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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 1ST BATTALION, 28TH INFANTRY, 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION, DURING OPERATION CEDAR FALLS, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM, 9-10 JANUARY 1967. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A COMPANY COMMANDER.)

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is that of covering the combat operations of a rifle company for a two day period in Vietnam to examine some problem areas encountered by the unit. The specific problems that will be considered are those that deal with the employment of the light machine gun organic to the rifle company. The subject of the light machinegun is one of great importance to the small unit infantryman, and the proper use of this weapon will substantially benefit the operational effectiveness of the infantry unit. Since the problems that the company faced occurred during quite normal operations in Vietnam, the discussion of the problems will make any infantryman who expects to go to Vietnam a more informed person who is capable of better performing his mission.

The company that I will discuss is B Company, 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, a unit of the 1st Infantry Division. The company activities took place during CEDAR FALLS, a II Field Force operation that was conducted in January 1967. To give a better understanding of the company's activities, the missions and general dispositions of some higher control headquarters must be given. Elements of the 1st Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and 173rd Airborne Brigade took part in CEDAR FALLS. The area of operations was the Iron Triangle-Thanh Dien Forrestry Reserve, an area that had not previously known extensive United States ground operations. (Annex A) 3rd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division conducted operations in the northern portion of the operational area. The mission of the

3rd Brigade was that of conducting airmobile assaults from Lai Khe and Dau Tieng into the Thanh Dien Forrestry Reserve, conducting search and destroy operations in the area of operations, and evacuating all inhabitants within the area of operations. To accomplish this mission the 3rd Brigade air assaulted several battalions into the northern portion of the Thanh Dien Forrestry Reserve on 9 January 1967. One of the battalions was the 1 - 28th Infantry.

A study of the terrain of this area showed that the jungle consisted of dense undergrowth which would hamper foot movement of troops and would limit visibility in most areas to about ten meters. The area was void of prominent terrain features and was mainly flat jungle.

Several open areas were located around the limits of the forrestry reserve but these areas were stream beds and swamps. If the terrain would be difficult, the weather would be ideal for operations since the month of January falls in the period of the northeast monsoon and is a dry month in the III Corps Tactical Zone. Air and artillery support would not be limited by the weather. Streams and swamps would be as dry as they ever would be. The terrain would favor enemy operations, but the weather would favor friendly operations.

Intelligence sources indicated that the area was a haven for the Viet Cong due to the absence of previous ground operations there. Headquarters of the Viet Cong Military Region IV was located in the area of operations. There was also a vast network of logistical bases consisting of food, ammunition and medical storage facilities. All base areas were expected to be defended by small units, but no major force was known to habitually occupy this zone.

The background information was plentiful and proved to be quite accurate. The units of the 1 - 28th also had sufficient time to prepare for the operation. The battalion was in its permanent base camp at Phuoc Vinh on the 6th of January when the order was issued by battalion. The companies had until 8 January to prepare for the operation since on the 8th, the battalion would move to Dau Tieng by fixed wing aircraft in preparation for the air assault on the 9th. The mission of the battalion was that of conducting an air assault into IZ5 on the 9th (Annex B) and establishing blocking positions during the night of the 9th prior to moving south on search and destroy operations the following day. On the second night, the battalion would occupy an old patch of rubber to cut out a ten helicopter landing zone. A total of 60 helicopters would be available for the assault so that the entire battalion would be on the ground within five minutes. C Company would assault first followed by B Company, elements of the headquarters, and A Company in that order. Once on the ground, the companies were to move to their night defensive positions, make contact on their flanks with the flank battalions, and prepare the defensive positions. The reconnaissance platoon was to search the woodline to the north of the landing zone and return to the C Company defensive position. During the night ambush patrols would cover the areas between companies to tighten a cordon in the north and prevent Viet Cong movement in that direction. On the late afternoon of 8 January, the battalion landed in Dau Tieng where it would spend the evening and make last minute preparations for the air assault on the 9th.

