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UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia

11 January 1968

**OPERATION OF THE 1ST SQUADRON, 4TH CAVALRY, 1ST
INFANTRY DIVISION, IN THE "BATTLE OF MINH THANH
ROAD", REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM, 9 JULY 1966.
(PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A TROOP COMMANDER.)**

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INTRODUCTION

STATUS OF HIGH-LEVEL OPERATIONS AND PLAN OF OPERATION

The 272d Viet Cong Main Force Regiment is considered the elite regiment of the 9th VC Division. However, during the Battle of Minh Thanh Road on 9 July, 1966, this regiment suffered its second defeat by the 1st Infantry Division and its supporting forces. On 8 June, 1966, two battalions of the 272d Regiment had attacked an Armored Cavalry Column and were severely decimated during the three and half hour attack. The Battle of Minh Thanh Road is an example of the departure from conventional tactics the 1st Infantry Division ^{WDY} experienced during its first year in Viet Nam.

The Battle of Minh Thanh Road was one of five major actions in which Viet Cong Main Force Regiments were engaged and defeated by the 1st Division during operation El Paso, June-July, 1966. The battle was classic in two respects. First was the planning and execution. Second, this was not an instance where the VC alone planned the attack and launched it at a time and place of their choosing, withdrawing before adequate resources were deployed in reaction.

Based on the previous successes of "Roadrunner" operations conducted by Armored Cavalry Forces, Major General William DePuy, The Commanding General, 1st Infantry Division, gave the 1st Brigade the mission of ~~developing a plan to lure the Viet Cong into attacking~~ US Forces. Colonel Sidney B. Berry, Jr., The Brigade Commander, received the mission, gave his staff the concept of operation, and issued the order for Operation

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Olympia/El Paso. The 1st Brigade's stated mission was: "to position forces and conduct reconnaissance in force to lure the VC to ambush/attack the column, enabling the 1st Brigade to destroy VC Forces by offensive action". Operation Olympia was a multi-phase plan in concept, easily modified to insure response to attack on either the Minh Thanh Road on National Route 13 South of An Loc. In response to additional guidance from General DePuy, the 1st Brigade included a feint against SROC CON TRANG. On 8 July, a simulated airmobile assault would be conducted into a landing zone in the vicinity of SROC CON TRANG following air and artillery preparations causing the VC to be drawn into the killing zone of a B-52 strike. Subsequent to receipt of the mission, extensive planning, reconnaissance and wargaming was conducted. All commanders participated in the plan and knew exactly what the philosophy was and what the other commanders felt. This facilitated the carrying out of modification with a minimum of radio transmissions once contact was made. On July 9, Phase II of the operation would begin with Task Force Dragoon, consisting of Troops B and C, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry and Company B, 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry conducting a reconnaissance in force along Route KNIFE (Map 1) to Minh Thanh. TF Dragoon would receive engineer equipment at Minh Thanh and return to An Loc. In the event the Task Force was ambushed or attacked enroute, forces previously positioned would respond immediately as the situation developed. Commitment of initial battalions would be against the VC flanks. Remaining battalions would be committed to the immediate battle

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area or to blocking positions. Landing zones and tentative blocking positions along likely VC routes of withdrawal were selected to be occupied on order. An important aspect to insure the VC were lured into contact was that information was leaked that the movement of bulldozers and resupply trucks from Minh Thanh to An Loc escorted with only a small amount of Armored Cavalry. Information was also leaked that a convoy would be moving down Route 13 in the near future in hopes that should the VC not be lured into attacking the Minh Thanh Convoy, they would attack the one on Route 13. The latter would be covered by Artv. Base II. The attack on the Minh Thanh Road was preferred because of better landing zones. The plan was wargamed from the VC standpoint, and although five possible sites were selected for the attack, the final position selected was the same location as the actual attack. The intelligence estimate indicated a minimum of one battalion and probably a regiment could be expected to attack. Intelligence had shown the 272d Regiment to be operating in that area in regimental strength.

