers exiting an aircraft at an altitude of 700 feet or below on combat assaults have little need for a reserve parachute. The reserve parachute could be worn by the individual paratrooper for in-flight emergency exits. The jumpmaster could insure that all reserve parachutes were removed at the ten-minute verbal warning, for example. This would reduce the individual paratrooper's load, eliminate extra paraphernalia to get out of on the DZ, and reduce the cost of lost or damaged air items.

#### TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

Speed and detailed planning based on a logical and orderly sequence of actions highlighted by coordination were key contributing factors to the success of the airborne assault near Dia Diem Bunard.

Continuity of effort is an important consideration in the planning and execution of a complex operation. The absence of continuity of effort will have a bearing on the overall operational efficiency.

Current U.S. Army doctrine provides excellent guidelines which can be adapted to suit the needs of various friendly irregular combat organizations in South Vietnam.

The airborne assault of Dia Diem Bunard provided a successful pilot operation upon which future airborne assault operations could be based.

The favorable characteristics of parachute operations are desirable and tactically sound in some areas of South Vietnam.

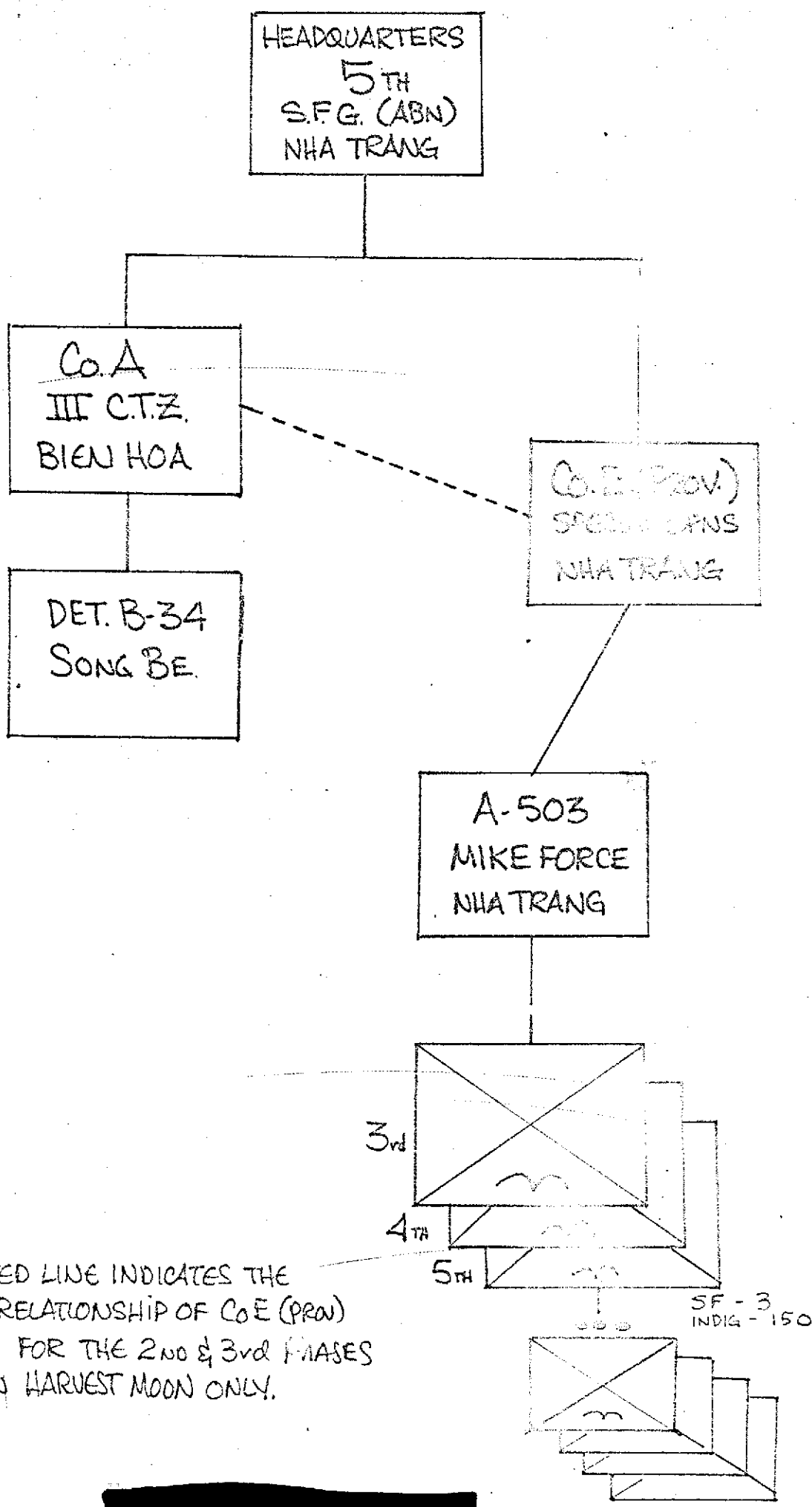
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NOTE:  
 THE DOTTED LINE INDICATES THE (OPCON) RELATIONSHIP OF Co E (PROV) TO Co A FOR THE 2ND & 3RD PHASES OF OPN HARVEST MOON ONLY.



ANNEX A, Organization & Command Relationship