NARRATION

The weather on the 9th was excellent as predicted. The members of B Company were experiencing the normal pre-air assault tension and were therefore reserved as the company formed for the helicopter pickup. Our battalion was the last of 3rd Brigade units to conduct the air assault so it was nearly 1130 hours when the helicopters arrived at the pickup zone. The pickup was accomplished without incident, and a quick radio check with the platoons confirmed that everything was proceeding according to plan. After a short flight, the C Company commander reported on the battalion radio net that his first unit on the landing zone did not draw enemy fire, and within seconds the first lift of B Company helicopters was on the ground. The first lift of B Company helicopters delivered the 1st Platoon which marked and secured the company assembly area without incident. The remainder of the company followed and scrambled into the thick jungle as quickly as possible to accomplish the assembly on the ground.

Upon completion of the air assault and assembly phases of the operation, the company started moving to the planned night defensive position. The movement of a company size unit through an area of limited visibility is a most difficult job. One good way to organize for such a movement is described in the following sentences. The platoon is organized into a platoon column formation with a squad, the platoon headquarters, the machine guns, a second squad, the platoon sergeant, and the last squad in that order. The lead squad is broken down by fire team so that one fire team is the scout element, and the remainder of the squad forms the front of the main body of the platoon. (Annex C) The scouts move forward of the platoon from 50 to 100 meters to perform a

reconnaissance of the area over which the platoon will travel. When the scouts have reached the desired distance to the front, the main body of the platoon moves forward to meet them. Upon visual contact, the scouts again move to the front. Flank security is provided by elements of the second rifle squad in the column. This squad can send up to a fire team to either side to accomplish the mission of flank security. The flank security elements depart the platoon formation at an angle, travel in the same general direction as the platoon, and close back to the platoon after describing a clover leaf type route. The flank security travels to a distance of 100 meters from the main body of the platoon before starting on the return trip. The period that the platoon is halted while the scouts are making their reconnaissance to the front allows sufficient time for the flank security to perform its mission. The flanks cover a greater distance than does the main body, and therefore they require more time for movement. This formation provides good security for movement through areas of limited visability, but it is difficult to control even though the basic formation is a column of squads. As simple as the scount and flank security missions appear, it takes a good deal of practice to enable a unit to move exactly right. To help control the formation, the scouts, flanks, squad leaders, platoon sergeant, and platoon leader should have radios on the same frequency. If a sufficient number of radios are not available, the lead squad leader, platoon sergeant, and platoon leader must have radios. This was the case in B Company as it moved to the night defensive position.

The lead squad leader is responsible for the scouts, of course, and must support them if they get in trouble. To do this he has a fire team and himself. This is a small force with limited fire power to accomplish such a mission against mostly an unknown size force that is normally hard to see. The only weapon that the

platoon has that is capable of supplying the great volume of fire necessary to gain fire superiority quickly is the machine gun. In dense jungle with limited visability, support from the middle of the platoon takes a long time to place correctly. A machine gun under the control of the lead squad leader can be employed quickly by the squad leader to support his plans for developing the situation and protecting the scouts. The lead squad should have a machine gun in such a situation. The platoon leader might well still need two machine guns with which to maneuver and to support by fire, but this will be discussed later in the paper.

Since the company had only two machine guns per platoon, the platoon leaders chose to keep them under platoon control. The company moved from the assembly area to the night defensive position without incident. A patrol was sent to the east to make contact with the battalion on the east flank. Local security was set up well to the front of the proposed perimeter and the leaders began organizing the ground for the optimum defense. Along with the mission of setting up a company blocking position, the company was told to set up two ambush patrols that would add to the blocking potential of the battalion. The loss of the men and weapons that were required to support two ambush patrols severely limited the ability of the company to successfully defend a perimeter.