On 7 July, the 1st Brigade began positioning its forces and completed care and maintenance for future operations. Headquarters, B, and D Batteries, 8/6th Artillery and A Battery, 1/5 Artillery moved to Artillery Base I. The 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry commenced infiltration to Minh Thanh using UH-1D and CV-2 Aircraft. The move was completed on 8 July. Forces at Minh Thanh included 2/2d and 1/18th Infantry and Battery C, 2/33d Artillery. The simulated Airmobile Assault was conducted

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on 8 July by the 1/28th Infantry followed by the B-52 strike. Air strikes were also employed against suspected VC locations in the SROC CON TRANG area. Headquarters, Battery, 1/5th Artillery and C Battery, 1/7th Artillery moved to Artillery Base II. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Haldane's, 1/28th Infantry occupied positions around the abandoned airstrip 2500 meters east of Artillery Base I and secured the artillery with one company. The 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, commanded by LTC Rufus G. Lazzell, moved from LOC NINH to QUAN LOI, 5500 meters northeast of AN LOC and was placed under operational control of the 1st Brigade. Company C, 1/2d Infantry and 1/3 ARVN Armored Cav. provided security for Artillery Base II. The 1/18 Infantry maintained one company at Position S5 and the remainder of the battalion at the Minh Thanh Airfield. The 2/2 Infantry occupied overnight positions in vicinity of S11.

The 1/18 Infantry (-) began moving to S5 at 0605 on 9 July, followed by the movement of 2/2 Infantry to S11 at 0656. Company B, 1/28 Infantry, assisting in the security of Artillery Base I, returned to control of its parent organization.

EXISTING SITUATION

1. Terrain: The area of operations can be characterized as flat with many streams throughout the area. Wooded areas run from heavy dense jungle growth to areas dominated by rubber tree plantations. Secondary roads are trafficable even during prolonged periods of wet weather. Cross country trafficability is from good to excellent in dry periods, but extremely limited during

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the wet periods.

2. Weather: Characterized by early morning fog clearing off by mid-morning. Rain showers occurred every day from light drizzles to heavy showers with occasional thunderstorms of intense but short duration.

PREPARATION FOR THE ACTION

After a squadron wargaming session on the evening of 6 July, 1966, an Infantry Company was requested for the operation and Co. B, 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry reported on 7 July. It was thought that seven men could fight from an APC and the company was broken down with the Company (-) to Troop C and one ^{PLATOON} attached to Troop B. Second Lieutenant Wolfe, the 1st Platoon Leader and his Platoon Sergeant, SFC Hernandez reported to CPT David S. Kelly, CO, Troop B and began troop level planning. As Troop B had only four or five men assigned per APC, the Infantrymen were broken down and assigned to a specific track to raise the number to seven. The Infantrymen were to augment the troop and use their rifles, M-16's, firing from the hatches of the APC's.

The 8th of July was spent rehearsing, and the Infantrymen soon proved that they were adaptable to the job. Infantrymen and Cavalrytroopers soon became fast friends and looked forward with anticipation to the next day's operation.

NARRATION

At 0700 hours 9 July, Task Force Dragoon crossed the start point at the An Loc Airfield with Troop C, commanded by Captain Stephen Slattery, leading Troop E, commanded by Captain David S. Kelly, followed at 0710. The main axis of advance was along the Minh Thanh Road. This

road is a secondary laterite road that was in excellent condition during the operation. It extends from the southern portion of the XA CAT Rubber Plantation at coordinates XT744801 through secondary undergrowth and over two fordable streams to the entrance of the Minh Thanh Rubber Plantation at coordinates XT638706.

Troop E's order of march was the Second Platoon, Platoon Leader, 2/Lt. Benjamin Phillips; Troop Command Group consisting of the Troop Commander's APC, the Medic APC and the Maintenance APC; 1st Platoon, Platoon Leader 2/Lt. Franklin Maughn; and 3rd Platoon, Platoon Leader, 2/Lt. Richard Wroe.

The Squadron moved to Check Point Hank, (see map) and was held there for over an hour, waiting for the low ceiling to lift so that pre-planned six-strikes could be employed along Route KNIFE. Troop B established a perimeter around the road junction and checked civilians that passed during that time.