What are the requirements of an ambush patrol? The organization of an ambush patrol varies with the expected enemy threat, the terrain and the distance of the ambush site from the company perimeter. If the enemy forces in the operational area are large, the ambush patrol must have sufficient size and firepower to accomplish its mission and have any kind of a chance of returning from the mission. A rifle squad and a machinegun team is a force that has the firepower required to engage a substantial enemy force. An ambush patrol of lesser size and without a

machinegun does not have the combat power to accomplish its mission. A larger force could be used, but two such forces put a real strain on the company perimeter. Two squads and two machinegun teams were chosen to occupy ambush sites on the flanks of the company.

Since two machinegun teams were not available for defense of the perimeter, the company had only four guns that were available for the perimeter. Under such circumstances commanders must give careful thought to the placement of the four remaining guns since it is extremely difficult to obtain interlocking fields of fire. Avenues of approach must be evaluated and priorities assigned.to the avenues of approach if all approaches can not be covered by machine gun fires. An added problem to consider is that of poor fields of fire. If the jungle is thick, a field of fire may be cut for the machinegun, but this cleared area can seldom be made to extend the length of the effective range of the gun. The poor fields of fire and the reduced number of machine guns severly limit the fire power available to the company. A malfunction of one or more weapons, or a casualty by enemy fire makes interlocking fields of fire by the machineguns impossible to achieve. On 9 January some extra machineguns were critically needed. Three guns per platoon would have solved many problems.

The night passed without incident, and after checking around the perimeter to a distance of 150 meters to make sure no enemy activity had taken place during the night, the company was ready to move to the south. A message from the battalion commander alerted the company that between its present location and the plot of rubber, lay a fortified area of some sort. While making a reconnaissance of the battalion area in a light observation helicopter,

the commander picked up some bunkers. B Company would move to the base area while C Company would pass to the west of the base area so that two companies were not too closely involved in the same area. Supporting fires could be more easily employed if the area were less crowded. A Company would move to the new battalion location and would not get involved in the base camp.

With the knowledge that some type of fortified area lay to the front, the company moved out of the old night defensive position. The 2nd Platoon was leading, followed by headquarters, 3rd Platoon, Weapons Platoon, and 1st Platoon in that order. Besides moving to and searching out the base area, the company was to cover as much ground as possible while moving south. Periodically the company stopped and sent squads out to a distance of 250-300 meters on both flanks to cover the ground on foot. During one of these stops the 1st Platoon leader reported that his search element had located a large rice storage area. The leader was ordered to take his platoon to the rice and destroy it as best he could; the company minus continued toward the fortified area.

By 1100 hours the scouts of the lead platoon reported bunkers to their front. The 2nd Platoon leader was ordered to move with caution into the area. The leader soon reported that there were several bunkers connected by a north-south trench system in the area. The bunkers were large, 12' by 12', with thick overhead cover. The area was apparently unoccupied, but an extensive search was necessary since the bunkers had tunnels of unknown length leading from them. The trench line and bunker complex seemed to end both on the north and south and seemed to be a single line. The 2nd and 3rd Platoons were ordered to outpost the complex in a perimeter type fashion while the Weapons Platoon was ordered to search the area. (Annex D)

While the area was being secured and the Weapons Platoon began to search it, the 1st Platoon reported that it had located and destroyed about three tons of rice, and since there was nothing else in the area it was ready to move to the company's location. The platoon was ordered to rejoin the company; all units were notified of the approach of the 1st Platoon. The Weapons Platoon found several 55-gallon drums of lubricant and fuel and two generators. So far, the bunkers had produced nothing but some tables, chairs, and bicycles. The Weapons Platoon continued to search.

While the 1st Platoon was rejoining the company, the battalion commander located several more bunkers about 200 meters to the west of the present company location. The 1st Platoon was ordered to continue to the west to search the area. The remainder of the company continued to search the initial bunker area. The 1st Platoon moved slowly to the west with scouts out to the front. It was 1215 hours and everything was progressing satisfactorily.

Shots from the 1st Platoon area broke the silence. The platoon leader reported that the firing came from the front of his platoon, and that he was checking on the situation. A short time later the platoon leader reported that his scouts had been fired on and apparently two were hit; he did not know how badly they were hit. In the dense jungle the scouts had apparently moved right up to several bunkers before they had seen the bunkers and had been taken under fire at very short range. The remainder of the platoon had deployed and returned fire, but as yet were unsuccessful in trying to reach the scouts. The enemy situation was still vague. The platoon leader estimated that five or six Viet Cong were occupying several bunkers to the front of the platoon. Although the platoon leader could see only two bunkers, he estimated that there were

several more because when the two bunkers were taken under fire, the enemy continued to return fire. Attempts to reach the scouts by fire and maneuver were unsuccessful. The platoon sergeant was hit in the leg during one such attempt. The platoon's momentum came to a halt. The 3rd Platoon was ordered to move to the rear of the 1st Platoon and to stand by there.

The problem at hand was not as simple as it first appeared. The enemy force was apparently no more than five or six well entrenched enemy. This was a problem in itself. How much should the company sacrifice to kill such a small force? The visibility was quite limited, with ten meters being a good estimate. The limited visibility presented a problem in organizing the firepower of the platoon. The people on the flanks had no idea what they were firing at since they could not see the only visible bunkers. It was also difficult to mass a great deal of firepower into a small area. The flanks of the enemy had not been discovered. This was also due to the limited visibility. One of the biggest problems, however, was the fact that air and artillery could not be brought in close enough to damage the enemy. The casualties were in the open not ten meters from the enemy bunkers so that the enemy was well covered while the friendly elements had no cover at all. (Annex E)

The contact had been going on long enough for an observer to quickly look over the situation and grasp the facts. The decision was that of sending the 3rd Platoon to the south flank with the mission of locating the flank, moving around the flank, and making the present enemy positions untenable. With the 3rd Platoon on the move, let me point out the enemy fields of fire to indicate his skill in the defense. The fields of fire were cut so that a man in an upright position would not be able to notice them.

Brush was cut away from ground level to a height of about three feet. The higher vegetation was bent over the cut out portion to form a tunnel effect. When somebody crossed the field of fire, he was visible from the waist down, although he was unaware of this fact and had the impression that he was still fighting through the jungle. The two 1st Platoon scouts were hit below the waist initially. One was not hit again while the other was shot in the head after falling down.

The 3rd platoon moved about 75 meters south of the flank of the 1st Platoon without contact so it started to the west to accomplish its mission. (Annex F) After getting about 20 meters to the west it too came under fire and suffered two casualties. These casualties also were not able to be retrieved easily. Time was running out since the people who were wounded initially had to be given aid quickly. The platoons still could not bring full combat power to the desired areas due to poor visibility. The 2nd Platoon was ordered forward. The platoon's machineguns were given to the 3rd Platoon and the rest of the platoon was ordered to stay in the rear to assist with the casualties. The 3rd Platoon and 2nd Platoon machineguns fired together to produce a heavy volume of fire in a limited area. This fire power plus some smoke grenades apparently caused the enemy to lose his good observation since the 3rd Platoon casualties were removed from the line of contact. The platoon disengaged and moved to the rear of the first platoon. The same tactics were employed in the first platoon area and resulted in a similar outcome. All casualties were removed from the front, however, three more casualties were suffered in the process.

With the casualties out of the way, the platoons moved about 50 meters to the rear and air and artillery were brought in on