At 0900 hours, the weather cleared enough to allow the Air Force to drop napalm and CBU along Route KNIFE. LTC Leonard L. Lewane, Squadron Commander, ordered the Squadron to move at 0910. Troop C deployed in an inverted wedge formation with one platoon on each side of the road with the other platoon to the rear and on the road. Troop E was in column formation about one kilometer to the rear. As the Squadron came out of the rubber plantation, LTC Lewane ordered reconnaissance by fire. Troop B was ordered to fire to the flanks at a 90 degree angle to the route of march to preclude any possibility of stray rounds into Troop C. Due to the

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delay caused by the hold at Check Point Hank and the slow speed of the inverted wedge formation, Troop C was ordered into a column formation to speed the rate of march. Troop C then returned to its flanking wedge formation at approximately coords XT 730786. This wedge formation was continued by Troop C as the Squadron conducted its reconnaissance mission along the axis of advance. Recon by fire was employed to the flanks. No return fire was received and no enemy activity observed. During this time, artillery preparations were being fired several thousand meters in advance of the Squadrons lead elements. The effectiveness of this fire could be observed along the roadway. Fire teams and an armed Chinook were making passes along the road in front of the Squadron. Overhead there were many LOH's and other command and observation aircraft. However, no signs of enemy activity were observed. The advance continued in this manner without incident until the Squadron reached a position on the bridge site at Objective DICK.

Upon arrival at the bridge site, Troop C assumed a box formation with the 3rd Platoon deployed facing west and the flanking platoons deployed to the north and south respectively. Artillery preparations followed by air-strikes were used in softening up the bridge area. A particularly effective napalm strike was employed to burn out dense undergrowth along the left side of the road adjacent to the bridge. Following the strikes, Troop C, 3rd. Platoon, supported by overwatching tank fire, with two engineer mine sweeper/demolition teams attached, moved forward in to the far side of the bridge. A quick check

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was made for demolitions and extensive scouting, mine sweeping and other checks were made of the bridge and surrounding areas. No evidence of enemy activity was found. The bridge was in good condition and would facilitate the crossing of heavy armor.

During this time a Track Commander received a moderately serious small caliber bullet round in one of his legs. No incoming rounds had been heard in the area, although a gun team had just made a pass and it was felt that the man had been hit by a stray slug. It is entirely probable that he could have been wounded by a hidden enemy sniper. The time was around 1045.

Upon securing the bridge at DICK, the advance continued without incident until the lead platoon leader of Troop C, Lt. Lyons (1st Platoon) reported 5 to 7 VC's running across the road from right to left at approximate coords XT 671740. Shortly afterward he reported a group of 20 VC running in the same direction. Both these groups were immediately taken under fire. It was soon followed by reports of incoming small arms, then automatic weapons fire. Troop C deployed and was engaged by enemy mortar and anti-tank fire.

LTC. Lewane ordered the Troop^B to move forward and compress on the tail of Troop C. It took less than a minute to close and enter the Herring-Bone Formation.

The battle lasted for less than two hours, but during that time, all personnel fired as rapidly as possible. The Viet Cong that were still alive literally ran from the battlefield allowing Gunships, Air Force, Forward Air Controllers and Artillery Air Observers to adjust

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Battle of Minh Thanh Road

Page 4, Para 3. When ambush was tripped, we received fire from both the north and south. After about 25-30 minutes fire ceased from the south and came from the north only.

Page 5, Para 1. Whether or not reaction forces were deployed toward the wrong area is unclear but they did wait until confusion cleared and arrived late in the fight.

Page 6, Para 1. Fighting was close in, about 5 to 10 metres from vehicles. Air strikes were hitting about 100-150 yards out. The VC was in the the middle of us and the airstrike. There was a call for a closer air strike which helped break up the fight.

Page 6, Para 3. a. Unknown. B. An attempt was made during the fight to evacuate the wounded and to resupply but ships would come in and get hit as soon as they were off again. Medivac and supply was impossible. c. Unknown.

Page 7, Para 2. 57 killed or wounded.

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fire at the disorganized retreat. It is therefore impossible to put all the events in chronological order as many were occurring simultaneously.

Shortly, after closing on Troop C, LTC. Lewane ordered Troop B's rear platoon, Lt. Wroe, to return to CP DICK to secure the armed Chinook which had been downed by ground fire. After securing the position, Lt. Wroe radioed that the area would be adequate for a dust-off site. The site received some sniper fire, but this was soon silenced.

After the Troops had compressed, the enemy's "killing zone" was at the rear platoon of Troop C and Troop B's lead platoon (Lt. Phillips). The elements of these two platoons were heavily engaged and firing constantly. The tanks had expended about half their basic loads of 90 MM ammunition within the first forty-five minutes. The cannister ammunition again proved extremely effective in the jungle growth.

Lt. Phillips and his Platoon Sergeant, PSG Quijano, were wounded and evacuated and the remainder of the platoon was put directly under the Troop Commander's control as he was in a position to control both the platoon and the troop. The Troop Commander had little need to maneuver his elements during the battle as all elements were busy shooting the enemy and very little movement was necessary.