the area. After a thorough bombardment of the positions, the 2nd platoon was ordered to lead a sweep through the bunker system. The first line of bunkers had not been hit, but the bunkers to the rear had been destroyed. The destroyed bunkers were not dug up and no bodies were found in this area or in the first line of bunkers. The results of the encounter were quite disappointing in terms of dead Viet Cong and dead Americans. Four soldiers died as a result of the encounter. The base area that was opened up, however, proved to be extremely fruitful. Apparently, the area was a hospital and rest area. Medical supplies were great in quantity and were confiscated to be given to the Vietnamese Army. Operating equipment and surgical supplies were discovered in tunnels and bunkers as well as stacks of clothes, supplies and documents. The company stayed in the area for two days and continued to uncover supplies. Combat engineer vehicles were brought in to destroy the bunkers, but the area was so extensive that they could not thoroughly complete the job in two days. The company then moved on to continue CEDAR FALLS with operations farther to the south.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The purpose of this paper as stated in the Introduction was that of discussing the machinegun and its employment during combat operations in Vietnam. The combat example brought out areas where the machinegun proved its worth to the rifle company. I believe that the machinegun has not only proved itself to be one of the rifle company's greatest assets, but also has performed so well that a hard look should be given to increasing the number of weapons per platoon to three.

In the defensive situation the advantage of the three extra

guns in the company are readily apparent. Extra ammunition can be flown in for the night perimeter defense, and then flown out the next day before the company moves out on operations. The mobility question does not effect the situation significantly. Ambush patrols can be sent out from the perimeter without lowering the combat power of the company perimeter to a marginal level. Interlocking fields of fire can be more easily obtained. Even with two guns outside the perimeter, the company still has seven guns inside the perimeter. Two guns could possibly be employed in pairs along the most dangerous avenue of approach. The third gun per platoon necessitates more qualified machine gunners; the training and personnel requirements are increased. These aspects are disadvantages, but to the man on the ground the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

In the offense the value of the third machinegun might be considered more doubtful. The thinking might be that since the infantry is normally going through the bushes, trees, or jungle, the machinegun can not support from a base of fire. I submit that just such a situation calls for maximum firepower right with the platoon. The platoon or company operating under conditions of limited visibility in jungle terrain has a good chance of having to use its organic firepower alone to accomplish a mission. An example was seen during the company operations in CEDAR FALLS.

Army doctrine for operations in areas of limited visibility can be found in FM 7-15. The limited visibility is due to darkness, fog or smoke and therefore is slightly different than the limited visibility encountered in jungle areas. The idea that the machinegun is attached to the squad for added firepower during the night attack can be applied to jungle operations. The lead squad, or squads, in a sweep operation need the added firepower to give

them some flexibility in making decisions. I believe that the platoon leader can use two additional machineguns, or three for the platoon, as well in the offense as in the defense. The combat example portrayed just such a situation.

The mobility of the present light machinegun has proven to be sufficient to keep up with the mobility of the squad, platoon, or company. The logistical problem is more difficult while in the offense. The unit must carry enough ammunition to make a third machine gun profitable, and it is true that each man in the platoon will have to carry some machinegun ammunition. With suitable canvas covers, however, the rifleman can carry a belt of 100 rounds without unacceptable strain. With each man carrying 100 rounds and with the machinegun team carrying its ammunition, the platoon has sufficient ammunition for the three guns. Resupply of ammunition by air can also be accomplished in most areas if the ground situation warrents it.

Still another problem area brought about by the added machinegun is the problem of control. The problem occurs especially if the guns are attached to the squads. In jungle areas, the control problem does exist. Because control is quite difficult, however, it is just as easy for one squad leader to control his two fire teams and a machinegun team than it is for the squad and a separate machinegun not to know where each other are in some dense area. The problem of span of control will always be around, but the control of two fire teams plus a machine gun has been handled successfully many times in the past and certainly is not an impossible task. The platoon leader can also handle the extra machine gun at his level.

Both on offense and on defense the advantages of having three machineguns per platoon out-weigh the tactical disadvantages when considering an infantry unit moving through vegetated terrain.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

1. The machinegun teams of the rifle company must train with the rifle squads as much as possible to develop a teamwork that will be beneficial in various combat operations.

2. The infantry rifle company should have the added organic firepower that three machineguns per platoon affords. This statement is true especially in areas of limited visibility, but perhaps can be expanded to any non-mechanized infantry organization.

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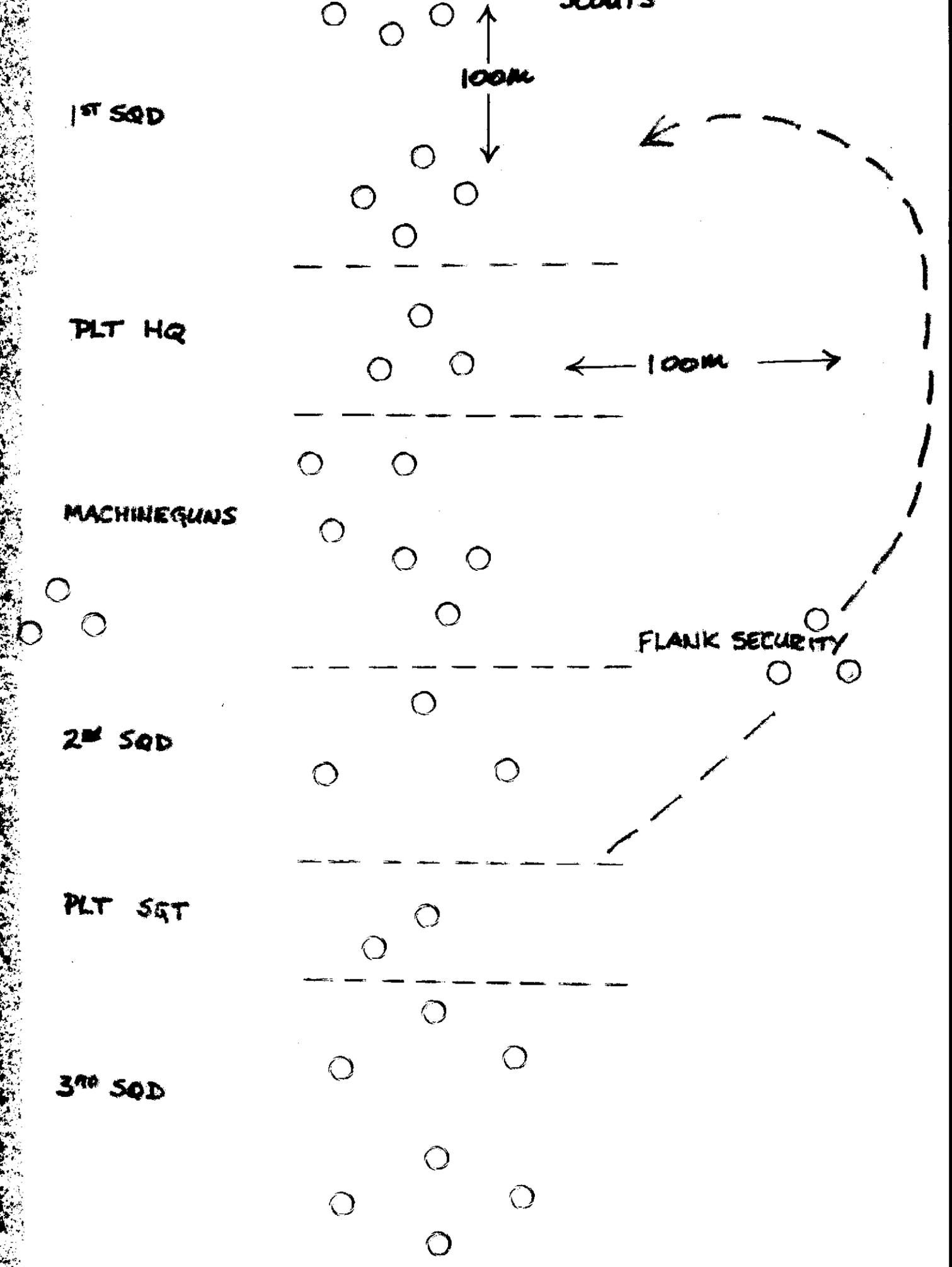
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