The Squadron Commander requested a determination as to which side of the road the main concentration was located. Initially this was difficult to determine because of the tremendous volume of fire being put out by all the deployed APC's. Reports were made that the

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VC were attempting to cross the road at the front of the column from right to left. Additional reports were received of heavy enemy fire being received at the rear of the troop and coming from the left side of the road. Initial determination was made that the main VC force was located on the left or south side of the road. Soon after this, as accurate casualty counts, concise reports and aerial observer reports tallied up; it was determined that enemy forces were concentrated on the right or NW side of the road. Artillery fire was reconcentrated in this area and its devastating effect could be observed by the ground troops.

Air strikes were immediately called in on the left side of the road. They were continuous and extremely effective, especially the Skyraiders napalm runs and several of the CBU attacks.

Artillery barrages were devoted to the right side of the road. They ranged both up and down the troop column and in and out from the roadway. Fires were brought in quite close to the troop APC's but no damage was sustained by friendly forces.

During this period several CS gas drops were made from helicopters of Troop D (air) 1/4 Cavalry. These provided extremely effective. The gas drifted over the roadway and settled along the dense jungle on the NW of the APC's along the road. Initially some slight concern developed in certain members of the troop, this was quickly overcome and the CS concentration in the troop battle area was not sufficient to cause masking.

Troop D's gunteams were used to the flanks (2-3)

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kilometers to avoid interference with the air or artillery) to destroy mortar positions and escaping VC. The gunteams were able to detect and destroy two mortar positions, considerably relieving the pressure on the troops on the road.

Throughout the battle, the Medic APC was used as an evacuation ambulance, shuttling between the battle area and the dust-off site. This worked out very well in that no combat vehicles had to be used for evacuation, but the wounded could be "dusted-off" expeditiously. In fact, no personnel in the Squadron died after the Medics had control of them.

Lt. Wroe stated that little fire was being received at the dust-off site so was ordered forward, leaving one Scout Squad for security. The Platoon was positioned on the Northwest side of the road in the Second Platoon's area to "beef-up" firepower in that sector.

The battle lasted another half-hour and then the VC started running. They left their cover and appeared to have no other concern than running as fast as they could as far as they could. The Infantry Battalions had been positioned by this time in blocking positions around the battle area and effectively cut off many of the escaping VC.

The fighting was over about as fast as it had started. The Squadron was ordered to resupply and not pursue the VC. Resupply started immediately and within an hour, completed. The resupply helicopter's used the road and came so fast it was sometimes difficult to unload fast enough. After resupply, Troop B moved to check point TOM

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and secured it for the night.

The Squadron had ten men killed and fort three wounded while the Viet Cong body count during the first afternoon was 239. Another two hundred and fifty were picked up during the next few days.

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ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Although it was not critical, seven men per APC proved to be too many, as a few times during the battle, the men got in each other's way. In later operations, five seemed to be optimum. Infantry should be positioned on the trail troop and dismount before the troop closes. The Company can then advance down the enemy's flank. The Company's position must be easily identifiable to the Cavalry so fire can be lifted or shifted.

The M-16 Rifle proved nearly worthless for the Infantry during the action. The rifles had collected dust during the road march and could not withstand the sustained high rate of fire. Soon after the action started, the Infantrymen discarded their weapons and used the M-14's of the Cavalrymen (Machinegunners, Track Commander's and Drivers) for the duration of the battle. No malfunction other than one broken firing-pin was experienced by the entire Squadron.

The Squadron had been issued quite a large amount of caliber 50 training ammunition. This ammunition is packed in "meat-can" containers rather than the newer "flip-top" boxes. The training ammunition was clearly so marked, but due to a shortage - was issued. Later, tests proved that it takes at least forty-five seconds to open one of the containers. The ammunition was mostly of World War II or Korean date of manufacture and many misfires occurred. One Track Commander was killed while disassembling his weapon, thinking it had malfunctioned, when, in fact, the ammunition was at fault. Further, the "meat-cans" are not adaptable to the ammunition box holders

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on the side of the mount and must be repacked into other boxes before use.

A separate medical evacuation site in a safe area should be established. Only the Medical APC's should be used to evacuate personnel to this area. Headquarters Troop vehicles should be used to secure the site to allow all combat elements to be used in the battle area.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Dust-Off and resupply site should be established by elements other than those engaged in the battle. The wounded must be evacuated by Dust-Off/resupply elements, allowing maximum fire power to be brought to bear on the enemy. Empty medical evacuation vehicles including armored personnel carriers and helicopters should be utilized to ferry ammunition to the engaged elements.