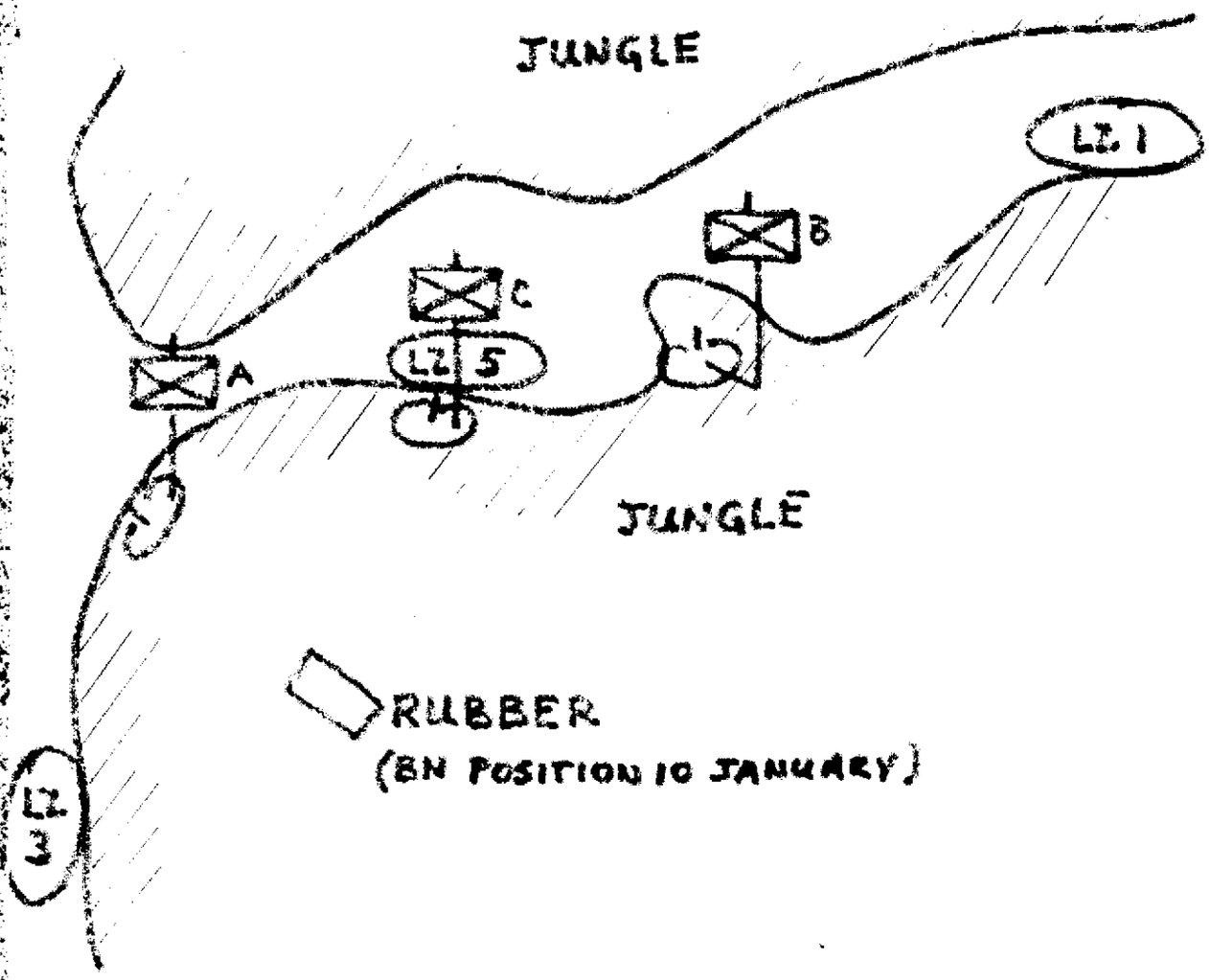
PLT SGT
3RD SQD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