Reserve (trail troops) must be committed as soon as contact with the enemy is established in order to bring maximum firepower to bear on the enemy at the earliest opportunity.

It is beneficial to carry Infantry or have them immediately available on the trail troops as they are able to influence the battle at the critical time and place.

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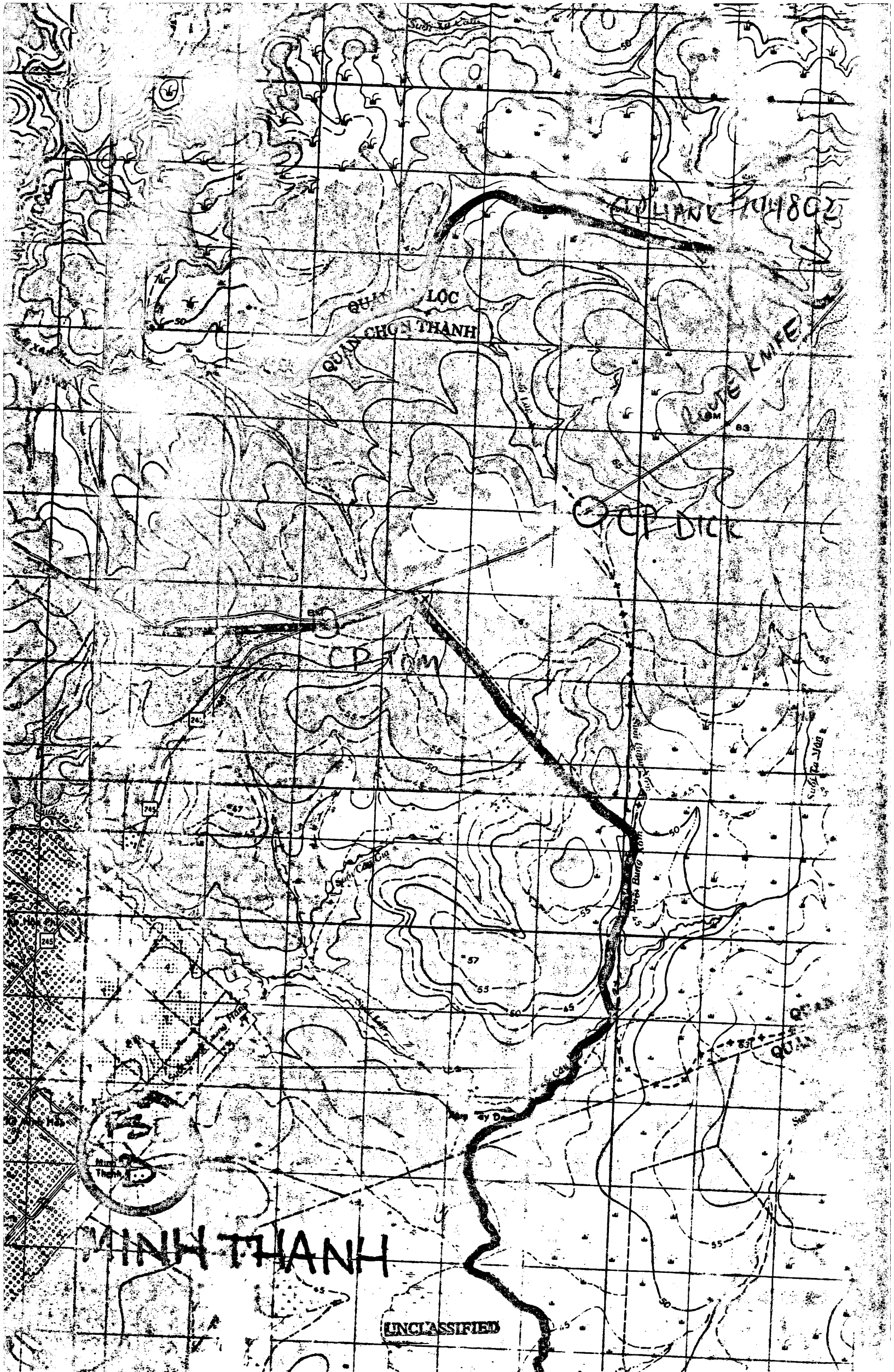
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